



# Preventing, Preparing for Critical Incidents in Schools

by Beth Schuster

Ten years ago, on a sunny day in April, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colo., and began shooting. They killed 13 people and wounded 21 others before turning the guns on themselves. The events of that spring day mark one of the most devastating school shootings in U.S. history.<sup>1</sup>

Statistically, shootings and other homicides are a rare event in U.S. schools — they represent less than one percent of the homicides among children aged 5–18. From 1999 to 2006, 116 students were killed in 109 school-associated incidents.<sup>2</sup>

But as those in Jefferson County know all too well, school shootings can be a very real and very frightening part of school violence in this country. Each attack has a terrible and lasting effect on the students, school and surrounding community — and on the nation as a whole. Even one school shooting is too many.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is working to help people who work in and around schools create safe environments for teaching and learning. The Institute develops and distributes tools to aid teachers, administrators, staff and law enforcement in preventing, preparing for and responding to critical incidents in schools.

## A Closer Look at School Shootings

A 2002 study by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education — funded in part by NIJ — took a closer look at 37 incidents of targeted school violence in the United States between December 1974 and May 2000.<sup>3</sup> “Targeted violence” — a term developed by the Secret Service — refers to any incident of violence where a known (or knowable) attacker selected a particular target prior to the attack. The study explored the behavior of the student-attackers in the 37 incidents in an effort to identify information that could help communities prevent future school attacks.

The study found that these were rarely sudden impulsive acts. In 95 percent of the cases, the attacker had developed the idea to harm the target before the attack. Most had access to and had used weapons prior to the incident. More than two-thirds of the attackers obtained the guns used in the attack from their own home or that of a relative.

There is no accurate profile of a “school shooter,” according to the study. The shooters came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and ranged in age from 11 to 21 years. Some came from intact families with ties to the community; others came from foster homes with histories of neglect. Their academic performance ranged from excellent to failing. Few had been diagnosed with any mental disorder prior to the incident, and less than one-third had histories of drug or alcohol abuse. Almost three quarters

*Ninety-three percent of the school attackers in the study of 37 incidents behaved in a way that caused concern to others.*

of the attackers (71 percent) had felt bullied, persecuted, threatened, attacked or injured by others.

Prior to the incident, 93 percent of the attackers behaved in a way that caused others concern or indicated a need for help. In fact, in more than three-fourths of the cases examined, the attacker had told a friend, schoolmate or sibling about his idea before taking action. But rarely did the person who was told about the impending attack — in nearly all of the cases, a peer — bring the information to an adult’s

**What Do We Know About School Attackers?**

The National Institute of Justice contributed to the funding of a study by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education that examined 37 incidents of targeted school violence in the United States between December 1974 and May 2000. Here is what researchers learned about the attackers in those incidents.

Developed idea to harm target before attack	95 percent
Behaved in a way pre-incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help	93 percent
Told friend, schoolmate or sibling about idea before incident	81 percent
Felt bullied, threatened, attacked by others	71 percent
Obtained gun used in attack from own (or relative’s) home	68 percent
Had a known history of weapon use	63 percent
Had a known history of drug/alcohol abuse	24 percent
Previous diagnosis of mental health or behavior disorder	17 percent
Academic performance	Ranged from excellent to failing

Source: *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, May 2002, available at [www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf).

### How Prepared Are Our Schools?

School districts with a comprehensive plan to address crisis preparedness, response and recovery	95 percent*
Among school districts with comprehensive plans, those that provided funding for training or offered training on the plan to faculty and staff during preceding two years	82 percent*
Schools with a crisis preparedness, response and recovery plan	97 percent*
Among schools with plans, those that provided training on plan to faculty and staff during preceding two years	87 percent*
School-based police officers who said emergency plans were not adequate	51 percent <sup>†</sup>
School-based police officers who said emergency plans were not practiced on a regular or ongoing basis	67 percent <sup>†</sup>

\* *School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006* (see note 5).

<sup>†</sup> *School Safety Left Behind? School Safety Threats Grow as Preparedness Stalls & Funding Decreases* (see note 6).

attention. A 2008 follow-up study by the Secret Service and Education Department explored how students with prior knowledge of attacks made decisions about what steps, if any, to take after learning the information. The study found that the school's culture and misjudgments about the likelihood and immediacy of the planned attack influenced whether the students came forward with the information.<sup>4</sup>

For more information on the 2002 study, read a related *NIJ Journal* article, "Preventing School Shootings," at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/jr000248c.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/jr000248c.pdf). The complete findings from the 2008 follow-up study can be found at [http://ustreas.gov/uss/ntac/bystander\\_study.pdf](http://ustreas.gov/uss/ntac/bystander_study.pdf).

### How Prepared Are Schools?

Many of the critical incidents examined in the Secret Service and Education Department study lasted no more than 20 minutes. In fact, 47 percent lasted 15 minutes or less from the beginning of the shooting to the time the attacker was apprehended, surrendered, stopped shooting, left the school or committed suicide; one-quarter were

over within five minutes. Given the short duration of most school attacks, it is crucial for schools to have prevention efforts and critical incident response plans in place.

But how prepared are schools?

According to a 2006 national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 95 percent of school districts had a comprehensive plan to address crisis preparedness, response and recovery. Of these districts, about 82 percent provided funding for training or offered training on the plan to faculty and staff during the two preceding years. As for individual schools, 97 percent had a crisis preparedness, response and recovery plan, and among these schools, 87 percent provided training on the plan to faculty and staff.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in a national survey of more than 750 school-based police officers, about half of the officers said the emergency plans for their schools were not adequate. More than 66 percent indicated that their emergency plans were not practiced on a regular or ongoing basis.<sup>6</sup>

## Helping Schools Prepare and Respond

NIJ makes tools and training programs available to help schools and school districts resolve conflict, manage critical incidents and prevent school violence.

