School Shootings in America
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“Only our deep moral values and our strong social institutions can hold back that jungle and restrain the darker impulses of human nature.” ~Ronald Reagan

The social issue within the realm of crime and deviance that I have chosen to present is the issue of school shootings in America. School shootings are a social problem and all Americans today are affected by this problem, whether directly or indirectly. This topic is of personal and social concern because the impacts of school shootings are widespread causing violent, unnecessary deaths of our children and school staff members, and unsuspecting community members in the surrounding areas of our schools. As a result, these senseless acts of violence cause widespread fear and feelings of insecurity, academic difficulties for the students, and mass confusion. According to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, “students and staff that witness school shootings are likely to suffer from traumatic stress symptoms, become anxious or depressed, and have general concerns about their safety” (Prevention, 2018, para. 2). Even the students who are able to resolve these symptoms and impairments in the short-term may suffer from ‘severe distress’ which can have “profound effects on academic achievement and social and emotional growth” (Prevention, 2018, para. 2).

This issue is concerning because it is a complicated, wide-reaching problem, and no one knows where or when it might happen next. It affects the very fabric of our society, and it seems to be a quite difficult problem to solve. Imagine sending your child/children to school one morning, it is just a regular day like any other. Then imagine seeing or hearing about a newsflash that there has been a shooting at your child’s school and no one knows whether your child is okay or not; or receiving that phone call that your child was one of the children who was shot. I cannot even begin to fathom how unbelievably horrific that might be. We send our children off
to school believing that they will be safe and cared for while they are being educated, and who would think that something so dreadful could happen within our trusted institutions.

School shootings have been reported and publicized for decades. This issue can be considered a social problem because it affects a large number of people, it may be remedied by collective action, and many influential groups have determined that this problem is threatening the values of our society. In fact, on February 16, 2018, in the aftermath of the February 14th shootings at Parkland, Florida that killed 17 people and wounded 14 others, a collective of college and academy physician groups along with the American Psychological Association made a plea to the President and the United States Congress to “label this violence caused by the use of guns a national public health epidemic” (Pediatrics, 2018, para. 3, no. 1).

Although many attempts have been made to stop the cycle of violence involving school shootings, Warnick, Johnson, & Rocha (2010) stated incidences of school shootings have increased throughout the years. Duplechain & Morris (2014) reported 53 school shootings in the U.S. between the years of 1960-1990 (a 30-year period) and 190 between the years 1990-2014 (a 24-year period), which shows that school shootings have more than tripled throughout the decades. These numbers can be frightening, and it is no wonder that the American public is on edge about this issue. In a survey from the Pew Research Center involving teenagers and the parents of teenage school children conducted in March and April of 2018, Graf (2018) said, that a majority of U.S. teens and parents are afraid that a shooting could happen at their school. But despite this data, the American public can be somewhat reassured by Warnick, et al. who says that schools apparently remain to be “some of the safest places for students,” and that the concern is not so much that schools are becoming more dangerous overall, but that within these incidents there is a symbolic meaning which “calls our lives, communities, and values into
question” (2010, p. 371-372). People begin to question their moral beliefs, entertainment choices, education, laws, and religion (or lack thereof), amongst other things.

**Myths and Stereotypes of School Shootings**

Within every social issue there is a tendency for false and misleading information, myths and stereotypes to be generated or circulated throughout society, thus causing confusion and preventing the issue from being viewed objectively. One myth regarding school shootings is that it is a new problem, when in fact school shootings have been happening since the 1700s (Duplechain & Morris, 2014, p. 145). The first recorded school shooting took place on July 26, 1764, in a schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, in which “four Lenape American Indians…shot and killed schoolmaster Enoch Brown and nine to ten children,” and in the 1800s at least 13 school shootings were reported (K12 academics, 2014-2018, para. 1-14).

