

Toward Preventing Future Tragedies: Mass Killings on College Campuses, Public Health, and Threat/Risk Assessment

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Mass Killings on College Campuses: Public Health, Threat/Risk Assessment, and Preventing Future Tragedies

Prevention of psychological injuries is important in the broader area of psychological injuries and the law. One area that is particularly prominent in this respect involves the serious violence that has occurred on some college campuses recently. The safety of those on our campuses is important. In certain respects, colleges and universities (“colleges” will refer to both in this article) function as a haven from the pressures and expectations of the broader society, providing a setting in which youth can learn, mature, and prepare to assume adult roles. In other respects, they reflect some of the same financial and performance pressures that students will face in the personal and professional roles they assume upon graduating. But it remains essential that colleges provide a safe environment in which undergraduates mature intellectually and emotionally in pursuit of an undergraduate degree, and others train to receive advanced degrees. The functioning of a civilized society depends in part upon a continuing supply of educated citizens and professionals who train in colleges.

Colleges have several characteristics that make them vulnerable to violence and crime. First, most campuses are not only open, but completely open. Anyone can enter the campus, without identification or a reason to be there. Second, since the student body is typically comprised almost exclusively of people in the age range that is associated with the highest levels of crime and violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>, retrieved 11-14-08), the base rates for violence would be expected to be higher than in the general population that has a broader range of ages. Third, there is a pronounced power differential between faculty and students, creating at least the potential of verbal, emotional, and even sexual abuse. Fourth, students are typically under a great deal of stress, and often removed from family and friends who would usually help them with adjustment and coping. For those students who flourish socially and academically, this may not cause much distress (although performing well academically and developing social networks may be associated with their own distinctive pressures). For those who experience failure and loneliness, however, college can be a terrifying place, and the associated isolation may intensify problems. Finally, because of traditions of academic freedom that encourage free speech and tolerate nonconformity, as well as law and policy protecting student privacy, colleges often lack the ability to respond coherently and collaboratively to threats. Individual faculty and supervisors may act as independent agents often not fully aware of their own limitations in these areas, being more likely to counsel a student academically than to notify the student health center or campus security.

Even though colleges are susceptible to violence for these reasons, society’s expectation that campuses provide a safe haven for continued intellectual and emotional development is one reason why mass killings (three or more killings

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committed around the same time; see 28 U.S.C. § 540B(2), 2000; Kraemer et al. 2004) committed on college campuses are so shocking. When they do occur, it is important for educators, legislators, security officials, and citizens to take a close look at the tragic event to determine steps that may reduce the risk of such recurrences. However, it is crucial that policy makers remain cognizant that reactions in the form of policy changes based on isolated events (however horrific) can result in unanticipated, unintended, and deleterious consequences for some of those affected by the changes.

In this article, we will review the advances in threat and risk assessment that have occurred in the last four decades, and consider them in the context of lessons learned from two mass killings on college campuses that were separated by 41 years: Charles Whitman, who killed 16 people and wounded another 33 firing from the tower that is part of the Main Building on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin in 1966, and Seung-Hui Cho, who killed 32 students and faculty at Virginia Tech in 2007 before killing himself. We will demonstrate how some of these advances can be helpful while others could be harmful if implemented. Since those who attend and work on college campuses and their families should be able to expect the implementation of reasonable and effective measures to minimize the risk of future tragedies, we also discuss metaphors that can be used to understand and address the problem of campus shootings and attend to public perception. We conclude with a set of recommendations for educators and policy makers.

Charles Whitman and Seung-Hui Cho

Charles Whitman was a 24-year-old former Eagle Scout and U.S. Marine in the summer of 1966, studying architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. His reasons for killing his wife and mother the night before he took a footlocker containing seven guns, a knife, food, and water up to the observation deck of the tower in the center of the UT campus are not well understood. Whitman himself died in the course of that afternoon, shot to death by an Austin city patrolman who had ascended the tower as part of the police response to the shootings. A total of 17 people died (including Whitman) and another 33 were wounded by Charles Whitman, whose deadly accuracy was undoubtedly enhanced by his training as a sharpshooter with the Marines.

