A Comparison of Averted and Completed School Attacks from the Police Foundation Averted School Violence Database

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COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

POLICE FOUNDATION

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Letter from the Director of the COPS Office

Colleagues:

It is essential that our children's schools be safe and supportive learning environments.

Unfortunately, communities across the country have been shattered by school violence for far too long. Leaders of government, school administrations, law enforcement agencies, and community stakeholders are diligently working to protect children and education personnel from school attacks. The Police Foundation, in collaboration with the COPS Office, implemented the Averted School Violence (ASV) database in 2015 as a platform for law enforcement, school staff, and mental health professionals to share information about ASV incidents and lessons learned with the goal of mitigating and ultimately preventing future injuries and fatalities in educational institutions. The database was begun with accounts of past incidents—starting with Columbine High School (1999)—and is available for submission of further incidents as they continue to occur.

The reports in the database can document "close calls" with weapons—guns, knives, improvised explosive devices—and can include information about incidents that were thwarted in the planning stages and incidents that were contained as well as what we know about incidents that were completed. Users can submit reports anonymously; the reports are never used for punitive measures but rather as a research tool and information resource for stakeholders.

The Police Foundation has completed a comprehensive analysis of the information collected from the ASV database as well as interviews with law enforcement and stakeholders to write two companion reports. The first is a preliminary analysis of the ASV database and detailed case study of an averted attack, and the second is a comparison of averted and completed school attacks. The reports provide a detailed picture of school-based violence, including the type of attacks, student demographics and type of school, and security measures in place on campus at the time of the averted incidents. The case study of one averted attack details lessons learned, including the code of silence—students' reluctance to trust school staff with information about a peer who may want to harm themselves or others. The reports provide findings and recommendations for schools to increase the safety and well-being of all the students on campus. Ultimately, we want teens and children to be happy and successful in their school careers. Through the information in these reports, communities can learn about best practices and methods to improve school safety.

On behalf of the COPS Office, I thank all the law enforcement, school staff, and mental health professionals who have submitted reports and work each day with teens and children in our schools. We applaud their commitment to making a difference in their communities and the lives of children. I urge everyone to continue to use the ASV database to report incidents of school violence, both completed and averted, in the hope that school shootings will soon be a thing of the past. I also thank the staff and leadership of Police Foundation for their work on the ASV database and these companion publications on averted school violence.

Sincerely,

Phil Keith
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Introduction

IN 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) provided funding to the Police Foundation to initiate the Averted School Violence (ASV) project. Through this project, the Police Foundation developed a database (Police Foundation 2018) to collect, analyze, and publish (in an online library [Police Foundation 2018b]) incidents of averted and completed acts of school violence that have occurred since the attack on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. The data are drawn from the public domain as well as from law enforcement, school officials, and others entering reports into the database. The database is intended to serve as a resource to law enforcement, schools, mental health professionals, and others involved in preventing school violence by sharing ways in which other school attacks across the country have been identified and prevented.

In this report, 51 completed and 51 averted incidents of school violence, drawn from the ASV database, were analyzed to help further our understanding of averted and completed school attacks. The report also seeks to provide important lessons about how school violence can be prevented.

ASV Project Definitions of Averted and Completed School Violence

Completed. A violent attack completed, with or without the use of a firearm, that took place on school grounds and resulted in any injury or loss of life.

Averted. A violent attack planned, with or without the use of a firearm, that was prevented either before or after the potential perpetrator arrived on school grounds but before any injury or loss of life occurred.

The 51 completed attacks[1] do not constitute every incident of school violence that has occurred in the United States since the attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. They have been chosen as a data set that can be compared to 51 averted incidents of school violence that have occurred since the attack at Columbine. As with the actual attacks, the 51 averted attacks do not constitute all the averted attacks that have occurred since Columbine, nor do they constitute a representative sample. The averted attacks (those that were identified from open sources) were selected based on the amount of information available in open sources and with an effort made to find reports in a wide range of states.

Information collected on each averted and completed incident consisted of the following categories as displayed in the database: basic information (about the person submitting the report); school information (about school security procedures, size, education level, etc.); event information (about the planned attack and its discovery or the actual attack and its impact); suspect information (about the plotters' or perpetrators' behavioral history, background, warning signs exhibited, etc.); and assessment (lessons learned from the attack or planned attack and recommendations on how to prevent future attacks or planned attacks of a similar nature.) Because the majority of the data on averted and completed attacks came from open sources, it was not always possible to gather data for all the categories under consideration from the database.[2] Thus, in some areas, the data cannot be assumed to be complete.

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1. Information on these attacks was gathered using Dr. Peter Langman's schoolshooters.info, an online repository of information on school attacks and perpetrators.

2. For example, whether or not a perpetrator had ever received mental health treatment or what kind of emergency preparedness plans a particular school had in place at the time of the attack was not always available.

Statistical Analyses

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICAL ANALYSES were conducted on 51 completed and 51 averted acts of school violence in the ASV database that occurred between 1999 (post-Columbine) through 2017. The results are presented in five sections, corresponding with the five sections of the database: basic information, school information, event information, perpetrator information, and assessment.

Basic information

The information provided in the database on averted and completed attacks was drawn from a variety of sources. Police Foundation staff gathered and input all information on completed attacks into the database from news articles, websites of the involved schools, schoolshooters.info, and court documents (if available).

The information used to develop most of the reports on averted attacks (49, or 96.1%) was gathered by Police Foundation staff and project subject matter experts from open sources including news reports, websites of the involved schools, *Campus Safety* magazine, and court documents. Two reports (3.9%) were entered by a law enforcement officer and a school administrator directly involved in the incidents of averted violence.

School information

School safety features

Information regarding physical security measures, emergency preparedness, threat assessment procedures, and related items was often unavailable either because the information was not publicly available or the information was not reported by the person who made the entry into the database. As a result, these data fields are too incomplete to be meaningful. A few items, however, will be noted, along with the number of times they were identified or reported. In the 51-incident sample of completed school attacks, the following people and protocols were present at the schools: school counselors (41), controlled access to buildings (9), controlled access to grounds (4), locked entrance and exit doors (7), and on-site

Figure 1. States with averted (n=49) and completed (n=50) school attacks analyzed in this study

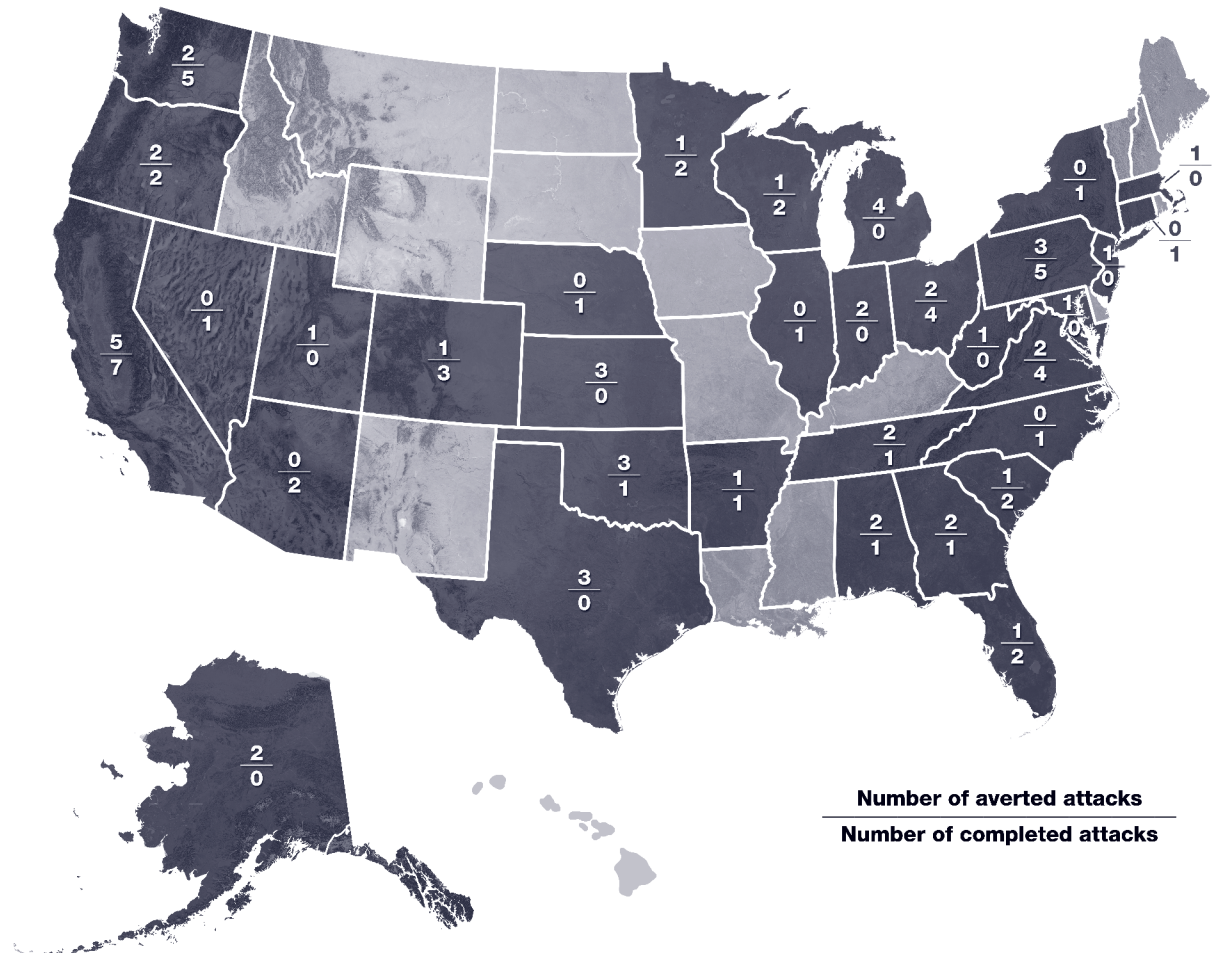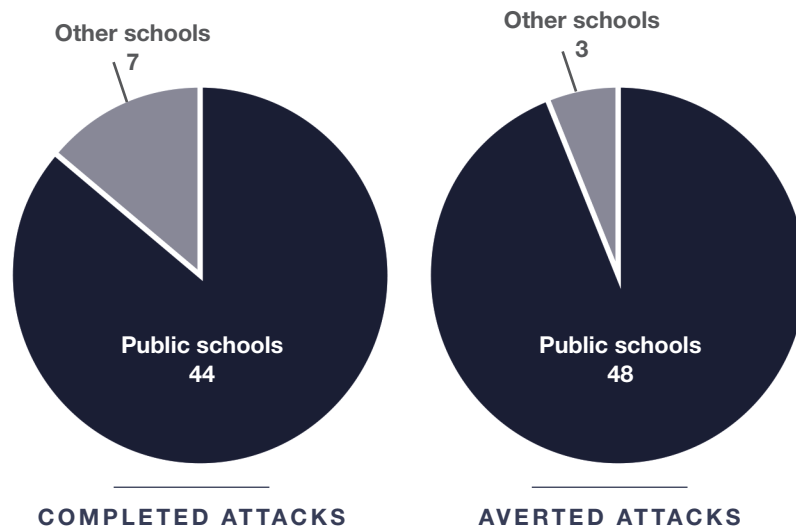Number of averted attacks
Number of completed attacks

