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NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR THE
STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

A joint project of the Anti-Defamation League and START, The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

Mass Violence and Extremism

Information for Educators and School Administrators

Fears of extremism, radicalization and mass violence in our schools have unfortunately become all too common for educators and school administrators across the United States.

Mass violence, defined as an attempt to kill multiple individuals, may or may not stem from extremism. It can stem from a multitude of reasons including but not limited to: domestic terrorism, availability of guns, romanticizing violence, and/or multiple risk factors operating simultaneously (e.g. depression, narcissism, alienation, lack of trust, poor coping skills, fascination with violence-filled entertainment, revenge fantasies, past suicide attempts etc.). Extremism is defined as a political, social or religious ideology and aspiration that rejects the status quo and also rejects the legitimacy of alternate ideas or the expression of freedom of choice. Radicalization is the process of adopting extremist ideas and aspirations.

Statistically, schools and students are at greater risk of incidents of mass violence than of the radicalization of students or acts of terrorism – violent acts intended to promote extremist ideology. However, several studies have identified strong parallels between mass violence and terrorism, including school rampage shootings and cases of lone-actor terrorism. These parallels include similar underlying causes and similar observable warning signs. As a result, experts are suggesting that if the challenges are similar, then the solutions to prevent them might also be similar.

This backgrounder delves into some of the causes and observable signs of student violence and extremism and provides a set of steps for schools to take that may aid in discouraging attacks.

By combining mass violence and violent extremism into one document, the backgrounder strives to provide comprehensive information that is relevant as well as appropriate for all school districts.

Summary: The number of students engaging in threatening, violent acts of mass violence, while low, represents a threat to U.S. schools. Similarly, the number of students susceptible to radicalization, while also low, represents cause for concern in some communities. Students engage in violent or extremist behavior for a number of reasons. While there are no foolproof indicators or specific pathways to violence, identifiable precursors do exist in a significant percentage of cases. These may include long term issues like social isolation and marginalization, as well as shorter term changes such as sudden interest in violence and shifts in behavior. Students who seek to perpetrate acts of mass violence may or may not be inspired by an extremist ideology. Awareness of observable warning signs, combined with school programs encouraging inclusion and lessons promoting savvy online consumerism represent a three-pronged strategy to decrease risk for both radicalization and mass violence.

Precursors to Violent Activity

The goal in identifying possible precursors to violent activity is preventive, not predictive: the creation of a wide safety net, rather than accurate pinpointing of threats. Educators, administrators, or others who recognize observable warning signs listed in this section should seek help out of an abundance of caution. Moreover, those students who exhibit these signs likely need and deserve help for themselves, even if – as will often be the case – they are not planning any violent activity.

Every case is different, but there are a number of common conditions that are often present for student attackers. Some of the most common precursors are:

- Feelings of marginalization and/or stigma
- Victim of bullying
- Feelings of isolation

The vast majority of students who feel marginalized, isolated or are bullied **do not** go on to commit violent action. The fact that most who do so also experience these problems means that **creating inclusive communities with opportunity for all students is an essential frontline defense against extremism and violence.**

People who may pose a threat often "suffer in silence" for a long time before acting out, exhibiting certain questionable behaviors that may be viewed as cries for help. If and when a student exhibits more immediate observable warning signs, a distinction must be made between posing a threat and making a threat. A student who makes a threat may or may not have the intent or the capability to carry out an attack. ***Nonetheless any individual who makes a threat must not be ignored***.

Examples of behaviors that may serve as possible observable warning signs of threat, expressed threats and calls for help that merit a degree of intervention include:

- Statements from friends, family or other peers indicating discomfort with an individual of concern.
- Written or spoken threats.
- Admiration or imitation of previous incidents of violence, especially other school shootings or terrorist attacks.
- Sudden interest in violence, which may manifest through "leakage" – violent fantasies that come out in writings, notes/scribbles, or school assignments. These can include, but are not limited, to direct threats against particular groups of people.
- Statements that advocate for violence against a perceived enemy.
- Access to extremist material online (may be visible on cell phone or school computer usage)
- Sudden interest in weapons.
- Easy access to weapons, such as firearms or knives, and/or access to information on making improvised weapons. Examples of information include The Anarchists Cookbook, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine, The White Resistance Manual.
- Socialization with known extremist networks or individuals espousing violence.
- Sudden, dramatic changes behavior, in conjunction with other observable warning signs.

