Chapter 3
A Systematic Review of K–12 School Shooting Research

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ABSTRACT

High-profile school shootings (i.e., rampage school shootings) have fueled empirical and general inquiry into school shooting characteristics and have been a point of emphasis for stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, and students) nationwide. The current chapter's goals are to provide a systematic overview of the available evidence examining school shooting incidents. Specifically, this review is intended to gather, summarize, and review relevant peer-reviewed studies on the topic, integrate and identify key findings and themes, identify gaps and limitations in the literature, and discuss implications for directions for future research. Further, it is expected this systematic review can inform practitioners, academics, researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders on the current state of school shooting research and promote innovation in methodological approaches for investigating school shooting incidents.

INTRODUCTION

High-profile school shootings (i.e., rampage school shootings) have fueled empirical and general inquiry into school shooting characteristics and have been a point of emphasis for stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, and students) nationwide (Elsass et al., 2016; Joseph et al., 2023; Joseph & Purser, 2023; Pane, 2019; Rocque & Duwe, 2018). Further, these incidents have fueled public and media discourse on gun control legislation, public concern for gun violence, and safeguarding educational institutions (Burton et al., 2021; Gammell et al., 2021; Schafer et al., 2018; Joseph, Motley, et al., 2023). Consequently, many schools have enacted target hardening strategies (e.g., zero tolerance policies, increased security personnel and equipment) as a solution; however, the effectiveness of these strategies has not received much empirical support (Blitzman, 2016) and have been shown to contribute to the school to prison pipeline and discrimination with schools (Blitzman, 2016; Henderson et al., 2021; Irwin et al., 2013; Lacorazza & Siaba, 2023). For instance, many schools increased security measures following the Columbine shooting with public support to protect students (Aguado & Joseph, 2023; Burton et al., 2021). Although support is contingent on party affiliation, some policymakers have suggested arming staff with firearms, assuming that armed staff can deter potential perpetrators or quickly subdue the perpetrators (Mooney et al., 2022; Stanford, 2022). Overall, these extremely rare incidents (i.e., rampage school shootings) dominate public and empirical discourse while ignoring more common types of school shooting incidents.

The emphasis on rampage school shootings (i.e., indiscriminate shooting events unrelated to any other crime or incident, with at least four victims), a commonly used definition in the literature, is partially responsible for the disagreement amongst scholars for developing a universal definition for school shootings (Elsass et al., 2016; Joseph et al., 2023; Pane, 2019; Rocque & Duwe, 2018). Consequently, the lack of a definition has indirectly contributed to both the under and over-reporting of school shooting incidents, lack of a clear direction for school shooting research, issues in validity in school shooting research, difficulty testing traditional theories of crime for explaining incidents, and methodological issues when testing research questions associated with school shooting incidents (Elsass et al., 2016; Joseph, Purser, et al., 2023; Rocque, 2012). Each of the issues makes it difficult to develop and evaluate effective strategies to prevent and mitigate the severity of school shooting incidents. For instance, databases attempting to capture incidents of school shootings to capture the extent of the problem suffer inconsistent definitions, which leads to the over and underestimation of these school shooting incidents (Elsass et al., 2016; Joseph, Purser, et al., 2023). Further, many databases only focus on rampage school shooting incidents, which only capture the rarest form of school shooting incidents (Elsass et al., 2016). Although well intended, these databases reduce the ability

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