Figure 2. Completed (n=51) and averted (n=51) attacks in public versus private schools

Other schools
7

Public schools
44

COMPLETED ATTACKS

Other schools
3

Public schools
48

AVERTED ATTACKS

security or police officers (37). In the 51-incident sample of averted school attacks, the following people and protocols were present at the schools: school counselors (43), controlled access to buildings (9), controlled access to grounds (7), locked entrance and exit doors (5), and on-site security or police officers (30). Because of the difficulty in obtaining this information, these numbers are likely underestimates.

Geography

The 51 completed school attacks and the 51 averted school attacks analyzed occurred in 33 states, as shown in figure 1 on page 4. (Sixteen states had both an averted and completed attack).

Comparing the states with more than one completed attack to those states with more than one averted attack, there are several states that appear in both categories: California, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Washington, Oregon, and Virginia (Daniels 2018).

Type of school

The vast majority of schools that experienced school attacks were public schools. The finding, shown in figure 2 on page 4, that 86.3% of completed attacks occurred in public schools is similar to that for the averted attacks, in which 94.1% of averted incidents occurred in public schools.

Education level of the schools

More than 80% of the completed and averted attacks occurred in the two highest levels of education—high schools and colleges or universities. These data are presented in figure 3.

The results in figure 2 show a substantial difference with regard to the college or university category. In the data, only 11.8% of the averted attacks occurred in institutions of higher education, while 39.2% of the completed attacks took place in institutions of higher education. The reason for this difference is unknown.

Figure 3. Education level of schools experiencing completed attacks (n=51) and averted attacks (n=51)
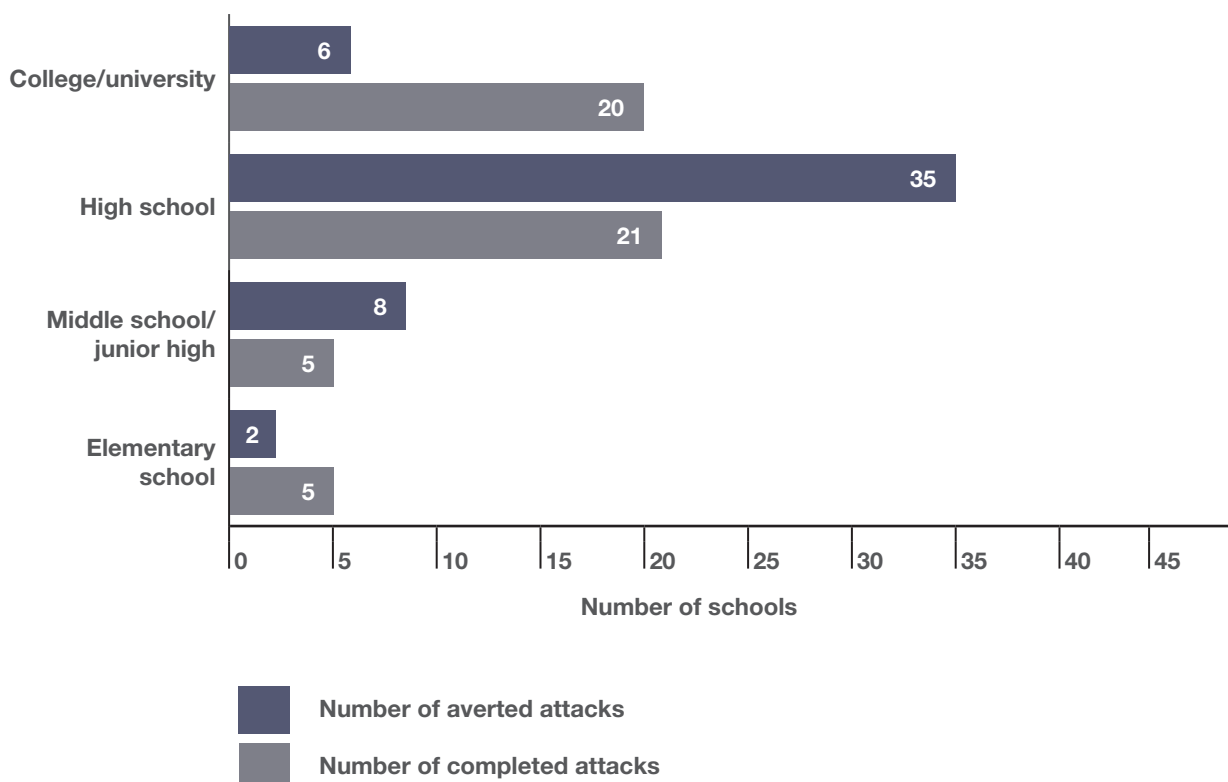
Table 1. Size of student body in K–12 schools experiencing completed attacks (n=31) and averted attacks (n=45)

Size of school	Averted attacks (N)	Percent (%) of averted attacks	Size of school	Completed attacks (N)	Percent (%) of completed attacks
500 or fewer	5	11.1%	500 or fewer	10	32.3%
501–1000	18	40.0%	501–1000	8	25.8%
1001–2000	15	33.3%	1001–2000	11	35.5%
2001 or more	7	15.6%	2001 or more	2	6.5%
All schools	45			31	

One possibility is that adult perpetrators provide less "leakage"[3] of their intentions and are thus harder to detect, making prevention more difficult with adult perpetrators.

Also, only 3.9% of averted attacks involved elementary schools, while more than twice as many actual attacks (9.8%) took place in elementary schools. The numbers involved, however, are so small (2 and 5, respectively) that this may not be a meaningful result. It is worth noting that none of the potential perpetrators or actual perpetrators were elementary school students (this will be discussed further in later sections).

As shown in table 1, while only 11.1 percent of averted attacks occurred in schools with fewer than 500 students, 32.3 percent of completed attacks occurred in this category of schools.

The results presented in figure 4 on page 7 demonstrate that the same number of averted and completed attacks (35 out of 51) involve suburban schools. More urban schools experienced completed attacks (7) than averted attacks (3). Conversely, more rural schools had averted attacks (13) than completed attacks (9).

Event information—completed attacks

Age of perpetrators and number of victims

Previous studies (Langman 2015b; Langman 2016a) have found a correlation between the age of the perpetrators and the number of victims in their attacks. The results from the present study are presented in figure 5 on page 7.

These data indicate that increasing age is correlated with increasing dangerousness through early adolescence into late adolescence and then into young adulthood, with young adults (ages 20 to 27) being by far the most dangerous perpetrators in terms of the number of people killed and wounded. After age 27, however, there is a dramatic decrease in dangerousness. This finding is consistent with other studies (Langman 2015b; Langman 2016a).

As noted earlier, there is a correlation between the perpetrator's age and the number of victims. In light of this, the results in figure 6 on page 9 may be surprising. The high number of victims among attacks at elementary schools can be attributed to the age of the perpetrators. In four of the five elementary school attacks, the perpetrator was an adult (ages 20, 32, 41, and 56). The fifth perpetrator was 14 years old. Thus, none of the perpetrators in these attacks was a student in the school that was attacked.

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3. "Leakage" means disclosing violent intentions to other people.

