

AN ANALYSIS OF MASS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND SCHOOL SECURITY IN  
AMERICA: THE PROMISE OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

An Analysis of Mass School Shootings and School Security in America:

The Promise of School Resource Officers

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In response to the rise of mass school shootings, schools throughout the nation have had to take a hard look at the safety measures they have in place to protect their students. Since the Columbine shooting and the increase in school-related shootings, schools have had to increase security and rethink daily operations during a normal school day. Through literature review, the history, potential causes and possible solutions relevant to school security and mass school shootings will be examined. The addition of armed and specially trained School Resource Officers (SROs) in every school has the potential to greatly benefit the school community. Acting as a foreseeable deterrent to school related violence and potentially mass school shootings, SROs can likely play a vital role as a liaison between the school, law enforcement and the community. SROs are arguably one of the better solutions for keeping schoolchildren safe.

## Introduction

Some of the most horrific and heartbreaking scenes in American history have recently played out over the television and internet, as the American public anxiously witnessed footage of students being rushed out of schools, surrounded by armed police and S.W.A.T, after a mass school shooting has occurred. Mass school shootings have changed the nature and climate of safety in American educational institutions over the past two decades. Due to mass school shootings, security in schools throughout the nation have had to take a hard look at the safety measures they have in place to protect their students. This raises the question: What changes can be made to schools that will best protect American schoolchildren? Since the Columbine shooting in 1999 and the increase in shootings throughout the country, such as the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, schools have had to increase security and reexamine daily operations during a normal school day.

Although extremely rare compared to the number of schools in the United States, mass school shootings have become an ever-increasing problem and topic for debate in the country. Violent acts are nothing new and have occurred in schools since formal education was instituted in the United States, but never to the magnitude of a mass school shooting until recent history (Rocque, 2012). Although, U.S. schools are now safer than they have ever been before and the number of violent acts in schools has been decreasing, the number of mass killings or “rampage” shootings has increased (Rocque, 2012). Many U.S. schools remain ill-equipped to handle an active shooter wielding a semi-automatic weapon, and steps must be taken to improve the security in schools for this specific type of event.

U.S. schools are not exempt from the ever-changing economic, political and cultural conditions present in the country today (Ozmen, et al., 2010). The majority of schools built in the twentieth century were not meant to keep people out, but now school districts are faced with the challenge of making them safer for students and inaccessible for would-be shooters. Failure to successfully address this issue can lead to the cultural belief that neither local nor federal governments will be capable of preventing mass school shootings in the future (Vuori, 2016).

In order to ascertain the best possible solution, a literature review is conducted here to examine the history of mass school shootings in the United States and the numerous potential causes that influence a person to commit these crimes. Of equal importance is the examination of possible solutions that will lead to the prevention of mass school shootings. Debate on this issue continues because there is no single, surefire, quick-fix solution to the problem. Although there are many viable options to increase school security throughout the nation, arguably the best conceivable solution is to have armed School Resource Officers (SRO) placed in every school.

The presence of well-trained, armed SROs in every school will bring an added level of security to a school. This does not mean simply dropping any police officer at a school, but rather having a specially trained officer, whose main function is to operate in a school environment. The presence of a SRO will act as a deterrent to would-be mass school shooters while providing security and crime prevention services to students and staff members.

In order to establish that having a SRO in every school is the best possible solution three main areas have to be examined. The first is a closer look at past school

shootings in U.S. history and laws put forth to address the issue. Second, what are the potential causes that lead someone to commit a school shooting? These are numerous, but some of the most impactful are gun-control laws, the mass media and mental illness. Finally, a multitude of possible solutions will be examined which include realistic active shooter drills, zero-tolerance policies and the implementation of SROs.

### **History of School Shootings in the United States**

It is important to examine what a mass shooting is and how it has changed American culture. Since the formation of the educational system in the United States, there have been incidents of school violence and school shootings. The majority usually resulted in one or two deaths and were often the result of personal disputes, acts of revenge and the misguided resolve of individual students (Nedzel, 2014). A mass shooting is defined as an event resulting in the injury or deaths of four or more people, not including the shooter (Paradice, 2017).

One of the most crucial mass shooting events, and perhaps the birth of how we discern mass school shootings in the U.S., was the University of Texas Tower shooting, on August 1, 1966. On that day, Charles Whitman, an ex-marine and engineering student at the university, killed his wife and mother at their homes. Whitman then proceeded to the University of Texas campus where he climbed to the observation tower of the main building and began shooting at people on the ground (Paradice, 2017). Many armed citizens showed up with good intentions to help (Fox, 2016). Their actions did more harm than good, as bullets ricocheted off the building, hindering rescue efforts on the ground by police and medical personnel (Fox, 2016). In the end, he killed seventeen

people and injured 31 (Nedzel, 2014). Significantly, the immediate and vast amount of media coverage and lack of police planning for such an event became prevalent. This was not the first mass school shooting in the U.S., but it was a critical moment in the relationship the media would have with these types of events (Silva & Capellan, 2019). That shooting became front-page news that captivated the nation. Within the first month after the shooting, the New York Times published 17 articles about the event, three of which were front-page news stories (Silva & Capellan, 2019).

