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A Qualitative Investigation of Averted School Shooting Rampages Ψ

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Abstract

The recent rash of school violence has again brought to the fore a need to investigate ways to enhance the safety of America's children. With its emphases on prevention and collaboration with schools, a counseling psychology perspective can add much to the growing body of research on lethal school violence. This article aims to understand school violence prevention from the perspectives of school personnel who intervened to avert deadly shootings. As such, this study used consensual qualitative research methodology. Six primary domains emerged from the data, including school conditions, intervention, crisis planning, relationship, prevention efforts, and problematic issues. A seventh *other* domain captured important data that did not fit with the aforementioned six domains. From all domains, data were collapsed into 42 core ideas.

Keywords

prevention; well-being; children/adolescent populations; school settings; school violence

On September 27, 2006, a 53-year-old man entered Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado, and took six female students captive, sexually assaulted them, and killed one before shooting himself in a classroom. Two

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days later, a 15-year-old boy fatally shot his principal at Weston High School, in Cazenovia, Wisconsin. Less than a week later, on October 2, a 32-year-old man shot and killed five girls before killing himself in a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania (Maxwell, 2006). These more recent incidents—combined with the highly publicized shootings in the 1990s in such places as South Jefferson County, Colorado; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and West Paducah, Kentucky—point to the need for continued research on the prevention of lethal school violence.

Counseling psychology is grounded in professional values that are well suited for collaborations in the schools (Romano & Kachgal, 2004), including an emphasis on prevention (Hage et al., 2007) and the enhancement of optimal human development (Walsh, Galassi, Murphy, & Park-Taylor, 2002). As such, the field may make important contributions to the study of lethal school violence and the interventions following such acts (Brabeck, Walsh, Kenny, & Comilang, 1997). Preventing school violence must be a multidisciplinary endeavor (Calhoun, Glaser, Stefurak, & Bradshaw, 2000), and counseling psychologists possess expertise that can make important contributions to this undertaking. Such input complements the perspectives of others, including school counselors and psychologists, administrators, teachers, parents, and the juvenile justice system.

The term *school violence* refers to targeted and nontargeted incidents. Nontargeted school violence consists of fights and quarrels that erupt in response to conflicts between two or more students (Daniels et al., 2007b). Targeted school violence is defined as that which occurs in schools or at school functions where the perpetrator and/or victims are known or identifiable before the incident (Reddy et al., 2001). Daniels and Bradley (2005) expanded the definition of targeted school violence to include violence that is potentially lethal, including averted shootings and armed hostage/barricade situations.

Several agencies—including the U.S. Department of Education (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (O'Toole, 2000), and the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002)—have conducted research in the area of lethal targeted school violence. However, despite what has been learned from these studies, little is known about successfully averted school shootings. Scholars have recommended that systematic research examine potentially lethal school violence that was averted (Moore, Petrie, Braga, & McLaughlin, 2003; O'Toole, 2000).

Averting Lethal School Violence

To date, little research has examined potentially lethal school violence that has been averted. The extant literature focuses on three primary areas: threat assessment (Cornell, 2004; Cornell et al., 2004), barricaded hostage events in schools (Daniels et al., 2007a, 2007b), and averted school shootings (Daniels, Buck, et al., 2007).

Following the lethal school shootings of the 1990s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation intensively studied 14 shootings and four schools at which a shooting had been averted (O'Toole, 2000). One of the findings was that many of the shooters made threats or exhibited warning signs before the shooting. Consequently, the bureau recommended that future efforts be directed at implementing a threat assessment approach to prevent lethal school violence. Other school safety experts have echoed this recommendation (e.g., Fein et al., 2002; Jimerson, Brock, & Cowan, 2005). Threat assessment entails gathering facts about a threat and making a determination regarding the likelihood that the threat will be carried out. From this perspective, not all threats are equal: O'Toole (2000) distinguished between low, medium, and high levels of risk. A low-level threat is vague and implausible, lacks realism, and suggests that the person making the threat is unlikely to carry it out. A medium-level threat contains more detail, suggests that some thought has gone into the planning, yet still may not be wholly realistic. Finally, a high-level threat is specific and detailed, and it suggests that the person has taken steps to carry a plan out. This level of threat poses imminent and serious danger to others.

On a practical level, schools are encouraged to develop a threat assessment team that includes, at a minimum, the principal or assistant principal; the school resource officer or a local law enforcement officer; and a school psychologist, counselor, or social worker (Cornell & Williams, 2006). This team then implements a seven-step threat assessment once they become aware of a threat (Cornell & Sheras, 2005). A discussion of the threat assessment protocol is beyond the scope of this discussion; however, Cornell et al. (2004) reported results of a threat assessment approach that was used in Richmond, Virginia, public schools. In one school year, students issued 188 threats; under zero-tolerance policies, every student who made a threat would have been expelled. However, trained threat assessment teams determined that only 3 threats posed serious risk. Thus, threat assessment can be an effective means of preventing lethal school violence.