Figure 4. Population classification of communities with schools experiencing completed attacks (n=51) and averted attacks (n=51)

Number of schools

- Number of averted attacks
- Number of completed attacks
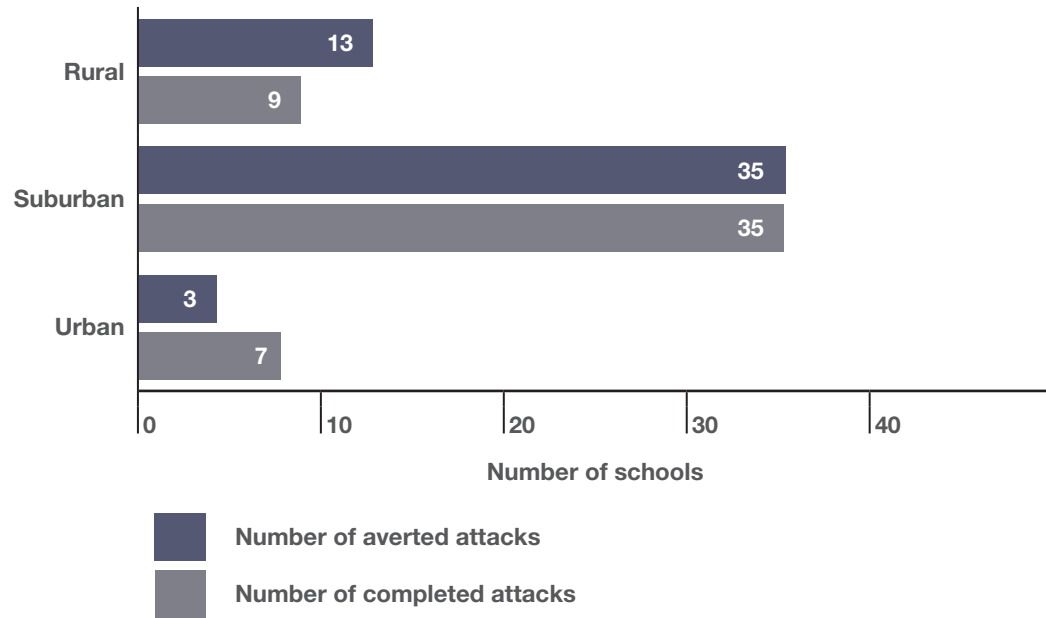
Figure 5. Average number of victims by age of perpetrator of completed school attacks

Number of victims

- Number of victims killed
- Number of victims wounded
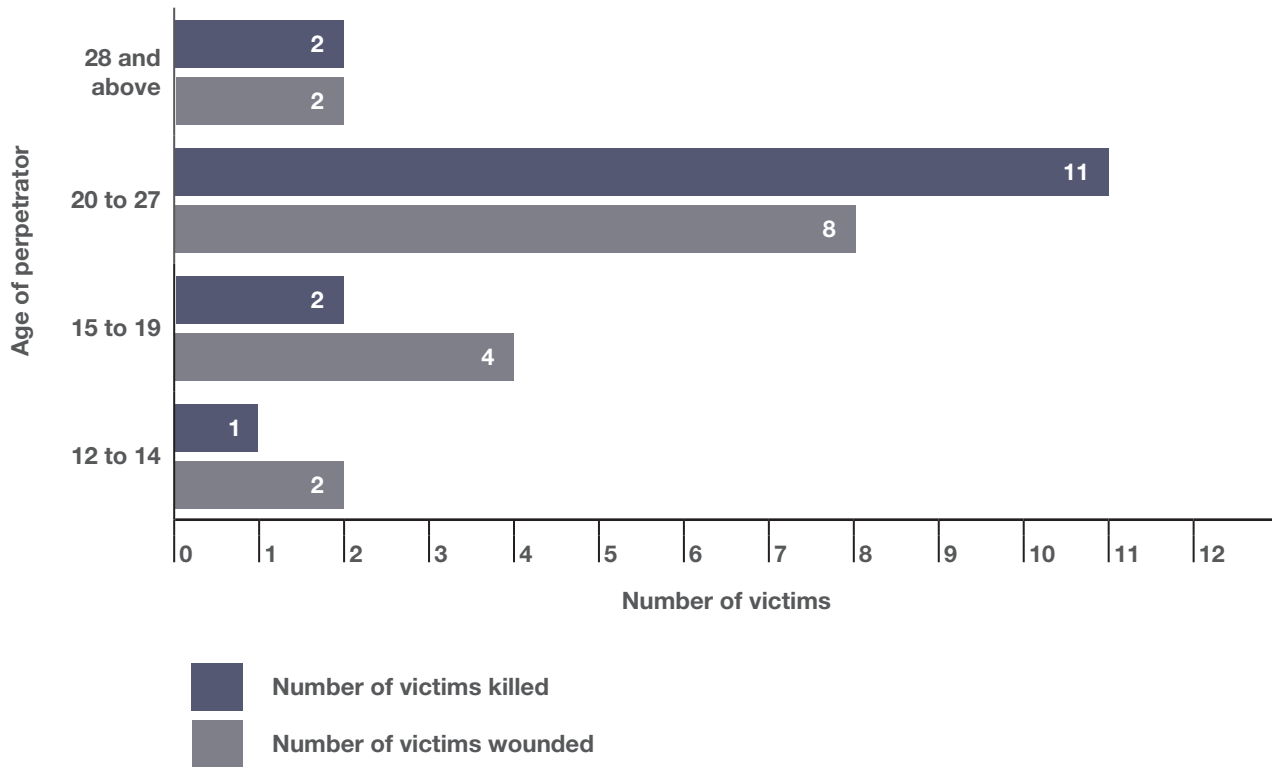
Note: Averages have been rounded to whole numbers.

Large-scale completed attacks

Eleven of the 51 completed attacks had 10 or more victims. These attacks are considered large-scale. The distribution of large-scale attacks across the four levels of schools is seen in table 2.

The number of victims in attacks is often related to the type of attack, whether random or targeted (Newman 2004; and Langman 2015b). Random attacks tend to have a larger number of victims, while targeted attacks are often limited to a few specific individuals. Because the attacks at the elementary schools were committed by outsiders (i.e., people with no connection to the schools), these were large-scale attacks. In the case of the 14-year-old perpetrator who attacked an elementary school, he had intended to kill "50 to 60" people; fortunately, his gun jammed after shooting five people.

Targeted attacks occurred a number of times among high school and college or university attackers, reducing the frequency of large-scale attacks in these settings. Thus, though perpetrator age is correlated with number of victims, this factor is mediated by the type of attack being committed. Attackers in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s often committed targeted attacks and thus had fewer victims on average.

Plotter and perpetrator information

All 51 completed attacks were carried out by single individuals. This is dramatically different from the incidents of averted violence, where only 30 (58.8%) of the attacks were planned by single individuals. As shown in figure 7 on page 9, among the averted incidents, 12 involved two people, 3 involved three, and 6 involved four or more would-be perpetrators (Daniels 2018). This difference may indicate that the presence of additional perpetrators increases the likelihood of the plot being discovered.

Gender

The attackers in both completed and averted attacks are overwhelmingly male.[4] This study found that in 47 of 51 completed attacks (92.2%), the perpetrator was male, and in four completed attacks (7.8%), the perpetrator was female. Similarly, 48 of 51 averted attackers (94.1%) were male, and three (5.9%) were female. The results in this study are comparable to those found elsewhere (Langman 2016a), where a study of 64 shooters over a 50-year period in the United States found 95.3% were male and 4.7% were female.

Table 2. Percent of completed attacks that were large-scale (n=11) by education level of school

Education level	Number of large-scale completed attacks	Total number of completed attacks	Percent of completed attacks that were large scale
Elementary school	3	5	60.0%
Middle school / junior high	0	5	0.0%
High school	3	21	14.3%
College/university	5	20	25.0%

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4.   Information in this and the following sections on plotter and perpetrator information relates only to the primary plotters of averted attacks and the perpetrators (as noted, always single individuals) of completed attacks.

