



TCCRI Testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Violence in Schools & School Security

July 18, 2018

Charge:

Examine the root cause of mass murder in schools including, but not limited to, risk factors such as mental health, substance use disorders, anger management, social isolation, the impact of high intensity media coverage — the so-called “glorification” of school shooters — to determine the effect on copy cat shootings, and the desensitization to violence resulting from video games, music, film, and social media. Recommend strategies to early identify and intercept high-risk students, as well as strategies to promote healthy school culture, including character education and community support initiatives.

Summary

The Senate Select Committee on Violence in Schools and School Security has a great responsibility in researching legislative options under today’s charge. The Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute (TCCRI) also takes great interest in today’s charge. The Committee is correct to focus its efforts on the root causes of school shootings: given that school shootings remain exceedingly rare, it is critical to focus on the specific risk factors that are tied to such shootings in order to minimize the likelihood that a particular individual ultimately executes a planned shooting.

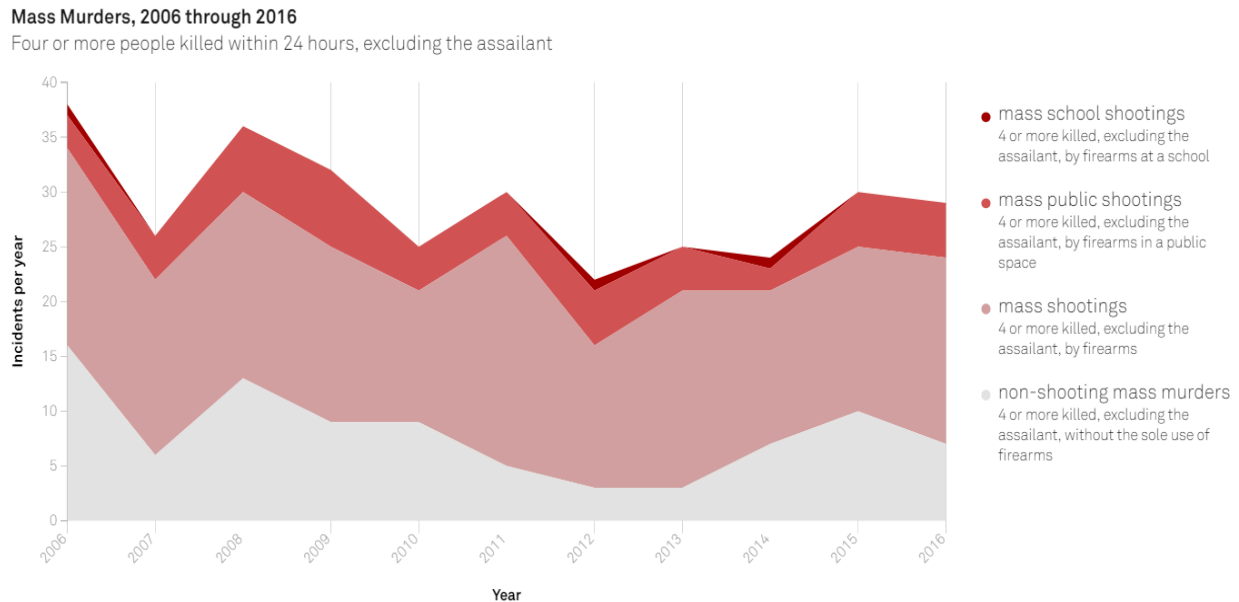
This testimony focuses heavily on the “threshold” model of collective behavior: the theory that school shooters and would-be school shooters across the country are essentially part of a community that glorifies previous shooters and seeks to emulate them. Under this model, with the passage of time and, hence, school shootings, individuals with a relatively higher threshold for engaging in a school shooting may act on their impulse.

The best way to counter this phenomenon, then, is not to pursue broad policies restricting gun ownership or access to violent media, but to rely on responsible adults to intercede in the lives of those individuals who may exhibit signs of the risk factors usually inherent in those who initiate school shootings. Parents and family members are typically on the front lines in this regard, but teachers and school counselors and psychologists, as well as others in leadership positions must also be able to take the lead and intervene.