A second area of averted lethal school violence that has begun to receive research attention is that of barricaded hostage events in schools. Early

research on barricaded hostage events focused on the characteristics of the offenders, the psychological impact of the events on the captives and their families, and the crisis negotiation strategies (Cremniter et al., 1997; Giebels, Noelanders, & Vervaeke, 2005; Parfitt, 2004; Regini, 2002; Vecchi, Van Hasselt, & Romano, 2005; Wilson, 2000). More recently, Daniels, Royster, Vecchi, and Pshenishny (2009) studied 19 barricaded hostage events in U.S. schools, and Daniels et al. (2007a, 2007b) qualitatively examined school-barricaded hostage events that were successfully resolved. Findings from these studies suggest that the following variables are important to successful resolution: developing positive connections with students; creating a safe environment; having school personnel be present throughout the school; possessing an awareness of conditions in and around the school; communicating with the subject in a calm, nonconfrontational manner; negotiating the release of captives; training; and clear communications with other professionals before, during, and after the incident (Daniels et al., 2007b).

Finally, a third important area of lethal school violence that has received little research attention is that of shooting rampages that were averted. Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, and Roth (2004) defined *rampage school shootings* as "attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random" (p. 15). Daniels, Buck, et al. (2007) examined printed news accounts of averted school rampages to assess important information about the incidents and how the plots were discovered. Findings indicate that subjects typically informed others of their plans through e-mail or paper notes and often did not act alone. Students were predominantly the intended targets of these events; however, in some incidents, teachers or other school administrators were targeted. The most frequent motive found was retribution for being bullied. Finally, the most common means of unveiling plotted school rampages was that of a student's coming forward and telling school personnel or the police.

Although shedding important light on averted shootings, the study by Daniels, Buck, et al. (2007) was limited to data reported in newspapers; thus, their data were anecdotal rather than scientific, and further research needs to be done. In addition, the literature has addressed other forms of potentially lethal school violence, such as threat assessment (once a threat has been made) and barricaded, captive events. However, little is known about how people intervened to avert a lethal school shooting. Such knowledge would aid educators, law enforcement, and psychologists in developing more effective school violence prevention programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate planned school shootings that were successfully averted once school personnel and school-based police officers became aware of the plot. Our goal was to get the perspectives of school personnel about their roles in averting the shooting, the systemic conditions that aided in the averted shooting, what they thought the reasons were for the

successful outcome, and what advice they would offer others. Data included interviews with school personnel (including school resource officers) who were directly involved with the discovery of, and intervention to resolve, plotted shooting rampages. Results will aid counseling psychologists and others in the prevention and mitigation of school shootings.

Method

Procedures

Schools in the United States that discovered and successfully averted shootings were identified through a search of the LexisNexis Academic database, consisting of published news reports. Search strings included *school & shooting*, *school & plot*, and *school & rampage*. The present sample drew from incidents that occurred between April 2001 and March 2003. Thirteen incidents were found and data were collected at four schools. Of the nine schools that did not participate, four never contacted the researcher despite numerous efforts; two were advised not to speak with anyone because the legal proceedings were still pending; two expressed initial interest but then did not return any further calls; and one stated that it was not interested in participating. Potential schools were located in the Northeast ($n = 5$), the West Coast ($n = 3$), the Midwest ($n = 2$), the Southwest ($n = 2$), and the Rocky Mountain West ($n = 1$). Interestingly, no schools that had averted a shooting were identified in the Southeast.

The first author (the principal investigator; PI) conducted interviews in person at the participants' schools, and depending on the interviewee's role and on information about the incident, each interview lasted 15 to 45 minutes. For example, one participant was the supervisor of the school resource officer, and his interview lasted 15 minutes. He did not become directly involved until the formal investigation began, so his information about the early discovery of the event was limited. Each participant responded to the following four questions:

Please describe your specific roles that helped to prevent the act of violence from escalating.

Please describe specific systemic conditions (community/school atmosphere or climate) that you believe contributed to the prevention of the violent act.

To what do you attribute the successful outcome of this situation?

What advice would you give to other school professionals who may be in a similar situation or may need help developing a violence prevention plan?

Design. Because of the low frequency of potentially lethal school violence, qualitative methods were deemed the methodology of choice (Moore et al., 2003). Data were analyzed using the consensual qualitative research methodology (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), which is a systematic method of attaining consensus among several voices on the main emergent themes within the data. The steps of consensual qualitative research are embedded in the procedures below.

First, tapes of interviews were transcribed verbatim. The PI then read through each transcript while listening to the tape and noted any discrepancies between what he read and what he heard. The transcriber and PI then met to discuss each discrepancy until they reached agreement on the actual statement.

Second, the research team members (the PI and the second, third, and fourth authors) separately examined transcripts and narrowed them into blocks, which are statements that answer each question asked of participants and so range from a single phrase to several sentences. For example, in response the roles that one participant played, she stated, "We began questioning the students as more and more came to light, more and more detectives came to help." Because this is a direct response to the question, it was included as a block to be analyzed. The research team then met to discuss each block and its differences until all team members agreed on every block.

Third, members of the research team individually examined the blocks and developed domains that captured their essence (Hill et al., 2005). Again, the team met to discuss the emerging domains and subsequent discrepancies until it attained consensus. After the team members agreed on each block's domain, they sent the domain definitions and blocks to the fifth author, who served as an auditor. This person was not directly involved in the analyses of the data but was familiar with the study and methodology (Hill et al., 1997). She then read through each block and its accompanying domain while considering the domain definitions. She noted any blocks that she believed were not accurately domained, and she sent them back to the research team for further consideration. This process continued until final consensus was attained.