Figure 6. Average number of victims by education level of school in completed attacks
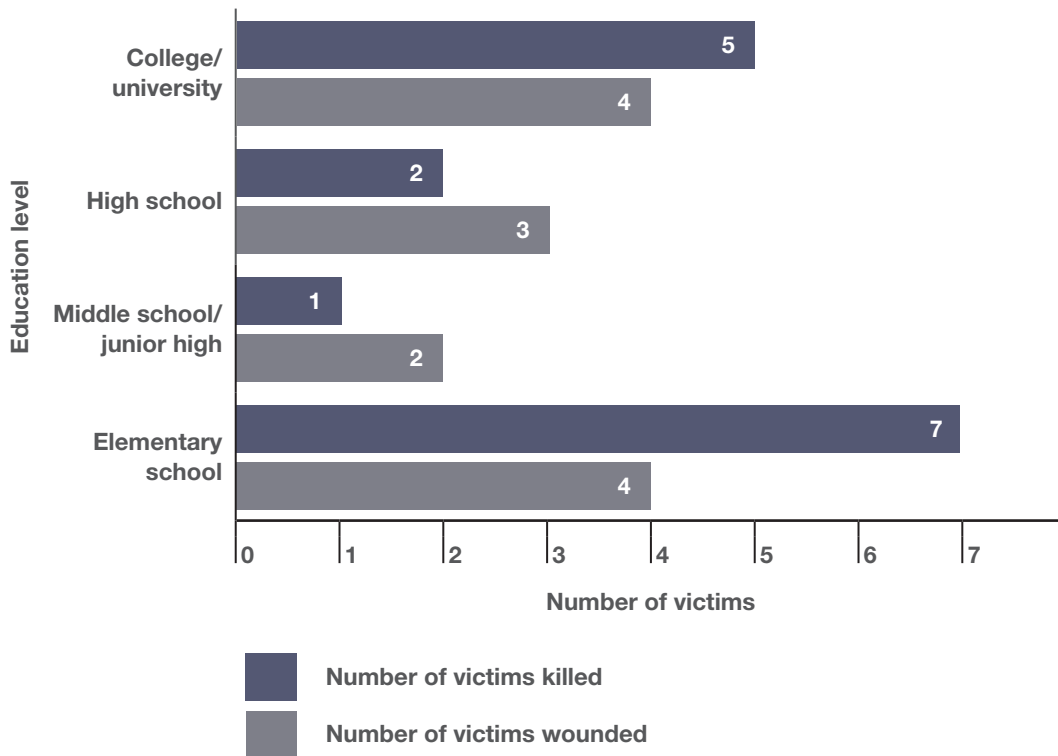
Note: Averages have been rounded to whole numbers.

Figure 7. Number of plotters or perpetrators involved in completed school attacks (n=51) versus averted school attacks (n=51)
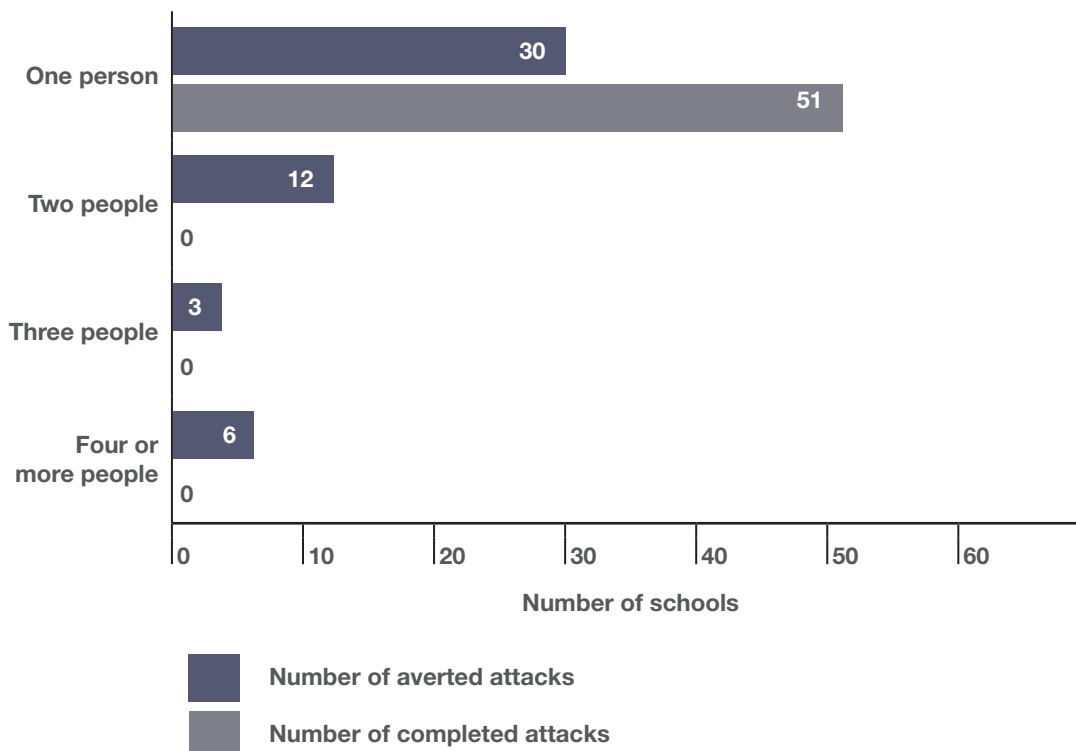
The finding is also consistent with data reported in a 2018 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report regarding active shooter incidents in the United States in 2016 and 2017, in which the perpetrators in the seven education-based incidents were male (FBI 2018).

Racial or ethnic identity

Though one of the stereotypes of school attackers is that they are virtually all Caucasian, the data from this study (see table 3) indicate that although Caucasians represent a plurality of attackers, they are nevertheless less than half the perpetrators of completed attacks.[5] This is consistent with other findings on post-Columbine school attackers (Langman 2016a). In addition, in the dataset of completed attacks, the distribution of racial and ethnic diversity appears to be correlated with the education level of the institution attacked. While 71% of the perpetrators who attacked K–12 settings were Caucasian, only 10% of those who attacked colleges and universities were Caucasian; the other 90% were either non-White or of mixed heritage.

Age of perpetrators

The age of the primary perpetrators in completed attacks ranged from 12 to 62. Designating perpetrators up to age 18 as juveniles and those 18 and older as adults yields two groups that are virtually equal in frequency (juveniles = 49%, adults = 51%). This finding is consistent with other data (Langman 2016). In averted attacks, the ages of primary plotters ranged from 12 to 47. Though school attackers may often be thought of as juveniles, these data confirm that approximately half the time they are adults. Thus, school attacks are not simply an issue among youth but an issue that involves a much broader range of the population.

In completed attacks, among juvenile perpetrators the most common ages were 14 and 15. Among adult perpetrators the most common decades were 20s and 40s. In averted attacks, among juvenile perpetrators the most common ages were 16 and 17. Among adult perpetrators the most common decade was the 20s. See figure 9 on page 11.

Table 3. Racial and ethnic identity of perpetrators in averted school attacks (n=22)* and completed school attacks (n=51)

Race or ethnicity of plotter of averted attack	N	Percent	Race or ethnicity of perpetrator of completed attack	N	Percent
Black or African American	1	4.5%	Black or African American	5	9.8%
Asian or Asian American	1	4.5%	Asian or Asian American	8	15.9%
White or Caucasian	19	86.4%	White or Caucasian	24	47.1%
Latinx	1	4.5%	Latinx	3	5.9%
Middle Eastern	0	0.0%	Middle Eastern	2	3.9%
Mixed heritage	0	0.0%	Mixed heritage	6	11.8%
Native American	0	0.0%	Native American	3	5.9%

* Data were limited on plotter race and ethnicity in the averted attacks dataset; information was only available for 22 of 51 plotters.

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5.   Of the six mixed heritage perpetrators in the completed attacks, the breakdown was as follows: Asian American/Caucasian (2), African American/Caucasian (2), Native American/Caucasian (1), and Asian American/Latinx (1).

Figure 8. Racial and ethnic identity of perpetrators of completed attacks on K–12 schools (n=31) and colleges and universities (n=20)

White
2/10%

Other*
9/29%

White
22/71%

Other*
18/90%

*Other: Black, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, Native American, or mixed race.