Seung-Hui Cho was one of two children of South Korean immigrants who moved to the U.S. in 1992. They settled in Fairfax, Virginia and established a dry-cleaning business. They ultimately came to own this business through a great deal of hard work, and purchased a townhouse in Centreville in 1997. Cho's mother told relatives that her son had autism,

although he was eventually diagnosed as having “selective mutism” that was part of an anxiety disorder. Throughout middle school and high school, he was often so uncommunicative that he would not even respond “present” or raise his hand when the teacher took the roll. He did receive some treatment in his secondary and high school years, but this did not continue when he enrolled at Virginia Tech—information about his diagnosis and treatment was not provided to university officials, per applicable federal law, and Cho himself did not seek disability accommodation. On April 16, 2007, at 7:15 AM, Cho first shot and killed two students in a campus dormitory. The subsequent shootings took place in Norris Hall, a campus building containing a number of classrooms. Cho, armed with two handguns, went from room to room on the second floor hallway, shooting and killing an additional 30 people before shooting and killing himself. An emergency 911 call was made at 9:43, just as Cho began shooting. When police were able to break into the building 8 minutes later (Cho had chained several doors shut), the rampage was over and the shooter was dead.

There are many questions that will remain unanswered about the motives of each of these mass killers. It is also tempting to ascribe what *is* known about Whitman and Cho as likely to give us important clues in this respect and to generalize from those assumptions to other shooters, past and future. This is one of a number of biases, well-recognized in decision theory, which must be avoided in a post-hoc analysis. In this case, *hindsight bias* would tempt us to overattribute the importance of various factors and influences since the tragic outcome is known. Nevertheless, there are several sources of common ground between Whitman and Cho:

- Both planned their acts carefully, obtaining the necessary supplies that allowed them to inflict tremendous harm before authorities could contain them.
- Both showed a clear determination to kill a large number of people.
- Both had access to weapons, and obtained multiple weapons and a good deal of ammunition.
- Both were sufficiently familiar with the operation of their weapons (Whitman through his military training, Cho because he practiced at a local firing range) to use them with deadly efficiency.
- Both acted alone.
- Both died in the course of their shooting rampage.

What can we learn from these tragedies, separated by 40 years? Following the Whitman killings at The University of Texas at Austin, the student Counseling Center was established to enhance the resources available to troubled students. After the Cho rampage, Virginia Tech (and many other colleges around the United States) greatly improved their disaster notification systems, to include the application

of text messaging and e-mail. But what can theoretical and empirical advances in threat assessment and risk assessment tell us about further reducing the risk of future tragic mass killings?

The Analogy to School Violence

Although the analogy is imperfect, it is useful to consider the research that has been conducted on school shootings during the last decade. Shootings in U.S. secondary schools occur in a smaller setting in which there is more familiarity and hence more contact between the same students and teachers. The secondary school setting also features students who are several years younger than college undergraduates, and the primary problem with aggression in secondary school (bullying) is not a significant problem at colleges. Nevertheless, there are important similarities as well. School shootings are rare but extremely serious acts of violence committed by youth in an educational setting, sometimes involving specifically targeted individuals, and also requiring a certain amount of planning. There may be particularly applicable findings and conclusions that have been drawn from work in this area (see, e.g., Cornell 2003, 2006; Mulvey and Cauffman 2001; Reddy et al. 2001) that will also be important in considering campus shootings. The work in school violence yields five important points that are apparently applicable to mass shootings on college campuses:

- The far more prevalent problem with aggression in schools is not shootings. In school contexts, it is bullying; on college campuses it is more likely to be date rape and hazing as part of organizational initiations. In both settings, much of this aggression is unreported and hence underestimated by official records (Cornell 2006).
- Most of those who make implied or even direct threats will not go on to commit serious violence. Communications with potentially threatening content can be constructed for a variety of reasons, including the sequelae of angry disputes, fear, jealousy, ideology, and a host of other possibilities. But there is a substantial gap between threatening and acting, particularly taking action that involves lethal violence using weapons (Cornell 2003).
- “Profiling” potential school or college shooters is a futile exercise that will inevitably identify far more individuals than would ever go on to commit such violence (Mulvey and Cauffman 2001).
- Threat assessment, by contrast, involves careful consideration of the nature of the threat, the level of risk posed by the individual, and the necessary actions to reduce the threat. It has been refined by organizations such as the U.S. Secret Service, which constantly deal with threats of targeted violence toward protectees, and can be applied in a variety of other contexts (including schools and colleges; Borum and Reddy 2001; Reddy et al. 2001).
- “Zero tolerance” policies are ineffective and potentially harmful to a variety of individuals. They impose a “one size fits all” response on conduct ranging from minor violations of rules to serious threats of severe violence (Cornell 2003, 2006).

