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# School Violence

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## Introduction

The concept of school violence is not new and despite increased media attention and dramatic headlines, school violence is not increasing. Facts surrounding school violence are frequently misrepresented and distorted, leading to false perceptions surrounding the prevalence and pervasiveness of school violence. Although mass tragedies resulting from extreme acts of violence are exceedingly rare, the fact that violence does occur within school settings necessitates an understanding of how and why this violence occurs and what can be done to prevent these acts in the future. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, at the start of the fall 2014 school year there were approximately 54.8 million students attending both public and private elementary and secondary schools, with an additional 21 million students attending postsecondary institutions (2014). Therefore, due to the fact that the majority of American youth attend school each day, it is essential that they are provided with a safe and secure learning environment.

Research shows that homicide and suicide are the third leading cause of death for young adults

ages 10–24, with each accounting for 15% of youth fatalities (Kann et al., 2014). Yet the majority of youth violence resulting in death does not occur within the schools. Over the last decade between 1% and 2% of youth violence resulting in fatality occurred within the school setting. Additionally, studies have shown that approximately one homicide or suicide occurs within the school for every 3.5 million students enrolled (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, Morgan, & Snyder, 2014). Overall, data on youth violence indicates that schools are one of the safest places for children and adolescents.

## Research on School Violence

### Defining School Violence

School violence is considered a subset of youth violence and includes the “intentional use of force or power to harm another” occurring on school property or at a school-sponsored event (CDC, 2013). In general, school violence encompasses a broad range of violent acts including bullying, physical fights, threats and/or use of a weapon, aggression (physical, psychological, sexual, and cyber), and gang-perpetrated violence. Although school-associated homicides are considered within the umbrella of school place violence, “most lethal youth violence does not occur in schools, and most acts of youth violence do not lead to death” (CDC, 2008).

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**Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2013**

Each year, the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics publishes a report on school crime and student safety. Drawing data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), since 1992 the rates of serious violent victimization (e.g., rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault), and all violent victimization (e.g., serious violent victimization in addition to simple assault) for youth ages 12–18 have all declined. In 2012, the rate of violent victimization at school was approximately 29 per 1000 students, and the rate of serious violent victimization was approximately 7 per 1000 students. Violent victimization was higher for younger students (e.g., ages 12–14), males, and students residing in urban or suburban areas (Robers et al., 2014).

**School-Associated Violent Death Study**

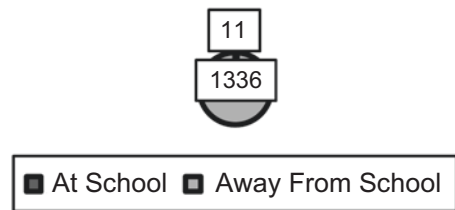
The School-Associated Violent Death Study (SAVD) is the result of collaboration among the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US Department of Justice, and the US Department of Education. This study included a compilation of school place fatalities that resulted from homicide, suicide, or legal intervention occurring within or on the way to or from elementary and secondary schools within the USA (Fig. 1). Between the school year of 2010 and 2011, there were a total of 31 violent deaths occurring within the school place, 14 of which included students ages 5–18. Of the 14 violent student

deaths that occurred, 11 were homicides and three were suicides. In comparison, there were approximately 1336 youth homicides (Fig. 2) occurring during the 2010–2011 school year and approximately 1456 youth suicides (Robers et al., 2014).

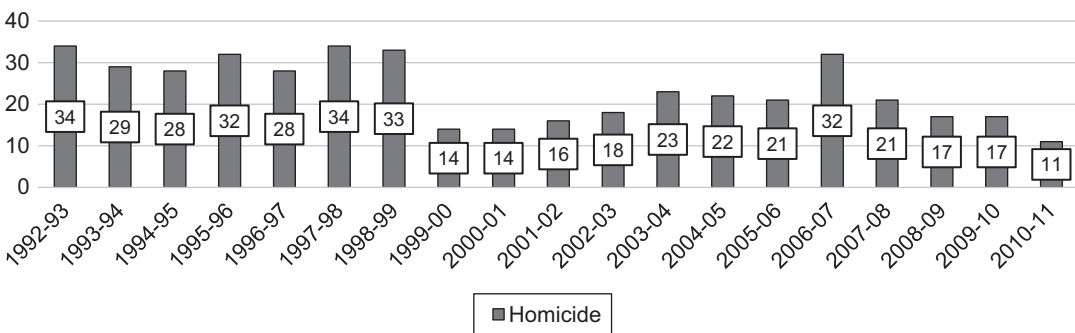
Between the years of 1992 and 1999, there were a total of 358 student deaths as a result of 323 incidents. In comparison, between the years of 1999 and 2006, there were 116 student deaths as a result of 109 incidents, 78% of which occurred on a school campus. This study shows that the majority of student-associated homicides involved a single victim and single offender, and that individual events resulting in mass homicides at school is exceedingly rare. For example, of the 116 student deaths 87% involved a single victim, whereas a total of eight incidents resulted in more than one homicide (CDC, 2008).

**Violence in Postsecondary Institutions**

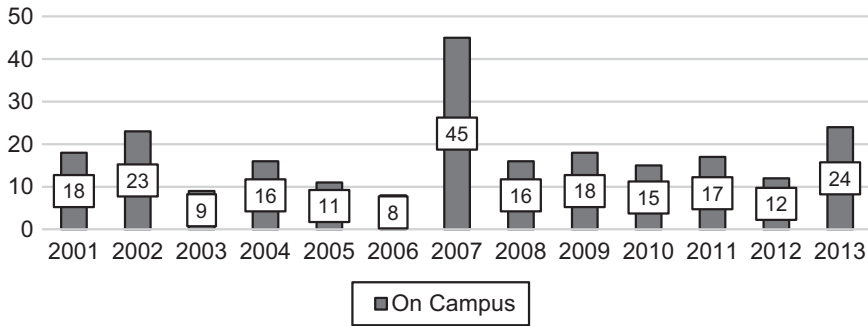
Research from the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that the rate of violent victimization is lower for college students (61 per 1000 students)



**Fig. 2** Homicide of youth, ages 5–18, at school and away from school, 2010–2011. Adapted from the “Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2013” by Robers et al. (2014)