COMPLETED ATTACKS
K–12 SCHOOLS

COMPLETED ATTACKS
COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY

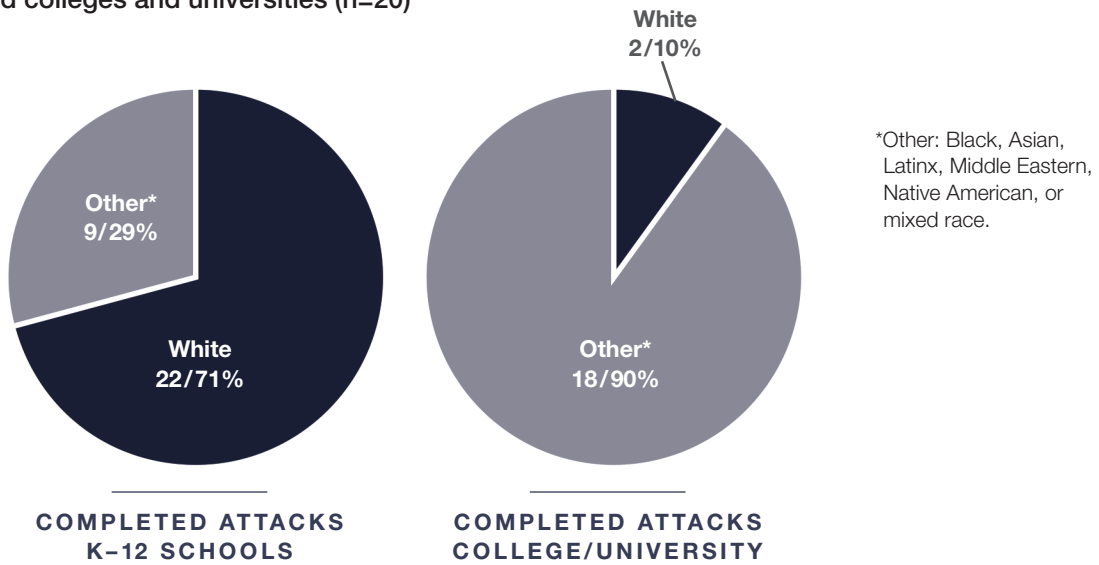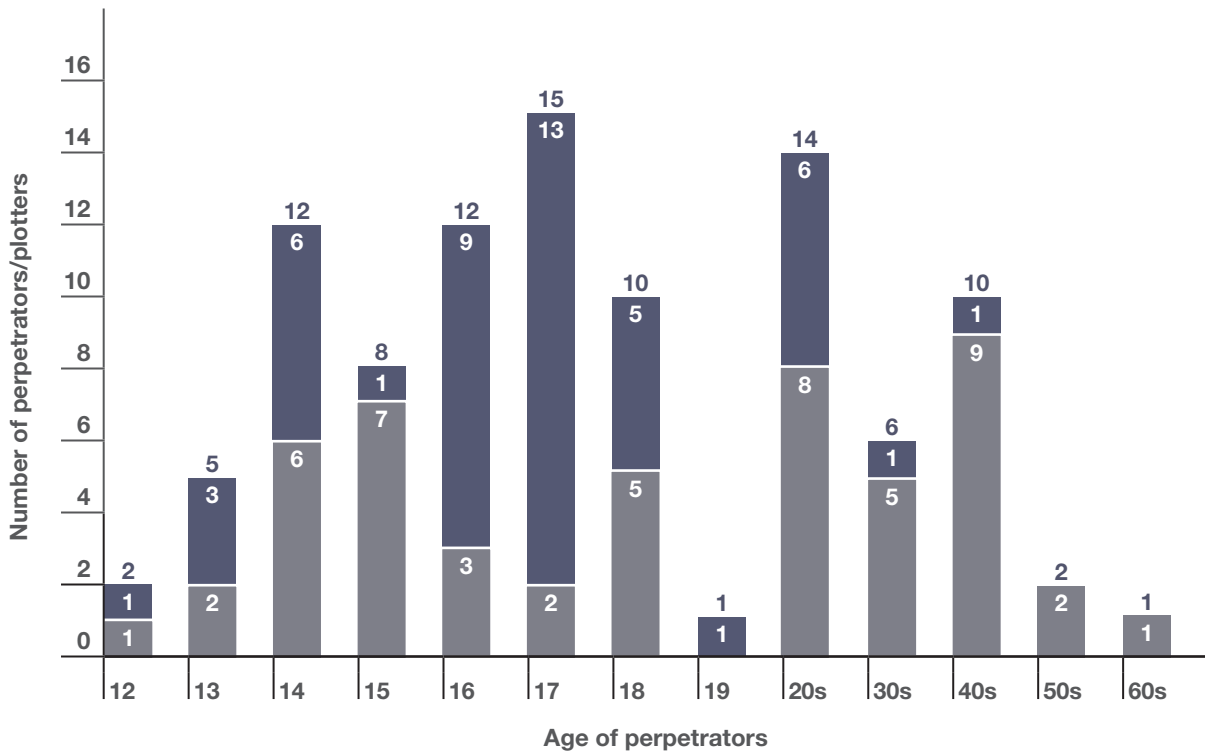**Figure 9.** Age of perpetrators of completed school attacks (n=51) and plotters of averted school attacks (n=47)*

Number of perpetrators/plotters

Age of perpetrators

* The exact age was unknown for four plotters of averted attacks. However, based on other information, the grade levels for these individuals was grade 8 (2), grade 7 (1), and high school (1).

The average age of the perpetrators in completed attacks across the four levels of education reveals an unusual pattern. Perpetrators of middle school attacks were an average age of 16.8 years old; high school attackers were on average 17.5; and college or university attackers were on average 35.2. However, and as noted earlier, four of the five perpetrators of elementary school attacks were adults and one was a teenager, which means the average age of these perpetrators was 32.6. It is interesting that for the two averted attacks that targeted elementary schools, the would-be perpetrators were also adults (ages 20 and 35).

Relationship between perpetrator or plotter and school

As shown in figure 10, the relationship of the perpetrator to the school current or former student (or employee) in 42 of the completed attacks (82.4%) and in 46 of the averted attacks (90.2%). The other

perpetrators had no prior connection to the schools they attacked. Put another way, most attacks were committed by "insiders" rather than "outsiders." The implications of insider versus outsider threats will be discussed in the Assessment section.

Bullies and victims of bullying

Determining whether or not the perpetrators were either bullies or victims of bullies is challenging because of incomplete or contradictory information. Though the presumed connection between bullying and school attacks has received significant attention in the media (STOMP Out Bullying 2018), research (Blad 2018, StopBullying.gov 2018) and the results here indicate that the majority of attackers and averted attackers were not victims of bullying. In fact, more attackers reportedly bullied their peers (10) than were bullied by them (8). Only nine averted attackers were reportedly bullied.

Figure 10. Relation of perpetrator to school in averted attacks (n=51) and completed attacks (n=51)

Number of averted attacks

Number of completed attacks
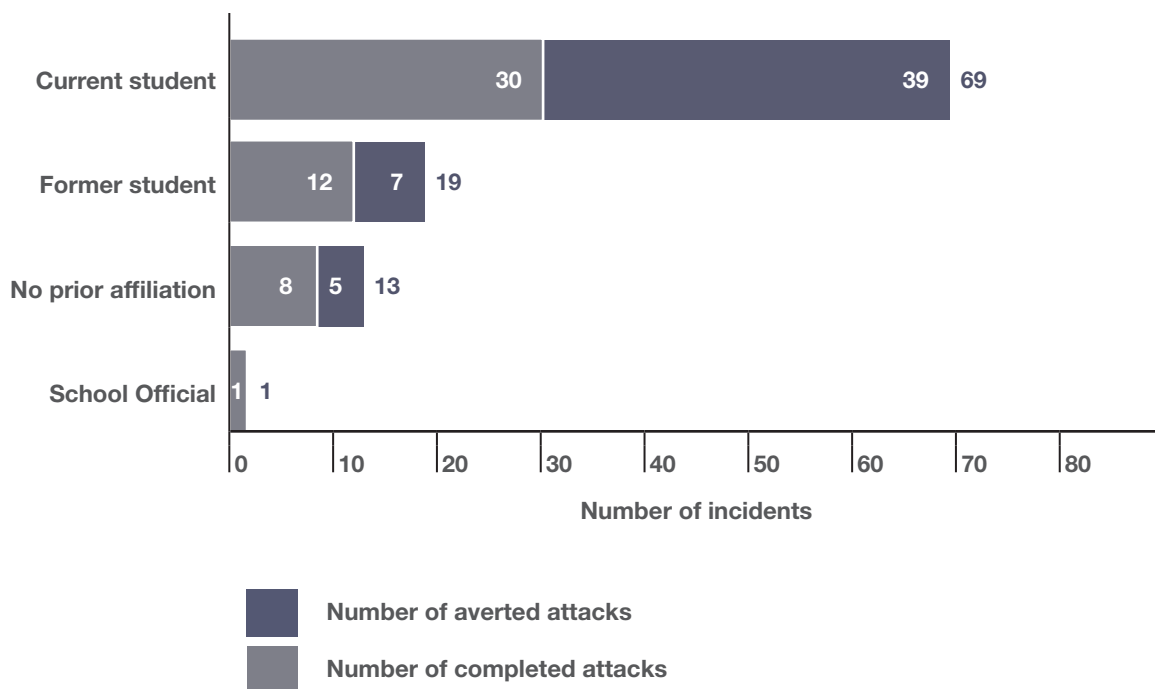
Life-changing events

There was evidence for almost all the perpetrators of completed attacks (48, 94.1%) that they experienced or witnessed some kind of life changing events. Significantly less information in these categories was available for perpetrators of averted attacks (9, 17.6%) because of limited information in open sources.

Perpetrators of completed attacks and plotters of averted attacks experienced life-changing events in their own lives, as shown in table 3.

Perpetrators of completed attacks and plotters of averted attacks witnessed life-changing events in the lives of those close to them, as shown in table 4.

These data are likely incomplete for both averted and completed incidents. In addition, there was often no way to know the impact of these events on the perpetrators or plotters. Though some left written records, many did not. Nonetheless, the significance and frequency of these events shed light on the life histories of the perpetrators.

