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SCHOOL SAFETY IN RURAL SETTINGS

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Extreme violence is in our communities and sometimes flows into our schools. Read no further than the local newspapers if you want to see the impact on campus: physical violence, serious injury, suicide, mental crises, and threats with deadly weapon. In fact, the first documented school shooting in this country occurred in the year 1764 in rural Pennsylvania (Keenan & Rush, 2016). Unfortunately, shootings continue to plague our society and occur on rural school campuses today. Are rural schools safe? Is there a way to better predict school violence so it can be prevented? What kind of rural schools are more likely to have violent attacks or a shooting? If we knew definitively the answers to these and other similar critical questions, we might be better equipped to minimize or eliminate some of the horrible tragedies that plague school campuses. Almost two decades ago, Netshitahame and Van Vollenhoven (2002) said that "literature studies indicated a general rule that as school neighborhoods become more and more violent, schools are also directly or indirectly affected" (p. 313).

In recent years, researchers have examined why violence occurs on school campuses and what are the most effective prevention strategies. Adams and Mrug (2019) examined predictors of violence and safety in secondary schools and discovered that issues of violence and safety occur more often in schools serving predominantly low-income families and minority populations. Unfortunately, high poverty and concentrated minority students are often in rural schools, not just in urban schools. To help fill gaps in the aforementioned literature, this chapter's focus centers on safety in rural schools and solutions. Through review of this research, this study provides yet another voice from the field and builds capacity for leadership and social change in rural schools.

Statistics

While there may not be a sole governmental agency that classifies and keeps track of violent attacks on school grounds, reports indicate that as many as 240,000 students have been subjected in some way to gun violence at schools since the Horrific incident at Columbine (Cox et al., 2020). The time after an incident seems to have a profound effect on society. A Gallup Poll taken after Columbine showed that "55% of parents feared for their child's physical safety at school" as compared to "about one-quarter of respondents" in a similar poll taken years later (DeAngelis et al., 2011, p. 313). Everytown for Gun Safety (2019) website's Gunfire on School Grounds in the United States keeps count of school shootings and "tracks every time a firearm discharges a live round inside or into a school building or on or onto a school campus or grounds, as documented by the press" (para. 3). The site published these statistics:

> When it comes to how American children are exposed to gun violence, gunfire at schools is just the tip of the iceberg—every year, nearly 2,900 children and teens are shot and killed and nearly 15,600 more are shot and injured. An estimated 3 million American children are exposed to shootings per year. Witnessing shootings — whether in their schools, their communities or their homes – can have a devastating impact. Children exposed to

violence, crime, and abuse are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder; fail or have difficulties in school; and engage in criminal activity. (para. 2)

The efforts of legislators' to enact measures to increase safety of children in schools increase right after incidents. For example, in March of 2018 following the tragic events of February, the Florida Senate passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, FL. CS/SB 7026 which authorized the appropriation of 400 million dollars towards public safety (The Florida Senate, 2018). It is important to note that state expenditures on school safety and security vary across states and district types. Because only some states report detailed information on their public security outlay, it is difficult to assess spending for school safety in urban and rural areas. DeAngelis et al. (2011) put this in perspective when they studied a public school system, Texas "is one of the few, if not the only, state that requires its districts to use a dedicated code to report security expenditures" (p. 318). Their findings revealed that district security spending dollar amounts per pupil in rural areas was 15.64, compared to 73.81 in urban, 51.36 in suburban, and 32.81 in town districts of Texas. Are rural schools that much safer and need less funding for security or is there simply less funding overall for rural schools?

The importance of appropriately financing school safety becomes evident from a recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics. The report informs the public that when asked "whether certain factors limited their efforts to reduce or prevent crime," schools reported most often, "inadequate funds (36 percent); a lack of alternative placements or programs for disruptive students (34 percent); and federal, state, or district policies on disciplining special education students (19 percent)" (Diliberti et al., 2019, p. 4). This indicates that the most common response limits establishing safety in schools and violence prevention efforts. After any tragic school shooting, no school leader would want to be that person who has to stand in front of the media and parents of victims and admit they chose not to prioritize funding for school safety and this was a result. That said, rural school funding is not unlimited.