A common misconception about those who carry out school shootings (school shooters) is that they are “crazed lunatics who suddenly snap, go berserk, and kill indiscriminately,” while in fact, school shooters extensively and methodically plan their attacks over a period of time, usually for weeks or months (Fox & DeLateur, 2014, p. 126). Neither are school shootings typically committed by ‘terrorists’ or by illegal immigrants but are generally orchestrated by white, male, American citizens (Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, & Brownie (2016). These are either known students who attend the school or persons who are unaffiliated with the school but have some sort of relationship with someone at that particular school (Duplechain & Morris, 2014). Shooters under 18 years old “made threats prior to the incident and were more likely to have stolen their weapons,” while others who were 18 or older may have purchased their weapons or retrieved them from home (Gerard, et al., 2016, p. 22). Contrary to the belief that many shooters
were known criminals before the incident, most perpetrators had no prior criminal background history (Gerard, et al., 2016).

One true common stereotype of school shooters is that the majority suffer from mental illness and/or depression (Gerard, et al., 2016). However, Duplechain & Morris (2014) say that most people with mental illnesses never shoot people. Poland (2012) states not just any kid decides to be a school shooter. He says that three types of school shooters have been identified. Those who are psychotic, those who are psychopathic, and those who are traumatized. Psychotic shooters do not live in reality, usually due to schizophrenic based disorders. Psychopathic shooters display a lack of conscience, remorse, and empathy (Poland, 2012). Traumatized shooters have suffered major traumatic events in their life and are very emotionally vulnerable. They may have suffered abuse at home or elsewhere; lost a parent to divorce, death, or incarceration; or have been bullied and humiliated at school; they also suffer from major depression and may be suicidal. For these three types of shooters, there are cries for help and there are warning signs. Prior to school shootings, these perpetrators incorporate intent within their coursework, tell friends/family/peers of their plan, and post things on social media (Gerard, et al., 2016).

**Variables Contributing to School Shootings**

Gerard et al. states that it is difficult to fully identify risk factors and to develop prevention strategies for the social problem of school shootings because there are very few empirical studies at this time that could help to shine a light on the root causes of this issue (2016). It is said that these studies are crucial, “as understanding the attributes of an individual who will open fire in a school setting, as well as finding common features” or themes for attacks like this may help to identify risk factors and develop prevention strategies (Gerard, et al., 2016,
Consequently, there are innumerable varying opinions about what factors or roots contribute to this social problem, as well as myths, false, or misleading information in this area.

Sullivan (2016) says a factor that contributes to the social problem of school shootings in America is that our “society experiences high levels of crime, drugs, and gun possession” (p. 134). Sullivan adds that with all these rampant societal issues “it is inevitable that some of these social ills spill over into the schools” (p. 134). Neither does it help the problem that guns are so widely accessible. At risk youth and young adults who are involved in carrying out school shootings can obtain guns from their homes, or may steal them in the streets (Sullivan, 2016). This variable is why solutions like restoring the federal ban on assault weapons may not prevent school shootings because shooters can still get weapons, mostly illegally (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Expanding ‘right to carry’ to deter or stop mass killers may not be the answer either, as “a sudden shootout between an assailant and citizens armed with concealed weapons could potentially catch countless innocent victims in the crossfire” (Fox & DeLateur, 2014, p.137). Enhanced background checks also may not solve the problem because many shooters do not have a criminal or a documented mental health history, therefore they would still be able to acquire weapons (Fox & DeLateur, 2014).

Faria Jr. (2013), who is a Clinical Professor of Neurosurgery and an Adjunct Professor of Medical History, has conducted extensive research on the topic of gun violence and shooting rampages. He said that there are mixed feelings about what the source of this problem is and why it is happening in America. Faria Jr. said, the American media and those in favor of gun control blame the problem on easy access to guns, way too many guns (2013). However, Second Amendment and gun rights advocates think that this issue runs deeper than that. They believe it lies within a criminal justice system that is too permissive and not tough enough on criminals;
“the failure of public education; the fostering of a culture of dependence, violence, and alienation engendered by the welfare state; and the increased secularization of society with children and adolescents growing up devoid of moral guidance” (Faria Jr., 2013, p. 85). It is important however to note that school shootings are not isolated solely to the U.S. They have happened in other countries as well, for instance in countries such as Canada, Germany, Scotland, Australia, Finland, and Norway.