Perpetrator and plotter characteristics

Data were collected on a variety of perpetrator and plotter characteristics. There is subjectivity in determining who possessed what traits. Also, because of the difficulty in accessing this information, these results may be underestimates for both averted and

Table 3. Life-changing events in the lives of perpetrators of completed attacks and plotters of averted attacks

Life event	Cited by number of perpetrators of completed attacks	Cited by number of plotters of averted attacks
Breakup, separation, or divorce	15	—
Move	12	3
Abuse	9	—
Financial stress or job loss	8	2
Substance abuse	—	1
Other	17	4

Table 4. Life-changing events in the lives of those close to perpetrators of completed attacks and plotters of averted attacks

Life event	Cited by number of perpetrators of completed attacks	Cited by number of plotters of averted attacks
Parents' breakup, separation, or divorce	21	1
Domestic violence	7	—
Incarceration or illegal behavior	4	1
Financial stress or job loss	3	1
Death	2	1
Illness	1	—
Other	12	2

Figure 11. Characteristics of perpetrators of averted school attacks and completed school attacks

Number of averted attacks

Number of completed attacks
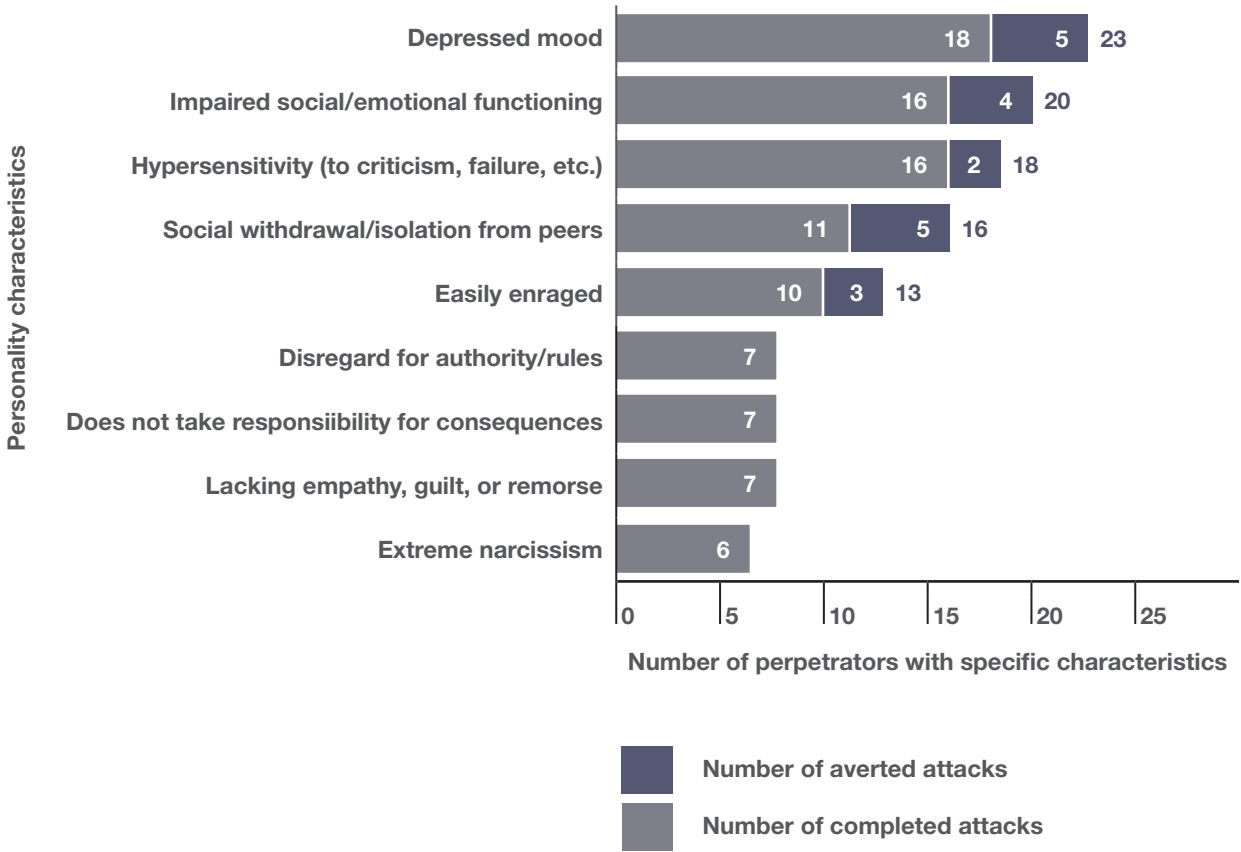
completed attack datasets. Finally, many perpetrators possessed more than one of the traits, as shown in figure 11.

History of mental health or other treatment

A majority of perpetrators who completed attacks had a history of being treated for one or more mental health issues or development disorders, including

- depression;
- schizophrenia;
- anxiety;
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
- delusions;
- suicidal thoughts or behavior;

- attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD);
- autism spectrum disorder (ASD);
- others.

Many of the individuals involved in averted attacks were also treated for mental health issues, including depression and anxiety.

Eleven perpetrators of completed attacks (21.6%) and three plotters of averted attacks (5.9%) had histories of substance abuse or addiction. Nineteen of the perpetrators of completed attacks (37.3%) and nine of the plotters of averted attacks (17.6%) were known to the criminal justice system prior to their attacks.

Seventeen perpetrators of completed attacks (33.3%) and 21 plotters of averted attacks (41.2%) were known to have an interest in or obsession with violent media or violent materials.

Discerning the motivations for their rampages was not always possible. The following results indicate motivations that were claimed by the completed and averted attackers. It must be noted that motivation for violence is usually complicated and multidetermined. Thus, the reasons these individuals gave for their attacks may not be the sole or the true reasons. Also, some reported more than one motivation. Motivations for completed attacks, when the reason was given, included the following:

- Hates people
- Grudge or seeking revenge
- Bullying
- Envy
- Resentment
- Rivalry
- Paranoid delusions or command hallucinations

Motivations for averted attacks, when the reason was given, included the following:

- Hates people
- Grudge or seeking revenge
- Bullying
- Envy
- Resentment
- Rivalry

Assessment

THE ASSESSMENT SECTION OF THE DATABASE is where both lessons learned and recommendations were recorded. These two categories contained significant overlap and thus will be combined here. The purpose of this section is to learn from past incidents to help prevent future incidents. The goal is not to find fault with people or institutions but to educate communities about what they can do to increase safety. All recommendations might not be relevant for all schools, and some present logistical and financial challenges. Taken together, however, they cover a wide range of concerns and present numerous options for improving school safety.

Also, though school attacks are often discussed as if they constituted a homogeneous group of incidents, the study of completed and averted attacks makes clear that there are many different types of school attacks. These different types of attacks pose different challenges in terms of prevention. Several variations of school attacks include the following:

- Large-scale random attacks that are usually planned well in advance

- Small-scale targeted attacks against specific people, against whom the attacker has a grievance; some have been planned well in advance while others have occurred the same day as the incident that was the source of the grievance

- Unplanned attacks in which the perpetrator had a gun at school but no intention of using it until unexpected circumstances occurred

In addition, the difference between attacks by insiders (current or recent students or employees) and those by outsiders (no current or recent connection to the school) needs to be considered. With insider attacks, schools have the chance to pick up on warning signs and intervene. When the perpetrator is someone with no connection to the school, the school usually has no way of anticipating the attack.

To distill the lessons and recommendations into meaningful sections, the following categories will be used: School, Home, Law Enforcement, and General. Finally, the recommendations from five after-action reports on specific attacks were reviewed and will be referenced in the sections that follow. These incidents occurred at one elementary school (Jackson 2015, on Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, December 14, 2012), two high schools (Erickson 2001, on Columbine; Goodrum and Woodward 2016, on Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, December 13, 2013), and two universities (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007 on Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia, April 16, 2007; Northern Illinois University 2008, on Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, February 14, 2008). Though these reports contain numerous recommendations regarding emergency response, which is beyond the scope of this report, they also include recommendations on preventing attacks.

Recommendations for schools

The importance of preparation

For all educational institutions, there was repeated emphasis on the need to establish threat assessment procedures with trained personnel who can investigate potential threats, to train the staff and students in warning signs, and to provide multiple channels of communication for employees and students to report their concerns. The need for well-trained threat assessment teams was also emphasized by four of the five after-action reports (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, and Arapahoe). The one that did not recommend this involved an attack at an elementary school by an adult outsider (Sandy Hook). In this case, a threat assessment system would not have prevented the attack. Two of the reports highlighted the need for anonymous tip lines (Columbine, Arapahoe).

In addition, preparedness includes training for attacks with lockdown procedures and active shooter drills so that people know what to do in an emergency

situation. This also includes having emergency notification systems in place to communicate effectively in the event of a crisis.

In several incidents, people reported that their training and preparation helped them to respond quickly and effectively to mitigate the loss of life.

The need to check in and maintain trusting relationships with students

Even in the absence of direct warning signs of violence, multiple recommendations from the after-action reports and the ASV database highlighted the importance of checking in with students and employees when it is clear they are in distress. Signs of distress include angry outbursts, verbal or physical aggression, inappropriate behavior, dropping out of a program, losing a job, or suing the institution.

Recommendations addressing students' emotional needs appear in various forms among the after-action reports, including calling for a focus on improving school climate, engaging anti-bullying programs, strengthening relationships among students and staff, better integrating students into campus life, and increasing communication regarding students of concern (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, Arapahoe, Sandy Hook).

In situations of harassment and stalking, institutions need to be aware that this behavior could be the prelude to violence that might be much larger than an assault against the one person of interest.

In several cases, students and employees with a well-known grievance against their institutions and no history of firearm use suddenly purchased firearms and began practicing with them. In the context of a hostile relationship with an institution that in some cases had escalated to a lawsuit, as well as other warning signs, the purchase of a gun by someone who has never owned or used a gun previously needs to be considered a possible warning sign of violence. If this behavior is observed by friends, classmates, colleagues, faculty, administrators, or other staff, it should be reported as a possible warning sign of violence.

Financial distress

For several university students and employees, financial distress was a significant stressor that contributed to their hopelessness and rage against the university. These attackers were generally middle-aged people for whom the inability to support themselves or their families had dire consequences. When financial distress is blamed on the university and occurs in the midst of a hostile relationship with the institution, especially when there are warning signs of potential violence, administrators should consider multiple ways of assisting the person in question.