Fourth, team members read all the blocks that had been placed into domains, and they summarized the data into core ideas, which aim to retain the essence of what the participants said. Core ideas are presented with fewer words and are more clear than the original statements (Hill et al., 2005). This process took place within the research team meetings, and everyone's ideas were discussed until consensus was attained.

Finally, the core ideas from all transcripts were examined in a cross-analysis (Hill et al., 2005). This process moves the data from the individual

interview to the entirety of the sample. Hill et al. (2005) describe the cross-analysis as moving the data to a higher level of abstraction. It is the cross-analysis that serves to examine patterns and themes among research participants.

A total of 656 blocks of data were analyzed, from which six domains emerged. Because the research team deemed some statements to be important yet not a good fit into any of the existing domains, it chose to include a seventh *other* domain. It is our belief that these data contribute to the overall understanding of the perspectives of all participants. Table 1 presents each domain, its definition, and a representative participant statement. We examined the extent to which the raters agreed on the primary domain of each block and the agreement of the auditor with the team's ratings. To determine the domain for a given block, the majority of raters (three of four) needed to agree. If less than a majority agreed, we discussed the block until we attained consensus. Across the 11 transcripts, the team members had 74.9% agreement for the ratings on domains. The agreed-on domains were then sent to the auditor, who agreed with the team on 72.2% of the ratings.

Participants

Participants initially included 12 individuals from four schools at which approval was given to conduct the study. Unfortunately, owing to technical difficulties, the interview with one principal was inaudible and so was not used for data analysis. Therefore, analyses were based on interviews with 11 participants, including 3 principals, 4 school resource officers (including a supervisor), 3 assistant/vice principals, and 1 district crisis coordinator. Age and years of professional experience were not solicited from participants; however, five participants were Caucasian males, three were Caucasian females, two were Mexican American males, and one was a Mexican American female.

School violence prevention must be a cross-disciplinary endeavor (Calhoun et al., 2000). As such, we were interested in the perspectives of all individuals who discovered, investigated, and intervened to avert a potentially lethal school shooting. Thus, our sample reflects a cross section of school personnel whom we believe gave us a more comprehensive understanding of the incidents.

Schools. There were two high schools, one middle school, and one elementary school. School A is a large urban high school, serving approximately 3,240 students. Roughly 78% of the student body is classified as White, and 16% are Hispanic. Only 2% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. School A is located in a suburb with a population of

Table 1. Domains: Definitions and Sample Statements

Domain	Definition and Sample Statment
School conditions	*Definition:* conditions that have been set up to ensure safety and promote optimal learning, school culture/climate, breaking the code of silence, awareness of intruders, awareness of unusual activities, rules and regulations, boundaries, monitors in the school, school size, relationships among staff, or relationships with students in general
Intervention	*Statement:* "So now you're progressed to the point where you can talk to the kids and instead of going out and beating up somebody they'll come."
	Definition: occurs after an awareness of a plot, immediate response, gathering information, interviewing suspects, getting help from externals (e.g., the police), coordination efforts, students reporting the incident
Crisis planning	*Statement:* "One of the students relayed the information that they had heard there was a gun on campus and that the boy was gonna shoot some kids. And so immediately upon hearing that I got a hold of the vice principal."
	Definition: discussions about the need/importance of preparation, training, relationships with externals (e.g., police, emergency workers) before an event
Interpersonal relationship	*Statement:* "Probably the most important thing was well . . . the policies that we have in place when things like this happen and knowing to follow them."
	Definition: efforts to establish a personal relationship or trust with a specific student/students, relationships among students, awareness of an individual's temperament, actively knowing students within their holistic context
Prevention efforts	*Statement:* "I think it's the dignity and the compassion that you show these kids."
	Definition: efforts to prevent violence (e.g., antibullying programs)
	Statement: "We got through [*sic*] some stuff through FEMA and . . . the Red Cross and put it together so it's more, um, complete."
	Definition: Things that did not go well, unanticipated events, unintentional harmful events
Problematic issues	*Statement:* "So, did we have a system? No, there was nothing, we were totally unprepared for that [the chaos when the police arrived]."
	Definition: Data that did not fit into any other domains.
Other	*Statement:* "I think again when I talked to him it was, he really thought it was a video game."

approximately 110,000 in an urban metropolitan area in the Southwest (2000 population: just more than 3 million). At this school, six students were planning a shooting and bombing spree, followed by their committing suicide. They had plans and had begun gathering weapons and examining bomb-making plans from the Internet. The plot came to light after two of the participants engaged in an argument because one wanted out of the group. Following the argument, a letter was found in the leader's backpack detailing the plot. The leader was tried and convicted.

School B is an urban middle school serving approximately 865 students. The majority of the students are Hispanic (89.0%) with White (7.3%) and Black (3.5%) students composing the majority of the remaining students. Almost all of the students (98%) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school is located in an urban city of approximately 250,000 people in the West. In this situation, a lone student was planning a shooting spree. Another student overheard him talking about it in the bathroom with his brother and so went to the school counselor to report what he had heard. While a class was lining up to go to lunch, the plotter stood behind a tree preparing for his assault. During this time, the principal approached him as he was just reaching into his book bag to pull out his gun, and the shooting was averted.

