Preventing School Violence: Evidence from Averted Rampage Attacks

Dr. Eric Madfis
Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice
University of Washington, Tacoma

Congressional Briefing
February 10, 2015
Contemporary School Violence Prevention Practices:

**Punitive Discipline & Amplified Security:**
- Zero Tolerance Policies
- Surveillance via School Resource Officers and Cameras
- Locked Doors and Metal Detectors

**Violence Risk Assessment:**
- Profiling
- Warning Signs
- The Threat Assessment Approach
Averted School Rampage

Philly Police Foil Teen's Plot to Attack School
Seize huge cache of weapons on display in his bedroom

Bomb Explodes in Home of NY Teen Columbine 'Fan'

Another Teen Nabbed in Columbine-Like Plot

Bombs Found Near School on Columbine Anniversary

Tampa Police: We Stopped School Massacre

SC Teen Busted in 'New Columbine' Plot
Research Methods

- Located 195 cases across USA from 2000-2009
- Granted access to 11 public schools in Northeast that averted a rampage attack
- In-depth interviews with 32 people (17 administrators, 4 counselors, 7 security/police officers, and 4 teachers) directly involved in averting incidents
- Triangulated with newspaper reporting, court transcripts, legal briefs, and police incident reports
School Rampage Prevention

What has worked:

- Positive bystander behavior (students coming forward to SRO’s, counselors, administrators, and teachers) – linked to positive school climates where students trust staff

- Threat assessments based on how direct, detailed, developed, and actionable the plots were, not warning signs or profiles
Bystander Behavior and the Student Code of Silence

Breaking the Code – Interventions through Leakage
- Directly Informed Confidants, Indirectly Informed Bystanders, Threatened Targets, Involved Co-Conspirators

Following the Code – Bystander Inaction
- People coming forward were rarely directly informed confidants or close friends, but were often acquaintances, targets, and even co-conspirators
- In nearly all cases, far more students knew and did not come forward than the number of students who knew and did come forward

Genuinely positive school climates are needed to foster positive bystander behavior
Forms of Risk Assessment

Threat Assessment Criteria:

- **Assessing the Plot’s Detail** – victim(s) targeted, location(s) selected, date and timing planned
- **Appraising Weaponry** – presence of weapons (firearms, knives, ammo, pipe bombs, explosives, chains and locks), attempts to obtain/manufacture weapons, weapons training

Profiling or Warning Sign Criteria:

- **Personal Characteristics** – ethnic/racial and gender identity, previous misbehavior, and prior mental health issues
- **Group Characteristics** – school social status, deviant subcultural affiliation
Conclusions

- Officials who averted attacks deemed threat assessment criteria to be the most crucial, and these criteria gave them far more confidence in the validity of their assessments – this speaks to the value of considering context and severity over zero tolerance and unreliable predictive measures.

- Focus should be on forging positive school climates and restorative disciplinary practices, rather than upon punitive discipline and enhanced security – this, in turn, will increase positive bystander behavior when leakage occurs.

- Both solutions not only thwart rampage attacks but have additional potential for reducing school exclusions and diminishing the school-to-prison pipeline.