**Fig. 1** School-associated student homicides of youth ages 5–18, from 1992 to 2011. Adapted from the “Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2013” by Robers et al. (2014)



**Fig. 3** Data on homicides occurring on college campuses, 2001 to 2013. Retrieved from the Campus and Security Data Analysis Cutting Tool (<http://ope.ed.gov/security/>)

than for same age non-students (75 per 1000), and that the rate of violent victimization against college students has decreased nearly 54% between 1995 and 2002 (Baum & Klaus, 2005). Only a small portion of violent crimes occur on campus and simple assault constitutes the majority of all violent victimizations. Although suicide rates among college students (e.g., 7 per 1000) are nearly half that of non-students within the same age range, research suggests that suicide may be the second leading cause of death for college students (Drum, Brownson, Denmark, & Smith, 2009). Homicide is the leading cause of death for youth ages 18–24, and approximately 13 youth within this age range are murdered every day (CDC, 2014). Additionally, 2008, young adults had the highest rate of homicide victimization and the highest rate of homicide offending (Cooper & Smith, 2011). Yet, despite these trends, homicides occurring on college campuses represent a small portion of the overall number of homicides of college-aged students (Fig. 3).

### Historical Perspective

A series of school shootings during the 1990s created the perception that school violence was a relatively new phenomenon and was increasing at alarming rates. The Columbine school shooting, in which two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, used firearms and explosives to attack their school, became one of the most

salient incidents during that time period. The Columbine tragedy resulted in the death of 12 students, a teacher, and the suicide of both Harris and Klebold. During the twenty-first century school massacres such as Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook resulted in mass fatalities of innocent students, and created a renewed sense of fear and horror in society. The increase in media coverage surrounding these events created the perception that society was faced with a new breed of school violence and that children within American schools were inherently unsafe. Despite these perceptions, school-based violent attacks have occurred throughout the history of America's educational system. For example, one of the deadliest attacks against a school occurred in 1927 when Andrew Kehoe, a disgruntled school board treasurer, bombed an elementary school. This attack resulted in 45 deaths, 38 of which were school children. In 1966, Charles Whitman, a former student at The University of Texas, killed his wife and mother and then went on a campus shooting spree, which resulted in the death of 14 students and school personnel.

Despite the fact that school shootings have not dramatically increased in recent years, the succession of high-profile school-based attacks following Columbine has given rise to the belief that there is an overwhelming number of massive attacks of violence, resulting in multiple fatalities, within the schools. Research shows that media coverage of school shootings intensifies the emotional valence surrounding these events by increasing their visibility and salience, and creating a

distorted sense of reality (Muschert & Carr, 2006). It is the traumatic and inexplicable nature of school shootings that creates an exaggerated sense of danger despite the fact that these events are statistically rare.

### **School Shootings as a Subset of School Violence**

School shootings are a subset of school place violence and, at first glance, it appears as though the term could be clearly defined, yet this is not the case. Part of the problem is that there is no uniform definition for the phenomenon of school shootings and inclusion criteria vary among studies. Determining the prevalence of school shootings is further compounded by differences in data collection methods, making the extrapolation of results across studies extremely challenging. The study of school violence in general, and school shootings in particular, encompasses several dimensions, such as the location of the attack, the perpetrator's association with the school, the method of the attack, how the attack was planned and carried out, and the outcome of the attack. For example, some studies include incidents that occur on or near school grounds or on the way to or from a school sponsored event. Another dimension of classification involves the perpetrator; some studies include events carried out by any individual on school property, whether or not this individual was associated with the school. Others include school-associated individuals, such as teachers, staff, and other school personnel, whereas some studies limit inclusion to incidents that were carried out by current or former students. Although school violence can take many forms most studies classify school-based attacks as those involving lethal weapons, whereas others only include attacks involving firearms. In regard to planning the attack, some researchers attempt to discern the motivation behind the attack, differentiating between incidents resulting from retaliation or a grudge and those in which the attack served a symbolic purpose. Another significant factor is the outcome of the attack. Some studies include any school-related event resulting

in injury or death, whether this event was accidental or intentional. Victim characteristics are often classified based on their relationship to the school and perpetrator and whether they were specifically targeted or chosen at random. Additionally, some studies are based on the outcome of the attack and whether or not the incident resulted in multiple fatalities. Researchers have attempted to use these various dimensions of school place violence in order to classify these attacks.

### **Research on Targeted School Violence**

#### **The Safe School Initiative Report**

The Secret Service, in conjunction with the US Department of Education, published the Safe School Initiative Report (SSIR), a study that was conducted following the massacre at Columbine in an attempt to understand and address the phenomenon of school shootings (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). This report was a comprehensive analysis of "targeted school violence," and included incidents in which a current or former student deliberately targeted their school, or individuals within the school, with the intent to harm others and/or themselves.

*Incident characteristics.* The SSIR identified a total of 37 school-based attacks, committed by 41 perpetrators, across 26 states, occurring between 1974 and 2000. Among these 37 incidents most occurred during the school day, 75% resulted in one or more fatalities, and the remainder resulted in at least one injury. Almost all of the attackers were current students (95%). The majority of incidents were carried out by a single attacker (81%), although in 11% of attacks the perpetrator had assistance from others. Two or more perpetrators committed school-based attacks in approximately 8% of the incidents. Lethal weapons were used in the majority of the attacks and approximately half involved the use of more than one weapon, with handguns and shotguns being most commonly utilized.

*Attacker characteristics.* The SSIR findings showed that all of the attackers were male and that most came from two-parent homes, were doing

well academically, and had no history of behavioral problems at school. Socially, most attackers were accepted by peers, characterized as having friends, and participated in extracurricular activities. Yet, despite this social acceptance, the majority of attackers were described as feeling bullied or persecuted by others prior to the attack. Only a small portion of these youth had a history of substance abuse, past violence, or prior arrests and the majority had never received a mental health evaluation. Most of these boys had been known to use weapons in the past and obtained the weapon used for their attack from a family member. The theme of violence was prevalent among attackers as evidenced by an interest in violent media or the integration of violent themes into their own writings. Almost all of the attackers were described as having experienced a significant stressor in the form of personal loss prior to the attack, 78% had a history of suicidal ideation or attempts, and 61% suffered from significant depression.

