

School Violence—Myths, Assumptions & Realities

The recent news about school shootings has many individuals taking note of unusual or bizarre student behavior. This “call to action” is important in emphasizing school safety. However, it can also lead to unwarranted stereotypes and assumptions about what “types” of students or persons commit violent acts.

Campus officials are often the “first line of defense” against school violence because they are responsible for counseling and referring troubled students.

Understanding potential myths, along with stark realities, may be helpful as you work day-to-day to “decode” the meanings behind student behavior.

Key findings from a 2002 *Safe School Initiative* study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service highlight some erroneous assumptions about school violence. MSNBC Investigative Reporter, Bill Dedman examined these assumptions by presenting them in the form of “10 Common Myths About School Shootings and Violence” (October 2006). We have adapted Dedman’s myths, originally intended to explore K-12 issues, for use on your campus.

Ten Myths about School Violence Perpetrators

1. **He Didn’t Fit the Profile.** According to the *Safe School Initiative* (SSI) study, there is no accurate or useful “profile” of students who engaged in targeted school violence. There are no demographic or socioeconomic commonalities that would allow authorities to develop such a “profile.”
2. **He Just Snapped!** The SSI study indicated that rarely do attackers “snap” or simply “lose it.” Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help. Incidents of targeted violence at school were rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
3. **No One Knew.** SSI study data suggested that, in most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
4. **He Hadn’t Threatened Anyone.** Both Dedman and the SSI study suggest that too much emphasis is placed on whether a student made threats. There are no guarantees that students who threaten will attack or that students who do not threaten will not. Talking about obtaining a gun or “seeking revenge” poses a threat, whether or not an actual threat is made.
5. **He Was a Loner.** Most attackers do have friends and are active in clubs, sports, and/or co-curricular activities. According to SSI data, in many cases, “mainstream” students were involved in attacks in some capacity. Furthermore, Dedman suggested that only 25% of attackers hung out with students considered to be part of a “fringe group.”
6. **He Was Crazy!** According to the SSI data, most attackers were not psychologically evaluated or seeking help prior to the attack. However, most attackers did have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
7. **If Only We’d Had a SWAT Team or Metal Detectors.** According to the SSI report, despite prompt law enforcement responses, most school shooting incidents were stopped by other means than law enforcement intervention.
8. **He’d Never Touched a Gun.** Contrary to what many people suggested about attackers AFTER an attack—most attackers had access to or utilized weapons before the attack.
9. **We Did Everything We Could to Help Him.** According to SSI data, most attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack. Dedman suggested that many of these students sought help prior to the attack but felt ignored by teachers, friends, and administrators.
10. **School Violence is Rampant.** Dedman indicated in his (MSNBC) article that only 12 to 20 homicides occur each year in the nation’s 100,000 schools. In addition, he suggested that school violence in schools has dropped by 50% in the last decade.

While this study focused on violence in K-12 schools, many of the report’s conclusions can be reflected upon in relation to higher education.

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