School C is a high school with a student body of approximately 1,350 students. Just under half the students are White (48%) and 45% are Black. Almost three quarters (71%) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This school is located in an urban community of approximately 41,000 people in the Midwest. Four students plotted to discharge bombs in the school while one of the four shot at police officers and administrators. Another student overheard the students talking about the plot and reported it to an administrator.

Finally, School D is an elementary school with about 575 students. Approximately 39% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and most students (80%) are White (13% are Hispanic). The community is in a rural region with a population of approximately 13,000 people, and it is located in the Southwest. Three students plotted to murder the principal and her family. They had acquired the weapons and had selected a date and time for the attack. The plot was averted when they attempted to recruit another student to help them. This student then went to the principal and revealed the details of the plot.

Researchers. The researchers included a counseling psychologist (the PI) who taught in an counseling psychology program (American Psychological Association approved) at a large Midwestern university. He has conducted quantitative and qualitative research. The research team included five

graduate students in the doctoral counseling psychology program at the same university. Team members had varying levels of education and experience, including courses in research methods. The PI trained the team members in qualitative methods in general and consensual qualitative research methodology in particular (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al. 2005). The auditor was a recent graduate of the master's in school counseling program at the same university. At the time of this research, she was employed as a school counselor and had been trained in the use of consensual qualitative research by the PI.

Results

Cross-Analysis

Core ideas were developed from each domain and then examined across cases. Table 2 presents the frequencies of each core idea by every participant. Noteworthy is that the majority of the statements classified as *crisis planning* were given by Participant 7. This individual, a principal, described at length the efforts that he had made in preparations, including serving on the community gang violence task force.

Results are presented by each domain, including the total number of blocks analyzed for the domain and the number of blocks that were classified into each core idea. Following the suggestion by Hill et al. (2005), we labeled each domain and core idea as *general* if all participants described it, *typical* if at least half the cases applied, and *variant* if at least two but less than half the cases applied. Because there were some important findings that were not expressed by multiple participants, we added a fourth label, *unique*, if only one participant addressed the core idea. A total of 61 blocks were coded with more than one domain. Blocks that were multicoded were included in the results of each domain to which they contributed.

School conditions. The most frequent domain addressed by participants was that of school conditions. In sum, 306 statements (46.6%) were classified as *school conditions*. All 11 participants addressed these conditions, thus rendering this a general domain (Hill et al., 2005). Seven primary core ideas emerged from this domain, with an *other* core idea consisting of data that did not fit into any of the remaining core ideas. The most frequently occurring core idea was that of preventive efforts (n = 82, 26.8%). This core idea captured participants' discussions of roles that were anticipated to prevent violence and programs that served to prevent the rampage shooting. A representative statement of preventive efforts (as made by Participant 2, a school

Table 2. Frequencies of Core Ideas

Domain: Core Idea	Participant												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	*n*	Label
School conditions												306	
Break code of silence	0	0	2	5	8	0	0	10	2	4	4	35	Typical
Preventive efforts	0	17	7	6	8	4	9	13	4	1	13	82	Typical
Watchfulness/presence	0	6	2	7	2	20	2	1	0	2	6	48	Typical
Philosophy: Dignity and respect	0	1	1	13	0	9	5	6	5	2	0	42	Typical
Establishing meaningful relationships	1	8	3	0	3	0	8	4	1	1	0	29	Typical
Follow established procedures	4	13	3	0	2	0	4	3	3	0	5	37	Typical
School–community cooperation	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	10	Variant
Other	0	3	0	0	0	3	2	10	1	1	3	23	Typical
Intervention												148	
Incident discovery	4	6	2	3	5	0	7	6	0	0	5	38	Typical
Search and seizure/maintain order	2	4	3	2	7	3	1	0	0	0	0	22	Typical
De-escalation	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	Variant
Notify school authorities	2	3	1	1	5	1	2	0	2	3	1	21	Typical
Interview suspects	1	4	0	0	1	1	3	5	0	1	3	19	Typical
School–community interaction	2	1	12	0	0	0	11	2	0	1	2	31	Typical
Mental health services	1	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	7	Variant
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	6	Variant
Crisis planning												48	
Training and practice	0	6	0	3	2	0	7	0	0	0	0	18	Variant
Adherence policies, procedures	5	1	1	1	3	1	8	0	0	0	0	20	Typical
School–community relationship	2	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	1	0	0	9	Variant
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	Unique

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Domain: Core Idea	Participant												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	*n*	Label
Interpersonal relationship												42	
Establishing trust	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	Variant
Prevention from rapport	0	7	0	5	2	0	2	1	0	2	0	19	Typical
Respect and compassion	0	0	1	8	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	10	Variant
Accentuate student strengths	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	Unique
Personal relationships	0	3	0	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	8	Variant
Prevention efforts												37	
Adherence to policies/procedures	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	Variant
Established roles	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	Variant
Training and practice	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	Unique
Establishing/implementing programs	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	6	5	2	8	22	Variant
Crisis planning	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	Unique
School–community collaboration	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Unique
Problematic issues												36	
Unanticipated events	0	0	0	2	1	5	5	2	0	0	0	15	Variant
Systemic deficits	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	7	Variant
Missed warning signs	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	Unique
Media	0	0	2	0	0	4	0	6	0	0	0	12	Variant
Other												39	
Suspect's state of mind	0	0	0	2	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	7	Variant
Dignity and respect	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Unique
Lesson learning (from present or other situations)	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	Variant
Information gathering/incident discovery	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	4	Variant
Positive outcomes	1	1	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	1	0	9	Variant
Lack of resources	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Unique
Other	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	8	0	0	0	14	Variant

resource officer at School A) is as follows: "To me, and this is what I stress in the school resource officer training stuff that I've pulled together, is the rapport building. That's what's gonna avoid this stuff occurring."