### **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI): Campus Attacks**

In 2010, the FBI published a study on targeted violent attacks occurring at institutions of higher education to determine if there were differences between these events and those that occurred between grades K-12 as identified by the SSIR (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010). Between the years of 1900 and 2008 a total of 272 incidents were identified which resulted in 281 deaths and 247 injuries. The majority of incidents occurred on campus (79%), almost all of the attackers were male (94%), all but seven of the incidents were carried out by a single individual, and 54% involved the use of firearms. An analysis of school affiliation showed that 121 of the attackers were current students, 39 were former students, 29 were current or former employees, 53 were indirectly affiliated with the school, and the remaining 25 had no known affiliation with the school or student victims.

### **The FBI: Active Shooter Incidents**

The FBI conducted a separate study of public acts of mass violence and used the term “active shooter incidents” to describe situations in which

one or more individuals were armed with weapons and in the midst of attempting to kill and/or seriously harm others (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Of the 160 identified incidents, 39 occurred within a school and resulted in 117 deaths and 120 wounded. Twenty five incidents occurred within an elementary or secondary school, 12 incidents occurred within a postsecondary institution, and two incidents were perpetrated by adults during the course of a school board meeting. Of the secondary school-based incidents, 17 of the attackers were current students, one attacker was a former student, and another attacker was a student at a different school. The post-secondary institution-based incidents consisted of five current student attackers and four former student attackers. The remaining incidents were perpetrated by employees, former teachers, or strangers with no relation to the school which they attacked. Of the 160 incidents analyzed by the FBI, 24.4% of the incidents occurred within educational settings and two such incidents - Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook - accounted for the greatest number of casualties.

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## **Characteristics of School Shooters**

One of the main findings from the research on school shootings is that there is no one “profile” to describe all school shooters and that there are no universal trends that can be easily identified and utilized to make predictions regarding which youth are likely to carry out acts of school violence. Although a number of risk factors that increase the likelihood a youth will engage in violence have been identified, many of these findings do not extrapolate to the more specific category of school shooters. Additionally, many youth exhibit similar characteristics, yet the majority do not commit massive acts of school violence.

### **Rampage School Shooters**

The term “rampage school shooter” is used by researchers to describe current or former students who deliberately and purposefully attacked their

school; this attack served a symbolic purpose and although some victims may have been specifically targeted, most were chosen at random (Newman, Fox, Roth, Mehta, & Harding, 2004). These attacks resulted in multiple casualties and often ended in the death of the attacker, mainly through suicide (Rocque, 2012). Although these incidents, such as the shootings at Columbine and Virginia Tech, remain relatively rare, they tend to receive the most attention. Rampage school shooters are of particular interest to researchers because their acts of violence tend to contradict common notions involving youth violence as a whole. For example, the majority of rampage school shooters were white, middle to lower class males, who lived in suburban or rural settings and communities that were characterized as relatively safe (Rocque, 2012). This has led some researchers to propose that internal risk factors are far more influential than external circumstances in cases of rampage youth violence and that this is largely due to the severe, yet unaddressed, mental health issues of these youth offenders (Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett, 2011).

## Psychological Explanations

### School Shooter Typology

In the book *Why Kids Kill*, Langman created a typology to describe the ten rampage school shooters within his study, with a particular emphasis on the mental health of these individuals (2009). The ten rampage school shooters included current or former students who meticulously planned, and purposely attacked, their school. The majority of these attacks resulted in multiple victims, many of whom were randomly or symbolically targeted. Langman (2009) explained that these attacks were the result of, “complex combinations of environmental, family, and individual factors that varied from one perpetrator to another.” Common factors that were identified included a failure of empathy, a profound sense of rage and anguish, identity disturbances, egocentricity, and both emotional and behavioral reactivity. All but one expressed suicidal ideation and demonstrated a sense of “exis-

tential anguish” or extreme despondency. Each of the ten school shooters fell within one of the following categories: (a) psychotic, (b) psychopathic, or (c) traumatized.

*Psychotic school shooters.* The psychotic school shooters were classified as having schizophrenia-spectrum disorders and included Michael Carneal, Andrew Wurst, Kip Kinkel, Dylan Klebold, and Seung Hui Cho. Symptoms among these shooters included delusions of grandeur, persecutory delusions, bizarre thought processes, and auditory hallucinations. These shooters were described by others as odd and egocentric, and there was evidence of disturbed thoughts and disorganized speech in their journals and writings. All of the psychotic school shooters came from intact families and there was no evidence of maltreatment or family disruption. They were all the youngest sibling in a family in which the older siblings were admired and successful. Additionally, none of these shooters were medicated or taking antipsychotics prior to the shooting; four of the shooters had a history of using illegal substances.

*Psychopathic school shooters.* The psychopathic school shooters exhibited a lack of empathy, were narcissistic, and demonstrated sadistic behaviors. The two shooters included within this category were Andrew Golden and Eric Harris. As was the case with the psychotic school shooters, both of the boys classified as psychopathic school shooters came from intact families where there was no history of maltreatment or abuse. Both Golden and Harris were fascinated with weapons and belonged to families where the presence and use of firearms was a normal part of growing up. From an early age, both boys demonstrated classical symptoms of psychopathy; they demonstrated a grandiose sense of self, a disregard for social norms, and a lack of remorse. They were skilled at deceiving those around them and derived pleasure from inflicting pain on others. Golden and Harris were manipulative and domineering, and recruited peers to help them carry out their attacks.

*Traumatized school shooters.* The traumatized school shooters showed extensive histories of maltreatment, neglect, and abuse. Traumatized

school shooters included Evan Ramsey, Mitchell Johnson, and Jeffrey Weise. These three youth grew up in families with a history of criminality and substance abuse. Both Ramsey and Weise had fathers who had been involved in an armed standoff with police; as a result, Ramsey's father was incarcerated and Weise's father committed suicide. For Johnson, his biological father had a history of criminal behavior and his stepfather had previously been incarcerated for weapon and drug related charges. All three had childhood histories of physical abuse and neglect, Mitchell and Ramsey had histories of sexual abuse, and Weise and Ramsey had been in and out of foster care growing up. All three of the traumatized shooters had attempted suicide prior to the attack, and each of them was either encouraged or recruited by peers to commit their violent attacks.