To be effective, a security plan for schools in rural areas must consider the unique features of the locale. That may not be easy to comprehend and anticipate on campus. Issues range from inadequate financial support, averaging 17% of the state funding, to the time students spend on the bus, where a quarter of students "have daily bus rides over one hour in length, and about 85% have rides of at least 30 minutes" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 21). However, law enforcement response times can take much longer in rural settings. Additionally, having a threat assessment team during the 2017-18 school year was also lower in schools located in rural areas (34%) compared to schools in cities and suburbs (50% and 49% respectively) (Diliberti et al., 2019). Longer police response time, coupled with fewer threat assessment teams, creates the potential for violent situations on rural school campuses, in particular, to unfortunately last far longer before they are stopped.

Review of Recent Literature

The sources consulted for the review of literature included books, book chapters, peer reviewed journal articles, government reports/documents, and dissertations. School safety, school shootings, weapons, and school shooters were keywords used to search a university library catalogue (1,294), ProQuest Criminal Justice Database (255), JSTOR (134), ERIC (481), National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD) (270), and Google Scholar. After vetting search results, we relied on 33 of the most relevant and recent studies from 2014-2019. With direct focus on the last five years of research, it became evident there was an increase in published works, particularly following school shooting incidents that received the most media coverage. The topics related to school shootings also had varying foci.

In fact, some of school shooting studies we examined identified ways to understand deviant behaviors and other challenges (Keatley et al., 2019; Lankford, 2012). Another study examined factors that could aid in identifying the likelihood of a future school shooting (Fridel, 2019). It is well known that there are more rural schools in the South and Western regions of the US, where land is less expensive and more readily available. Aside from ways to identify behavior patterns and likely shooting locations, Agnich (2015) found that "February has the highest number of mass shootings," however "April and September have the highest number of attempted [shootings]" (p. 11). Overall, the timing of school shootings seems to appear universal.

Research suggests the amount of student support plays some role in the likelihood of violence. A study asserted, "Shootings occurred more frequently in schools with higher student-teacher ratio," "the frequency of school shootings could be largely reduced by creating smaller schools," and "schools that foster a collaborative (as opposed to competitive) learning environment, offer supportive services, and facilitate a sense of mutual respect between students and faculty members have been shown to experience few, if any, bouts of violence on school grounds" (Baird et al., 2017, p. 267).

In contrast to student supports, bullying affects students in different ways, sometimes extreme violence is an outlet. Leary et al. (2003) studied aggressive behaviors such as teasing, rejection, and violence and determined they had a role in some shootings. In fact, there are many studies that have identified possible contributing influencers that lead to school violence in terms of individual characteristics, factors and behaviors, family dynamics, and triggering events (Gerard et al., 2016; Girard, 2018; Eleni et al., 2017; Ioannou et al., 2015; Lenhardt et al., 2018), fame seeking (Lankford, 2018; Silva, & Greene-Colozzi, 2019; Willis, 2019), fear (Madfis, 2016), plans to improve safety with technology (Doherty, 2016; Duplechain, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2016), studies that involve higher education violence (Schildkraut et al., 2015), and even a studies that search for meaning of why extreme violence occurs (Madfis, 2017) or blaming it on video games when shooters are white (Markey et al., 2019). Regardless of the demographics, factors, or causal reasons, the fact remains that the US leads the way by far 31% with shootings worldwide (Lankford, 2016). There are many reasons why school shootings happen, so some researchers

use other various studies as well as survey data to narrow the statistics in hopes of finding possible helpful patterns to better predict, and thus prevent extreme violence in rural schools.