1. Mass shootings – including school shootings – are trending downward

Despite popular belief, mass shootings—including school shootings—are not increasing in frequency. In a March 2018 preview of research at Northeastern University by James Alan Fox, Northeastern released data showing no increase in frequency of school shootings.ⁱ The research finds that mass murders occur between 20 and 30 times per year, and roughly one of those, on average, takes place at a school.ⁱⁱ It also finds that shootings involving students have been declining since the 1990s, when four times the number of children were killed in schools than are killed in similar circumstances today.ⁱⁱⁱ There have been 16 multiple victim shootings in schools since 1996. Eight of those were mass shootings (4 or more deaths, excluding assailant). Furthermore, Fox provides that students are far more likely to be killed drowning in a pool or in a bicycle accident than by gunfire at a school.^{iv} The following graph is provided by Fox and Northeastern University to illustrate those points:



Data Source: Fridel, E. E. (2016). Mass murder in the United States: 2006-2016. Northeastern University (Original dataset: Adapted from Overberg, P., Hoyer, M., Hannan, M., Upton, J., Hansen, B., & Durkin, E. (2016). "Explore the data on U.S. mass killings since 2006. USA Today."). Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/16/mass-killings-data-map/2820423/>

None of this is to belittle or downplay the horrendous nature of mass shootings, and especially those that take place in our schools. Every life lost in this way is a tragedy for everyone. The questions before this committee today, however, are whether these losses of life are in any meaningful sense “preventable”, and if so, what steps can the state take to prevent them?

This Committee is correct to direct its attention in this hearing to social, cultural, and mental health related risk factors that may make certain individuals more likely to commit these atrocities. Attempting to prevent school shootings by looking at these types a risk factors is far preferable to infringing on constitutionally protected rights. Such an approach is also likely to be significantly more targeted at the problem that it seeks to address, although, as this testimony will discuss, legislators should be prepared



to conclude that it is not possible to prevent every single school shooting even if significant time and resources are devoted to mitigating the types of risk factors that are often present in those who commit school shootings.

2. The “threshold” model of collective behavior

Of the factors outlined in the Committee’s charge – mental health, substance use disorders, anger management, social isolation, the impact of high intensity media coverage, the “glorification” of school shooters, and the desensitization to violence resulting from video games, music, film, and social media, it is the glorification of school shooters and the “copy cat” nature of school shootings that is perhaps most compelling.

In a 2015 *The New Yorker* article, author Malcolm Gladwell painstakingly recounts the story of John LaDue, a seventeen-year-old high school student from Waseca, Minnesota. In April 2015, LaDue was detained by Waseca police officers after being found in a storage unit with a variety of weapons, bomb-making equipment, and other supplies needed to execute a Columbine-style attack on his high school.^v Gladwell recounts LaDue’s initial conversation with police officer Tim Schroeder:

Schroeder asked him what his intentions were.

“I have a notebook under my bed that explains it,” LaDue replied.

Schroeder: “O.K. Can you talk to me about those intentions that are in the notebook?”

LaDue: “O.K. Sometime before the end of the school year, my plan was to steal a recycling bin from the school and take one of the pressure cookers I made and put it in the hallway and blow it up during passing period time. . . . I would detonate when people were fleeing, just like the Boston bombings, and blow them up too. Then my plans were to enter and throw Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs and destroy everyone and then when the *swat* comes I would destroy myself.”

In his bedroom, he had an SKS assault rifle with sixty rounds of ammunition, a Beretta 9-mm. handgun, a gun safe with an additional firearm, and three ready-made explosive devices. On the day of the attack, he would start with a .22-calibre rifle and move on to a shotgun, in order to prove that high-capacity assault-style rifles were unnecessary for an effective school attack.

Schroeder: “Do you have brothers and sisters?”

LaDue: “Yes, I have a sister. She’s one year older than me.”

Schroeder: “O.K. She goes to school too?”

LaDue: “Yes.”

Schroeder: “She’s a senior?”

LaDue: “She is.”

Schroeder: “O.K. So you would have done this stuff while she was at school as well?”



LaDue: "I forgot to mention a detail. Before that day, I was planning to dispose of my family too."

Schroeder: "Why would you dispose of your family? What, what have they done?"