### **Suicide as a Primary Motivation**

Many of the school shooters exhibited severe depression and suicidality prior to their attacks. This phenomenon has been described as "suicide with hostile intent," in which suicidal youth commit mass homicide prior to their death, in order to exact revenge and receive the recognition they believe they deserve (Preti, 2008). It has been proposed that these mass homicides are a subtype of murder-suicide and are committed by "pseudocommandos" who deliberately plan their attack, come prepared with a multitude of weapons, kill in an indifferent and indiscriminate manner, and plan to commit suicide at the end of the attack (Knoll, 2010). Therefore, suicide is the primary motivation for these attacks, and homicidal intent develops subsequent to suicidal ideation (Joiner, 2013). Joiner proposed a typology to describe these murder-suicides as "perversions of virtue." For example, the Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, committed his massacre in a perversion of justice, based on his perception that his attack would right the wrongs he perceived had been inflicted upon him by others. In the case of Columbine, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were motivated by a perversion of heroic glory and the desire to be infamously remembered for their horrific act of violence.

Although most suicidal individuals do not engage in violence toward others, the fact that many of the school shooters exhibited suicidal thoughts and behaviors prior to their attacks necessitates an understanding of this relationship; because suicidal ideation often predates homicidal intent, considerable attention should be given to youth who exhibit these warning signs. Furthermore, an "understanding of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention in a school environment may avert violence on school grounds" and is a necessary component in ensuring school safety (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2014).

## **Social and Cultural Explanations**

### **Access to Weapons**

Following Columbine increased attention was given to the topic of gun control, with one study showing that 42% of media reports published after the attack defined the problem of school shootings in terms of the availability of guns and inadequate gun control laws (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). This pattern continued during the series of subsequent school shootings in which the discourse surrounding gun control increased substantially. In 2013, 5.4% of surveyed high school students reported that they had carried a weapon to school in the preceding 30 days, which was a significant decrease from the number that reported carrying a weapon to school in 1993 (11.8%). Approximately 6.9% of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon in 2013, which has also significantly decreased since 1993 (Kann et al., 2014). Another study found that 56.4% of school-associated violent deaths occurring between 1992 and 1999 involved the use of a firearm with 69.1% resulting in homicide, 26.8% resulting in suicide, and 4.1% resulting in homicide followed by suicide. Additionally, 37.5% of the firearms were obtained from the perpetrator's home, while 23.4% came from a friend or family member (CDC, 2003).

## Violent Media

Violent media is also a proposed explanation for the increase in school shootings and a preoccupation and unusual fascination with violent media has been discussed as a warning sign associated with school shooters (O'Toole, 2002). Research shows that more than half of school shooters studied showed an interest in violent media such as violent movies (27%), violent books (24%), and violent video games (12%). Many of the school shooters demonstrated a fascination with violence through their writings which included poems, journals, internet postings, and school assignments, which included both fictional and nonfictional work (Langman, 2012). For example, Seung-Hui Cho submitted a series of disturbing writings and poems that alarmed his teachers and other students in the class, which included a about a fictional character who was contemplating a school shooting. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris submitted a video for a film class that depicted them as hitmen, shooting students within the school. Klebold also had submitted an assignment where he talked about a fictional character killing other students and Harris had posted extensively online regarding his desire to kill others. Despite this relationship, exposure to violent media alone cannot explain the occurrence of school shootings. Additionally, upwards of 97% of youth report playing video games and, for the majority, this does not translate to real-world acts of violence (Harvard Medical School, 2010).

## Bullying

Bullying can take many forms and in 2011 approximately 28% of students, ages 12 through 18, reported being the victims of bullying (Robers et al., 2014). Self-reports of bullying were slightly higher for females and most commonly involved being the subject of rumors or being verbally harassed and insulted. Research shows that both victims of bullying and perpetrators of bullying have an increased risk for suicide (CDC, 2014). In regard to school shootings the majority of shooters felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others and, in some cases, this victimization was considered severe. Yet Langman (2014) debunks common myths surrounding school shooters by showing that in the majority of the 48 cases that he studied

the shooters were not isolated, alienated, bullied, or victimized. He estimated that approximately 40% of school shooters had a history of being bullied. One example of prolonged and severe bullying included the case of Evan Ramsey and following his attack at Bethel High School, he was quoted saying he was "sick of being picked on in school" (Stout, 2002). Ramsey was the only school shooter on the list who specifically targeted the student who had victimized him (Langman, 2014). Victim and perpetrator characteristics also varied based on the shooter typology. For example, approximately 75% of traumatized school shooters had a history of being bullied, whereas approximately 94% of psychopathic school shooters had a history of bullying others.

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## School Violence, Threat Assessment, and Response

### Profiling

After the series of school shootings in the 1990s, a compilation of checklists and warning signs were created in an attempt to create a "profile" of the average school shooter. Unfortunately, as previous studies have emphasized, there is no one profile to explain or predict youth who will engage in acts of school violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Additionally, "there is no research that has identified traits and characteristics that can reliably distinguish school shooters from other students" (O'Toole, 2002). The use of profiling has received substantial criticism within the research literature due to the likelihood of over-identifying youth who will not engage in violence and the failure to accurately identify those who do. The fact that many nonviolent youth exhibit these so-called warning signs is problematic and using checklists to predict violence and label students has been described as "dangerous" (Cornell, 2006).

### Threat Assessment

Threat assessment has replaced the use of profiling and involves a comprehensive evaluation to determine the likelihood that once a threat



has been made, it will be carried out. An analysis of high-profile school shootings showed that many of the attackers relayed their plans directly to others, attempted to recruit classmates to participate in the attack, or provided ominous warnings to classmates and friends. This “leakage” of information surrounding the planned attack has been identified as an important warning sign in assessing the seriousness of a given threat. According to Langman (2009), “youths who commit school shootings typically leave a long trail of signals of what they intend to do.” The SSIR shows that almost all school-based attacks were planned in advance, 93% of the attackers exhibited behavioral signs prior to the incident that concerned those around them, and in 81% of cases others knew about the attack before it took place (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Some pre-incident behaviors were explicit and included telling other students about a desire to kill classmates or indicating when the attack would occur. In other cases, pre-incident behavior was more vaguely related to the attack. Examples include the submission of class assignments centering on homicidal and suicidal themes or generic threats involving violence toward others. In a little less than half of the cases, classmates of the attacker directly or indirectly assisted in the commission of the violent act. This involvement ranged from encouraging the individual to participate in the attack to help in planning the attack and procuring a weapon.

