School crisis prevention and preparedness: Let the data be your guide!
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School psychologists are trained to be skilled data-based decision makers. We collect, analyze and synthesize data regularly, often on a daily basis. From individualized evaluations of student needs to reviews of school-wide trends, data guide what we do.

Yet in the realm of school crisis work, fear-based decisions often trump those important data-based decision making tendencies. Understandably, it is difficult not to become distressed by horrific armed assailant incidents like those that have occurred in Newton, CT, and, more recently, in Marysville, WA. As a response to those incidents, an increasing number of schools are adopting crisis response tactics that put focus, trainings, and resources squarely on countering the armed assailant or school intruder. Educator outrage, as well as community alarm can heavily influence those decisions.

But are those emotionally-charged decisions the right ones for your school? Certainly, feelings of outrage and fear can be signals to which we should all pay attention. Still, during emotionally challenging scenarios, school psychologists can provide a strong and rational voice. We can help guide our schools by carefully analyzing data trends that highlight the most probable school crises in our schools and communities. As a result, decisions about resource allocation, drills, and educator trainings can be made based on crisis likelihood or specific local vulnerabilities.

The remainder of this article will focus on two important strategies for how school psychologists can lead data-based school crisis prevention and preparedness efforts: 1) Be aware of national school crisis trends, and 2) Know the vulnerabilities in your school or community. Because the stakes involved in school crisis preparation are often high (e.g., significant time involved, financial cost, and trauma-causing potential of some training/drills), a data-based decision making approach is essential. Our students, families, fellow educators, and communities deserve no less.

Be Aware of National School Crisis Trends

School psychologists and safety teams can assist crisis prevention and preparedness efforts by being aware of national trends in violence. Youth suicide and school-associated homicide victimization rates are presented here to provide perspective. The following data points can provide starting points for determining prevention and preparedness needs.

- **1.56 per 100 thousand** – Annual odds of children ages 11 years old or younger being a victim of homicide in any U.S. setting (Based on an average calculated for the years 2005-2009; Smith & Cooper, 2013)
3.8 per 100 thousand – Annual odds of youth ages 12-17 being a victim of homicide in any U.S. setting, ages 12-17 (Based on an average calculated for the years 2005-2009; Smith & Cooper, 2013)

.04 in 100 thousand (also about 1 in 2.5 million) – Approximate annual odds of a K-12 public or private school student being a victim of a school-associated homicide (defined as: occurring on school property, on the way to/from school, or to/from/during a school sponsored event). The calculation was based on the U.S. school-associated homicide annual average of 21.7 from 2005-2009 and an approximate student population of 55 million (Center for Disease Control, 2014).

10.9 per 100 thousand (also about 1 in 10 thousand) – Annual odds of suicide in adolescents and young adults ages 15-24 (Based on 2012 data, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2012)

While any school-associated homicide is one too many, the data noted here reflect the relative rarity of such events in American schools. Young people are about 250 times more likely to die by suicide than by school-associated homicide. Furthermore, 7.8 percent of high school students report having attempted suicide in the preceding year (Lieberman, Poland & Kornfeld, 2014). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of these national trends.
When turning specifically to active shooting events in America, a recent FBI report (Blair & Schweit, 2014) reflected interesting trends. Using data gleaned from Appendix A of that report, school-based active shooter incidents were broken into two seven-year groupings: 2000-2006 and 2007-2013. The mean number of annual U.S. school-based active shooting incidents between 2000 and 2006 was 1.86 (58 killed or wounded in those 13 total incidents). The mean number of annual school shooting incidents between 2007 and 2013 was 1.71 (53 killed or wounded in those 12 incidents). These data suggest the numbers of active shooting incidents and casualties in schools alone have remained stable between 2000 and 2013. Comparatively, U.S. active shooting incidents in settings other than schools have trended upwards sharply. The mean number of annual U.S. active shooting incidents between 2000 and 2006 in any setting other than schools was 33.4 (234 total non-school incidents). The mean number of annual U.S. non-school active shooting incidents between 2007-2013 was 112 (784 total non-school incidents). These data suggest that schools remain some of the safest possible settings in America. See Figure 2 for a visual representation of the data.

![Figure 2](image_url)

These data were not presented to discourage schools from bothering to prepare for school violence, school intruders, or armed assailants. Indeed, some recent school shootings have occurred in communities that we might generally consider quite safe. The Columbine and Sandy Hook incidents are good examples; however, school psychologists and school safety teams are encouraged to start by planning crisis prevention efforts that target the most likely crises – and causes of crises - many of which are related to student mental health. Schools are highly encouraged to approach armed assailant trainings and drills extremely cautiously, as they may unintentionally narrow educator efforts toward only reacting to rare events. Such strategies are not required in most states and often not necessary to prepare students. If used, such strategies
should never be implemented at the expense of developing a more comprehensive approach that considers multiple and more likely hazards.