Faria Jr. believes that there are other causes of the social problem of school shootings that should be examined more closely, namely the “failures of the mental health system and the role of the media and popular culture in the sensationalization of violence” (2013, p. 85). He opines that possibly the biggest factor contributing to school shootings is excessive violence in the media and popular culture. He said, the sensationalized way in which the media reports violence adds to this problem also because at risk people tend to view news coverage of violence as a way of gaining celebrity attention and are therefore more apt to carry out a horrific criminal act in order to gain notoriety (Faria Jr., 2013). Criminals should not be portrayed or rewarded with celebrity status. In essence, journalists should act in a more responsible fashion while gathering, writing, dispersing, and publishing information. They should report the news in an unbiased manner and remain objective. Neither should they use “emotionally charged, atrocious crimes to incite even more passion to sell newspapers or television time, or to effect a desired public policy” (Faria Jr., 2013, p. 91). What should be covered more frequently in the news are acts of saving lives and property by law-abiding citizens, which go largely unreported.

According to Faria Jr., television and media have a lengthy history of inciting criminal behavior. To support this claim, he refers to the work and studies of Dr. Brandon Centerwall of the University Of Washington School Of Public Health. Interestingly, while Dr. Centerwall was
studying the homicide rates in Canada he found that they were largely un-related to the easy access of guns, but that criminal behavior was more directly associated with watching television (Faria Jr., 2013). This was true in other countries as well, as acts of homicide appeared to soar 10-15 years after television was introduced in each of those countries. More surprisingly, Faria Jr. states Centerwall’s studies show homicide rates in the U.S. doubled after the introduction of television and that up to half of all homicides, rapes, and violent assaults in America were directly connected to the viewing of TV violence (2013). This was all before violence became as rampant and graphically displayed as has become customary in today’s TV, movies, games, and internet outlets. So, the number of acts that can be attributed to violence through the influence of these mediums has no doubt skyrocketed.

Economic hardship is another possible factor that contributes to the issue of school shootings. Duplechain & Morris (2014) have identified poverty and lack of resources as an instigator of anger and dissatisfaction. Blad says, that in a study of school shootings, researchers found that higher unemployment rates may be partly responsible for elevated rates of school shootings, and that “gun violence at schools is a response, in part, to the breakdown in the expectation that sustained participation in the educational system will improve economic opportunities and outcomes” (Blad, 2017, p. 5). School shooting rates were shown to be higher in areas where joblessness rates were soaring. Unemployment and joblessness creates added stress to individuals who may already be having a hard time psychologically. The inability to secure a job and the strain of financial stressors can cause enough anguish and self-esteem issues for a person who is mentally stable and competent, imagine what it might be like for someone with mental illness problems.
Perhaps the greatest contributors to school shootings are the social meanings about schools that exist within American society. There are three aspects of school that can contribute to school shootings. First of all, schools are “places of both real and symbolic violence, where force and power often rule the day” (Warnick, Kim, & Robinson, 2015, p. 371). Secondly, schools are places “connected to expectations of hope and refuge, friendship and romance, and when these expectations are not met, bitter resentment flows” (Warnick, et al., 2015, p. 371). Third, most schools are viewed as places where people can express their individuality, which unfortunately sometimes may be expressed in terms of violence. Collectively, these three aspects of school can make some students think that school is a fitting place to act out violent intent.

**Sociological Insights and Theory**

The social issue of school shootings in America can be further examined and evaluated using the interactionist perspective or social interactionism. Within this perspective the everyday social interactions among individuals are examined and these interactions help to determine how society and the groups thereof are created and function. “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences and people act on the basis of their beliefs and perceptions about these situations” (Sullivan, 2016, p. 10-11). In this perspective, Sullivan notes that symbols are also important and are used to define, interpret, and attach subjective meanings to objects, events, people, and places. Simply put, people’s actions are based on what they believe.