Depending on the situation, this could involve tuition remission, forgiveness of debt, or (for employees) financial assistance for a designated period of time. For people who feel they have suffered at the hands of the university and may be harboring thoughts of revenge against those they blame for their financial hardship, reaching out with compassion may go a long way to defusing their hostility. Though it is understandable that at times institutions are so uncomfortable with someone's behavior that they want to make a clean break as quickly as possible and either expel a student or fire an employee, this can aggravate the situation.

Any assistance that can be given to help someone in this situation move forward academically or occupationally may prevent their rage from escalating into violence. Thus, rather than cutting ties with someone who is hostile and accuses the institution of having treated them unfairly, it may be safer and more productive to reach out to the person. To do otherwise might add to their feeling of having suffered an injustice.

Building security

Several attacks were committed by people who had no recent or current connection to the schools they attacked. Despite having no reason to be in the schools, they were able to enter the buildings either because the doors were not locked or someone allowed them to enter. These attacks by outsiders to the school community cannot be prevented through early detection because the schools do not even know that the people exist. The only prevention measure schools can put in place for this type of attack is to increase physical security. Increased scrutiny regarding outsiders might have prevented these attacks.

The only after-action report to address school safety through architectural design was the one following the attack at Sandy Hook, in which the perpetrator was an outsider to the school. In this case, the assailant was unable to enter the school because of a locked door, so he shot his way through a full-length window. Preventing this kind of attack involves a consideration of building design. As noted earlier, averting attacks by outsiders depends in part on physical security measures and keeping intruders out of the building.

Metal detectors

In the situations noted earlier, the known presence of a metal detector might have deterred the perpetrator from attempting to enter the school. In general, however, the effectiveness of metal detectors to prevent rampage attacks is limited, as rampage attacks have occurred at schools where metal detectors were used (e.g., Red Lake High School in Red Lake, Minnesota, March 21, 2005).

Because rampage school attackers are not trying to get away with their crime and often expect to die in their attacks, they are not deterred by a metal detector. First, if they really are determined to get a gun in the building, they may find a way to bypass the detector. Second, even if they have to walk through the detector, they may be willing to do so, not caring if they set off an alarm or signal. One of the after-action reports (Columbine) even recommends against the use of metal detectors.

In some cases, however, a metal detector might have prevented an attack. For example, in one incident (Campbell County High School in Jacksboro, Tennessee, November 8, 2005), a student brought a gun

to school with no intention of using it. When confronted by three administrators, however, he apparently panicked and opened fire. A metal detector could have resulted in the weapon being discovered and confiscated.

Similarly, for schools that have an ongoing issue with guns and knives being smuggled into the building, a metal detector could reduce the problem.

Security or school resource officers

Several recommendations supported the use of security guards or school resource officers. These individuals, if properly trained and equipped, may serve as a deterrent—but even if they do not deter an attack, their presence on site can allow for a much quicker intervention than waiting for local police to arrive.

Take threats seriously

Though it may seem like common sense that threats of violence need to be taken seriously, in multiple situations people reported their concerns only to have them dismissed. Not every threat is meant seriously, but every threat needs to be taken seriously.

Understanding FERPA

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that governs the confidentiality of student records. In at least one incident (Arapahoe), the school was aware of a student's homicidal threat but kept communication to a minimum among their personnel and did not reach out at all to law enforcement because they believed that FERPA prohibited this. FERPA does not prohibit communication related to student threats. To clarify this issue, the U.S. Department of Education has released two FERPA guides, one for elementary and secondary schools and one for colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education 2007a; U.S. Department of Education 2007b). Two of the after-action reports (Northern Illinois University, Arapahoe) cite the importance of having staff be properly trained in FERPA in

order to avoid having them withhold information that should be communicated and shared among persons responsible for school safety and security.

Grounds security

Though most school attacks occur inside a building, not all of them do. Some happen outdoors as students are arriving at or departing from school. Others occur at recess while children are playing outside. Still others have involved the perpetrator standing outside and shooting through windows into classrooms. With this in mind, some recommendations involved a consideration of what can be done to protect children from these threats, including walls rather than fences around playgrounds, stationing security guards outdoors with the students, and using bulletproof glass in ground floor doors and windows.

Suspension and expulsion

An important point for administrators is that punishment is not prevention. In several incidents, students have been suspended or expelled and returned to school with a gun and committed murder (e.g., SuccessTech Academy in Cleveland, Ohio, October 10, 2007; Weston High School in Cazenovia, Wisconsin, September 29, 2006; Townville Elementary School in Townville, South Carolina, September 28, 2016). Though punishment may be necessary, if there is any concern about violence, simply trying to remove the student from the school does not lead to safety.

On a different note, twice students who were suspended for reasons other than potential violence returned the same day they were suspended and killed people at school (Lake Worth Middle School in Lake Worth, Florida, May 26, 2000; Millard South High School in Omaha, Nebraska, January 5, 2011). In neither of these cases, however, did the administration have any reason to suspect that the student was at risk of committing violence. Even so, the lesson here is that when students are suspended and prohibited from being on school property and this is

not communicated to school personnel, the students can return to the school, enter, and commit acts of violence. This possibility highlights the need for communication among school staff to ensure that everyone is properly notified and access to the school is carefully monitored.

Promote reporting mechanisms

Some schools have systems in place for students and staff to report safety concerns, but these are useless if nobody knows about them or how and when to use them. Thus, it is essential that there be programs, trainings, advertising, and so on to make sure that everyone in the school community is aware of the reporting systems, when the systems should be used, and how they are used. Sandy Hook Promise (www.sandyhookpromise.org), for example, has developed an anonymous reporting system as well as extensive training to assist students, parents, teachers, staff and community members regarding signs and warnings. This issue is also addressed in an after-action report (Arapahoe).

Record keeping

Schools need a system for keeping track of safety concerns and making this information accessible to anyone who has a need to know. It should be possible for employees to log their concerns in a database and also to see what others have documented about a student. Communication is essential, and often different people have different pieces of the puzzle; a comprehensive, accessible, and user-friendly system is necessary to facilitate putting the pieces together.

Educate teachers about warning signs

Several school attackers have handed in assignments in which they mentioned homicidal intentions. In some cases, fictional pieces by students have foreshadowed their rampage attacks. Teachers need to be aware that student projects and papers, whether fiction or nonfiction, can contain clues of impending violence.

Educate students about warning signs

Students need to know the warning signs of violence and what to do when they encounter them. In many cases, students heard the perpetrators talking about their plans but either did not take the threat seriously or did not know what to do with the information. They need to be taught the difference between snitching and reporting a safety concern and the ramifications of their decisions. The importance of educating both students and school personnel in the warning signs of potential violence is noted in multiple after-action reports (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, Arapahoe).

Develop relationship with law enforcement

Schools should work closely with the local police department to improve safety. Ideally, police not only have diagrams of schools but also do walk-throughs to familiarize themselves with the buildings. In addition, administrators need to know what level of threat reaches the threshold for notifying the police. Two of the after-action reports (Columbine, Northern Illinois University) recommend greater communication between educational institutions and local law enforcement agencies.

Seeking student safety concerns

One school (Red Lion Area Junior High School in York County, Pennsylvania, April 24, 2003), in the wake of a shooting, asked students to report any safety concerns they had and then passed the information on to police. As a result of these student reports, a 17-year-old student's car was searched at home. Police found a handgun, a sawed-off shotgun, a rifle, ammunition, and pipe bomb materials. In the home of an 18-year-old student, police found several firearms, ammunition, and narcotics. In another 18-year-old student's home, a handgun was found concealed in a drainage pipe. Police reported that the weapons were stolen. Even if the students in possession of these weapons were not planning school

attacks, they were still potential risks for violence. Thus, simply seeking student input about peers they perceive as potentially violent can be an effective method of intervention.

Recommendations for home

Firearm security

The most frequent recommendation for the home was that older family members (parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.) need to properly secure their firearms. The vast majority of juvenile attackers obtained their guns from their own homes.

Though some adults took steps to keep their guns safe, these steps do not mean the guns really were secure. Adolescents can be very resourceful and may know where keys are kept or even figure out the combinations to locks. One 14-year-old tried to use his cell phone to surreptitiously film his father putting in the combination for the box where his guns were kept. In many instances of school attacks by juveniles, firearms that belonged to their parents or other relatives were accessible to the perpetrators (Langman 2016b). True firearm security means that even with all the tools available, the guns cannot be accessed.

Even in cases where the attacker was not a juvenile, there were often reasons to deny them access to firearms. In one case, both the 26-year-old attacker and his father had made suicide attempts, but there were still guns in the home that were easily accessible (Langman 2015a). Keeping guns out of the hands of people who are dangerous to themselves or others is essential.

For example, in one case, the perpetrator's mother was acutely aware that her son had significant mental health issues as well as an anger problem, yet she encouraged his interest in guns and knew he had weapons available in the home. She even reported to the police after the attack that he once pointed a shotgun at her, but she did not call the police at that time or have his guns removed. Though the suspect was old enough to legally own guns, given his mental and emotional instability his mother could have insisted that no firearms be allowed in the home (Oregon State Police 2017).