In 1953, prior to the University of Texas shooting, the School Resource Officer (SRO) program was created in Flint, Michigan (Weiler & Cray, 2011). In response to safety concerns, the program was designed to place active law enforcement officers in primary and secondary schools. It received little attention until mass school shootings became more prevalent during the 1990s (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

Quality data pertaining to school violence became available in the 1970s allowing researchers to monitor and compare trends throughout schools (Rocque, 2012). In 1976, only 2% of urban students and 1.6% of rural students experienced acts of violence (Rocque, 2012). There was a slight increase during the 1980s, which then led to a steady 70% decline from 1994 to 2007 (Rocque, 2012). While smaller acts of violence decreased during this time, “rampage” shootings, although rare, were on the rise (Rocque, 2012).

In 1990, the federal government passed the Gun-Free School Zones Act (GFSZA), which made it a federal crime to carry or fire a weapon in a school zone (Nedzel, 2014). Although an individual with a concealed carry permit was able to carry a firearm onto school grounds, it was illegal for them to discharge it (Nedzel, 2014).

Additionally, most state laws generally prohibit both the carrying and discharging of a firearm in a school zone (Nedzel, 2014).

A reflection of the violence and loss of life that happened at the University of Texas Tower shooting became prevalent at the turn of the twenty-first century. A new, different form of school-wide attack appeared, in which a disgruntled student or adult entered a school with a variety of semiautomatic firearms and killed people at random, before taking their own life (Nedzel, 2014). David Paradise (2017), from Auburn University, estimates that there have been 420 shooting deaths in U.S. educational institutions since 1840. Prior to the 1966 University of Texas tower shooting there were only three school mass murders, resulting in a total of fourteen deaths (Paradise, 2017). From 1966 to 2015, there have been seventeen mass shootings, resulting in 166 deaths and prompting a huge increase from prior years (Paradise, 2017).

This has drawn widespread concern from the public and has led to greater research regarding the safety of U.S. schools. Currently, research is conducted by many different organizations including: the Center for Disease Control (CDC), National School Safety and Security Services, and the Department of Education (Rocque, 2012). Findings conclude that the chances of a student being killed at school are very low, but the fear of being a victim of a mass school shooting is very high (Rocque, 2012).

### **Potential Causes**

When examining the cultural shift in mass school shootings and the need for armed School Resource Officers in every school, it is important to identify the characteristics of these shooters and their reasons for committing these violent acts.

According to David Paradice (2017), 97% of mass school shooters are male. Often, these young men or teenagers are attempting to get revenge on fellow students or teachers (Nedzel, 2014). Their goal is to inflict as much harm as possible before taking their own lives, while simultaneously gaining attention from the mass media (Nedzel, 2014). There are several different factors that motivate these mass murderers, including: anger, mental illness, attention, fight, domestic issues, and racial discrimination (Paradice, 2017).

Some researchers have classified mass school shootings into two distinct categories: random “rampage attacks” and “targeted shootings” (Dumitriu, 2013). They believe that not all the victims are random and that shooters, who carefully plan out their method of mass murder, have certain students or faculty members in mind when they enter a school (Dumitriu, 2013). Those who are not on the shooter’s list, are not targeted victims, and are shot simply because they are in the vicinity of the gunman at the time.

Camélia Dumitriu (2013), a professor at the University of Quebec at Montreal, emphasizes that all school shooters were emotionally detached from one or more of the following: one or more family members, their school community, and society in general. Had there been intervention and guidance from the family, school community, or society, many of these mass school shootings would have been avoided (Dumitriu, 2013).

Dumitriu separates mass school shooters into two distinct groups, those who are under the age of 30 and those who are over 30. Refer to Table 1 (Dumitriu, 2013).



Table 1: Categories of school shooters

Dumitriu stresses that all younger shooters, in Group A, share six common characteristics. These include: family issues, health-related issues, extreme political, social and religious views, easy access to guns, ties to various organizations, and cultural influences (Dumitriu, 2013). Family issues can stem from abuse, neglect, and sometimes favoritism of one child over another (Dumitriu, 2013). Health-related issues include substance abuse, anxiety disorders and any prescribed medication the shooter may have been taking (Dumitriu, 2013). Thirdly, extreme political and social views, as well as religious beliefs, can lead to aggression and distorted views of society (Dumitriu, 2013). The easy accessibility of guns is another common factor among young shooters, who are legally unable to purchase firearms on their own. Often the guns they use come from family members or friends, who are unaware of their intentions (Dumitriu, 2013). Two prime examples of this are the Columbine shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The Columbine shooters persuaded a friend to purchase their firearms, whereas the Sandy Hook shooter acquired the weapons from his mother's collection. The

fifth characteristic, ties the shooter to an organization, whether they were a Boy Scout or had family members in the military (Dumitriu, 2013). Finally, many school shooters were affected by cultural influences, such as television, the Internet, and violent video games (Dumitriu, 2013). All of these factors, in some way affected each mass school shooter's view of the world around them and influenced their decision to commit mass murder.