For example, Diliberti et al. (2019) recently used the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSCS) in 2,762 public schools in 2018 to examine "the practices and programs schools have implemented to promote school safety" (p. 1). The questionnaire was "developed and managed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education" and "has been administered seven times" and "was funded by NCES, with supplemental funding provided by the National Institute of Justice" (p. 1). Further, the study found approximately "962,300 violent incidents," 71% of the schools (i.e., city, suburban, and rural) "had at least one violent incident," "3,600" involved "the possession of a firearm or explosive device at school," "5 percent involved the removal of students with no continuing services for at least the remainder of the school year," "lower percentages of schools located in towns (38 percent) and rural areas (34 percent) reported having a threat assessment team," school safety plans that focused on "natural disasters (94 percent), active shooters (92 percent), and bomb threats or incidents (91 percent)," schools with "at least 50 percent minority enrollment, half (50 percent) reported involving students in restorative circles," "about 46 percent of traditional public schools had a School Resource Officer present," "a higher percentage of schools with 1,000 or more students had at least one sworn law enforcement officer present who routinely carried a firearm," and "about 51 percent of schools provided diagnostic mental health assessments to evaluate students for mental health disorders and 38 percent provided treatment to students for mental health disorders" (pp. 3-4).

Purpose

School shootings research is prevalent and growing. The bottom line is clear, school violence and shootings are alarmingly on the rise. Therefore, a major reason for this chapter is to enlighten educational leaders regarding rural school safety. Our review of relevant literature utilized both a historical (Katsiyannis et al., 2018) and practical lens (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015) which grounded our findings from current research.

Our goal is to vastly improve school safety preparedness and prevention in-line with Eadens et al. (2019) recent notion that "the very first step to begin to contemplate how to best prevent violence is to more fully comprehend it from diverse lenses and varied perspectives" (p. 3). After all, "twenty-first-century school leaders need to be cognizant and well versed about the serious dangers of school violence that are unfortunately a reality of our present" and they "need to persist on situational awareness coupled with effective preventative steps that could potentially thwart tragedy on campus" because it "is vitally important to know what other educational leaders are, and are not, doing in regards to school safety" (Eadens et al., 2018, p. 384).

Most importantly, it remains crucial to have unbiased, research-based strategies and information regarding violence and safety on campuses; especially because of recent years' polarizing social perspectives with conflicting paradigms, and extreme political and legal activists. These factors likely have an impact on school leaders' strategic planning direction and prioritization of resource allocation within districts. Rural schools have uniquely special challenges in this regard. Our chapter fills this literary gap surrounding the lack of narrative research on rural school safety and offers practical insight that may be helpful for scholar-leader practitioners and policy makers.

State and Federal Policy

Public safety fears for children in schools leads to interminable complaints (Cornell, 2017). With school shootings, historically states have enjoyed immunity from negligence in Torts while there remains a high bar to prove liability in Federal courts (Alexander, 2019). However, liability litigation exacerbated by rapidly spreading social media hysteria triggers sweeping political actions and social movements. These affect Federal and State laws that often oversimplify the vast complex issues and cause one-size-fits-all and draconian zero-tolerance policies with districts and schools adopting extreme security measure and procedures.

Societal violence spills into school campuses and our children's school classrooms. Overall, US changes have not had the impact needed to greatly reduce school shootings and extreme violence on campuses. However, some nations such as Australia, have indeed experienced far more success in reducing public shootings and extreme acts of violence. That said, it is far easier to enact sweeping constitutional amendments and directly change laws in some nations.

The question then begs, how can we build varied and strong coalitions that address school safety issues with resources and power to spur lasting changes that will increase public confidence? One option includes establishing relationships between the federal and state government and community-based organizations that seek to address violence within and outside of school settings. Strengthening these bonds is particularly critical for rural enclaves that may not have the same political capital of larger areas. Far too often these relationships can become frayed because of some government policies that do not align with community needs.