Parents need to know warning signs

In some cases, parents were aware that their children had significant mental health issues and also knew of their obsession with school attackers but did not intervene. In one case, the perpetrator had tried to kill himself on the anniversary of the Columbine shooting. Though he survived this attempt, he was so obsessed with Columbine that he convinced his mother to drive him across the country, from North Carolina to Colorado, so he could see Columbine High School and the home of one of the Columbine killers. Despite knowing that he was suicidal and obsessed with Columbine and owned firearms, she apparently did not recognize these factors as warning signs for violence (Langman 2015b).

Privacy

The attacker who made a pilgrimage to Columbine High School also wrote a journal about his plans for the upcoming attack. If his parents had searched his room, the journal could have been discovered and the attack prevented. Similarly, other attackers have kept journals as well as guns and bombs hidden in their rooms.

This does not mean that teenagers should not be allowed any privacy, but in multiple cases there have been reasons for parents to be concerned enough about their children to search their rooms. These reasons have included discovering that their teens have been building bombs, that they are suicidal, that they are homicidal, and so on. In these situations, parents need to do what they can to keep their children safe, and this can mean conducting room searches.

In one particularly tragic case, the perpetrator did not want his mother in his room, and she accepted this. Not long before the attack, however, she did go into his room and was disturbed to find gory drawings,

including "a woman clutching a religious item, like rosary beads, and holding a child, and she was getting all shot up in the back with blood flying everywhere." (Lysiak 2013) Because she was not supposed to be in his room, however, she never questioned him about this. Their relationship was extremely tenuous, and she did not want to cause a complete break. Shortly after this, he killed his mother and committed a massacre at his former school.

Recommendations for law enforcement

Most recommendations were directed to schools and parents, with just a couple considerations for police. First, some attackers used chains to lock doors or find other ways to impede the police in their response. Officers should carry door-breaching equipment in their cars to facilitate their entry when necessary. Also, some attacks end up in hostage situations, so local law enforcement needs to have people trained in negotiating hostage release. Finally, as noted earlier, police should have school floor plans and be familiar with the buildings by doing walk-throughs. They should also work with local schools so administrators know when it is appropriate to call them with safety concerns.

General recommendations

Suicide

Though most people who are suicidal are not homicidal, many homicidal people are also suicidal. This is true of school attackers, approximately half of whom intend to die in their attacks (Langman 2015b; Langman 2016a). Keeping this fact in mind, mental health professionals should routinely ask about homicidal thoughts when dealing with suicidal students.

Social media

Social media is addressed in two ways. First, social media posts may indicate risk of violence. Such posts need to be reported; they may be the earliest warning signs that an individual is considering committing vio-

lence. Second, for an individual who has come to the attention of authorities as a potential violence risk, searching through their social media activity may provide further evidence of their violent intentions.

Child Protective Services

Several attackers came from highly dysfunctional and violent households (Langman 2009; Langman 2015b). In some cases, multiple reports to child protective services had been made, and in a couple of cases, criminal charges had been filed against one or more of the parents. Nonetheless, the children were not removed from these homes and their abuse continued. Increased funding for children's protective services and mental health interventions for both children and adults should be a national priority.

Mental health treatment

Increased knowledge about mental health and the signs of psychological distress could have resulted in better intervention by parents, teachers, and others. In addition, the stigma regarding mental health treatment has been a barrier that has kept people from getting help. Efforts to destigmatize mental health treatment should be a national priority, along with increasing available services and making sure they are accessible and affordable to all who need them.

After-action reports include similar recommendations. For example, the Virginia Tech report recommended changing laws related to temporary detention and involuntary commitment of potentially dangerous people, as well as increasing the capacity of crisis stabilization units so that people at risk of violence do not have to wait to receive treatment. The Northern Illinois University report emphasized the importance of destigmatizing mental illness and integrating all students into campus life. The Sandy Hook report recommended improving the mental health system and increasing the accessibility of services.

Laws regarding threats

Many states have laws against threatening behavior. The laws may refer to "terroristic threats" or "menacing" or use other terminology. Regardless of the terms used, however, educators, mental health professionals, and others should be familiar with the laws in their states and report threatening behavior to law enforcement.

Other recommendations from the after-action reports

Two after-action reports (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007; Sandy Hook Advisory Commission 2015) include recommendations on changing state or federal laws. One domain these recommendations address includes background checks for all long gun sales or transfers of ownership and the reporting of information to the background check system so that individuals prohibited from owning firearms can be identified. Other recommendations address laws relating to the temporary detention of potential perpetrators of violence, involuntary commitment, privacy and confidentiality, and access to information.

Case Studies

Averted attack

THIS CASE TAKEN FROM THE ASV DATABASE involved a 17-year-old boy, his brother, and perhaps several friends. It was not clear how many were truly involved in the planned attack and how many simply were part of the conversations about it. There is little information available about the two primary suspects regarding family and educational histories.

The attack plan included blowing up the school and shooting any surviving teachers and students as they fled. The group of students called themselves the Trench Coat Mafia in imitation of a group of students at Columbine (it was originally believed that the two Columbine killers belonged to this group, but this was a mistake).

The potential attack was foiled by one of the conspirators, who disclosed what she knew to the one teacher with whom she felt most connected. The teacher than passed the information along to a school resource officer, who notified the local police. In addition, a custodian found and reported a letter that mentioned the attack plans. A local landlord found and reported bomb-making materials in the attic of one of his buildings. The police obtained a search warrant for the home of the two brothers and found ammunition, bomb-making instructions, and photographs of the boys holding handguns. As a result of the investigation, five youths were arrested.

This case highlights the importance of students coming forward with their concerns as well as the importance of establishing meaningful relationships between school staff and students that can foster a higher level of communication, particularly regarding safety concerns. In addition, the case makes clear that safety is a community concern and when more people take action to maintain safety, the more likely a community is to prevent an act of violence.

Completed attack

The case from the database selected as an example involved a 15-year-old boy (who will be referred to as AW). His parents were divorced and lived in different states, and he lived with his father. The boy reportedly was bright, but his grades dropped and he began having disciplinary issues at school. He was given multiple detentions for tardiness and truancy. When the school left voicemail messages for his father, AW would make sure he arrived home before his father to erase the messages. He also intercepted his report card so his father would not see his poor grades. In this way he was able to ensure neither the school nor his father had any reason to be concerned about violence.

AW's friends, however, had plenty of reasons to be concerned. He talked repeatedly about "pulling a Columbine." For weeks, if not months, he told his friends he was going to bring a gun to school and kill people. Sometimes they dismissed this as a joke. Other times, someone would be concerned enough to ask if he were serious, and then AW himself would dismiss it as a joke. Once he said that he was going to use his father's guns, but when his friends questioned him further, he told them that the guns were locked up and he did not have access. At one point, a father figure to one of his friends heard about this and reportedly called AW and talked to him. At another point in time, AW invited his friends to join him in the attack. The day before the attack, he announced to a friend, "tomorrow I'm going to bring a bunch of guns and I'm going to shoot a bunch of people. I'm going to shoot people down and you're going to watch."

The morning of the attack, some of his friends were concerned enough that they patted him down to check for a gun. When they did not find one, they apparently thought it had all been a joke. However, they failed to search his backpack, which contained the gun. He entered the school and shot 15 people (Langman 2014).

This case highlights the need for students and adults to know what to do when they encounter warning signs of violence. Even though AW's friends suspected that he might be serious, questioned him, and even searched for a gun, nobody that knew about his threats reported their concerns to the school or to police.

Commentary on Case Studies

The primary difference between the two case examples is that in the averted shooting, multiple people reported their concerns, but in the completed shooting, no one who was concerned about a possible attack contacted either the school or local law enforcement. Communication is the key to preventing mass attacks. To improve communication, communities need to be trained to recognize warning signs and to know what to do when they encounter them.

Conclusion

THIS REPORT PRESENTED DATA on 51 completed and 51 averted school attacks that occurred in the United States since the attack at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. It also presented recommendations on multiple ways to prevent school attacks, including large-scale social changes as well as specific strategies for schools to use. This report is part of the Police Foundation's ongoing Averted School Violence project. The Police Foundation will continue to gather information on both completed and averted school attacks from open sources as well as from individuals that submit reports of violence to the ASV database to further our understanding of the causes of these attacks and to refine our knowledge of how they can be prevented.

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About the Police Foundation

The **Police Foundation** is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing innovation and science in policing. As the country's oldest police research organization, the Police Foundation has learned that police practices should be based on scientific evidence about what works best, the paradigm of evidence-based policing.

Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.

To learn more, visit the Police Foundation online at www.policefoundation.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.

- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office–funded training organizations.

- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, www.cops.usdoj.gov. This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

The Police Foundation, in collaboration with the COPS Office, implemented the Averted School Violence (ASV) database to provide a platform for sharing information about averted incidents of violence in institutions of elementary, secondary, and higher education. As a companion to the preliminary report on the ASV database (Daniels 2018), this report compares 51 completed with 51 averted incidents of school violence from the ASV database and analyzes both sets. It includes findings on the demographics of individuals who plan attacks, victims' demographics in completed attacks, and community characteristics; it also provides important recommendations to minimize school violence and improve student and school safety.