Research has shown that school violence “stems from an interaction among the person, situation, the setting, and the target”; therefore, all of these factors must be taken into consideration during the course of a threat assessment (Fein et al., 2002). When active threat assessment procedures are in place educators, clinicians, and school personnel can respond immediately and implement appropriate interventions to prevent acts of school place violence. These procedures should not be developed following a massive school tragedy; instead, it is essential that each school has policies and procedures in place in advance to delineate how school members will respond to threats and threatening behavior.

### **Threat Assessment Team**

The threat assessment team should consist of school personnel, such as teachers and administrators, in addition to mental health professionals, such as counselors and psychologists, and law enforcement personnel, such as school resource officers and through liaisons with local police departments (Poland, 2008). A member of the threat assessment team should be identified as the primary point-of-contact who will be responsible for the initial screening of any and all threats. This individual should be readily available, easily accessible, and known to all members of the school and community (Fein et al., 2002).

The utilization of a threat assessment team is necessary to ensure fairness and accuracy in evaluating the threat and to guarantee that an appropriate response is implemented. A multidisciplinary approach to threat assessment allows for the provision of necessary resources and services aimed at reducing the factors or stressors that precipitate the threat. Additionally, this multidisciplinary approach allows for the implementation of interventions tailored to fit the individual needs of the student (Erbacher et al., 2014). A threat assessment team, involving a multitude of properly trained individuals from various backgrounds, will augment current school safety procedures, instill confidence in students that their needs will be met, and enhance the overall safety within the educational environment.

### **Threat Classification**

Although the majority of threats that are made are unlikely to be carried out, a necessary initial step in the threat assessment process includes a classification of the threat that was made. According to O’Toole, the main questions that must be addressed when a student makes a threat center on the reasonableness and sincerity regarding the threat and the perceived ability of the student to carry out the threat. Once a threat has been made, it can be classified as transient or substantial (Poland, 2008). Transient threats are emotion-based, reactive, and tend to occur in the heat of the moment. These threats are generally short-lived and dissipate quickly. In general, transient threats tend to lack specificity, do not appear

to be well thought out, and do not contain details on how the attack would be carried out. When details are provided, they tend to be implausible or inconsistent.

On the other hand, a substantial threat involves premeditation and are usually accompanied by the means and a method to carry out the proposed attack. Substantial threats include specific details such as the location of the attack, the time in which the attack will occur, the intended victims, and how the attack will be carried out. These details would indicate significant planning on the part of the individual who made the threat which increases the likelihood that the threat will be carried out (O'Toole, 2002). In substantial threats, there is an explicit intention of severe harm. For example, a hostile statement regarding the use of a weapon to injure or kill someone else would be indicative of a substantial threat, and would require immediate intervention. In the case of the Jonesboro shooting, Andrew Golden announced his plans prior to the attack, by proclaiming to students, "you're all going to die" (Newman et al., 2004). Michael Carneal spoke about the "day of reckoning" and specifically told other students he was planning a school shooting, prior to his attack in Paducah (Adams & Malone, 1999).

### **Immediate Response**

Once a threat is reported it is essential that school personnel respond appropriately. All of those who could potentially be affected should be involved in the response. This includes the student who received the threat, parents of both students, and any other relevant school personnel. First and foremost, safety precautions should be enacted immediately and may require the involvement of local law enforcement or a school resource officer. Once the potential for imminent danger has subsided, the threat assessment team can begin the process of evaluating the seriousness of the threat. The crux of threat assessment is not limited to whether or not a threat was made; instead, this approach emphasizes whether the student who made the threat poses a substantial risk to others.

### **Comprehensive Interview**

The next step in school violence threat assessment includes conducting a comprehensive interview with the student who made the threat, the student who received the threat, and any students or school personnel who may have witnessed the threat being made (Erbacher et al., 2014). This initial interview is conducted immediately and all information obtained should be sufficiently documented. It is important to gather as much information as possible, such as the exact wording of the threat, the context in which the threat was made, the circumstances precipitating the threat, the motivation behind the threat, and the intention underlying the threat (Cornell, 2007). The team can then use this information to determine the level of risk posed by the threat and whether the threat was transient or substantial.

### **Psychosocial Evaluation**

A psychosocial evaluation is necessary to determine the influence of psychological and social factors in making the threat and to help guide the resulting intervention. Prior to this evaluation collateral information, such as school records, juvenile arrest history, and other documentation, should be obtained and reviewed. This assessment should be conducted by a trained mental health professional and the evaluation should focus on the student's current mental state, current stressors the student may be facing, difficulties in peer and interpersonal relationships, family factors such as level of functioning and support, and any potential coping and protective factors (Cornell, 2003; Poland, 2008). This evaluation will help to determine if immediate mental health intervention is necessary.

*Example assessments.* There are several risk-assessment instruments available to mental health practitioners that help screen for violence potential in youth. The Adolescent and Child Urgent Threat Evaluation (ACUTE) includes an interview with the child and family members in addition to a review of collateral information (Copelan & Ashley, 2005). This assessment results in six threat cluster scores, along with a total risk score, which quantifies and classifies the youth's potential risk of harm to self and others. The

Psychosocial Evaluation and Threat Risk Assessment (PETRA) is implemented once a threat has been received, and is used to classify risk severity and potential for imminent violence (Schneller, 2005). This assessment results in eight cluster scores (e.g., depressed mood, alienation, egocentricism, aggression, family/home, school, stress, and coping styles) three domain scores (e.g., psychosocial, resiliency problems, and ecological) and a total score. The PETRA is also useful in identifying various psychosocial stressors and guiding intervention strategies to meet the specific needs of the student.

The Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY) is another instrument that assesses risk and protective factors within the following domains: historical, social/contextual, and clinical/individual (Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2005). This instrument is often implemented to aid clinicians in formulating intervention plans and monitoring behavioral changes over time. A four-pronged assessment method has been proposed as a tool to determine if the student who made the threat has the “motivation, intention, ability, and means, to carry out the proclaimed threat” (O’Toole, 2002). This method includes the identification of warning signs and risk factors within the domains of personality traits and behaviors, family dynamics, school dynamics, and social dynamics. The analysis of risk and protective factors can aid in determining the needs of the individual student in order to tailor interventions accordingly.