No school or college campus is impervious to an active shooter attack. No matter how vigilant the staff and students, there is no way to predict when a violent episode may occur (Fox, 2012). The majority of college campus shooters are middle-aged, well into their late thirties and forties (Fox, 2012). Most of these students feel intense pressure to succeed, fearing they will disappoint their family or never achieve financial success because of their age (Fox, 2012). Foreign students are increasingly susceptible to these pressures because of the added pressure of maintaining their visas and ability to stay in the country (Fox, 2012). They may also feel cut off from academic and social support because of language barriers and intense loneliness from being so far from home, family, and friends (Fox, 2012).

Research reveals that the majority of active, or "rampage," shooters are white males who target suburban or rural schools, in areas of very little crime (Rocque, 2012). The majority of victims do not matter to the shooter; the targets are symbolic and ultimately used to make an affirmation of violent recourse for injustices they have suffered (Rocque, 2012). A common thread among most active shooters is suicide, or more precisely, suicide with hostile intent (Rocque, 2012).

In the late 1990s, the FBI released a report of possible risk factors that should be considered when looking at a student who has made a school-based threat (Rocque, 2012). The four areas to be considered were: school dynamics, social dynamics, family situation, and the student's personality (Rocque, 2012). Psychological explanations lead to mental illness as the main cause, stating that most active shooters have suffered from severe depression (Rocque, 2012).

In 2009, Peter Langman classified active shooters into three distinct types: psychopathic shooters, psychotic shooters, and traumatized shooters (Rocque, 2012). Psychopathic shooters exhibit antisocial behavior, enjoy torturing others and feel no sense of empathy or remorse for others (Rocque, 2012). An example of a psychopathic killer is Eric Harris, one of the Columbine High School shooters. He wrote:

“I want to tear a throat with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut someone with my own hand, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck... show them who is god (Rocque, 2012).”

Psychotic shooters suffer from a mental illness, which disassociates them from reality. They exhibit strange behavior and are prone to hearing voices and experiencing hallucinations (Rocque, 2012). Lastly, is the traumatized shooter, who acts out in response to having suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse (Rocque, 2012). It is important for teachers, staff, and students to be vigilant of any warning signs. It is equally important to have support for students who suffer from any of these conditions. Family, community, and school psychologists play a vital role in discovering and resolving these issues.

Another factor that warrants consideration is the enrollment size of a school and the amount of support available to each student. Specifically, this relates to high school mass shootings. The impact of a mass school shooting on a community and the nation is intense and unforgettable. Yet, these events remain very rare, accounting for less than 1% of youth deaths yearly (Baird, Roellke, & Zeifman, 2017). Many are unlike other forms of school violence in that they do not target a specific individual. Random shootings do not target specific individuals for reasons of personal vendettas, gang affiliation, or drug dealing (Baird, et al., 2017). The actions of a mass school shooter remain very unpredictable, but in most cases they have been Caucasian males, in rural or suburban areas, focused on making a symbolic statement through mass killings (Baird, et al., 2017). They are often reclusive, socially excluded from their peers, and the subject of ridicule and bullying (Baird, et al., 2017). Lack of support from school faculty and the feeling of being “lost in the crowd” have led to the conclusion that violent episodes are more likely to occur in larger schools, where less attention is given to each student (Baird, et al., 2017). It is much easier to identify and deal with violent acts in a smaller school with an increased level of faculty involvement (Baird, et al., 2017). A research study conducted at Vassar College gathered data on the ratio between students and teachers. The study revealed that more school shootings occurred in schools with a larger number of students (Baird, et al., 2017). Findings also concluded that school shootings happened more when a student was involved in a tough transfer from a smaller school, with a lower student-teacher ratio to a larger school with a higher student-teacher ratio (Baird, et al., 2017). Increased monitoring of students from smaller to larger schools may help to prevent school violence. The presence of SROs in larger schools may act as a

deterrent to potential shooters and help safeguard the schools. Furthermore, a reexamination of school size and student to teacher ratio may help school districts prevent a catastrophe (Baird, et al, 2017).

### **Gun Control / Laws**

Firearms are the tools used in a mass school shooting. They are a big part of the problem, but are also offered up as part of the solution. Some proposed solutions include: armed SROs, arming teachers, or allowing licensed citizens to carry guns on school grounds. Gun control laws remain a hot topic among lawmakers today and the increased polarization surrounding the issue makes it seem nearly impossible that a bipartisan compromise for the good of society will happen anytime soon.

The Gun Control Act of 1968 established the structure for the regulation of the firearms manufacturers, dealers, and owners (Cook, 2018). This federal law requires that firearm sales conducted across state lines need to be done by licensed dealers or manufacturers (Cook, 2018). Later, the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, or the Brady Bill, was enacted. In 1994, the Brady Bill required federal background checks on gun purchases and a five-day waiting period before transfer of ownership (Cook, 2018). This was later replaced in 1998, with the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). It removed the five-day waiting period and instantly determines, through name and birth date, whether or not a buyer is eligible to purchase a firearm. Although guns are used in mass school shootings nationwide, manufacturers are not held accountable. In 2005, the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act gave gun manufacturers immunity from lawsuits that involve the misuse of a firearm (Cook, 2018).