LaDue: "They did nothing wrong. I just wanted as many victims as possible."^{vi}

What could possibly explain a seventeen-year-old high school student with no grudge or no ill-feeling toward his family wanting to "dispose" of them, simply because he needed "as many victims as possible" for his, *his*, school shooting? Gladwell's compelling answer to this question builds on the work of Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter. Writing in the late 1970s, Granovetter examined the dynamics of collective behavior – how people act when they are part of a crowd, how riots build and so on:

By explaining paradoxical outcomes as the result of aggregation processes, threshold models take the "strangeness" often associated with collective behavior out of the heads of actors and put it into the dynamics of situations. Such models may be useful in small-group settings as well as those with large numbers of actors. Their greatest promise lies in analysis of situations where many actors behave in ways contingent on one another, where there are few institutionalized precedents and little preexisting structure.^{vii}

Gladwell explains Granovetter's "threshold model":

A riot was a social process, in which people did things in reaction to and in combination with those around them. Social processes are driven by our *thresholds*—which he defined as the number of people who need to be doing some activity before we agree to join them. In the elegant theoretical model Granovetter proposed, riots were started by people with a threshold of zero—instigators willing to throw a rock through a window at the slightest provocation. Then comes the person who will throw a rock if someone else goes first. He has a threshold of one. Next in is the person with the threshold of two. His qualms are overcome when he sees the instigator and the instigator's accomplice. Next to him is someone with a threshold of three, who would never break windows and loot stores unless there were three people right in front of him who were already doing that—and so on up to the hundredth person, a righteous upstanding citizen who nonetheless could set his beliefs aside and grab a camera from the broken window of the electronics store if *everyone* around him was grabbing cameras from the electronics store.^{viii}

Applying these thresholds to school shootings, Gladwell then argues that the Columbine shooting essentially changed the thresholds:

Then came Columbine. The sociologist Ralph Larkin argues that [Columbine perpetrators] Harris and Klebold laid down the "cultural script" for the next generation of shooters. They had a Web site. They made home movies starring themselves as hit men. They wrote lengthy manifestos. They recorded their "basement tapes." Their motivations were spelled out with grandiose specificity: Harris said he wanted to "kick-start a revolution."



Larkin looked at the twelve major school shootings in the United States in the eight years after Columbine, and he found that in eight of those subsequent cases the shooters made explicit reference to Harris and Klebold. Of the eleven school shootings outside the United States between 1999 and 2007, Larkin says six were plainly versions of Columbine; of the eleven cases of thwarted shootings in the same period, Larkin says all were Columbine-inspired.^{ix}

Indeed, the extent to which post-Columbine school shooters (and even the half-dozen school shootings that lead up to the Columbine attack) engaged in the “glorification” of previous shooters is striking. Many of these shooters can certainly be described as “copy cats,” to use the term from this Committee’s charge, but it goes much deeper than that. Analyzing the “manifestos” and other writings of school shooters, sociologist Natalie Paton describes one who refers to Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho as “a brother in arms,”^x and other shooters associating themselves with [Columbine shooters] Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s “cultural tastes,”^{xi} as well as using footage of the Columbine shooters in their own manifestos and materials. Pertinent to the threshold thesis, Paton concludes that “the boys actively take part in associating themselves to a group.”^{xii} Gladwell also recounts how nineteen-year-old Darion Aguilar shot and killed two people at a skate shop in Maryland before taking his own life. Aguilar used the same weapons as the Columbine shooters and started his attack at precisely 11.14 a.m., mirroring the time the Columbine attack began.^{xiii} Another shooter – Aaron Ybarra, who shot three people at Seattle Pacific University – told police that he could “never have done it” without the influence of the Columbine and other perpetrators, including Cho.^{xiv} In Gladwell’s narrative, this is evidence of the threshold model in action:

Between Columbine and Aaron Ybarra, the riot changed: it became more and more self-referential, more ritualized, more and more about identification with the school-shooting tradition. Eric Harris wanted to start a revolution. Aguilar and Ybarra wanted to join one. Harris saw himself as a hero. Aguilar and Ybarra were hero-worshippers.^{xv}

Which brings us full-circle back to John LaDue. Why *does* a teenager who likes his family, who likes his parents, who has no real grievances decide that he has to kill them and massacre his classmates? He is a quintessential *high*-threshold shooter. Gladwell recounts how he continually delayed his attack, first until April to coincide with tragedies like the sinking of the Titanic, the Waco siege, the Oklahoma City bombing, and, of course, the Columbine shooting. But, as April wore on, he delayed until May, needing time to buy a pressure cooker from which to construct a bomb, then his ammunition clips would not fit, and so on. By the time he was detained by police, the school year was almost over.