Amending Policies on Campus Violence: Decision Theory, Public Perception, and the Importance of Metaphor

Whenever there is a tragedy like the mass killings committed by Whitman or Cho, there is tremendous public pressure to change the policies under which the event occurred. It is not unusual for Congress or a state legislature to pass a law intended to drastically lower the risk of the recurrence of such acts. But law and policy that are relevant to violence risk have a potential impact on four cohorts: *true positives* (individuals predicted to be violent who would actually behave violently); *false positives* (those predicted to be violent who would not behave violently); *false negatives* (those predicted not to be violent, who nevertheless go on to behave violently); and *true negatives* (those predicted not to be violent, who are not). These terms can be combined to reflect the extent to which a procedure accurately identifies those who will be violent, a measure known as the *true positive rate* or *sensitivity* and defined as $TP/(TP + FN)$. They can also be combined to reflect accuracy in identifying those who will not be violent, through the *true negative rate* or *specificity*: $TN/(TN + FP)$. Mass killings are extremely rare. In decision theory terms, they present a classic “low base rate” problem; adjusting decision criteria to identify more true positives will invariably increase the number of false positive errors. This means two things. First, it is not possible to make accurate decisions targeting individuals who would commit campus shootings without mistakenly identifying a large number of individuals who would not. Second, and consequently, interventions and decision criteria changes should focus on problems that are related to extreme violence, but occur much more frequently (Mulvey and Cauffman 2001).

As such changes are considered, it is important that their potential impact is weighed carefully. In a related (but not identical) vein, it is also important that changes be *perceived* as effective and responsive. A meaningful accounting of the substantive impact of policy changes

may not be possible for years—but public support (or lack thereof) for changes may be apparent as quickly as the next election, or the time it takes a board of regents to ask for the resignation of a college president.

How the problem of youth violence is understood by society, and particularly by law-makers, is particularly important in a policy context. Dodge (2008) has recently suggested that metaphor plays an important role in the public's awareness and understanding of the problem of chronic youth violence. Although campus shootings could more accurately be described as episodic and rare than as frequent and chronic, the central point is the same: how we think of campus shootings and those who commit them is affected by applicable metaphors for campus violence. Indeed, some of Dodge's specific metaphors even apply. Among the current metaphors about chronically violent youth, he identifies several (corrective surgery, vaccine, and chronic disease) that may be applicable, judging from the public response to both the Whitman and Cho shootings. Much of the commentary focused on what mental health symptoms were experienced (in Whitman's case, speculation about a brain tumor; in Cho's, a focus on his learning difficulties, selective mutism, and social isolation). Given these problems, some argued (with all the bias of hindsight), why did we not foresee the coming tragedy? Why did we not isolate and treat these symptoms (vaccine) or remove them entirely, as we would in corrective surgery (perhaps literally, by removing the individual from the campus)?

As an alternative to these metaphors, Dodge suggests, we should instead consider

- *Preventive dentistry*—involving a system of universal, selected, and indicated intervention policies that become more intensive as need dictates;
- *Cardiovascular disease*—considering risk factors that are weakly related to the target outcome, others that are more strongly related, and an emphasis on long-term prevention;
- *Public health model*—focusing on injury and victims to elicit popular support, this approach would conceptualize violence of various kinds as specific problems to be targeted for reduction and elimination; and
- *Public education for illiteracy*—combines specific educational interventions for those experiencing social difficulties with more intensive interventions for those at higher risk.