For example, researchers contended that policies designed to prevent school violence disproportionately impacted Black students (Triplett et al., 2014). According to Triplett et al. (2014), from 1990-1999, "the data indicates that school shootings during this period were also significantly more likely to take place in suburban/rural (31 incidents) settings than in urban (17 incidents) settings" (p. 358). From 1990-2011 they recorded 29 shootings in rural areas. There is a need for more research into how some school safety measures disproportionately impact not only minorities, but students from poverty, special education students, English Language Learners, and students at risk.

Overall, there is a need for a coordinated effort between policymakers and rural communities. These conversations must include underserved and marginalized populations from Black, Latina/o, and immigrant groups. Ensuring government policies address societal needs without maligning certain communities is critical. For instance, Walker (2018) examined policies from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and asserted that changes, including funding for socio-emotional support, could negatively impact Black students. The point is noteworthy because the article highlighted how government policies could influence support systems in under resourced communities. Although some state policymakers have responded to tragedies including school shootings, it is vital to have a balanced approach that recognizes how race and racial bias influence which students may be targeted unfairly for discipline.

Societal Impact

Since the Columbine mass shooting, Americans have witnessed a variety of troubling school-based violence that continues to grow (Lee, 2013). While the impact violence, specifically adolescent gun violence, has on communities seems relatively new, researchers for years have foreshadowed the troubling trend. Specifically, the problems associated with guns and adolescent suicide. A study conducted by Brent et al. (1993), titled *Firearms and adolescent suicide: A community case-control study*, suggested that physicians have to ensure that guns are removed from the homes of troubled adolescents. Further, they found that adolescent suicide victims in rural communities were more likely to have access to long guns. This is significant, considering the high rate of gun suicides in rural communities (Hirsch & Cukrowicz, 2014).

While not all school shooters have struggled with suicidal ideation, the majority could not adapt to the school culture (Rocque, 2012). Recently, states, including Florida, have taken additional steps to prevent school violence with the passage of the Baker Act. This bill states:

> It is the intent of the Legislature: to authorize and direct the Department of Children and Families to evaluate, research, plan, and recommend to the Governor and the Legislature programs designed to reduce the occurrence, severity, duration, and disabling aspects of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorder. (Florida Legislature, 2019, para 1)

Highlighting the actions in Florida is vital because of the impact mass shootings and community-based violence has on students, parents, and other stakeholders (Nurmi et al., 2012).

Federal and state governments have to ensure rural communities have resources that allow them to meet the needs of students that feel disconnected. Preventing maladaptive behaviors in adolescents can prevent future occurrences that negatively impact the local community's mental health. Violence including mass shootings have a lasting impact on schools and local neighborhoods. Thus, identifying and funding support systems will prevent students from struggling with anxiety and depression associated with previous and recent tragic events.

Rural vs Urban Resources

School violence may be thought of as different compared to urban settings. The facts are that researchers purport that "higher percentages of students in urban and suburban areas reported being afraid of attack or harm away from school than students in rural areas" (Flynn et al., 2018, p. 263). However, incidents of school violence are not occurring in urban schools alone. Even though students in rural areas were reported to have "a lower rate of total victimization at school (18 per 1,000 students) than urban students (35) and suburban students (36)," "rural teens were just as likely to perpetrate as urban and suburban teens and that rural schools also offer fewer violence prevention and mental health services" (Flynn et al., 2018, p. 264). While rural schools experience many of the same problems as urban schools, they may face even more complex challenges brought about by the scarcity of resources to address problems (Renfro et al., 2003). As mentioned earlier, police response times are longer and there are fewer threat assessment teams.

In rural locales, where access to mental health is already lower than in urban settings, families depend more on schools for mental health support and intervention programs. Nevertheless, the intervention programs can be limited in rural schools due to geographic, transportation, economic reasons, and even lack proper validation through adequate testing (Leadbeater et al., 2013).

Renfro et al. (2003) purported rural school administrators are not keen on admitting the existence of serious violence in their schools or that is it similar to metropolitan campuses. A more widespread problem in rural settings is perceived to be "low academic achievement among students and overall poor performance of their schools on certain national standardized tests" (p. 115). Therefore, the implementation of violence preventive measures in rural schools may lead to be more challenging.