The low-threshold shooters were the grip of powerful grievances. But LaDue doesn’t seem to have any real grievances. In his notebooks, instead, he seems to spend a good deal of effort trying to manufacture them from scratch. School-shooter protocol called for him to kill his parents. But he *likes* his parents. “He sees them as good people, loving him, caring about him,” [examining psychologist John] Gilbertson said. “But he has to take



their life, according to [his] manifesto, to prove that he's up to the task, to prove he has no human feelings anymore, that he's scrubbed out."^{xvi}

LaDue may never have acted out his plan, and there is no telling how many boys and young men begin taking the steps that he took toward the perpetration of a school shooting without ever going through with it. That number is likely very low, but each of them have likely spent many, many hours reading about, watching, and absorbing the actions, methods, and, engaging in the "glorification" of previous shooters. That fact seems to be the constant running across the majority of school shooters.

3. Other factors?

This Committee's charge also speaks to the influence of video games, films, and music, but their influence appears to be less clear. In a *New York Times* piece earlier this year entitled "Do Video Games Lead to Mass Shootings? Researchers Say No," University of Southern California professor Henry Jenkins points out both that juvenile crime is at a thirty-year low, and that people incarcerated for violent crimes "consume less media before committing their crimes than the average person in the general population."^{xvii} Summarizing decades of research on the issue, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in 2011 that:

Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively ... Any demonstrated effects are both small and indistinguishable from effects produced by other media.^{xviii}

Even if it were the case that movies, music, or video games were somehow strongly correlated with school shootings (or mass shootings or acts of violence of any type), regulating such free expression is problematic from both a constitutional and a practical standpoint. Indeed, the quote above is taken from Justice Scalia's opinion in a Supreme Court decision that overturned a California statute regulating the purchase of violent video games by minors without parental supervision.^{xix} Constitutional concerns aside, any governmental regulation seeking to limit access to violent media of any sort is, in the 21st Century, unlikely to be able to stop people from accessing such material given the plethora of ways to access music and videos through the internet and more traditional means. In any event, such regulations would be no substitute for the benefits of a strong and supportive family environment – if a particular individual is susceptible to violent video games, then a responsible parent is best placed to regulate that behavior.

Mental health plays a significant role too. John LaDue was ultimately diagnosed with an autism-spectrum disorder, specifically Asperger's syndrome.^{xx} Kip Kinkel, who killed his parents before shooting 27 people at Thurston High School in Oregon in 1998 was likely a paranoid schizophrenic.^{xxi} Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho was declared "dangerously mentally ill" by a judge but did not receive treatment before he took the lives of 32 students and faculty.^{xxii}



4. Identifying and addressing risk factors

While every school shooting is a tragedy, policymakers must be cognizant of the fact that they remain extremely rare. Many factors come into play when explaining how and why each individual shooter decides to act. The threshold model is compelling – that the glorification of previous shooters can bring other boys and young men to the verge of committing their own atrocity, when they would perhaps not otherwise do so. As Jim Geraghty explains in *National Review Online*:

But for a certain segment of angry young men, infamy isn't a disincentive; it's the goal. School shooters are hated, but they're remembered, they're feared, everyone wonders about what motivated them. They're famous. Their experiences and pain aren't just random occurrences in a cruel world; they're key clues in the run-up to a horrifying crime. No doubt many shooters believe that through their wicked actions, they're forcing everyone else to belatedly care about what happened to them.^{xxiii}

Policymakers seeking to navigate this labyrinth of potential causes and danger signs should heed the advice of Dr. Frank Robertz, the former CEO of the Institute for Violence Prevention and Applied Criminology, who explains that:

Often these young assassins are inspired by examples set by previous shooters. The fantasies typically intensify over a number of years before they are acted on. With time, the mental images become more detailed, and they often become buttressed by a distorted sense of what is just or moral, such as the need to avenge a perceived offense or the belief in a divine right to decide the fate of others.