It may be that a narrow focus on campus shootings as risk-reduction targets is not particularly facilitated by prevention, education, and intervention-as-needed metaphors. But what if the extremely rare mass killing on college campuses were viewed in the larger social and interpersonal contexts of university communities? What policy changes would minimize the collateral harm to any affected by these changes,

provide needed assistance at a level that balances the need to avoid intrusiveness and stigmatization against the need for community safety, and *perhaps* help that rare individual who *might* engage in a serious act of violence?

Developments in risk assessment (see, e.g., Andrews and Bonta 2006; Borum and Reddy 2001; Douglas and Skeem 2005; Dvoskin and Heilbrun 2001; Heilbrun 2009; Kraemer et al. 2003; Monahan and Steadman 1994) during the last two decades can help to inform our thinking. Risk factors (influences that increase the probability that violence will occur) can be considered as residing within the *individual* or associated with the *situation*. Likewise, protective factors (influences decreasing the likelihood of violence) can be individual or situational. Approaches to risk assessment can focus primarily on (a) predicting or classifying risk level, or (b) both classifying risk level and identifying risk-relevant needs. Among such needs, those of primary interest are the needs that can potentially be changed through planned intervention (“dynamic” risk factors), as opposed to those that are historical (e.g., violence history) or otherwise unchangeable through intervention (e.g., gender). The risk assessment task in the context of campus shootings is clearly not exclusively predictive. Extremely low base rates and the problem of stigmatizing and otherwise adversely affecting false positives render that alternative unworkable. However, it might be conceptualized as a combination of assessing the level of threat with gauging the indicated level of response—an approach that is quite similar to the threat assessment process described by others (Borum and Reddy 2001; Cornell 2003) in the context of secondary school shooting risk.

So, the appropriate strategy in preventing and reducing the risk for college shootings might be conceptualized in two broad stages. The first would involve invoking a public health perspective on primary prevention, with the target being all forms of physical aggression and threats of aggression on a college campus. The second would implement a threat assessment-driven approach to identifying individuals who gave some indication of considering lethal or otherwise serious acts of violence, gauging this risk, and recommending specific interventions and conditions that would manage that risk if the individual remained on campus. In addition, there are a number of situational influences that might be incorporated in the prevention and assessment stages, as well as in the course of managing an ongoing act of serious violence. We will describe these in more detail in the next section.

Interventions Promoting Public Safety on College Campuses

Events involving mass killings on college campus are fortunately very rare. Consequently, it is very unlikely that

they could ever be predicted accurately, and there would be a high proportion of “false positive” predictive errors if this were attempted (Mulvey and Cauffman 2001). As an alternative, we recommend colleges consider using the broad stages of prevention and threat assessment/intervention, respectively, noted in the last section. The first stage—prevention—might incorporate a number of procedures:

- *Promote a greater sense of community and collective responsibility for the safety and well-being of those who live, study, and work on college campuses, and identify and refer troubled students, faculty, and staff members to appropriate help.* This could be addressed through the orientation of new students, faculty members, and staff. The college could also develop a clear policy about responsible steps in the face of concerning behavior that would balance student privacy against campus safety through the referral to a campus office (e.g., Dean of Students) that would coordinate a threat assessment procedure conducted by a group of those experienced, trained, and competent in this area. Although difficult to accomplish, this goal has two potentially powerful advantages. First, it should improve the quality of life for many individuals, and is unlikely to harm any of them substantially. It moves the exclusive focus from shootings or other extremely rare acts to include the less serious but more common problems of date rape, hazing, and (on some campuses) robberies committed by those who are not students. Second, it increases attention to the small number of students who may be experiencing very substantial problems, including isolation, substance abuse, depression, and thoughts of self-harm. Any of these problems are sufficient to justify an offer of help and, occasionally, an attempt to persuade an individual to accept it. This strategy will not identify many potential campus shooters, as there are not many to identify. But for the very small number who fantasize and sometimes plan for such acts, it may offer the opportunity for detecting this risk and intervening.
- Perhaps equally important, this strategy recognizes that people experiencing difficulties are subject to a wide variety of adverse outcomes, only one of which is interpersonal violence. For example, suicide is the second leading cause of death on college campuses. Further, it is useful to consider mass murder and suicide together; the majority of mass murderers take their own lives, and the rest are likely to spend the rest of their lives in prisons. While only a tiny percentage of suicidal students plan or carry out mass murder, providing help to students in trouble will prevent more suicides—perhaps one of which is committed by an individual who might have tried to take others along for the tragic ride.
- *Promote respectful and responsive behavior, and a sense of fairness, through interactions at all levels of university.* There are a variety of approaches to addressing this goal. Clear and fair policies (described during orientation), emphasis to faculty and staff about their interactions with students, modeling and teaching of communication skills, the availability of mediation and other forms of dispute resolution, and the modeling of such behavior by senior leaders within the college are all possibilities. Individuals who perceive that they are treated unfairly or disrespectfully, ignored if they should complain about it, and marginalized in the process of making important decisions about their life are likely to feel dissatisfied and frustrated. For those who are well adjusted and resilient, this may lead to a “live with it, get your degree and move on” approach, or an expression of dissatisfaction through available and socially acceptable means. For others with fewer interpersonal resources or limited social support—those who see fewer effective alternatives for solving problems created by organizational dysfunction—the alternative of violence is less far-fetched. Like the previous recommendation, the creation of an organizational expectation of respectfulness, responsiveness, and fairness is likely to benefit a number of individuals while harming very few.
- *Make conflict resolution services available.* Students with disputes with other students, faculty members, or university staff members should perceive that another option is available outside the usual alternatives (e.g., dorm adviser → dean of student life, or faculty member → department head → dean of the college). Some colleges have created an ombudsperson position for just this reason. Such an individual (who could be a faculty member or an individual not employed by the college) is available to listen, advise, and sometimes attempt to mediate a dispute toward a resolution acceptable to both the student and the other individual involved in the dispute. For this alternative to be effective, students must be aware of its existence and perceive the ombudsperson or mediator to be substantially independent of the influence of either disputant.
- *Control weapon possession.* Almost without exception, there is no place for guns on college campuses. Students should be prohibited from obtaining or possessing guns on campus, and this should be enforced as carefully as possible. It is worth observing that the substantial supply of powerful weapons and ammunition obtained by both Whitman and Cho enabled them to inflict horrific damage in a relatively short period of time.
- *Provide voluntary services to those at risk for depression, self-harm, learning problems, social isolation, and substance abuse.* University-based psychological

counseling and other services should be available to those with significant mental health and physical health problems. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, it would be illegal to discourage such availability by failing to provide appropriate accommodations for those who document the need for such. The test should be functional—those who experience problems but do not seek assistance or accommodation should be able to choose that option so long as they are able to adequately fulfill the demands of the student role. But some might be reluctant to seek services even when such services would substantially assist them in daily functioning, social interactions, and academic performance. We would suggest that it is necessary to have a counseling center or student health center appropriately staffed and equipped to handle a range of student problems (see Flynn and Heitzmann 2008). We would add, however, that the intervention of a residence hall advisor, or departmental advisor, or faculty member to encourage the use of such services when they may be indicated could make an important difference in whether a troubled individual considers this alternative seriously. We know of no evidence that mental or physical disabilities have a proximal or even a distal relationship to campus violence. However, mental health services are equally valuable to address situational crises and stressors that have been associated with virtually every instance of extreme campus violence. In addition, provision of these services to troubled students may prevent other, less dramatic but tragic consequences such as suicide, addictions, or pregnancies.

- *Routinely ask about violent fantasies and thoughts of harming others in triage for those receiving services, just as therapists in Tarasoff (1976) jurisdictions should routinely ask such questions.* Therapists in jurisdictions in which *Tarasoff*-type laws apply should routinely ask questions concerning violent thoughts and fantasies, particularly as part of an initial evaluation (college campuses are not exempt from *Tarasoff*-type statutes, as the facts of the original *Tarasoff* case, occurring on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley, would attest.) Campus mental health centers should have a clear protocol for handling cases in which self-report or other indications suggest that a client is at risk for lethal or otherwise serious violence toward others (see Monahan 1993). Similarly, students, faculty, family, and staff members must be encouraged to report troubled people, including those who scare others or make threatening statements, even when they are not certain that the threat would be carried out. In order to encourage people to make such reports, it is crucial that the college's response to such reports is presumptively beneficent. Even

in the extreme case in which a person must be temporarily or permanently removed from the campus, he or she should be treated with dignity and respect.

