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**How to Prevent School Shootings**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

To combat the rise of violence in academic settings, law enforcement must learn from the mistakes of the past, acknowledge current issues and plan accordingly to prevent tragedy in the future. Agencies should use a proactive approach when it comes to stopping school violence. In recent years, violence in academic settings, particularly mass shootings, have become more common and even more frequent. In fact, these acts of violence have become so normal that many people are not even shocked when they find out another one has occurred. Across the country, there has been a big push to place more police in schools, which is a good thing, but with the influx of officers in academic settings, attention should now be paid to the standards to which those officers are held. Firstly, those officers should avoid complacency at all costs; this is a major issue in law enforcement as a whole and when compounded with a relatively laid-back school environment, this quickly becomes a problem. Officers need to be as proactive in the schools as they would be if they were out on the streets working their normal area. Looking out for mental health issues is another essential component in the world of school police. With the uptick of teen suicides in recent years and media coverage that seems to glorify these actions, academic-based officers need to make a conscious effort to look for and speak with students whom they think may be having problems. Being in decent shape and having a “squared away” appearance is another valuable law enforcement trait that has been proven to stop people from causing problems. The easiest deterrent for violent actions in schools, and often the most overlooked, is officer visibility.

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## INTRODUCTION

Agencies should use a proactive approach when it comes to stopping school violence. The topic of school shootings sends chills down the spine of most parents; they drop their child off at school every morning hoping they make it home each afternoon. Before the late 1980s, school shootings were relatively an unheard-of event. A schoolyard fight or a student carrying a pocket knife was the most dangerous thing going on. Fast forward to Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, when 12 students and 1 teacher were killed a month before graduation. Many refer to this as the day the nation's school children lost their innocence. The news media reported that the incident at Columbine stemmed from two angry boys who were bullied, got fed up, and took it out on their classmates. The public has since learned that the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, presented mental health issues, had access to weapons, had suicidal tendencies, lacked parental supervision; and displayed many other key warning signs that are looked for today. Sadly, in the 12 years between the Columbine High School shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recorded 140 "active shooter" events around the United States, 33 of which were at schools (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). Studying and learning from these events should be a priority among school-based officers.

On May 18, 2018, in Santa Fe, Texas, 10 were killed and 10 were wounded after 17-year-old Dimitrios Pagourtzis opened fire at Santa Fe high school (Shapiro & Margolin, 2018). In hindsight, it is easy to recognize that in the weeks and months leading up to the shooting, Santa Fe shooter, Pagourtzis displayed key warning signs. Reports state he may have been bullied at times during football, had been wearing a

black trench coat before the shooting, was infatuated with guns, and prior to the shooting he posted on social media a shirt illustrating the words, "Born to Kill" (Seba & Hampton, 2018,). In September of 2019, a woman and a girl were injured when a fight between a group of parents led to a shooting at an Eastern Hills Elementary School football game (Chavez, James & Silverman, 2019).

## **POSITION**

Frequently the same type of behavior is demonstrated, and warning signs are missed. Unfortunately, in this day and age, law enforcement has to start looking at every student as the next potential school shooter. They have to question why a student would be wearing a trench coat in hot Texas weather. They need to know what's being posted on social media, and they must build relationships with students who feel comfortable telling them about potential issues. By realizing that officers are still looking for the same basic traits, mentality and characteristics of school shooters, they can then begin to fix why so many are missing some of the main signs that they have been taught to look for or shown over and over again (Raymond, 2010). In addition, school resource officers have responsibilities beyond that of traditional police officers. They are often the first person on scene for major events such as critical incidents that affect the school environment, traffic accidents, fires, chemical leaks, and many other possible life-threatening events. There are several widely used training programs to instruct civilians on how to respond to an active shooter situation. One is the ADD (Avoid, Deny, and Defend) model and the second is CRASE (Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events) from the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center (Texas State University, 2020). This comes back to what is needed to prevent

school shootings long before they start, which is to avoid complacency, be proactive, be visible, watch for mental health issues and always present a good physical appearance. According to Michael Dorn, “The most negligent, unprofessional, obscene words anyone can ever say are, it will never happen here” (2005, p. xix). Schools are considered soft targets, which means that they are essentially unguarded and our “Innocent children would evoke a strong emotional reaction” (Dorn & Dorn, 2005, p. 64). In the police academies, many police training instructors preach to each officer that they should never approach any traffic stop as routine, because doing so puts them at a disadvantage causing them to let their guard down. The same thing needs to be taught to school officers so that they never get stuck in a routine and are always expecting the unexpected. To many, these may seem like basic concepts and something that is going on every day, well the truth is that these things aren’t going on every day in the schools and most definitely should be. Some feel like it is a retirement job, and they will never have to do real work. Then there are school officials who don’t want police officers to do anything because it will show up on a rating sheet somewhere and they can be labeled an “Unsafe School” which leads to other problems and is a very negative mark on the school district.