**Know the Vulnerabilities in Your School and Community**

All Wisconsin schools have been required to have a safety plan in place since May of 2013 (*WI 2009, Act 309 - Senate Bill 154*). One of the most important objectives a safety team can include in a safety plan involves conducting periodic vulnerability assessments (i.e., understanding and preparing for community or school crisis “blind spots”). Consider the many common possibilities beyond armed assailants: Are student mental health needs on the rise in your school? Is your school or community located in a flood zone? Is your school climate negatively influencing student conduct or bullying? The following anecdote, recently posted to a NASP online community by Dr. James Persinger, brings life to the issue. Dr. Persinger noted how the issue of active shooters in schools was raised by an audience member during a PREPaRE Crisis Prevention & Intervention workshop that he had conducted. His posting summarized his response to the audience, as follows:

> I first relayed a discussion I had with my daughter last year, who was in sixth grade at the time, about Run, Hide, Fight (a strategy for responding to an active shooter). During school, they had a lengthy discussion of active shooter procedures, including explicit discussion of the means they might use to fight if needed. She said they were told to pick up chairs and, as a group, to charge the shooter. I then relayed how a few weeks before this PREPaRE training, I had been on an internship visit in a large, wealthy Midwestern school district. I met with administration and supervisors in a large, beautiful, nearly new middle school. When I inquired about the construction zone at the front of this nearly-new building, with pride they described how the school board had recently allocated nearly one million dollars to renovate the front to make it more secure against shooters.

> Then I relayed this: Just last year in my daughter's building, there was a suicide of a parent. She had been a long-time volunteer, helped run a scouting group, and so on... very emotionally close to many of the children in that building, and the school did NOTHING. My offer to assist the school in better handling the crisis was rejected. I was essentially told that by doing something, they might create a crisis. And, in the aforementioned wealthy school district that dropped a million bucks to put bulletproof glass and other measures around the entrance of their middle school, they had NO suicide prevention program. They had a passive referral process, well, in some years anyway. That’s it.

> So, what I conveyed in the training is this: Violent incidents have declined in the past
twenty years. For instance, in the 2010-11 school year, 11 students died at school from homicide, out of a total American school student population of 55 million. Yet in my state, approximately 20 school-aged children die by suicide each YEAR, while most buildings have no suicide prevention programs.

So while I can appreciate the intent of school officials having my daughter do drills on what to do should somebody burst into her building and try to shoot her, statistically I think she'd be better off if school personnel focused on proactive mental health programs which build resilience and screen for anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior.

*NOTE: Thanks to Dr. James Persinger, school psychology professor at Emporia State University in Kansas, for granting permission to the author to use this posting.

The job of the school safety team is to collect ample data and to persuade district stakeholders to make appropriate crisis preparation and response decisions. The physical structure of a school building is an important consideration in any vulnerability assessment and may necessitate attention. However, in the anecdote just shared, a carefully considered vulnerability assessment could have provided the data needed to shift valuable resources toward more pressing district needs - suicide prevention and intervention efforts in this case.

**Critical Resources**

In addition to becoming familiar with general trends in school violence data, such as those reported here by the CDC and FBI, readers are encouraged to consider the vulnerability assessment training provided within PREPaRE Workshop 1 - Crisis Prevention & Preparedness: Comprehensive School Safety Planning. The training materials contain a sample vulnerability assessment that can help safety teams evaluate multiple physical and psychological vulnerabilities in the school environment. The assessment can highlight problems related to building access, bathrooms, the cafeteria, hallways, the playground or the parking lot. This tool can also help schools prioritize planning for potential vulnerabilities such as chemical spills, sexual assaults, and dam failure, among others.

Of additional note, at the time of this writing (November 2014), scholars from several different school-based fields around the country have been collaborating on the completion of a Best Practice Guidelines in Armed Assailant Drills document. Armed assailant drills are not required of schools in Wisconsin or most other states and probably not necessary for most schools. However, if your school is contemplating doing one, exceptionally careful planning and consideration of best practices is warranted. Look for more information about armed assailant drills in the near future.
In conclusion, school psychologists are encouraged to get involved with school safety planning efforts. If we do not assist with safety plan development, others may make uninformed plans without us (or, perhaps, make no plans at all!). An informed school psychologist’s awareness of general crisis trends and local vulnerabilities can be critical to appropriate prevention and preparation efforts, including ensuring substantial consideration of student mental health. Let the data be the guide for your school.

References


**Editor’s Note:** The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction was recently awarded a $472,000 grant to support school emergency management preparedness in Wisconsin. That grant will contribute to low-cost PREPaRE workshops for schools and educators around the state for the next 18 months. UW-River Falls faculty members, Dr. Todd Savage and Dr. Scott Woitaszewski, and Carol Zabel from the Wisconsin Safe and Healthy Schools Center will conduct PREPaRE Workshop 2 in Rice Lake, WI on January 13th and 14th, 2015. Additional winter/spring workshops will be offered throughout Wisconsin in 2015. For more information about currently scheduled PREPaRE workshops in Wisconsin, contact Carol Zabel (czable@cesa10.org) or Christine Kleiman (ckleinman@cesa7.org).