### **Additional Response and Action**

Following the comprehensive threat assessment evaluation the team should decide which interventions would be most appropriate. For example, if it is determined that the threat is transient the team may decide that the provision of services such as conflict resolution or counseling are more appropriate than serious disciplinary actions or legal intervention (Cornell, 2007). In cases of serious and severe threats, disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion may be warranted. In other cases, the team may determine that the student does not pose an active threat to the safety of the school community and

would benefit from a comprehensive and active intervention approach.

### **Intervention Approaches**

Effective interventions are those which address the psychological, social, and ecological factors that contribute to youth violence. Intervention approaches should focus on the individual, school, family, and community. Appropriate interventions may include the provision of mental health services, counseling, individualized student safety planning, and parent education. School-based interventions may include mentoring programs, conflict resolution, academic support, and programs that address violence prevention, anger management, problem solving, and social skills training. Community involvement is also important and these interventions may include mentoring programs, youth groups, and the provision of other forms of prosocial recreational activities.

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## **Crisis Intervention**

### **Crisis Drills and Preparing for Active Shooters**

According to the guidelines set forth by the US Department of Education, schools should conduct exercises and drills to prepare for incidents involving active shooters. Within these guidelines it is proposed that there are three options to choose from during an active shooter incident: run, hide, or fight. The fight option, which is considered a last resort, includes “trying to disrupt or incapacitate the shooter by using aggressive force and items in the environment” (U. S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 65). One example is the ALICE training model which a five stage strategic response to active shooter incidents in schools (2014). These stages include: (a) alert; (b) lockdown; (c) inform; (d) counter; and, (e) evacuate. Although this program has been implemented in schools across the nation, it is not without criticism. The most controversial aspect of this program is the “counter” stage which includes actions such as distract-

tion, movement, distance, and teaching children to “fight back.” Researchers and educators have criticized this notion by stating that it is inappropriate and potentially dangerous to be training children to confront an armed intruder (Trump, 2011). This criticism and lack of professional and academic endorsement has led the ALICE training institute to preface their program by saying, “ALICE does not endorse civilians fighting an active shooter” (2014).

In order to determine the efficacy of a program, such as ALICE, it is necessary to determine how children feel after completing the ALICE training. For example, does this program create a sense of security and increased awareness, or are children left feeling frightened and confused? Do these types of training programs take into account the unique needs of the students? How do these training experiences affect children with trauma histories? If retraumatization is experienced, do the children receive the necessary counseling afterwards? Many questions are raised when it comes to the appropriate implementation of crisis drills and training programs. According to Trump (2008), “recent years have brought out discussions of arming teachers, bulletproof backpacks, and now flying textbooks. Such proposals often prey on the emotions of anxious parents and educators looking for a ‘quick fix’ to the complex issues of school safety and emergency planning.” The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has recommended taking an “options-based approach” which allows schools to implement measures and training that accounts for student “developmental levels, school culture and climate, and features specific to each school community” (2014). Although the NASP recommends expanding current safety practices, they acknowledge the lack of research supporting the implementation of armed assailant drills. Therefore, it is recommended that schools adhere to best practices, such as traditional lockdown approaches, that have proven effective over time and can ensure the physical and psychological safety of all students.

## Responding to School Tragedies

The best form of crisis response is one that has been planned in advance. School security planning and crisis preparedness should be implemented prior to the occurrence of a tragedy, with an emphasis on acting instead of reacting (Trump, 2011). An important component of crisis preparedness includes the development of a crisis response team and proper training of all response personnel. School crises are not limited to massive school shootings and encompass a wide range of events such as nonlethal violence, natural disasters, terrorism, and violent and nonviolent deaths of school members. Regardless of the source of the crisis, children, staff, and personnel must be given the opportunity to effectively process and recover from the tragedy in order to prevent the negative, long-term consequences associated with traumatic experiences. Crisis intervention should consist of a multidisciplinary approach and must address the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of everyone affected by the tragedy.

One of the most effective strategies in crisis response includes the psychological triage, or identification of those most in need of immediate services. Individuals are differentially affected by trauma, and factors such as geographic proximity, psychosocial proximity, and previous history of trauma, all influence the likelihood of a traumatic response. These factors are important when determining the necessity for follow-up or the long-term provision of services for individuals who have been exposed to trauma. In cases of school tragedy students and faculty must be given the opportunity to express the wide range of emotions they are experiencing. This can be done through group processing sessions which should give each and every individual the opportunity to talk about their personal experience, their immediate and current reactions to the tragedy, and their concerns and worries about the future. Importantly, individuals should be prompted to describe the coping skills they could utilize and the steps that could be taken to allow them to feel safer immediately and in the future.

### **The National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT)**

The National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT), founded by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), is a crisis intervention program which focuses on the mental health needs of those affected by tragedy. The training model, PREP<sub>a</sub>RE, stands for: Prevent and prepare for psychological trauma; Reaffirm physical health and perceptions of security and safety; Evaluate psychological trauma risk; Provide interventions; Respond to psychological needs; and, Examine the effectiveness of crisis prevention and intervention. This program offers workshops that focus on crisis prevention and preparedness, utilizing a comprehensive school crisis team, crisis intervention and recovery, and the roles of school-based mental health professionals. Research shows that individuals that participated in the training workshops were satisfied with the program and reported an improvement in attitudes and knowledge regarding crisis prevention and intervention (Nickerson, Serwacki, & Brock, 2012).

### **Psychological First Aid**

Psychological First Aid is an evidence-based crisis response program that was developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD (Brymer et al., 2006). The goal of this intervention is to foster resiliency, improve adaptive functioning, and minimize the distress and negative effects associated with experiencing a traumatic event. This program can be used in individual or group formats and consists of eight core components (Fig. 4).

### **Follow Up**

An effective crisis intervention continues long after the tragedy has ended. Debriefing sessions should occur for the weeks following the tragedy to determine the effectiveness of the crisis plan and the potential need for additional services. Ongoing support and assistance should be available for an extended period of time so that all those who have been affected by the tragedy can continue to feel supported.