Mental illness is another significant issue that exists and school-based law enforcement should be trained on that. On most school days, officers around the country will be called down to the counselor’s office for a student having some sort of breakdown, making threats, or expressing thoughts of suicide. Normal options range from either contacting a student’s guardian or contacting one of the mental health outlets. Many officers are used to hearing parents say that they would take these

students to get help and wouldn't or would leave after they found the wait at the hospital to be too long, or a bed at the mental health facility was unavailable. Schools have had to come up with a document to be signed stating the student could not return to school until they were seen by a physician and cleared. This is all they could really do to both help the student and cover themselves, but it by no means indicated the student was ok. Failure to address these problems will potentially only lead to further and more detrimental problems as "Youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are at an increased risk for school problems and negative consequences into adulthood, increasing the need for collaboration between families, school personnel and mental health providers" (Kramer, 2006, p. 1).

Another reason agencies should be more proactive toward violence is due to lack of parental involvement. During situations involving the threat of suicide, officers first should ascertain if the student has access to weapons. If the student states that their parents do indeed have guns and then the parents are asked and give a different answer, it is difficult to determine who is being truthful. Furthermore, many times the parent knows that their child is having problems but fails to get them help and to make matters worse, they fail to secure their weapon(s). No matter how gentle the phrasing, genuine concern, and offers of help are expressed; when school administrators call to speak with a parent about concerns with their child's mental health, they are almost always met with hostility and denial. This is most likely a defense mechanism, as the parent feels the call is a direct attack on their parenting skills (Cox & Rich, 2018).

As many psychologists, teachers, and counselors have stated over and over, if one or both parents are not in a child's life, it can cause serious issues (Spencer,

2013). Schools are now dealing with these issues on a growing scale. Even if the parent(s) are in the home, absence caused by working several jobs can manifest serious problems within a child. A vast majority of troubled youth also come from single-parent homes (Wasserman, 2020). Schools need to find more avenues to obtain the positive male and female role models the students are missing. They then have to get the parents on board to understand that they must replace this major missing piece of development.

If agencies are more reactive than proactive, more violence will occur. An opportunity for proactive advancement centers should focus on building design. Great strides have been made in designing schools, but the fact of the matter is, they are made to be aesthetically pleasing and as many people now see, they have extremely too many entrances. On a period-by-period basis, students are letting other students into the building through locked doors (even if they did not know them) and even propping open doors designed to lock upon closure. School officers regularly arrest or cite numerous individuals for trespassing who were let in by students.

Agencies must be proactive because information between local and federal agencies is not shared with school district police departments. The effects of the inability to communicate and share vital data among criminal justice agencies are not just felt during national emergencies but rather, on a day-to-day basis (Weedon, 2003). Many incidents that happen over the weekend or night involving the local PDs could have direct effects on schools the next day. A good example could be a theft of a firearm from a student who may have planned to bring it to school the following day intending to harm themselves or others. The school district is the common denominator



between all these cases, and these weekend or overnight issues usually manifest into problems within the school on Monday or the next morning. Agencies are required to send a notification of arrest form to schools if a student is arrested on a felony charge or certain misdemeanors, but sadly a third of the time, this falls through the cracks for various reasons. What's even more alarming, is that there is no requirement for any type of notification for mental health situations, or if a student is just a suspect in a case. This brings up a major loophole in safety the next day at a school; where no one is aware that anything has happened, so they aren't looking for it.

School-based law enforcement officers should be more proactive to social media as well. If more social media threats are being posted then they should put more time into investigating these, make arrests if necessary, and make sure the public brings all of them to the attention of law enforcement. Many times, the issue is brought to law enforcement after the fact because the information is received too late. Social media monitoring companies were not widely known before the early 2000, s but many would later learn they are an invaluable asset. Robert Boyce, a retired New York Police Department chief, noted that social media can hold a number of clues (Keneally, 2018, para. 9). Boyce stated, "If someone sees something eerie or out of character on social media, someone needs to step forward. Go tell a teacher." (Keneally, 2018, para. 10)

Another great tool that could be utilized by all schools is the Campus Tips App, which works in combination with local Crime Stoppers programs. Crime Stoppers is traditionally used to report crimes; however, local school districts have built on to the existing format and urged students to report instances of bullying and/or classmates exhibiting mental health issues. Monetary incentives encouraged participation as did

ease of use. Screen-shots, pictures, and videos are instantly routed to the appropriate entities, i.e. SROs, counselors, administration. In some cases, students tip information about weapons, planned fights, thefts, and drugs and just do it to keep their school safe, but as expected, the allure of money is the biggest incentive. A normal term used to promote the App is, “tipping ain’t snitching”...as some kids would say. After dealing with teen suicides, another unused function of the App was using it as a way for students to let law enforcement know about other students who were having mental health issues and were considering self-harm. This was innovative at the time and no one had thought to use it for helping mentally ill students, but it was an easy transition as it was really doing the same thing: saving lives.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