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Extremist and Individual Activity

Students who perpetrate attacks may do so almost entirely on their own, to assuage personal anger or to lash out by mimicking violence they see in their homes, communities, or even just on television and the Internet.

Some students who perpetrate attacks are also influenced by extremist ideologies, including left wing extremism, right wing extremism and Muslim extremism.

Between 2005 and 2013, there was an average of at least one school rampage shooting a month in the United States.

To date, no known school shootings have taken place that were known to have been inspired primarily by Muslim extremism or right wing extremism. However, Nazi references fairly often qualify as observable behaviors and Nazi ideology can be viewed as at least a partial motivator in at least two cases. (It is worth noting that individuals espousing Nazi ideology have not exclusively been white or Christian). And since 2009, at least 10 individuals under the age of 18 in the U.S. are known to have traveled or attempted to travel to join foreign terrorist groups abroad or plotted to commit attacks against non-school targets at home. There are indications that the number is larger, but the majority of incidents are not publicly reported.

Creating Safe Communities

The first step toward discouraging students from extremist or violent activity **must address the feelings of isolation and marginalization** so often expressed by students who turn toward those actions.

1. Implement programs that promote inclusion, empower students to be allies and not bystanders, and engage students as leaders and members of their communities.
    a. Do not single out students based on religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or other groups. Statistically, no one group is more or less likely to engage in violent or extremist behavior. Despite a common assumption that school shootings are perpetrated by white males, there have been at least 28 documented cases of high-profile rampage school shooters in the United States who were not White Males. Moreover, singling out groups can encourage feelings that some do not belong – furthering potential feelings of isolation.
    b. The Anti-Defamation League provides a number of free and fee-for-service programs geared at creating inclusive communities. These include No Place for Hate™, A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute anti-bias workshops, cyber-bullying workshops and anti-bullying resources. See more at http://www.adl.org/education-outreach.
    c. The Anti-Defamation League also has extensive anti-bias resources for educators that can be utilized to promote an inclusive environment, at http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/additional-anti-bias-resources.html#.VsXfkvkrK1s.
    d. The University of Maryland's START center provides a "Countering Violent Extremism" training, available through FEMA, with components designed explicitly for educators, as well as for mental health professionals and other community members. More information is available at

https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/program-fact-sheet-starts-cve-education-and-training-initiatives

e. The Anti-Defamation League also provides a number of free of charge lesson plans addressing current events issues, as well as issues of bias and inclusion. Lessons are available at http://www.adl.org/lesson-plans/.

2. Provide resources for students who appear to be suffering from bullying and/or bias.
    a. Ensure that district guidelines are followed for educators to address bullying and bias in their classrooms among their students.
    b. Ensure that district guidelines are followed for educators to aid students who appear to have violent or abusive home situations.
    c. When appropriate, help students who are victims of bullying and bias to find opportunities for inclusion and leadership, including through extracurricular activities.
    d. When and if appropriate, refer students or families for counseling.

Identify Warning Signs and Refer Individuals to Appropriate Support

Even the most safe, respectful and inclusive school environments will have instances of bias and bullying, and students may be more susceptible to feelings of isolation for personal, independent reasons.

1. Train educators and students to take seriously any verbal statements espousing violence or indicating that a person may act violently. Example: Dylan Storm Roof told several people he was thinking about killing African Americans, but they either did not take him seriously or did not know what to do with that information.
2. A wide variety of hate and extremist symbols, which may be expressed through tattoos or doodles, are identifiable on the ADL Hate symbols database. Bearing in mind First Amendment considerations and restrictions, develop and follow referral guidelines for students who demonstrate a sudden interest in gang symbols or extremist symbols.
3. Establish a threat assessment team (sometime also called a behavioral assessment team). The Virginia model of threat assessment has been empirically demonstrated as effective. Develop referral practices based on the results of the information gathered and analyzed using the Threat Assessment methodology. Schools should also develop written agreements, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, with local law enforcement, as well as protective resources such as mental health facilities, social service agencies, hospitals, etc.
4. Refrain from jumping to conclusions if a student demonstrates changes in religious attitudes or other seemingly innocuous personal behavior, but do ensure that support is available for the student. Again, judgments should not be made based on fears, but on facts analyzed through the threat assessment process.
5. Do not dismiss reported concerns from friends or peers about sudden shifts in a student's behavior.