Participants also talked about the importance of watchfulness and maintaining a presence in the school ($n = 48$, 15.7%). These statements relayed the importance of being aware of what is happening in the school and being present during movement times so that students know they are being observed. Participant 6 (a school resource officer at School B) stated, "[The principal is] in the hall, I'm in the hall. It was the end of lunch hour, I'm shooing all the kids into class and so I think just my presence was a deterrent at that time, at that particular incident."

The third-most-frequent core idea involved a philosophy of treating students with dignity and respect ($n = 42$, 13.7%), which refers to the interactions between staff and students. Participant 4, the principal at School B, described how he expects the teachers to treat the students: "So the philosophy has changed to the point where you treat the kids with dignity, the teachers treat them with dignity. If they don't, I don't have them on campus." Another core idea involved following established procedures once the incident was discovered ($n = 37$, 12.1%). The assistant principal at School A highlighted this core idea when describing how the plot was discovered:

> We stress that here, both with security, the staff, with teachers, etc . . . if there's an altercation, uh, verbal between kids, even body language stuff, they're encouraged and trained to contact either me, or an administrator or security to come make either a better assessment of it or immediately handle it.

Efforts to break the code of silence ($n = 35$, 11.4%) included statements about how students were able to communicate with staff when they had concerns or heard rumors about the plot. The principal at School D (Participant 8) described how a group of students with knowledge of the plot came to her: "At least these kids had the courage, when if they really realized or thought that it was serious enough, that they came." Twenty-nine statements (9.5%) involved establishing meaningful relationships between staff and students as an integral part of the school environment. Participant 7, the principal at School C, highlighted the importance of rapport: "It comes down to . . . having that rapport with kids. . . . I think that is so important."

The core idea of school–community cooperation ($n = 10$, 3.3%) highlights the importance of establishing connections between the school and the larger community. A representative statement comes from Participant 3, the district crisis coordinator at School A: "Officer [—] . . . brought

his team in, detectives and other officers. And he went quite quickly through the investigative piece of it." Finally, 23 statements (7.5%) were classified as *other*. One example comes from Participant 9, the school resource officer at School D:

> I wear a uniform, but that's on a rare occasion because it's very intimidating to [the students] . . . otherwise, I wear plain clothes; I wear a gun . . . in a fanny pack. That's one of the reasons I wear jeans, but I'm more approachable."

Intervention. The second-most frequently discussed domain was that of intervention (n = 148, 22.6%). All participants described this domain; thus, it was classified as a general domain. Seven primary core ideas emerged that related to the intervention domain, with an eighth *other* core idea reserved for data that did not fit with any of the remaining core ideas. The most frequently discussed core idea was that of incident discovery (n = 38, 25.7%), which captured descriptions of how the plot was discovered, how information was gathered about the plot, and which students were interviewed (not including the suspects, which was classified as a separate core idea). Participant 1, the assistant principal at School A, discovered a note with the details of the plot:

> [I] came across a sentence that referred to a MAC-10 . . . and I kinda thought this was a gun, but I wasn't quite sure, so I called the other assistant principal that I knew was here, and he said, "Oh yeah, that's a gun. A pretty big gun."

Following incident discovery, 31 statements (20.9%) were classified as *school–community interaction*, which represents the school's reaching out to the community (e.g., calling the police). Participant 3 described the principal's efforts to reach out to parents following the incident: "Dr. [—] . . . communicated letters home. The phone rang and he answered them; he didn't let them roll over to the answering machine." Another core idea to emerge from the data was that of search and seizure/maintaining order (n = 22, 14.9%), which relates to looking for evidence and assuring students that they are safe. Participant 6, the school resource officer at School B, searched the backpack of the suspect and found the gun: "We had his backpack here; we searched his backpack . . . on that particular day when he was going through with his plan." Twenty-one statements (14.2%) pertained to notifying other school authorities (e.g., calling the school resource officer). Participant 9, the

school resource officer at School D, was the authority that the principal called: "I was contacted by the principal of the school."

Nineteen statements (12.8%) related to interviewing the suspects. Participant 8, the principal at School D, brought the suspects into her office and interviewed them, with the assistant principal as a witness: "And they just told it . . . they sat and just basically just, 'Yeah, we're going to do this.'" The remaining three core ideas were variant: mental health services ($n = 7$, 4.7%), which involved statements about counseling offered to students or suspects; de-escalating the situation ($n = 4$, 2.7%), which involved interventions designed to decrease the feelings of crisis among students, parents, and so on; and, finally, six statements (4.0%) classified as *other*. Because these were variant responses specific examples will not be offered.