While certain types of incidents appear at similar rates in all geographic settings, like bulling, certain cases are more pronounced in rural areas. Flynn et al. (2018) found that instances of bringing a "cutting instrument" to rural campuses was the highest, "with 8 incidents per 100 student-days compared to three in urban schools and two in suburban schools" (p. 266). Fontanella, et al. (2015) reported that "youth suicide rates are consistently higher in rural compared with urban settings" (p. 472). On a level of general population, when comparing rural and urban areas, Dresang (2001) revealed that there were actually more percentages of shotgun and rifle related deaths in rural areas as well as higher rates of gun death from accidents and suicides. While handguns were used in the majority of school shooting incidents, more casualties resulted from the use of shotguns and rifles in addition to higher casualty shootings taking place in rural and suburban schools (Livingston et al., 2019).

Armed with these facts, policies and intervention programs must be targeted to the unique characteristics of rural communities. They must contemplate low funding, limited

availability of local experts, difficulties in involving parents and community, and consideration for local norms and values (Leadbeater et al., 2013).

Prevention

Today there is a swelling number of prevention strategies. Some effective approaches appear to focus on following school threat assessment protocols which might include a wide variety of options on campus such as mental health identification and psychological first aid teams that screen, consult, and refer to counselors. Social media platforms are now beginning to include algorithms that can identify and notify, when possible credible threatening traffic emerges. Most schools now have required visitor sign-ins, visitor badging, locked entrances during school days, random locker checks, picture student badges or identification, and a student code of conduct that requires a signature. Rural schools are also searching for effective reporting systems including mass text alerts, 24-hour hotlines, anonymous reporting recorders, student action teams that help identify at-risk students, and other referral systems. A growing number of rural districts are incorporating memorandums of understanding with licensed mental health groups to provide crisis counseling and interventions. Urban and rural schools may have differing access to counselors and referral systems, but both are actively searching for more ways to alert. The key remains that if anyone sees something, they should say something.

Aside from identification, schools are hardening and establishing greater collaboration with local law enforcement agencies. Response plans and drills are typically dictated and required, although there is push-back on live drills that are a little too realistic, due to the possible negative impact on children and using academic time. Popular school safety personnel and infrastructure plans may include variety of strategies such as school Marshall programs, guardian plans, teen leadership programs, extra fencing, limiting entrances and exits, increased outdoor lighting, safety glass and upgrades, reinforced vestibules, metal detectors, deadbolts, locks, panic buttons in front offices, live cameras, clear bag policies, key cards, door alarms, real-time video and audio, and streamlining access.

Partnering with local law enforcement reduces response time and effectiveness. Response times in urban areas may be much shorter, depending on other off-campus crimes that are occurring at that time in conjunction with staffing capabilities of city police. In rural areas, county deputy sheriffs may take longer to respond because of the greater geographic region. Live camera feeds with the closest law enforcement agencies may be an option, if district leaders and the population are in favor. Many schools are now hiring veterans as security officers, training school safe teams and officers, and even creating school police district offices that benefit from simple economy of scale. Hiring local law enforcement at every school can get expensive, so alternatives are rising. While most schools are increasing campus security in general, lack of funding and resources lead many rural schools to search for less expensive safety and security options.

There are strategies that do not have a cost associated with them. The department of Homeland Security's Office of Academic Engagement offers free PDF download https://www.dhs.gov/exercise-starter-kits-esks of active shooter kits. These Academic Community Exercise Starter Kits are available for Elementary, Middle, High schools, and Higher Education. Each kit has planning documents with exercise content including an exercise briefing, facilitator guide, after action template, and participant feedback form, and a situational manual. While there is a lack of empirical evidence that hardening strategies are effective, quantifying threats that were prevented may prove to be very difficult.