Stricter gun laws, such as the Gun Free School Zones Act fail to reduce mass school shootings, since “few, if any” past active shooters were licensed to carry a concealed weapon (Nedzel, 2014). Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter, used three of his mother’s semi-automatic weapons: a .223 caliber Bushmaster XM15-E2S rifle, a 10mm Glock 20SF and a 9mm SIG Sauer P22g handgun (Fox, 2015). Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, carried shotguns, a semi-automatic rifle and a Tech 9 semi-automatic handgun. A friend, Mark Manes, who was later sentenced to six years in prison for firearm acts violations, purchased their weapons for them. Nikolas Cruz, responsible for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, legally purchased a Smith & Wesson M&P 15 .223 semiautomatic rifle. Cruz had no criminal record and passed a background check. In regards to mass school shootings, many gun laws are ineffective. Teens, hell-bent on committing a mass school shooting, can bypass these restrictions by acquiring guns from friends, family members, or by other illegal means.

Guns make it easier for an active shooter to kill more victims in a shorter amount of time, while psychologically distancing themselves from their victims (Fox, 2011). If a shooter had to use a knife or other non-projectile weapon, he would not be able to kill as many people, or may not be able to go through with it, when confronted with the victim face-to-face (Fox, 2011). Limiting the amount of firepower made available to the public would decrease the amount of casualties during a mass school shooting (Cook, 2018). However, the National Rifle Association and the Republican Party continue a policy pushing for the deregulation of gun sales and usage (Cook, 2018). Without wide-ranging

changes in gun control laws and a downsizing in public ownership, American culture will not change and mass shootings will remain a part of the American landscape (Fox, 2015).

Currently, twelve states allow gun owners, with a permit, to legally carry concealed firearms onto college campuses. College faculty members have voiced concern that this could cause problems when tackling sensitive issues in the classroom or when dealing with an angry student (Fox, 2016). This also presents problems for police and first responders in an active shooter situation, when they have to very quickly determine who is the shooter and who is an armed, well-intentioned bystander trying to help (Fox, 2016).

The news has not been completely negative. Democrats and Republicans have compromised on legislation that would prohibit gun sales and ownership to the mentally ill and those who commit acts of domestic violence (Cook, 2018). In 2007, the NICS Improvement Amendments Act was passed to make mental health records available during criminal background checks for gun ownership (Cook, 2018). This was enacted in response to the Virginia Tech shooting, where the system failed, allowing a mentally unstable Seung-Hui Cho to purchase firearms.

### **The Media**

Today, the mass media provides around-the-clock coverage of mass school shootings, thus shaping the public's perception of the event and the courses of action needed to prevent further shootings from happening (Silva & Capellan, 2019). In the U.S., most news reports are predicated on acts of violent crime, adhering to the old adage, "If it bleeds, it leads" (Silva & Capellan, 2019). The result of these actions lead to

oversaturated coverage of these rare mass shootings that shift fear away from more common worries to an issue that, statistically, is very unlikely to happen.

Early media coverage supplied very little information about school-related shootings, garnering very little public attention. David Paradice (2017) offered this example from *The Penny Press*, in Cincinnati, dated January 21, 1860:

One School Boy Shoots Another Dead.

-A son of Col. Elijah Sebree, of Todd County, KY, was killed in the school-house, at Trenton, a few days since. The boys of the school had been practicing upon the credulity and fears of one of their number, by inducing him to believe young Sebree had been making threats against him, and intended to kill him, whereupon the lad armed himself and walked deliberately up to Sebree, in the school-house, and shot him dead.

Contrary to the past, mass media coverage of school shootings in the twenty-first century saturate the viewing public with Internet accessibility and television news coverage operating around the clock. Certain aspects of an event receive more media coverage than others including: shooters who have little or no relationship to the victims, incidents involving semiautomatic weapons, a large number of casualties, mass murder, younger perpetrators, shooters suffering from mental illness, Asian and Middle Eastern shooters, and shooters who survive (Silva & Capellan, 2019). Mass school shootings fit the majority of these characteristics and make them prime candidates for unrestrained news coverage. The mass shooting at Columbine set off a media firestorm and received the most news coverage of any other school shooting (Silva & Capellan, 2019). The



constant and intense media coverage give the shooters instant notoriety, and they become infamous for their acts of violence.

The media's reaction to mass school shootings is often sensationalized into the idea that all U.S. schools are unsafe and potential powder kegs for violent episodes (Rocque, 2012). Michael Rocque suggests that the media's portrayal of "rampage" shootings misinterprets reality and creates a "moral panic" leading the public to believe that there is an outbreak of school shootings happening throughout the country (Rocque, 2012).