Crisis planning. The third domain developed from these data was that of crisis planning ($n = 48$, 7.3%). Three core ideas emerged from the crisis-planning domain, with an *other* core idea representing data that did not fit into any of the established core ideas. Seven participants addressed issues pertaining to crisis planning; thus, this domain was considered typical (Hill et al., 2005). Furthermore, one core idea was typical, two were variant, and one was unique. The most frequently addressed core idea was that of adherence to policies and procedures ($n = 20$, 41.7%), the notion that preparing for crises entails establishing and following set standards. The principal at School C (participant 7) described the importance of keeping doors locked:

> I told every teacher, "You have to have your door locked. You can have it open, but I want it locked. 'Cause if I have somebody come in here, I want to make sure that you can shut your door, that you're not running to find your keys to get to the door."

In addition, training and practice ($n = 18$, 37.5%) was seen as an important preparatory set of activities. Participant 2 attributed much of his school's success in averting the shooting to luck. However, he stated,

> The harder you work, the luckier you get, in this kind of situation. The more you train and the more you have an open dialogue of what to look for and why, and people . . . [are] willing to say, "Yeah, I'm buying into that."

Three participants indicated that it was important to develop effective school–community working relationships ($n = 9$, 18.8%). Last, one statement (2.1%) was classified as *other*. Because these two core ideas came from only three

people (one participant made statements pertaining to both; see Table 2), examples are not given.

Relationships. Forty-two (6.4%) participant statements pertained to the development and maintenance of relationships with students. We discovered five core ideas from these data. The most commonly occurring core idea was that of prevention resulting from rapport with students (n = 19, 45.2%). This core idea relates to using the positive relationship that has been developed between faculty and students to prevent violence from occurring. Participant 5, the school resource officer at School B, provided a representative statement of this core idea: "We had a counselor who was accessible for the child who reported. He came and reported it to a counselor. They knew that that was the safe and appropriate thing to do." Also identified as a core idea was that of respectful and compassionate interactions between staff and students (n = 10, 23.8%). A third core idea described efforts to develop a personal relationship with the students and their families (n = 8, 19%). We classified three statements (7.1%) as efforts to establish a sense of trust with students and two statements as accentuating students' strengths (4.8%). Because of the low frequency of these core ideas, representative statements are not offered.

Prevention efforts. Thirty-seven participant statements were coded as prevention efforts (5.6%), a domain that contains six core ideas. The majority of the statements (n = 22, 59.5%) were classified as *establishing/implementing violence prevention programs*. Participant 10, the supervisor of the school's resource officer, described the importance of the school's bullying prevention program:

> The bullying training the kids received . . . helped give them the confidence [and] the familiarity with the officer, as well as the knowledge that they had from the presentations, to step forward and to bring this to light before it became a real bad event.

Six statements (16.2%) were coded as *crisis planning*, which pertained to any efforts the school or district made for responding to crises. Four blocks (10.8%) composed the establishment of roles for crisis prevention. Two core ideas were each represented by two statements (5.4%): training and practice for crises and adherence to policies and procedures. Finally, school–community collaboration was represented by one statement (2.7%). Because of the low frequency of these core ideas, representative statements are not offered.

Problematic issues. A sixth domain that emerged from the data was that of problematic issues (n = 36, 5.5%), in which four core ideas were identified.

The most common core idea was that of encountering unanticipated events (n = 15, 41.7%). Participant 5 had not planned on the forcefulness of the police in an emergency: "It was intrusive and they were everywhere, and they were clearly in charge once they got here." Three participants described problems created by the media (n = 12, 33.3%). The principal at School D (Participant 8) was personally attacked in the press:

> You know, it's scary. And then your name is plastered in the newspaper and they don't quite get the story right. And . . . the thing that bothered me in the whole situation with the press is that after a while you look like you caused the problem.

Seven statements (19.4%) were classified as systemic deficits, which highlights problems within the school or community that were uncovered as a result of the event. Finally, two statements (5.6%) represented missed warning signs from the troubled students. Because of the low frequency of these core ideas, representative statements are not offered.

Other. In total, 39 statements (5.9%) did not fit into any of the domains. From these statements were discerned six core ideas and an additional *other* category, again for data that was important but did not fit into any domain. The greatest number of statements were unclassifiable (n = 14, 35.9%) and so were placed into the *other* category. For example, Participant 5 offered, "Anybody who's systematically picked on or harassed, we could all break eventually, I believe. Even adults." Nine statements (23.1%) addressed positive outcomes of the events, as shown in this statement, from Participant 1: "I think the way it turned out, we were very fortunate." Seven blocks (17.9%) related to hypotheses about the suspect's state of mind—for example, "When I talked to him it was, he really thought it was a video game" (Participant 4). Four statements (10.2%) were classified as information gathering and incident discovery. Three statements (7.7%) were classified as lessons learned from the present or other events; one core idea (2.6%) described treating others with dignity and respect; and one (2.6%) was about a lack of resources to handle the event. Again, because of the low frequency of these core ideas, representative statements are not offered.

Discussion

This study attempted to understand averted school rampages from in-person semistructured interviews of 11 individuals from four schools. In it, we conducted a content analysis of the answers that the 11 participants gave to the

four research questions, which yielded six primary domains (intervention, school conditions, interpersonal relationships, crisis planning, prevention efforts, and problematic issues) and a seventh *other* domain.