The school-to-prison pipeline, as it is called, refers to what people believe is the disproportionate tendency of minors and young adults to become incarcerated because of what some believe are increasingly harsh school and municipal policies. Some also include zero tolerance that has caused many students to be arrested for issues many believe should be handled with school discipline. It has been a hot topic over the years and has made many people shy away from the thought of police officers in schools and focus on what effect this may have. Some studies show an increase in arrests and some studies show that there was no increase in arrests, but that some were arrested at later times due to having to call officers from outside agencies and the response times this reflects; meaning they weren’t always considered a high priority and thus arrested at their homes after school hours (Flannery, 2015). However, the National Association of School Officers (NASRO) believes that each school should carefully

select the right SRO (NASRO, 2015). The person that is selected by their agency should be a hard-working officer who is well rounded, patient, and carefully selected. An ideal school-based officer is a person who knows procedures and also knows not to arrest students for disciplinary issues; these issues should be handled by a teacher or administrator. Data shows that well-designed, well-trained school resource officers who follow best practices as established by NASRO lead to less arrests at school, less student violence, less property damage, and an increased feeling of safety for students and staff (Candelaria, 2021).

Some also believe that having officers in schools shows a negative impact as many critics have explained that students tend to become uneasy when coming to school and having to see and sometimes deal with police officers. In a report, some community leaders have reported that they have documentation of 60 cases since 2010 where students had been injured during interactions with their school police (Terrence, 2020). In these articles they have shown figures that show disparities among races that show minorities are disproportionately impacted (Terrence, 2020).

With that said, the other end of the spectrum shows numerous news stories about how officers in schools have saved lives. One instance being when a 10-year-old boy went into cardiac arrest and the school officer administered CPR to bring him back (Belloso, 2022). Just like the officers seen on the streets, the officers in schools are always willing to help and place themselves in harm's way to protect students, staff and the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the country, there has been a big push to place more police in schools, but with the influx of officers in academic settings, attention should now be paid to the standards to which those officers are held. Agencies should use a proactive approach when it comes to stopping school violence. Firstly, those officers should avoid complacency at all costs; this is a major issue in law enforcement as a whole and when compounded with a relatively laid-back school environment, this quickly becomes a problem. Officers need to be as proactive in the schools as they would be if they were out on the streets working their normal area. Looking out for mental health issues is another essential component in the world of school police. With the uptick of teen suicides in recent years and media coverage that seems to glorify these actions, academic-based officers need to make a conscious effort to look for and speak with students whom they think may be having problems. Being in decent shape and having a “squared away” appearance is another valuable law enforcement trait that has been proven to stop people from causing problems. The easiest deterrent for violent actions in schools, and often the most overlooked, is officer visibility.

To combat the rise of violence in academic settings, law enforcement must learn from the mistakes of the past, acknowledge current issues and plan accordingly to prevent tragedy in the future. Fixing and addressing mental health is where they should start. They should actively be seeking out the students who are having problems. This will most likely be hard because most people are afraid to admit they are having problems. Young men are brought up to show no emotion and to put on a macho persona. Asking for help can be embarrassing to some and the stigmas that surround it

can keep people from getting the help they really need. Parents many times do not want to admit their child may have mental health problems but rather rationalize it as “kids are just being kids” or “it’s just a phase they are going through.” Putting out information, resources, and having parents look for the warning signs is key. More importantly, parents need to be more involved and present in their children’s lives. Many parents work long hours at their job in order to provide for their family, but they are also missing out, especially during the formative years between 0-8. These years are important because studies have shown the lack of good experiences in childhood results in abnormal brain development that leads to problems in cognitive growth, poor school performance and behavioral problems (Chijioke, 2019). A reflection of abnormal brain growth could be bullying. Even though schools have strict consequences for bullying, and there are state and federal laws against this, it still happens.

Lessons from the past must always be kept in the forefront of the minds of school-based law enforcement. There’s no clear profile of a school attacker, but some details stand out. Many were absent from school before the attack, often through a school suspension; they were treated poorly by their peers in person, not just online; or they felt mistreated. They fixated on violence and watched it online, played games featuring it, or read about it in books (Long, 2019).

Other lessons include passing information between local agencies on calls involving school-aged children suffering mental health episodes. If it happens overnight, they need to make sure this is available to the school officer or staff prior to their arrival at the school. Knowing that a student may have a weapon before they would even get on a bus is a crucial part of stopping a problem before it even starts. Also, keeping track

of social media whether it be through some type of social media monitoring service or through some good kids at school or tipsters, will help to know when drugs, weapons, fights, and a multitude of other things are planned. Students and juveniles will post anything and everything on social media nowadays, which is a good source. Sometimes it is not possible to combat the rise of violence in an academic setting and knowing how to deal with an active shooter is imperative. In the event law enforcement is not able to arrive in a timely fashion to back-up other officers, then individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to confront an active shooter and save their own and the lives of others (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2008). SROs are there to keep students safe which doesn't always involve being a friend. Sometimes, just like parents, they have to be the bad guy to keep students safe.

There has been enough data provided to show that the school-to-prison pipeline may have existed in the past but as stated, selecting a well-rounded, highly trained officer who wants to be an SRO can make a huge difference in the school and students' lives. That means the officers should be trained in first aid, mental health, weapons, traffic and realize they are there to fall into whatever role is needed at any given time.

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