The mass media and mass school shooters share a bizarre, symbiotic relationship where mass media feeds off the extreme violence and graphic nature of the event, while the shooter requires a public outlet for their violent crime (Silva & Capellan, 2019). Constant, sensationalized coverage of these events can also lead to copycats trying to emulate the actions they have just seen (Rocque, 2012). Today, mass media coverage illustrates to young and impressionable minds how to get justice and popularity through violence (Rocque, 2012). The media's focus on young shooters makes it appear to be a youth-oriented problem, when in reality the average age of a mass shooter is 35 (Silva & Capellan, 2019). The impact of mass media attention is not isolated to the United States alone. In Finland, two mass school shootings, one in 2007, in Jokela, and the other in 2008, in Kauhajoki shook the nation (Vuori, 2016). In both cases, the attackers idolized the U.S. mass shooters at Virginia Tech and Columbine campuses (Vuori, 2016).

Included in the topic of mass media is the debate over whether or not violent video games influence violent behavior. Video games come under heavy scrutiny after a mass school shooting, particularly games that emulate school violence, such as "School

Shooter: North American Tour 2012” and, more recently, a first-person shooter game entitled “Active Shooter” (Rhen, 2011). These games allow the player to portray a mass school shooter, choosing his own weapons, then moving throughout a school, killing anyone in his path, and, finally, giving them the option of committing suicide in a violently graphic manner at the end. Games of this nature are quickly condemned by the public for their insensitivity towards victims and families affected by actual school shootings and the glamorization of school-related violence (Rhen, 2011). These games are often taken off the market after much scrutiny and a pullout of sponsor support (Rhen, 2011). There is a great deal of debate over the effect of violent video games leading to violent behavior. Iowa State University Professor, Craig A. Anderson, collected data to support the theory that daily exposure to violent video games can lead to an increased level of aggression in an individual (Rhen, 2011). However, the issue remains controversial, as some researchers dispute Anderson’s findings (Rhen, 2011). Although video game developers are protected under First Amendment Rights, the sensitivity of American culture on the issue is so overwhelming that it would be implausible for these games to be released and make a profit (Rhen, 2011). While it is true that several young mass school shooters had become fixated upon violent video games, it is difficult to assess how much it impacted their level of aggression and perception of society around them (Dumitriu, 2013).

Mass school shootings have increased significantly since the turn of the century, but, surprisingly, mass media coverage of the shootings has not increased at the same rate (Silva & Capellan 2019). Mass media outlets will always cover mass school shootings, but may have become more desensitized to them and are less likely to devote time to

them (Silva & Capellan, 2019). Research shows that shootings in the work environment are the most common, but receive less media coverage than school-related shootings (Silva & Capellan, 2019). This lack of attention can lead to safety and security measures being utilized in the wrong places (Silva & Capellan 2019). Research indicates that between 2001 and 2015, the biggest increase in security measures among U.S. schools has been in the addition of security cameras and maintaining locked doors. Refer to Table 2 (Fisher, et al. 2018).

Table 2: Nationwide percentage increase of schools utilizing any method of school security from 2001 to 2015.

While these measures create a safer environment, they also create a constant reminder that a gunman could attack at anytime. The overall chances of a student being killed during a mass school shooting are very slim, but the fear it has instilled in today's youth is astoundingly high. A 2018 Pew study revealed that 57% of students from 13-17 years old fear that they will be the victims of a mass shooting in their school (Fox &

Fridel, 2019). The five years prior to the 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida only saw 13 students out of 50 million nationwide killed by a mass school shooter (Fox & Fridel 2019). In contrast, between 2006 and 2015, 301 students were killed traveling to school, either by walking, riding a bike, or in a vehicle (Fox & Fridel, 2019). Mass media news coverage and the public's reaction to it create a high level of fear and anxiety in today's students.

Although there are many incredible advantages and benefits of social media, it too can render the same harmful effects as the mass media. Social media outlets, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter can cause similar levels of fear and anxiety and can also contribute to online bullying. Social media has become a powerful and almost indispensable part of American culture, but these outlets offer would-be shooters the opportunity to voice their situation and attempt to justify their actions. Many shooters feel they need to tell their side of the story, claiming they are the victim, perhaps of bullying or other social injustices, and are exacting justice for their suffering (Fox, 2014a). The negative effect of social media is the message it sends to other would-be shooters who seek attention and justification for committing the same types of horrible acts (Fox, 2014a).

### **Mental Illness**

The final cause that merits examination is the role that mental illness plays in the profile of a mass school shooter. A student's access to firearms is usually the first issue the media and politicians pounce on after a mass school shooting, but the mental stability and prescription medication the shooter is on should be taken into account. A common

factor among many assailants is the presence of psychiatric drugs found in their system (Duke, 2018). Many antidepressant medications, such as Prozac, Luvox, Paxil, and Zoloft, are widely prescribed to young adults (Duke, 2018). Many of these psychiatric drugs can cause “homicidal ideation,” invoking sporadic thoughts of revenge to strategically formulated plans of assault and murder (Duke, 2018). A lack of empathy and social distancing from their peers frees the shooter to carry out these horrific acts without the fear of responsibility or consequences for their actions (Baird, et al., 2017).

