Chapter 48
Mass Shootings in Rural American Schools

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ABSTRACT

Although student homicides have remained consistently low over the past decades, highly publicized lethal incidents in American schools have garnered concern among the public. Mass shootings in primary and secondary schools have impacted the fear of victimization and subsequently affected school policies to prevent and control school violence. While school violence is largely viewed as a problem in urban schools, mass shootings have occurred more often in town and rural schools. This chapter examines the nature, prevalence, and incidence of mass shootings and multiple victim violence in rural schools. The chapter includes a review of contributing factors to mass school shootings and examines perceptions and fear of the problem from students and parents. The chapter concludes with threat assessment, and research on prevention and control strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A 17-year-old student, armed with a sawed off shot-gun and pistol, stormed into an art class at an east Texas high school. Witnesses claim the gunman yelled and cursed as he fired shots inside the school, killing ten and injuring at least another ten. Clad in a black trench coat, he donned a T-shirt underneath with the phrase "Born to Kill." It was Friday morning, May 18, 2018, at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, a small community of about 13,000 people. After the carnage, 8 students and 2 teachers were dead, and a normally quiet community was reeling from a horrific tragedy. But unfortunately, it was not the first time a school community outside of a central city suffered from the victimization of a mass shooting.

Research shows that homicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers in the United States (Minino, 2010). Although homicides in schools have remained consistently low over the past decades, highly publicized lethal incidents in American schools have garnered concern among the public. While school violence is largely viewed as a problem in urban schools, mass shootings have occurred more often in schools in town and rural communities. So while urban schools may be depicted as more violent than their rural counterparts, multiple victim homicides have been committed by youth in non-metropolitan schools across the country. Mass shootings in secondary schools and higher education institutions have impacted the fear of victimization and subsequently affected school policies to prevent and control school violence. The number of mass shootings in rural schools indicates a need to examine the availability of violence prevention resources, as well as explore the influence of any cultural factors and their relationship to youth violence. Such tragedies run counter to the low crime rates generally experienced in rural and small-town America.

Much of the public discourse and research into U.S. schools have focused on those in metropolitan areas. This is likely because the majority of schools in the nation are located in urban and suburban areas. Data shows that populations have increased in urban and suburban areas, while rural area populations have declined (Ratfliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016). Even so, a substantial proportion of students and approximately one-third of schools are located in rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; Lavalley, 2018). The term "rural" covers a variety of communities, but according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the classification means that the area is nonmetropolitan (Ratfliffe et al., 2016). While most American students are not educated in rural schools, data indicates that over 5.6 million students were enrolled in public schools in towns and over 9.1 students were enrolled in public schools in rural communities across the United States. (NCES, 2016). These numbers vary considerably at the state level, where over half of public schools are in rural communities in 13 states (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). In fact, 11.4 and 18.4 percent of enrollments in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States are in small town and rural areas, respectively (NCES, 2016). Like their counterparts in metropolitan areas, schools in rural communities face a number of challenges in providing an environment conducive to learning. One of those challenges is serious school crime. Over 500 youth have been killed at or near a school in the last 25 years. Schools in small towns and rural communities have not been immune from these tragedies. In Agnich's (2015) analysis of school-based mass murder attacks, she found that middle and high schools in rural areas are targeted more frequently than those in suburban and urban areas.

School-Associated Homicides

Violent deaths at school are rare. Eighteen of the 1,478 homicides of youth ages 5-18 occurred at school between July 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016 (Musu, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2019). Table 1 indicates the number of homicides that occurred on school property and in route to and from school and school events over the past twenty years. While the number of school-related homicides fluctuates each year, these homicides are less than 3 percent of all youth homicides. Studies show that the majority of school shootings are perpetrated by current students (Rocque, 2012). Most of these homicide incidents were perpetrated with firearms and involved a single victim (Shultz, 2013).

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