Early on, troubled teenagers typically keep these fantasies secret, but they increasingly begin to leak their thoughts and plans to friends, chat rooms and even media outlets. Recognizing the signs of such deadly thoughts, as opposed to harmless daydreaming, can enable parents, teachers, social workers and other trusted adults to head off trouble before it begins. We have recently developed strategies for identifying youths at risk, for helping to prevent them from descending into a destructive fantasy world and for reacting expediently in the event of an imminent or actual shooting.^{xxiv}

The goal for legislators, then, must be to help foster an environment in which the “parents, teachers, social workers and other trusted adults,” that Robertz describes can successfully intervene when they observe warning signs. In many cases this will happen organically and is likely occurring already. Many schools in Texas already employ psychologists, counselors, and social workers. To the extent that these positions already exist, they should prioritize identifying, targeting, and treating students who exhibit troubling behaviors before they escalate. Governor Abbott’s recent “School and Firearm Safety Action Plan” suggests a variety of strategies to identify risks and prevent threats, including mental health evaluation of certain students. The report specifically points out that:



Many counselors employed by Texas schools are licensed in mental and behavioral health, but because of the other responsibilities placed on them, are unable to care for health needs of their students. Changing the way that school districts view counselors and better utilization of existing staffing resources could be part of a solution to address the mental health needs of students.^{xxv}

Conclusion

This Committee's charge is a strong one in that it correctly identifies that it is only through the acknowledgment and identification of the risk factors leading to school shootings can we hope to prevent them. Usually, those closest to the individual in question are the most likely to observe the types of behavior indicative of those risk factors. Parents and family members are on the front line in this respect. This Committee's next hearing will discuss "red flag" protection orders as one potential tool through which close family members can raise concerns about a person's behavior. That proposal is worthy of debate and TCCRI will provide testimony to further that discussion.

Ultimately, because school shootings are so rare, broad policies seeking to control gun ownership, access to violent media, and the like should be avoided: they imperil constitutional freedoms while doing little to lessen the threat posed by the individuals who ultimately perpetrate mass shootings. Instead, it is up to the responsible adults in every young person's life – parents, teachers, etc. – to provide an environment that is not conducive to those risk factors and to step in when those factors become apparent.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Allie Nicodemo & Lia Petronio, “Schools are safer than they were in the 90s, and school shootings are not more common than they used to be, researchers say,” *News @ Northeastern* (Feb. 26, 2018), <https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/02/26/schools-are-still-one-of-the-safest-places-for-children-researcher-says/>.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*
- ^v Malcolm Gladwell, “Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on,” *The New Yorker* (Oct.19, 2015).
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*
- ^{vii} Mark Granovetter, “Threshold Models of Collective Behavior,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 83, No. 6, (1978).
- ^{viii} Malcolm Gladwell, “Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on,” *The New Yorker* (Oct.19, 2015).
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*
- ^x Nathalie Paton, “Media Participation of School Shooters and their Fans: Navigating between Self-Distinction and Imitation to Achieve Individuation, in Glenn W. Muschert, Johanna Sumiala (ed.) *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age (Studies in Media and Communications, Volume 7)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.203 – 229 (2012).
- ^{xi} Malcolm Gladwell, “Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on,” *The New Yorker* (Oct.19, 2015).
- ^{xii} Nathalie Paton, “Media Participation of School Shooters and their Fans: Navigating between Self-Distinction and Imitation to Achieve Individuation, in Glenn W. Muschert, Johanna Sumiala (ed.) *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age (Studies in Media and Communications, Volume 7)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.203 – 229 (2012).
- ^{xiii} Malcolm Gladwell, “Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on,” *The New Yorker* (Oct.19, 2015).
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvii} “Do Video Games Lead to Mass Shootings? Researchers Say No.,” *New York Times* (Feb. 23, 2018).
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 564 U.S. 786 (2011). f
- ^{xx} Malcolm Gladwell, “Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on,” *The New Yorker* (Oct.19, 2015).
- ^{xxi} See Dr. William Sack’s Evaluation of Kinkel, available online at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kinkel/trial/sack.html>
- ^{xxii} “Cho Didn’t Get Court Ordered Treatment,” *Washington Post* (May 7, 2007).
- ^{xxiii} Jim Geraghty, “School Shootings and the Incentives of Violence,” *National Review Online* (May 21, 2018), <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/school-shooter-causes-incentives-violence/>.
- ^{xxiv} Dr. Frank J. Robertz, “Deadly Dreams: What Motivates School Shootings?” *Scientific American*, August 1, 2007.
- ^{xxv} Governor Greg Abbott, “School and Firearm Safety Action Plan” (May 30, 2018).