Mental illness is an issue that is overlooked by the media and politicians due to the fact that it is not as sensational as the gun issue. Also, pharmaceutical companies pour billions of dollars into funding politicians and members of Congress (Duke, 2018). In 2017, researchers for The Guardian reported that pharmaceutical companies spent close to 2.5 billion dollars on lobbying and campaign funds over the last ten years (Duke, 2018). Solvay Pharmaceuticals, Inc., the manufacturer of Luvox, acknowledged the negative effects their drug can have on individuals, but has not stopped producing it (Duke, 2018). A study revealed that one in twenty-five patients taking Luvox developed mania, a mental condition causing periods of great excitement, euphoria, hyperactivity, and delusions (Duke, 2018).

Pharmaceutical sales are big business in the U.S today and one out of every six people in the U.S is on some form of psychiatric medication (Duke, 2018). Some acknowledged side effects from these medications include: insomnia, homicidal ideation, confusion, agitation, anxiety, suicidal ideation, depression, paranoia, hostility, hallucinations, depersonalization, and lack of empathy (Duke, 2018). The effects of

psychiatric drugs should not be overlooked when examining the causes of a school-wide mass shooting, because they may be part of the problem.

### **Possible Solutions**

As stated, there are many causes that influence an individual to commit a mass school shooting, but all of these factors lead to the question: What is the solution? Although these events are rare, the reaction of the public is overwhelming, leading to increased security measures throughout the nation. But how much security does a school need? And how much is too much? Too many security measures can act to remind students of the constant threat of danger, which can lead to students having a negative outlook of their school environment, leading to a decrease in academic success (Fisher, et al., 2018). Students may also begin to exhibit antisocial behavior as increased security measures can cause them to feel helpless, angry, and frustrated (Fisher, et al., 2018). If implemented incorrectly, school security measures can have a lasting negative impact on a student's stress, anxiety, family relationships, and social behavior (Fisher, et al., 2018).

The rarity of mass school shootings coupled with the death of the shooters leave these events to be the least understood forms of school violence (Baird, et al., 2017). In short, there is no quick fix or finite solution to the problem of school safety and security. Across the U.S, every school is different, possessing its own set of challenges, including funding, building design, and community attributes (Ozmen, et al., 2010). Michael Rocque (2012) concluded that, "interventions have generally been guided by situational crime prevention rather than theories about why violence occurs in school" (p. 304). He

continues to argue that more research needs to be done before solid policy can be made (Rocque, 2012).

### **Federal Initiatives**

There are growing public concerns about the safety of U.S. public schools. In 2001, the Federal government took initiative with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This act required public schools to report violent occurrences, and it also reinstated two programs from the 1990s: The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act and the Gun-Free Schools Act from 1994 (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). These acts supported violence prevention programs, helped schools create systems to penalize students who carry a firearm on school grounds, and referred them to the proper authorities within the criminal justice system (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). Also, the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, spearheaded by the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services have contributed over \$450 million dollars to educational institutions since 1999 (DeAngelis, et al., 2011).

### **Active Shooter Alert System**

In 2016, the state of Michigan passed a statewide active shooter alert system, which notifies the public of an active shooter via television, radio, and mobile device (Fox, 2016a). Although a well-intentioned idea, there is opposition to it. The problem is that a crisis that ends quickly can cause a state of panic and alarm hours after it has been resolved (Fox, 2016). Republican Representative Martin Howrylak claimed, “There is also the possibility of creating public hysteria” (Fox, 2016). FBI studies have revealed

that 80% of shooters remain in the same area and most events end within two (40%) to five (60%) minutes (Fox, 2016).

### **Active Shooter Drills**

Many schools have adopted realistic active shooter drills. In some cases, these drills have included fake blood and gunshot sounds in order to maximize the realism (Fox, 2014b). It is reasonable to assess, that although done with the best intentions, these drills can have more harmful effects than benefits (Fox, 2014b). Unlike fire drills or even the duck-and-cover drills of the mid-twentieth century, active shooter drills are more aggressive and create an environment of fear and panic (Fox, 2014b). It is unclear how effective they will be in preparing students for the very rare instance they may be confronted by an active shooter. Instead, it may place them in a perpetual state of fear and uneasiness about their personal safety (Fox, 2014b). Overuse of these drills may confuse students and staff and inhibit the proper response during a real emergency (Fox & Fridel, 2019). When the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School was attacked, many of the staff members thought the active shooter alert was simply another test (Fox & Fridel, 2019). Schools need to be careful that these drills do not backfire and produce an unsafe outcome.

In addition, active shooter drills may do more to inspire potential shooters to carry out their malicious plans (Fox, 2014b). The best option here would be to train the school faculty how to handle these events and involve the students as little as possible (Fox, 2014b). A few simple and concise instructions given to the students would help reduce their fears, while still offering preparation for an active shooter event (Fox, 2014b).



### **Target Hardening**

Another viable solution is to discourage a potential shooter from targeting a school. This process is known as “target hardening” (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). Highly visible deterrents, such as security cameras and armed SROs, may deter a possible shooter if he realizes that the risk of early detection may not make it possible to successfully commit the crime (Fisher, et al., 2018). One option is to secure schools so much that they begin to resemble a fortress or prison (Nedzel, 2014). This may be more of a detriment to all students, making them feel more like prisoners than students. Also, it would be very costly and infeasible for many school districts (Nedzel, 2014). It could envelop funds that would otherwise be used to bolster student health, staff development, and other instructional programs (DeAngelis, et al., 2011).