The tools and programs were developed with evidence-based practices and the recommendations of experts in NIJ's School Safety Technology Working Group in mind, said Mike O'Shea, program manager for the Institute's school safety portfolio. "These resources — all of which are free — can help teachers, administrators, staff and law enforcement officers prepare and respond to any type of critical incident in their school," O'Shea said.

Here are some of these resources:

### School Crime Operations Package

This NIJ-funded software allows school-based police officers, administrators and security officers to map and analyze crime incidents that occur in and around schools. They can enter a daily log of incidents of school violence and crime, quickly display incidents involving a particular student and produce graphics showing school "hot spots" or year-to-year trends. For example, a map can show where bullying incidents have occurred on a school campus. This software can help schools establish policies for school safety, target school violence and prepare for future threats. (For more information, see [www.schoolcopsoftware.com](http://www.schoolcopsoftware.com).)

### School Safety Plan Generator

Law enforcement officers and school staff can use this to create a document that helps prepare the school and serves as a reference guide for all first responders during critical incidents. The document can include the school's demographics, members of the critical incident planning team, roles and responsibilities, emergency locations, supplies and equipment on hand, and critical lines of communication.

## THE LARGER SCOPE OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School shootings are only part of the problem of violence in schools. During the 2005–2006 school year, for example, 86 percent of public schools reported that at least one violent incident, theft or other crime occurred at their school, according to the *2007 Indicators of School Crime and Safety* by the U.S. departments of Education and Justice. In 2005, students aged 12–18 were victims of approximately 1.5 million nonfatal crimes at school.<sup>7</sup>

In the same study, 8 percent of students in grades 9–12 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon in the past 12 months. Meanwhile, 28 percent of students aged 12–18 reported having been bullied at school during the previous six months.<sup>8</sup> Six percent of students aged 12–18 said that they had avoided a school activity or a particular place in school during the past six months because of fear of attack or harm.<sup>9</sup>

### A Critical Incident: What to Do in the First 20 Minutes

Developed by the North Carolina Office of the Attorney General and Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, this video shows a school shooter scenario. Viewers watch the school's response to the shooting and then discuss what went right, what went wrong and how they can use the lessons learned to improve their own critical incident plans.

### Incident Commander

Incident Commander uses electronic gaming software to mimic a school shooting, a chemical spill, the aftermath of a severe storm and similar incidents so managers can practice what to do in the event any of these situations occurs. Users take the role of the incident commander, who manages the command team. They can act alone or coordinate with a team to employ emergency and public services. Developed by BreakAway, Ltd., with funding from NIJ, this computer simulation program also allows users to download maps of their city, county or state, so the scenario is played where they would respond to a real-life critical incident. (For more information, see [www.incidentcommander.net](http://www.incidentcommander.net).)

### Active Shooter

This NIJ-funded program — scheduled to be released later this year — will train local police on how to respond to a school shooting. An emergency response system known as Rapid Response is first installed in a local school. The system takes surveys, videos and photographs of the school and creates a Web-based tool that police officers can then use in a crisis. Officers can access the tool on their patrol car computers, get an electronic view of the school, and identify hazards, exits and vantage points for a fast, accurate response.

To obtain any of the tools discussed in this article, contact NIJ program manager Mike O'Shea at Michael.OShea@usdoj.gov, or the Rural Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center at 866-RURAL LE (866-787-2553).

### Protecting Students

In the decade since Columbine, other communities across the country — such as Blacksburg, Va.; Lancaster County, Pa.; and Red Lake, Minn. — have experienced similar tragedies.

Schools should be places of learning and development — not violence and fear. Keeping students and schools safe should continue to be at the top of every school administrator's and police department's agenda. NIJ's ongoing efforts will help them achieve that goal.

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### About the Author

Beth Schuster is an award-winning writer and editor with more than eight years of experience in technical writing and editing, mainly in the area of education policy. She is the managing editor of the *NIJ Journal*.

### For More Information

- Additional information on NIJ's school safety research and technology can be found at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime-prevention/school-safety](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime-prevention/school-safety).

### Notes

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2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "School-Associated Student Homicides — United States, 1992–2006," *MMWR Weekly* 57 (02) (January 18, 2008): 33–36, available at [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5702a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5702a1.htm).
3. Vossekul, B., R.A. Fein, M. Reddy, R. Borum, and W. Modzeleski, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, May 2002, available at [www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf).
4. Pollack, W.S., W. Modzeleski, and G. Rooney, *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack*, Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, May 2008, available at [http://ustreas.gov/usss/ntac/bystander\\_study.pdf](http://ustreas.gov/usss/ntac/bystander_study.pdf).
5. *School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/shpps](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/shpps).
6. Trump, K.S., *School Safety Left Behind? School Safety Threats Grow as Preparedness Stalls & Funding Decreases, NASRO 2004 National School-Based Law Enforcement Survey*, February 2005, available at [www.schoolsecurity.org/resources/2004%20NASRO%20Survey%20Final%20Report%20NSSSS.pdf](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/resources/2004%20NASRO%20Survey%20Final%20Report%20NSSSS.pdf).
7. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2007*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, December 2007, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2007>.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.