



Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

FS-SC21

2008

The Role of the Bystander in Preventing a Targeted Attack

In 1999, as a result of school shootings like those at Columbine High School, the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education initiated a study, the *Safe School Initiative (SSI)*, which researched incidents of planned attacks in our schools. The SSI studied 37 incidents of targeted attacks in American schools and concluded that there were important key findings which indicated that future attacks can be prevented. Importantly, perpetrators exhibited behaviors prior to the attack that were of concern to others in 93% of the cases and others had prior knowledge of the perpetrator's plans in 81% of the cases. Of those with prior knowledge (bystanders), 93% were peers of the perpetrator. Although this study only involved a small number of participants, its results indicate the important role that bystanders can play in thwarting future attacks.

Key Findings

- Relationships between attackers and bystanders varied from friends and acquaintances to family members and others. Most were friends and most received their information directly from the perpetrator. Most heard of the attacks days or weeks before the attack took place.
- Bystanders differed in their willingness to come forward with information. Although some shared their information easily, others did so only with prodding from adults or did not share at all. Only 4% of the bystanders attempted to dissuade the attackers from their plans.
- School climate plays an important role in the bystander's decision to come forward with information. Bystanders were more comfortable sharing information in schools where they reported that they had positive relations with other adults and where they felt that their concerns would be taken seriously and managed appropriately.
- Many bystanders did not report because they didn't take the perpetrator's threats seriously. Some thought that the threats were either too overt or extreme to be taken seriously, while others thought the perpetrator was joking or just looking for attention.
- Often, bystanders felt that the threatened attacks were not imminent. Some felt that they had more time than they actually had in order to decide an appropriate course of action.
- Parents and other responsible adults often played a role in the bystander's decision to report a threat. Some adults, when told of a threat, supported and assisted in reporting the threat, while others actually discouraged reporting the threat.

Implications for Prevention of Targeted Attacks

Schools that project a climate where students feel comfortable sharing information about possible violence will more likely encourage students to report threats to school safety. When students feel that adults will take their reports seriously, respond with sensitivity and protect their confidentiality, they are more likely to share information. Students need to know that any information they report will not affect them adversely and that trusted adults will take appropriate action to keep them and their school safe. Developing strong connections between students and adults at school is important in creating a school climate that promotes safety.

School districts should have clear policies regarding how the reporting of threats should be handled. These should include:

- An environment that encourages everyone to report threats to school safety.
- Clear options for reporting, including the ability to report anonymously.
- Assurance that reports will be accepted respectfully and confidentially.
- Guarantees that appropriate action will be taken and those reporting will receive feedback.
- Conditions under which information can or cannot be shared with others.
- Clarity concerning who is responsible for receiving and acting on information.
- A review process that includes input from mental health and law enforcement professionals, when appropriate.
- The tracking of threats and incidents over time for the purpose of understanding the extent and nature of the problem, as well as understanding how future incidents can be prevented.

All school personnel should be trained in how to properly respond to students who report threats to school safety and to be aware of discussions or actions which might indicate a threat of violence.

The role of the bystander in maintaining a safe school environment is critically important in preventing targeted school attacks. In order to insure that bystanders will report threats to school safety, schools need to create responsible policies for addressing reports, ensure a school climate where everyone feels comfortable sharing information and encourage all students and school personnel to be aware of their responsibilities in creating safe schools.

Reference:

United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2008) *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent A Targeted Attack*. Washington, D.C.