

# Virginia Tech Shooting

With the great sorrow and distress over the shooting at Virginia Tech, it is natural to wonder what went wrong and what we can do to prevent something like this from happening. Extreme, irrational acts of violence can give us the false impression that violence is everywhere and that schools are not safe. It is important to remember that these events are anomalies and do not represent the conditions in our schools. We know objectively that there is far less violence in schools than outside of schools. According to multiple studies, the level of violent crime in schools has been declining for a decade and the level of violent crime by young people is lower than it has been in decades. So we must try to understand a terrible event that does not represent young people of today or reflect the safety conditions in our schools.

Who would commit such an act? Individuals who commit these shootings are angry, depressed, and suicidal. We know that they have serious mental and emotional problems that need treatment. We also know that these individuals typically do not “just snap” –their actions are often well-planned.

The most important preventive measure that schools can take is to establish a bond of trust and communication with their students and to encourage them to come forward with information when someone makes a violent threat. Threat assessment is the single most important means of preventing mass school shootings. We know that in most cases, the shooter made threats of violence and communicated his intentions well in advance of taking action. We have prevented school shootings in many schools by learning about threats, investigating them, and taking appropriate action.

By the same token, we have to be careful not to over-react to students who engage in foolish pranks or make rash statements in anger that they do not really mean. In our research over the past 5 years we have found that schools can conduct standardized threat assessments and distinguish between threats that are serious and those that are not serious. What is important is to find out about the threats. Many students do not understand the difference between snitching for personal gain and seeking help to prevent an act of violence. We have to teach students the difference between snitching and seeking help.

Although the deaths of so many people in one place is terribly tragic, it is part of a larger ongoing tragedy that we have not fully recognized. We have about 30,000 deaths by firearms every year in the United States, about 80 deaths per day. Only a small fraction of these shootings take place in schools. This problem is more properly viewed as a firearm issue than a school issue.

More broadly, we need more attention to the mental health problems that generate so much anger and violence in some individuals. We need more efforts to help troubled persons to resolve interpersonal conflicts and stressful circumstances that seem beyond their control. Sensitivity to these problems should begin early in a child's school experience. Suicidal acts of violence are the last resort of deeply disturbed individuals. It is important to create opportunities for them to be identified or to reach out for help before they reach this state. This is not just the obligation of schools but of parents and communities.