### **Zero-Tolerance Policies**

Many schools have embraced harsher security measures, one of which is the adoption of zero-tolerance policies (Rocque, 2012). A zero-tolerance policy implements harsh punishment for a student breaking a pre-established school rule. There is no avenue for leniency and strict penalties are often given for lesser offenses, thus making them one of the most scrutinized security policies (Rocque, 2012). Although well intentioned, zero-tolerance policies were put in place to deter violent activity from happening in a school. Harsh punishments are dealt out for drug or weapons possession and offer little recourse for those who have committed the violation by accident, ignorance, or extenuating circumstances (Rocque, 2012). For example, having a gun charm on a key ring, carrying nail clippers, or having prescription medication could lead

to suspension or expulsion. Many researchers believe that zero-tolerance policies do not work and do more harm to students and the school community than good (Rocque, 2012). Furthermore, these policies can lead to a lack of social and academic participation that can have lasting effects on a student as they mature and move into adulthood (Fisher, et al., 2018).

### **School Resource Officers (SROs)**

Many schools and institutions have instituted measures instructing teachers and students what to do in the event of an active shooter situation. Some advise to flee the scene, hide in a locked room, or “distract and disarm” the assailant (Nedzel, 2014). Given the fact that an active shooter armed with a semiautomatic weapon can average shooting one bullet per second, it is unlikely that police will arrive to help on time (Nedzel, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to have an armed School Resource Officer on the school premises, in the rare instant that a mass school shooting occurs.

One of the largest expenses for school districts, and arguably the most effective, is the cost of security personnel. There are three types of personnel: School Resource Officers (SROs), security guards, and police officers (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). SROs and police officers are sworn law enforcement officers employed by the local police department (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). SROs are specially trained police officers whose main function is to operate within a school. They provide safety and security education to students and staff, while also providing daily law enforcement services (DeAngelis, et al., 2011). A good SRO can be a positive role model and have a strong influence on the development of many young students. Currently, SROs are more prevalent in high

schools, but primary schools are equally susceptible to school violence and would likely benefit from increased security. During the 2015-2016 school year, only 13.4% of primary schools had an SRO present during a full school day, as compared to 45.8% throughout high schools. Refer to Figure 1 (Musu-Gillette, Lauren, et al., 2018).

*Figure 1.* Among public schools with any sworn law enforcement officers present at school at least once a week, percentage with officers present at specific times and percentage with any officers present for all instructional hours every day, by times present and school level: School year 2015-16. Reprinted from *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017*, by Lauren Musu-Gillette, Anlan Zhang, Ke Wang, Jizhi Zhang, Jana Kemp, Melissa Diliberti and Barbara A. Oudekerk, March 2018, retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov> or <https://bhs.gov>

A SRO is part of the school community, but primarily they are a branch of local law enforcement and are police officers first (Weiler & Cray, 2011). There are Federal Grants available to help school districts start an SRO program. One initiative, known as the Community Oriented Police Services (COPS), provides funding for the SRO program for three years (Weiler & Cray 2011). After the three-year period, funding then becomes

the responsibility of the community, whereby state, local, school district, police department, and private funds are utilized (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

Having an armed law enforcement officer on staff is an excellent initiative for school safety, but it is no guarantee of safety. Simply assigning a police officer to patrol a school building will not work. The right person, with adequate training and disposition, is necessary for it to be successful. SROs need to be adept at working with minors, be knowledgeable of students' rights and juvenile law, and be able to give presentations regarding school safety, the law, and community service (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

University of Northern Colorado professors, Spencer Weiler and Martha Cray (2011) point out that the job of SROs has three distinct responsibilities: police officers, counselors on law-related issues, and teachers of law. Primarily, their first responsibility is to be a police officer, but SROs can also be very beneficial to a school by offering knowledge and perspective that may not be held by school administrators. The school administration may not have the proper knowledge and training to handle criminal issues in their school (Weiler & Cray, 2011). The SRO also possesses the training to handle a violent school situation that teachers and administrators may not be equipped to manage (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

In both primary and secondary schools, SROs most commonly are involved in coordinating with local police and emergency teams, patrolling and security enforcement, identifying problems and seeking solutions in the school, controlling motor vehicle traffic, and mentoring students. Refer to Figure 2 (Musu-Gillette, Lauren, et al., 2018). SROs perform a variety of different tasks, and it is imperative that each school has a policy outlining the duties and responsibilities of these officers. School districts often

have different definitions of the primary role of their SROs, ranging from reporting crimes to law enforcement agencies, making arrests on school grounds, use of physical restraints, school discipline, and handling the use of firearms (Musu-Gillette, et al., 2018).