### **Prevention**

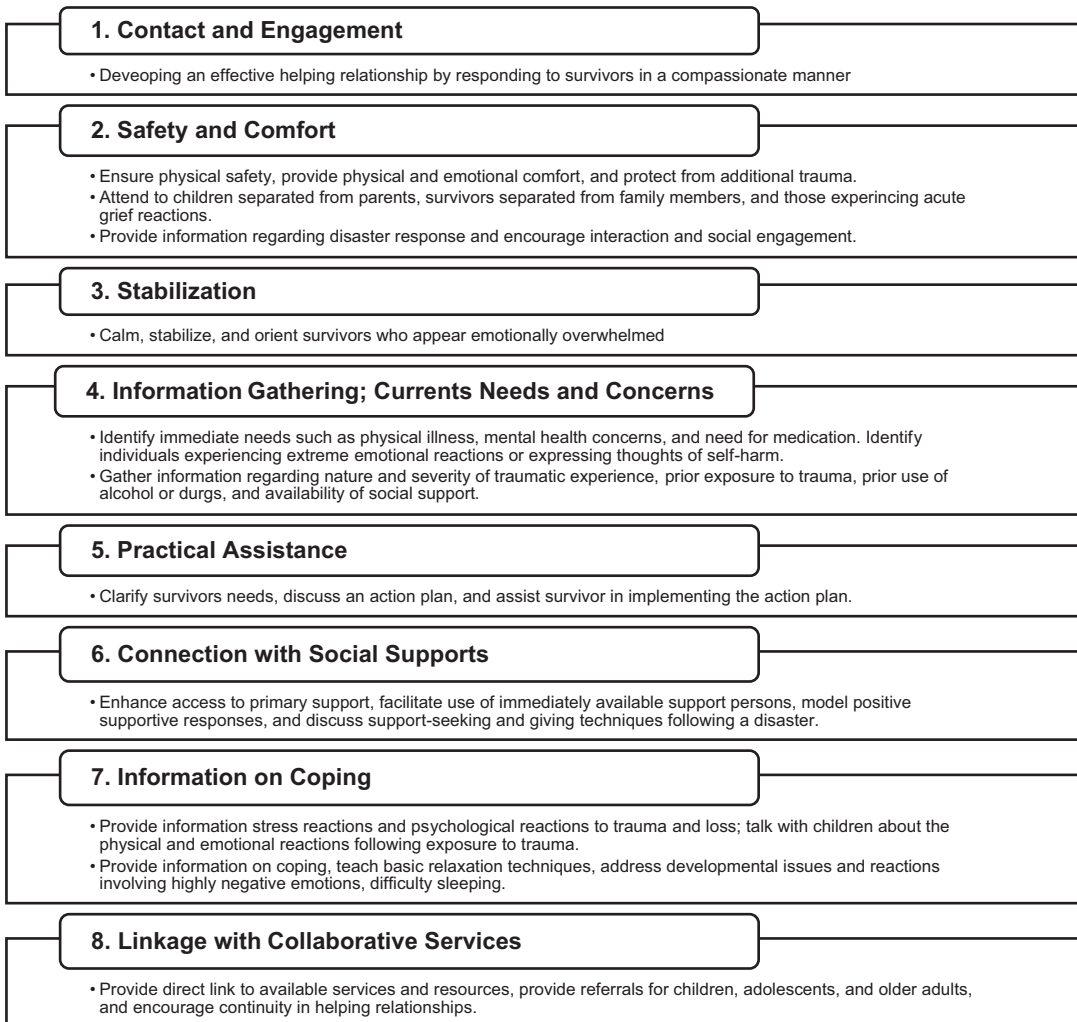
Although school-associated violent deaths are exceedingly rare, the fact that they do occur reinforces the importance of prevention and school safety planning. School safety is a prerequisite for an optimal learning environment and requires that students, teachers, and school officials feel protected and secure within the school setting. School safety planning must include the community as a whole and comprehensive safety planning necessitates collaboration among teachers, administrators, principals, students, parents, law enforcement, guidance counselors, coaches, additional school personnel, and mental health professionals (Fig. 5).

### **School Safety Planning**

School safety planning should begin with an assessment of current school practices. Specific concerns and issues should be identified and addressed so that the subsequent safety plan can be individually tailored to meet the needs of the school. Data from school crime reports and administrative assessments of school safety should be collected and analyzed to determine problem areas that need to be addressed. Additionally, through the use of dialogues and surveys, information regarding school members' perceptions of safety and security should be obtained to help guide the safety planning procedures (Stephens, 1998).

### **School Safety Pledges and Student Task Forces**

One of the most important components of safety planning is student involvement, and every student should feel as though he plays an essential role in stopping school violence. Student task forces serve to increase student commitment to safety by enhancing personal connection to the school. Student safety pledges should outline expectations such as antibullying, and the reporting of threats, violence, and any other acts that



**Fig. 4** The core components of Psychological First Aid. Adapted from “Psychological First Aid: Field operations guide, 2nd edition” by Brymer et al. (2006). National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD

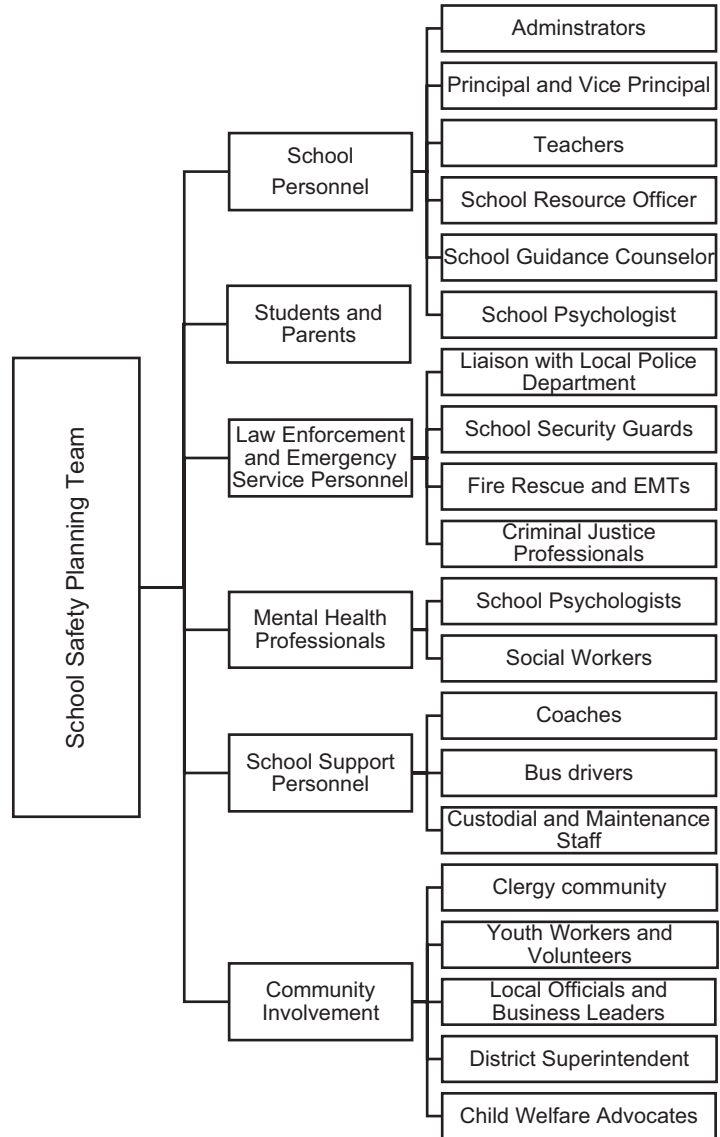
may negatively impact the school milieu. Signing school safety pledges can serve as a source of empowerment for students by showing that they agree to adhere to a set of standards aimed at reducing violence and creating a safe and supportive school environment.

## Physical Security

In the last decade, schools have taken significant safety precautions and have increased the use of security measures to ensure student safety. In 1995 the percentage of students who reported

being afraid of attack or harm while at school was 12%, whereas in 2011 this number dropped to approximately 4% (Robers et al., 2014). Increased security precautions being taken by schools include controlling access to the school building, installing security cameras within the school facility, increasing the presence of security guards during school hours, using an electronic notification system during emergencies, and implementing the use of security badges for school personnel. In 2011, 99.6% of youth surveyed reported that they were aware of security measures being implemented in their school, such as a student code of conduct, visitor restric-

**Fig. 5** Recommended members of a school safety planning team



tions, additional staff supervision, use of security cameras, and the presence of security guards.

**School Environment**

One of the most important factors fostering student willingness to come forward and report potential threats to school safety is a safe and supportive school environment in which students feel they will be respected and taken seriously (Fein et al., 2002). Although research shows that most attackers made others aware of their plans

prior to the attack, these threats often went unreported. This is due to several factors, such as students fear of retaliation, disbelief regarding the sincerity of the threat, a desire to remain uninvolved, being conditioned not to go to school officials for help, and the belief that nothing would be done even if the threat was reported (Poland, 2003). A study conducted by the Secret Service found that school climate was the most significant factor in whether or not a student came forward with information obtained regarding a threat (Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008). Those who came forward expressed the

belief that they would be taken seriously by school officials, would not experience a negative response as a result, and that the threat would be addressed sufficiently. A safe school environment is one in which bullying, harassment, and victimization are not tolerated, and supportive relationships between students and staff are fostered through interaction and collaboration. This “climate of safety” should include respect and open communication, a sense of connectedness, and a positive, reciprocal relationship between students and school personnel (Poland, 2012).

### **Getting Involved in School Safety: Program Examples**

#### **Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE)**

Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) is a national organization comprised of student chapters that promotes collaboration and interaction and allows students an active role in enhancing school safety (2014). SAVE focuses on crime prevention, conflict management, and service projects by promoting nonviolent prevention techniques within the school and community. Goals of this program include education on violence and safe practices, empowerment through the acquisition of service skills, encouragement of positive peer interactions, and student engagement in violence prevention activities. This program encourages the formation of a safe school committee and the creation of a safe school plan that allows students to identify and address different problem areas related to violence within their schools. Additionally, students are given the opportunity to anonymously answer questions regarding their perceptions of school safety and offer suggestions of ways to enhance feelings of security within the school environment.

#### **Safe and Sound Schools**

Safe and Sound Schools is a nonprofit organization created by Alissa Parker and Michele Gay, who lost their daughters during the Sandy Hook tragedy. This tragedy inspired the Safe and Sound School Initiative in which Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Gay work to provide communities with resources

to improve school safety (2015). The “*Straight A School Safety Model*” provides a variety of recommendations and activities in the form of safety toolkits which focus on the following school safety steps: (1) assessment, (2) action, and (3) audit. These safety steps include preparedness and active awareness, the evaluation of potential external and internal threats to school safety, the development of safety procedures, and the implementation of security measures. Importantly, it is emphasized that school safety and security is an ongoing process and schools are encouraged to continually monitor, redefine, and update existing practices and procedures.

#### **Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE)**

STRYVE is a national youth violence prevention program which promotes youth safety and health through collaboration with community and organizational resources and encourages the formation of positive relationships with supporting adults within the community (David-Ferdon & Simon, 2012). This model emphasizes using a continuum approach by implementing developmentally appropriate preventative measures throughout the life span. STRYVE focuses on targeting youth violence on the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels, and offers evidence-based resources and training programs to promote safety among youth within the community.

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### **Conclusion**

Although violence is not rampant within schools, even one violent death occurring in what should be a safe and secure environment is unacceptable. In order to promote learning and foster academic excellence, students must be provided with an atmosphere in which they can learn and excel. This environment of safety is one in which students feel connected and respected and have a vested interest in improving the quality of their academic environment. Student involvement in safety planning and procedures is essential and every school should have programs in place that cultivate and encourage student participation.



Any act of school violence undermines the goals of education and threatens the stability and security of the school as a whole. Oftentimes, crisis intervention and response procedures are implemented subsequent to the occurrence of a tragedy; yet this approach is inadequate. The best form of intervention is prevention. School safety procedures should be delineated in advance and adhere to best practices that have proven effective over time. This is a continuous process and safety procedures should be assessed and updated on a continual basis to ensure that the unique needs of all students within the school are being met. Additionally, the responsibility of ensuring school safety does not fall on one individual. Instead, school safety is a collaborative process which requires involvement from students, parents, teachers, administrators, school personnel, mental health professions, law enforcement officials, and the surrounding community. It is up to all of us to make an active commitment toward safeguarding American youth.

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