

Is There Any Way For Schools To Prevent Shootings?

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Could anyone have stopped this? That's one of the biggest questions for schools and educators as the nation takes in the facts of the shooting in Parkland, Fla., that has left 17 dead and 23 injured.

While the U.S. remains a global outlier by far when it comes to mass shootings, and owns 42 percent of the world's guns, the fact is that most schools in the country have taken steps to prepare for this kind of threat.

Since the Columbine massacre in 1999, schools have changed the way they respond to both potential threats and actual attacks. And they've done so even without coordinated federal oversight or much in the way of dedicated resources, either for training, safety or broader prevention.

Warning signs

There is no one profile of those who cause violent deaths in schools, other than the fact that they tend to be male. In addition, no federal law requires K-12 schools to report violent crimes, which means there is no central repository of such reports. (There is such a law for colleges and universities).

The National School Safety Center, a nonprofit, has compiled a list of the following pattern of behaviors from published reports of students and former students who have caused violent school deaths, which include:

- Violent temper
- Has brought a weapon to school
- Serious disciplinary problems
- Fringe of his peer group
- Bullies peers or is an abusive partner
- Preoccupied with weapons
- Has been expelled from school
- Cruelty to animals
- Lack of family supervision
- Prefers violent themes in media
- Depressed or suicidal

From what we know about the alleged perpetrator in Florida, so far, he satisfies almost every one of these. And of course these indicators often show up on social media these days. As they did here.

Schools' ability to respond

What we also know so far in Florida is that the school seemed to take this student's behaviors very seriously. He was expelled for disciplinary reasons.

Not every young person who displays these behaviors is an imminent threat to the public. There is no 1-to-1 correlation between any mental health issue and criminal behavior. In fact, people struggling with mental health issues are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence.

However, what each of these red flags has in common are clear indicators of someone who needs mental health intervention and support. But there is a dearth of resources for that.

One in 5 K-12 students in the United States has a mental health problem, as we've reported. But 4 in 5 of those problems go untreated.

In part that may be because, on average nationwide, each school counselor is responsible for nearly 500 students. And there is just one school psychologist for every 1,400 students.

Incidents prevented

They don't always make the headlines, but in at least 21 cases since 2001, family members, classmates or school authorities have reported young people who seem to be planning school attacks. The details of these cases are eerily similar: a stockpile of weapons, maps, a threat written in a school assignment or posted on social media. The reports have led to charges as serious as attempted murder.

Just this week, in Everett, Wash., a grandmother reported her 18-year-old grandson to police. She showed the officers a journal that allegedly included detailed plans of different weapons.

And exactly 17 years before Parkland, on Valentine's Day, 2001, an 18-year-old was arrested at school in Elmira, NY. According to The New York Times:

[A] senior at Southside High School, passed a disturbing note to another student. That student gave the note to a teacher, who alerted school administrators. A police officer was dispatched ...

The officer found him in the school cafeteria, armed with a .22-caliber Ruger semiautomatic, the police said. Beside him was a duffel bag crammed with 14 pipe bombs, 3 carbon dioxide cartridge bombs filled with gunpowder, one propane bomb and a sawed-off shotgun with several rounds of pellets.

Policy changes

Prevention can be looked at through a broader lens too. There's a growing awareness that schools do have a responsibility over their social and emotional climate, and that successful interventions can save lives in multiple ways.

The new federal education law requires states to report data related to school climate and safety. Things like: how safe students feel at school, the prevalence of fights, and even suicidal thoughts.

And researchers say that, when this data is reported, it can help target whole-school interventions.

There is solid evidence backing approaches like restorative justice, social and emotional curricula, wraparound mental health services and networks of referrals. These big-picture public health approaches can reduce bullying, suicidal ideas and discrimination as well as, potentially, school violence. But it all takes money and training to do well.

Question: What do you think can be done to prevent school shootings?