A consistent theme throughout the interviews involved the importance of creating a safe and secure school environment (school conditions). Also important was creating and maintaining an open, trusting relationship with all students throughout the school. In many instances, participants thought that it was beneficial to extend an open, trusting relationship beyond the students (i.e., to their families). Participants also emphasized showing dignity and respect to their students as a strong component toward establishing such meaningful relationships. Specifically, they viewed these open, trusting, and meaningful relationships as one of the most essential roles in preventing the plotted rampage. These findings are similar to those found in a study by Daniels et al. (2007b) of successful resolutions of armed hostage/barricade events where the relationship between students and faculty was seen as a crucial factor in peacefully facilitating a resolution. However, within the context of averted rampages in the present study, these relationships created a climate where students were comfortable to seek help (from school personnel, e.g.) once they had knowledge of a potential event.

This finding supports past research that has found that students are more likely to seek assistance when they feel connected to the faculty and peers in their school (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). Students' seeking help from school personnel when they have knowledge of a potential event is not trivial, considering that past research has shown that perpetrators of school rampages often inform others of their plans (e.g., Daniels, Buck, et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2000). In fact, in a report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, O'Toole (2000) coined the term *leakage* to highlight the phenomenon of how the majority of school shooters will communicate with other individuals their plans for a school rampage. However, O'Toole noted that in schools that had an actual shooting, many students had preexisting knowledge of the event in some form or fashion (e.g., rumors) but never informed any school personnel (O'Toole, 2000). This is often referred to as the code of silence, which results when there is little to no trust between students and school personnel. The four schools in the present study appeared to have broken this code of silence in that students felt comfortable enough to seek help from school personnel on the basis of their preexisting open, trusting relationship, after obtaining knowledge of a potential shooting.

Another consistent theme was that of establishing and utilizing a preexisting relationship with the plotters (as subsumed under the intervention domain). Many participants indicated that although they made efforts to

establish meaningful relationships with all students, they also made a concerted effort toward those students who may have already been on the radar owing to past behaviors, comments, overall disposition, and so on. Such meaningful relationships with the plotters made intervention efforts (e.g., interviewing, search and seizure) a relatively smoother process because of the plotter's cooperation. Daniels et al. (2007b) also found that preexisting relationships with the perpetrator in armed hostage/barricade events was an important factor in obtaining a peaceful resolution. Participants made a common recommendation for establishing such meaningful relationships—namely, to increase faculty's nonclassroom contact with the students, which may include spending time in the hallways, having lunch with the students, attending extracurricular activities, and involving students in crisis planning, training, and prevention programs.

As alluded to earlier, participants considered the following as important components of the intervention process: immediately responding to students who come forward with information of a potential rampage (incident discovery), interviewing potential suspects, and executing search and seizure of suspect materials. Finding evidence and immediately responding appears to be an effective means of diffusing plans for a school rampage (Daniels, Buck, et al., 2007). Many participants emphasized having an alert and receptive administration with clearly defined roles as an important factor in maintaining order within the school and deescalating the situation. Notification and involvement of the local authorities as part of the investigation was also part of the school's intervention process.

Participants at all four schools attributed the success of their intervention process, from interviewing students to involving the authorities, to having a formal crisis plan in place (crisis planning). Training and practice provided these schools with clear roles for each individual, along with knowledge of what and when to do something (or what and when not to do something). This planning allowed for a relatively orderly process with minimal unexpected problems. The participants in this study, like others (e.g., Daniels et al., 2007a), highly recommended that all school personnel be trained in and so practice crisis response procedures. Crisis planning also included having a school–community working relationship, such as training and communicating with local authorities as part of the response team. Working and communicating with the local authorities is important not only during the event but also before and after the event.

Many participants also stressed the importance of their roles after the crisis was averted. For example, some school personnel provided a notice to the parents explaining the recent situation to reassure them of the safety of

their children. Mental health services were also offered to students as an option, whereas the plotters were suspended or expelled from school. Finally, several respondents described the importance of channeling all communications to the media through a school or district media specialist.

Many participants emphasized the importance of school personnel's having an overall presence and awareness within the school. This physical presence not only facilitates developing open, trusting relationships with students but also provides an opportunity to assess and respond to anything or anyone that appears atypical or concerning. Furthermore, this presence facilitates a positive school climate by way of providing a safe and protective atmosphere for the students. Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, and Dumas (2003) assert that a positive school climate is positively related to school safety and negatively related to delinquent behaviors in the schools. Daniels et al. (2007b) found that school personnel's awareness was an important factor in successfully intervening and resolving armed hostage/barricade events. Awareness in the present study also appears to have had a significant impact on participants' immediately responding to suspicious events and rumors, which in turn resulted in a successful intervention process at all four schools.

The most salient prevention effort mentioned by multiple participants was that of establishing and implementing what they believe to be successful antibullying programs. Such programs appear to have instilled a climate within these schools that bullying is not acceptable and not tolerated. Consistent with best practices on prevention (Hage et al., 2007), participants mentioned antibullying programs that the literature has supported, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (e.g., Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). It is important to note this explicit effort to minimize bullying when considering that some studies have shown that retaliation for being bullied is one of the most common reported motives for planning and executing a school rampage (e.g., Daniels, Buck, et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). As Molina, Dulmus, and Sowers (2005) emphasize, the sooner such prevention/intervention programs are implemented, the greater the likelihood that future school violence can be prevented.