The second stage we have termed threat assessment and intervention. It would also involve several distinct aspects:

- *Provide specialized threat assessment services in a small number of cases, including those in therapy whose words or behaviors suggest a risk of violence to self or others.* The effective implementation of threat assessment procedures would differ across colleges, depending upon available resources and personnel. At a minimum, it should include one individual who is quite familiar with the process of assessing the risk of targeted violence, in consultation with university personnel and perhaps a consultant from outside the college. It may include a larger number of individuals, and function as a team (Flynn and Heitzmann 2008). This process should have the potential to determine that the evaluation should result in a range of outcomes, including “not a meaningful threat; no further action indicated,” “threat modest but several responses indicated,” and “threat significant, with the following actions indicated.” This assessment service should be an integral part of the decision-making process used by a college in cases in which the risk of more serious violence needs consideration and response. It should be implemented when the initial screening for threat severity (perhaps conducted under college policy by the office of the Dean of Students) indicates that it is sufficiently serious to justify the need for a more formal and intensive evaluation.
- *Use information from multiple observers in different contexts.* One of the lessons learned through clinical research and forensic assessment in the last 15 years is that multiple collateral observers can be better than one—but multiple observers from *different domains* are more likely to provide comprehensive, meaningful information (Kraemer et al. 2003). Concretely, this means that a threat assessment is more likely to obtain meaningful information when concerning communications are shared between various law enforcement, mental health, and administrative arms of the college. In some cases, this might even mean interviewing a roommate, a professor, and a co-worker rather than by interviewing three roommates or three classmates. It may be that a particular situation calls for no collateral contact, if this might make the situation worse. Collecting collateral information should be carefully considered, as it does have the potential to intensify the problems that are driving the threat and the potential for acting upon it. Accordingly, this might be implemented only in unusual circumstances and with threats that are judged to be potentially very serious.

One of the major changes resulting from the Whitman shootings at Texas involved the expanded availability of resources through the newly-developed university counseling center. Decades later, the most apparent change in the wake of the Virginia Tech mass killing was the revised use of technology to quickly warn, inform, and reassure those on campuses regarding the nature of an ongoing threat or event. Such communication is beyond the scope of what risk assessment can offer, but it does fall more closely within the domain of risk communication. To our knowledge, there has been little empirical study regarding questions such as how risk-relevant information is most effectively and efficiently conveyed on college campuses, although a review of college websites post-Virginia Tech clearly indicates that many campus disaster communication plans have been updated since the Cho killings—there has been a concerted effort to incorporate the use of electronic and telecommunication (including e-mail, text messaging and voicemail on cellular telephones, and information posted on websites) methods in the event of emergencies. Of course, these notification technologies will be needed only when there has been a failure to detect a threat, respond appropriately to a troubled individual, take steps to render the situation safe, and thereby remove the threat from the campus, perhaps before it becomes a threat. It is our hope that colleges will need to use these very rarely. We also hope that some of the present recommendations, consistent with advances in risk assessment, can help to reduce the risk of all forms of aggression on campus—including the rare, tragic acts of serious violence committed by individuals such as Charles Whitman and Seung-Hui Cho. It is fortunate that colleges have apparently not attempted to follow the lead of some elementary and secondary schools in dealing with the risk of serious violence by “profiling” school shooters. For reasons we have discussed, it is likely that such attempts would do more harm than good.

Finally, it is important to create campus communities that people do not want to disrupt with violence. Considering the combination of newfound freedom, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and an array of severe stressors, colleges must take affirmative steps to create environments where students, teachers, and staff feel valued, respected, and heard. Help must be easy and straightforward to obtain, or people will not seek positive solutions to their problems.

Many of these solutions do not require significant additional resources. Promoting more skillful and respectful

communication by faculty and supervisors is relatively inexpensive. Even solutions that do require resources, such as increased staffing for student counseling centers, are a small price to pay for reducing risks, whether for suicide, interpersonal violence, or other adverse outcomes. Ultimately, the question may not be whether we can afford to pay for these steps to safer campuses, but whether we are willing to live with the consequences if we do not.

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