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3 Ways to Prevent School Attacks

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School resource officers and administrators face many challenges. The more challenges we experience will increase our ability to successfully face future ones. On the other hand, challenges that occur infrequently and require help from others may be difficult to effectively prepare for. One example is targeted school violence. Preparing can seem overwhelming, but learning these three steps can help you.

Targeted school violence (TSV) occurs when someone selects a target, attacks or attempts to attack the target using lethal means, and the attacker purposely chose a school as the place to attack. What makes preventing targeted school violence difficult is:

1. There are two distinct types of school attackers,
2. Students are needed to recognize/report potential attackers, and
3. One must be able to assess information about future events.

Types of Attackers

Two types of TSV offenders are inside and outside attackers. Stopping them takes different types of methods. Inside attackers mainly include students. They can be difficult to stop since they are expected to be at the very place the attack is to occur, in school. They will most likely be familiar with the school's security, know when the SRO will or will not be present, and possibly have help from other students. Outside attackers are adults who have no real connection to the school. Many times, you will not observe this attacker for any significant amount of time. They may visit your school for seemingly legitimate reasons while conducting pre-attack surveillance. Both types of attackers may plan their attack from a few hours or up to years. This makes TSV a planned attack, and when a crime is not a random act of violence, there are opportunities to stop it.

Inside attackers will often "test" their plan of attack. When testing they are looking for a reaction. When no response to the testing occurs, the attacker will view it as permission to carry out the attack. An example would be when the Columbine High School attackers turned in a school

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videotape project involving playacting of them shooting people in the school. They received a grade with no repercussions. A student at Springwater High School took bullets to school and showed them to students. No one reported it and later that day he brought a gun and began shooting at the school.

Three good resources available to learn more about inside attackers are, [The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States](#). It was first published in 2002, by the US Secret Service. Their research about student attackers resulted in ten key traits. Since being published, most school attackers have possessed a majority of these ten traits. The other two publications are [Preventing Violence in Our Schools](#), by Dave Grossman and Loren Christensen and [Warning Signs of Youth Violence](#), 2002, provided by the American Psychological Association. These give you a beginning point to see the warning signs of inside attackers.

Outside Attackers won't be stopped using the same techniques employed against inside attackers. Attacks from outside attackers occur less frequently, but are just as horrendous. Examples of an outside attacker involved the [Platte Canyon High School](#) incident in Colorado and the Amish school attack in Pennsylvania. Both attackers were adults with no connection to the school. It appeared they just walked in the school and began their reign of terror. This was not the case. Both attacks were carefully planned and each school chosen for a reason.

Duane Morrison was the 53-year-old attacker at Platte Canyon High School. He entered the school, took female students hostage, molested them, and killed one before killing himself. The investigation revealed that he had visited the school before, camped in a nearby park, and was seen by several people on campus just hours before the attack. Carl Roberts IV was the 32-year-old attacker at the Amish school. He brought so many supplies for his attack that he needed a pickup truck to transport them. Roberts lived close to the school and his job enabled him to drive past the school regularly, allowing for easy surveillance. While it will never be proven, many speculate that he chose the Amish school since it could easily be defended from an advancing attack, the doors would not be locked, and there were no phones in the school so an emergency response would be delayed.

Both examples show how the attackers planned or tested their attacks prior to the assaults. The 1995 National Institute of Justice's [Research in Action](#) publication states three factors that must be present for targeted violence. One factor is, "A setting that facilitates or permits the violence, or at least does not stop it from occurring." The schools mentioned here presented this to both attackers.

Outside attackers will present warning signs. The key is to learn more about how past attacks occurred, what warning signs may be presented, and have a prepared response. One place to start is by reviewing the following guides: [Platte Canyon HS Attack](#), by Derrick Crews, [Threat Assessment: An Approach To Prevent Targeted Violence](#), 1995, by Robert Fein, Byran Vossekuil, and Gwen Holden, and [Protective Intelligence & Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and local Law Enforcement Officials](#), 1998, by Robert Fein, and Byran Vossekuil.

Learning to recognize these warning signs does not have to be difficult. Working in schools myself, I will admit that it can become overwhelming. Starting out with the suggested resources can help start a new realm of school security. Once you know what to be aware of, you can begin to educate others and increase your ability to properly assess future attacks.