**Contributing Sociologists**

Max Weber is a sociologist who thought that people act in accordance to the way they interpret the meaning of their world (Aragona, 2018). Pursuant to this idea, some people may interpret their world as violent and therefore adjust by acting violently. Edwin Sutherland is
Another sociologist who can shine some light on this social problem with his differential association theory, which is one of many cultural transmission theories. This theory says that “crime and delinquency are learned and culturally transmitted” through intimate socialization such as with peer groups or families (Sullivan, 2016, p. 268). This deviant behavior is modeled. Shooters may learn bullying practices from bullies that they have unavoidable associations with daily. They may learn dysfunctional coping skills from family members or they may copy violent behaviors from abusive parents. Shooters may also copy the deviant behavior modeled by other shooters that have been spotlighted within the media.

Another sociologist, Thomas Scheff discussed mental illness as an example of deviant behavior. He said secondary deviance can be used to partially explain how a labeled person may begin to live up to that label. The expectations of the label ‘crazy’ or ‘worthless’ may cause a self-fulfilling prophecy in which a person might live up to that label, intentionally or not (Sullivan, 2016). As labeled people are “cast into a social role with certain expectations” they may act out the expectations that one would attach to someone who is considered crazy, insane, or out of control (Sullivan, 2016, p. 101). A perpetrator may act out against a deviant label that has been placed on them by school bullies. School kids may act out toward a person who has been labeled by other school kids or society in general by teasing, snubbing, or being violent toward them. The deviant individual may then act out against the people who they deem to be threatening their values, comfort, and safety. In the case of a school shooter, this in turn means that the values, comfort, and safety of others in society may be threatened and disrupted, as well.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

One advantage to using the social interaction lens to better understand the social problem of school shootings is that it can provide a way to view the reasons why a school shooter might
feel the need to carry out this type of heinous act and what it is that makes them tick. Thus, those in problem solving positions would be more equipped to seek out warning signs and have a better chance of preventing school shootings from happening in the future. In this lens, school shooters might be seen as victims too. One disadvantage of using this sociological lens is that it can take the responsibility away from those who commit deviant acts by blaming the acts upon others in society, societal structure, and the meanings and symbols therein. The media is not fully responsible for school shootings, or else everyone who views TV or media would be orchestrating violent rampages. Neither can the educational system be blamed for emphasizing the cultivation of individual self-expression.

Possible Solutions

Within all the confusion and fear of the school shooting crisis there are those who must try to make sense of things and find a solution. Some possible solutions to the social issue of school shootings in America have been identified in this paper, however some of these solutions can be quite difficult to implement or are unrealistic. There is also great debate about which solutions would be most beneficial. Many states have passed more stringent laws and regulations on gun control in recent years, one of these regulations was to restrict firearm access to the mentally ill. Schools have also stepped up their security measures to protect against the threat of shootings. Unemployment rates in many places and in our country in general are also down tremendously, although financial disparity is still a huge issue. The current mental health system also needs to be addressed, although it is not clear exactly what should be done and how. Maybe the media should make changes in the way that they present information. The news should be presented in an unbiased way in which violence is not sensationalized, but also it would be better if the portrayal of violence in any type of media was less frequent and less explicit.
Another solution that requires a change of societal beliefs, values, and norms is that males not be stigmatized as weak for asking for help. Studies have shown that the majority of school shooters are male, and that raises the question why there are not more female offenders. The only conclusion I can think of is that females are usually thought of as and brought up to be less aggressive, but also that females are not as stigmatized for asking for help and letting their needs and problems be known.

There is clearly a great need for expanded research and empirical studies to examine the phenomenon of school shootings, risk factors, and to develop preventative strategies (Gerard, et al., 2016). Some schools have implemented proactive programs that are used to help increase the self-esteem of all students and to help students with any problems they might have which might eliminate some risk factors for troubled students. But, perhaps the best solution is that everyone within the school settings and the community needs to report anything that they see or hear that seems suspicious (Duplechain & Morris, 2014).

Conclusion

School shootings are a social problem and all Americans today are affected by this problem. These senseless acts of violence cause widespread fear and feelings of insecurity, academic difficulties, and mass confusion. The social issue of school shootings in America is a challenging problem to solve. Although school violence may be a social issue that will continue to exist for quite some time, it is possible to curb it and implement proactive strategies to prevent it. Hopefully, we as a country together with our deep moral values and strong social institutions can solve this grave issue and in doing so maybe it can bring us together more than ever before.
References