*Figure 2.* Among public schools with any sworn law enforcement officers present at school at least once a week, percentage with officers participating in selected activities, by type of activity and school level: School year 2015-2016. Reprinted from *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017*, by Lauren Musu-Gillette, Anlan Zhang, Ke Wang, Jizhi Zhang, Jana Kemp, Melissa Diliberti and Barbara A. Oudekerk, March 2018, retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov> or <https://bhs.gov>

**Potential Consequences of SROs.** One example of where the program failed was the 2018 shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The school's SRO, Scot Peterson, a sheriff's deputy assigned to the school, was on location, but never entered the building. He took up a position outside the building, and at one point positioned himself in a stairwell, but failed to enter and confront the shooter. Although this is a case where the program failed, research from the Virginia

Department of Criminal Justice Services finds that an overwhelming majority of students and teachers feel safer with a SRO patrolling their school (Weiler & Cray, 2011). The presence of a uniformed and armed officer may also be an excellent deterrent for any potential school shooters or anyone thinking of committing a crime on school grounds. Due to the rarity of mass school shootings, it is difficult to determine how effective SROs are in that situation, but research indicates that they do curtail school violence overall (Rocque, 2012).

A good SRO can bolster the community by creating a strong connection between the school and police department that is critical to school safety (Weiler & Cray, 2011). However, Weiler and Cray (2011) also point out that the increase of SROs has also led to an increase in student arrests. Statistically, higher levels of security are utilized in schools with larger numbers of African American students (Fisher, et al., 2018). A community has to be wary of inadvertently creating a “school-to-prison pipeline” that could inhibit the program and leave students and staff feeling unsafe in their school (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Improper placement of an SRO can lead to the victimization of students, causing poor academic performance, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and drug and alcohol abuse (Fisher, et al. 2018). Schools should not enter into the decision to hire a SRO lightly. It is important that they establish a good working relationship with the police department in order to find the right officer for the job.

The perception of being a SRO also has to be appealing to a police officer. They have to want to do the job, and it needs to be recognized as a specialized unit of the police force (Weiler & Cray, 2011). If the program is looked upon as “glorified babysitting” and an unwanted chore, then it will not be taken seriously by police officers

(Weiler & Cray, 2011). The SRO program has to remain a priority in communities across the nation. There has to be job security, ensuring that funding will always be available to support the SRO program, even in financially difficult times (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

Student and staff perceptions of SROs are of equal importance. One study revealed that increased interaction with SROs made students more accepting and confident of their abilities to stop violence, judge fairly, and keep the school safe (Theriot, 2016). However, the study also revealed that these students were less connected to the school community (Theriot, 2016). A SRO may be a constant reminder of school violence, crime, and mass school shootings (Theriot, 2016). The presence of a uniformed, armed SRO may inhibit a student from fully participating at school if they carry the fear and anxiety of being arrested, going to a juvenile detention center, or having a criminal record (Theriot, 2016). Students may also exhibit mixed feelings about SROs after they have witnessed a fellow student being punished or arrested (Theriot, 2016). This is especially the case if it were for a minor infraction that could have been handled by a teacher or the principal (Theriot, 2016). In this case, it would be important for SROs to maintain an open dialogue with students in order to alleviate any anxiety.

Although there can be several pitfalls to implementing a SRO, there can also be many benefits. In addition to their law enforcement duties, they can be teachers, mentors, and positive role models for students. A good SRO can be a caring and responsible adult within the school community working for the safety and positive development of students (Weiler & Cray, 2011).

## Conclusion

It is important that all students feel safe and secure in order to provide the highest quality education possible. Students who are victimized and bullied at school are prone to low self-esteem, bouts of depression, and increased chances of using drugs and alcohol (Fisher, et al. 2018). It is important for schools to carefully select the security measures that will work best in their particular school. It is also vital that they communicate to the school community how and why these measures will be utilized to make the school a safer place (Fisher, et al., 2018).

It is difficult to pinpoint the causes of mass school shootings, because there are a multitude of factors that need to be taken into account. In the future, more empirical research is needed in this area. Mass school shootings are rare events that garner an enormous amount of attention. Addressing these shootings is important, but it should not overshadow other issues, such as teen suicides, that claim roughly 1,400 young lives per year or incidents of gunfire at schools, which average about one per week in the U.S. (Fox & Fridel, 2019). Gun violence is the second leading cause of death among children in the U.S., averaging 2,900 deaths per year (The Impact of Gun Violence, 2019).

Schools are arguably safer now than they have ever been before, but they should not be turned into fortresses that instill a constant state of fear in students. Security measures should be taken, but remain discreet. Funding would be much more beneficial if utilized on teachers, equipment, sports, and extracurricular activities (Fox & Fridel, 2019).

Looking toward the future, it is encouraging to see that the problem of mass school shootings is being addressed. It is important for both staff and students to be



vigilant and keep an ear out for anything suspicious. The issue of school safety should not be limited to schools, parents, and teachers, but should extend throughout the community to include law enforcement, healthcare facilities, local businesses, and community members (Ozmen, et al., 2010). Mass school shootings are a problem that twenty-first century Americans are charged with solving, and by working together they can help provide lasting solutions.

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