Many participants reported unanticipated events as problematic issues during the process of averting the rampage. Common themes included systemic deficits such as poor communication with the authorities during the intervention process and coping with the presence of the media and subsequent newspaper reports. Even though these unanticipated events did not ultimately compromise the success of the prevention efforts, they still played a role in hindering the process and can thus be considered a risk factor. Even with formal

crisis planning and training implemented by all four schools, the experience of an actual school rampage plot demonstrated potential deficits, which emphasizes the importance of assessing and learning from such events to maximize success of averting future school rampages.

Limitations

This study has provided much-needed detailed information of firsthand accounts of averted school rampages; however, it did have some limitations owing to the nature of the study that should be considered. First, the sample was relatively small. The generalizability of the results and corresponding conclusions are limited because data were derived from only four schools. Although this research can be strengthened by an increase in the number of represented incidents, 11 participants were interviewed, which is considered an adequate sample for this type of qualitative research (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Moreover, important considerations in qualitative research include redundancy of data and theoretical saturation (Morrow, 2007): Redundancy of data is the point at which no new information emerges, and theoretical saturation occurs when the domains "account for all of the data that have been gathered" (p. 217). Our analyses of the 11 transcripts reached a reasonable level of redundancy and saturation; no new domains were generated after the ninth transcript.

Second, three of the four schools were in urban areas, whereas one was in a smaller town; thus, the results may not generalize to other locations, such as rural areas. Third, the sample was not randomly chosen. Participants included only those from schools that provided permission to be interviewed—hence, the potential for a selection bias, which could influence the results when considering that the experience of the individuals from participating schools may be different from the experiences of the nonparticipants.

Future Research

This study examined the successfully averted school shooting rampages from the perspectives of school personnel and school-based police officers. As important as this information is for understanding the mechanisms of preventing school violence, this is only part of the perspective. Future research must include additional sources of data, especially from the perspective of the plotters who had the plan and the means to follow through with a school rampage event. It will be important to understand the precipitating

factors that influenced the plotters to even consider such violent acts. Additional insight on what the school–community system could have done differently from the perspective of the plotters would add to the current knowledge of prevention efforts.

What is also missing in the literature is what happens to the plotters after the rampage is averted and the intervention process is complete—especially, those formally convicted of plotted rampages. For example, is the plotter placed in a juvenile detention facility, prison, or hospital, or is this person returned home to parents? Are mental health services provided to the plotters, and if so, to what extent are these effective? The type and effectiveness of such placements is important to consider when the plotters are later returned to society.

It is also important to follow-up with the students, school personnel, and the community as a whole to assess how they are coping after the averted rampage over time (e.g., 6 months, 1 year). For example, has the climate in the school experienced any significant changes? Did school administration make any changes with its crisis planning and collaboration with outside authorities? To what extend were counseling psychologists and other mental health experts involved in planning, intervening, and postincident recovery efforts, and how can they be better utilized in the future? Finally, it will be interesting to assess the atmosphere of the community in which the school resides, including the parents and family of the students.

Recommendations

In summary, results of this study lead to several implications and recommendations for counseling psychologists and others who work to avert lethal school violence. These recommendations are not placed in order of importance but in chronological order, from preincident to incident and postincident.

Averting lethal school violence is a community-wide concern and thus requires a community-wide effort (Calhoun et al., 2000). Counseling psychology adds to the dialogue through disseminating knowledge of prevention (Hage et al., 2007), which must include active efforts from school personnel, including the establishing of trusting relationships with all students. Through workshops, counseling psychologists may offer their expertise to school personnel of how to establish trusting relationships (Daniels & Volungis, 2009). In addition, according to the participants in the present study, establishing trusting relationships may be accomplished through spending time outside the classroom, getting to know students. Moreover, prevention must include

key people from the community, including law enforcement, emergency responders, psychologists and other mental health experts, and religious and civic leaders (Bell, Psych, Gamm, Vallas, & Jackson, 2001).

Once school personnel become aware of planned lethal violence, they must act immediately. Participants in this study described the importance of taking all rumors seriously and acting on them. Because the majority of school shooters informed one or more people of their intentions before the incident (O'Toole, 2000), school personnel must actively strive to break the code of silence. They also must intervene and include law enforcement as soon as possible once they discover a plot. It is during this time that they closely follow the school's crisis response plan. As such, counseling psychologists who have expertise related to crisis response and recovery should be included on the crisis plan development team. The response plan must include cultural and personal considerations (Barton, 2009), two areas about which counseling psychologists are particularly knowledgeable.

Following the resolution of a potentially lethal act, school personnel must clearly communicate to parents, students, and the larger community their knowledge of the threat, the steps that they took, and their assurance of safety. It is important that students feel safe and that the adults are doing all they can to take care of them. Counseling psychologists who work in community and school settings may offer their services in a timely manner to anyone affected by the incident, including students and staff (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007). Finally, it is important that the plotters not be viewed as heroes: The seriousness of the threat and the consequences to the plotters need to be highlighted to lessen the likelihood of the copycat effect (Daniels, Royster, & Vecchi, 2007).

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