Students Are Needed

During a regular school day, hundreds of students are aware of their environment in their own way. Since you cannot be everywhere at all times, students are needed to help stop TSV. They will see and hear much more than you. The Safe School Initiative found that students often knew about plans of a school attack but never told an adult. Since students are the largest population in the school, they are more likely to see suspicious activity first. The key is teaching them what to be on the lookout for and that communication is imperative.

One hurdle you might encounter is the fear that talking to students about TSV may cause anxiety or increase unfounded fears about school attacks. However, this is based on unfounded fears. Talking to students about school violence saves lives. Review Commissions of the [2001 Columbine High School](#) and the 2007 [Virginia Tech](#) shootings were very similar. They both concluded that it is important for students to learn warning signs and report those to an adult or employee who can help. Sadly, this only became evident after people were killed. Schools teach fire safety and repeatedly conduct fire drills. These are done to prepare and protect against something that could potentially kill but hasn't in recent years. Fire preparedness is obviously saving lives.

[The MMWR Journal](#), Jan. 2008 / Vol. 57 / No. 2, reported 116 schools associated homicides from July 1999 to June 2006. If fire prevention is accepted and sometimes required in school to save lives, there should be no problem teaching TSV prevention to prevent school homicides. Obviously students are being killed by criminal acts more often than being killed by fires.

Some believe lockdown drills and intruder training are more intrusive into a student's psyche than other prevention teachings. The very nature of a school attack is more violent than other school safety issues. Teaching students basic life-saving skills should provide a level of security instead of unneeded stress or a distorted perception of school safety. These concerns were addressed in [School Psychology Review](#), 2007-vol. 36, No.3. The goal of the study was to find if teaching intruder safety to students would adversely impact their state of anxiety and perceptions of school safety. Two groups of students were brought in. One group was taught intruder safety methods while the other group was given origami lessons. Afterwards, both groups were evaluated to determine their perception and anxiety levels pertaining to school safety. The results found, "...students reported feelings of anxiety and school safety similar to the students who did not partake in the [intruder safety] drill." They also concluded students exposed to intruder training, "experienced a level of anxiety and sense of safety comparable to what they feel on [any] typical school day." In other words, teaching kids school safety did not cause them any emotional harm.

Several other sources also cite the [need to include students](#) in the overall effort to help prevent a school attack.

Students can make a difference not only in their own personal safety but school safety as a whole and should not be left out in the prevention training process.

Assessing Future Events

Police officers and school administrators routinely gather facts after an event has occurred. Assessing information of a potential future TSV event involves a proactive mindset. When a student comes to you and says that he heard a student wanting to bring a gun to school, is it just gossip or the planning of an attack? In order to prevent TSV, a proper threat assessment should be initiated allowing a proper response and justification for further actions from school and law

officials. The foundation of a threat assessment is the fact that TSV is the result of a noticeable process of thinking and behavior.

A threat assessment approach works best within schools. To get a basic understanding of a student threat assessment it helps to know the different practices of assessing future attacks. Four resources are available that can help with threat assessments in order to prepare for one.

[Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and Other Approaches](#), 2001, vol. 38(2), published in *Psychology in the Schools* first defines targeted violence. It also explains why schools should practice threat assessments over other practices. The second source titled, [Threat Assessment: Defining an Approach for Evaluating Risk of Targeted Violence](#), 1999, vol. 17, No. 3, published by *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* explains the three fundamental principals of a threat assessment and includes key questions you should be asking. The third source is a companion guide to the Safe School Initiative and is titled, [Threat Assessments in Schools: A guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates](#), 2004, by the US Secret Service. This source goes into detail from establishing a threat assessment team to managing the threat. It is important to understand the principals of a threat assessment by reading the prior publication.

Once reviewing these three sources, you will be ready to practice an actual threat assessment. To test yourself in the virtual world, the US Secret Service has made a CD-Rom that allows you to conduct an interactive investigation. The CD titled, [A Safe School and Threat Assessment Experience: Scenarios Exploring the Findings of the Safe School Initiative](#), 2006, provides two school based scenarios. The assessments are very detailed and allow you to decide who to interview, what questions to ask, plus helpful tips provided during the process. These resources won't make you an expert, but they will make you more experienced and familiar with the threat assessment process.

The chance of a violent attack at your school is probably very low. The low probability doesn't mean you can afford to miss the opportunity to prevent an attack. Those who have the ability to prevent violence, have a responsibility to take action. Using these resources will help you educate others and increase your ability to properly assess threats brought to your attention.

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