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Additional security resources

Ensure that the district has a well-understood plan for violent scenarios. Some helpful resources include:

- Virginia Model of Threat Assessment

- START: Lessons Learned from Mental Health and Education: Identifying Best Practices for Addressing Violent Extremism

- DHS Active Shooter Informational Pocket Card (PDF)

- FBI/DHS Bomb Threat Guidance (PDF)

- FBI Guidance: If You Receive A Suspicious Letter or Package, What Should You Do? (PDF)

- Suspicious Mail or Packages: Protect Yourself, Your Business and Your Mailroom (PDF)

- Ideological and Non-ideological Mass Shootings in the U.S. – NJ Department of Homeland Security

- START: Moving Toward a Society with NO HATE – A Proposal for Advancing U.S. Domestic CVE

Appendix: Examples of student violence and radicalization:

Non-Ideological

- **Littleton, CO – 1999:** The Columbine School shooting in 1999 was the first significant school shooting by a student in the U.S. and has served as a model and reference point for later shooters to emulate; Columbine is regularly cited as inspiration for school shooters. On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two teenage students killed 12 other students and a teacher and wounded over 20 others before committing suicide. The two had also attempted, but failed, to detonate bombs in the school cafeteria. Harris was posthumously diagnosed as psychopathic. Prior to the attack, Klebold had written an essay about a man shooting innocent victims as an assignment. Harris had maintained a hate-filled personal website.
- **Blacksburg, VA – 2007:** On April 16, 2007, twenty-three year old senior Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people on the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, before taking his own life. In 2005, Cho had been ordered to seek outpatient care after making suicidal remarks to his roommates. Cho wrote angry and violent materials for some class assignments that had raised concern among some of his former professors and fellow students. Cho authored a manifesto prior to the shooting in which he referred to the Columbine shooters as martyrs.

Right-Wing extremism influence

- **Edinboro, PA – 1998:** On April 24, 1998, 14-year-old eighth grade student Andrew Wurst shot and killed a teacher and wounded two students at a school dance. Although not necessarily a follower of Nazi ideologies, Wurst had cited Hitler as a hero and had allegedly said that Hitler and the anti-Christ were "cool." Prior to the incident, a teacher had overheard Wurst discussing a plan to kill his mother; she reported this to a school administrator.
- **Red Lake, MN – 2005:** On March 21, 2005, 16-year-old Jeffrey Weise killed his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend, then took his grandfather's weapons to his school, where he killed 10 other individuals. Weise, a Native American, identified with Nazi ideologies and commented on the Libertarian National Socialist Party forum online. Students, who said he was sometimes teased, had noticed that Weise drew pictures of skulls and swastikas on his notebooks.

Muslim extremism influence

- **Minneapolis, MN – 2008:** On November 3, 2008, 16-year-old Burhan Hassan left the U.S. to join Al Shabaab, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia. Hassan was one of at least 20 young people from the Twin Cities area believed to have traveled to join Al Shabaab between 2007 and 2009. Hassan had allegedly been actively recruited to travel to Somalia, with an adult who purchased his plane ticket believed to have been the recruiter. The majority of individuals who traveled to join Al Shabaab in that period were radicalized through a combination of online and in-person recruitment efforts. Hassan was killed in Somalia in 2009.
- **Denver, CO – 2014:** On October 14, 2014, three Denver high school students left the U.S. in an attempt to travel to Syria and join ISIS. They were turned around at a stop-over in Germany and returned to parental custody. The three had actively engaged in extremist social networks and accessed extremist propaganda online prior to their attempted travel.