In addition to cost-free methods, policies can and should be revised. Zero-Tolerance policies are becoming more controversial and tend to impact minority students. While resources are scarce, they are being used to fortify schools instead of hiring the mental health care professionals that could make another difference in helping students and preventing bullying, deal with community issues, and other relationship problems that could cause or motivate students to become an active shooter.

In fact, the average age of a school shooter is around 16. That typically is not a stable time in adolescents' lives. Arguably, soft prevention strategies can be even more important than hardening. Relationship building is another cost-free crucial intervention, both initially and ongoing, as a step to prevent students from losing control as well as mitigation. Trauma informed teaching is on the rise and may also be beneficial in relationship building. Teachers are now more than ever practicing daily check-ins with students and ensuring every student is known and no student falls through the cracks. Mentoring and getting to know students does take valuable time and relationship building is slow-going. However, this investment is very important for student development.

Lastly, culturally relevant crisis response and special education responses are also highly important to preplan. Every plan needs to clearly address these two issues and not leave gaps that may cause serious problems. Some special education students may have a variety of special needs that may prove to be challenging to deal with during an emergency evacuation or lockdown, especially in rural schools. Allowing police to interact with students with special needs and those that have intellectual disabilities can be beneficial because many police training academies offer limited training in these areas, according to Eadens et al. (2016).

When schools are locked down for long periods of time, teachers need to have basic need kits in their offices or closets. These should include small snacks, water, and porta-johns. Student medications are also important to access during an emergency. The better prepared teachers are, the more comfortable they can keep their students and help them remain calm and quiet during a lockdown from an active shooter on campus while police are responding.

Action

In addition to targeted hard/physical and soft/psychological prevention measures, there are other practical steps individuals can accomplish that can lead to safer schools. Volunteering to advocate for intervention-based tactics is an important step. Advocating for more common-sense approaches to security measures is similarly important and may help to maintain a healthy climate and school culture. Social media news that may inadvertently memorialize perpetrators can rapidly spread negatively affecting the psyche of individuals, even during an actual event. The horror may sometimes motivate copycat shootings because they can be directly fueled by the amount of media coverage.

Prior planning and decisions should be research based. Best practices for dealing with these and other aspects are recommended. Additionally, being politically astute, scrutinizing mounting legislative movements, and offering voices to advocate for school safety that is grounded in the best interests of students, is paramount.

Healing

Mass shootings have a profound impact on the community and cause severe psychological distress. Hylton et al. (2019) recently studied the effects of creative arts therapy on improving mental health of students affected by the tragedy that took place in Parkland, Florida, in 2018. To a varied extend, the participants reported experiencing "clinically significant moderato-to-severe depression," "moderato-to-severe anxiety," and "high levels of posttraumatic stress" (Hylton et al., 2019, p. 1). Researchers found that while all of the components of the creative arts therapy – music, drama, dance, and visual arts therapies – had statistically significant positive results, drama therapy improved mental health most considerably. Their results are consistent with the existing "substantial evidence for the efficacy of imaginal exposure, or re-living the trauma memory in a safe environment" and suggest that creative arts therapies may be effective in improving mental health of those exposed to mass shootings, particularly on the school grounds (Hylton et al., 2019, p. 7). Regardless of which method is chosen, working to heal is crucial for schools.

Conclusion

Keeping rural schools safe is a unique responsibility for not only federal and state departments, school district governance teams, and local school leaders, but also for all citizens to safeguard school campuses. The in-depth rural schools research in this chapter, coupled with specific hardening, softening, and healing strategies recommended herein, provide a basis for a better climate for educational leaders and policy makers to carefully consider best practice planning for preventing school shootings and extreme violence on rural school campuses.

Lastly, creating and fostering a culture and community for improved safety and security is not only important for psychological well-being, but meeting students' basic needs of safety and security (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). For these reasons, it is our moral, ethical, and legal duty to be proactive in mitigating and preventing extreme school violence and mass shootings wherever possible. We owe it to our future to protect our most precious resource, the children of today and hope for tomorrow.

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