THE FINAL REPORT AND FINDINGS OF THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF SCHOOL ATTACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

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UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE AND
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON, D. C.
May 2002

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IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF SCHOOL ATTACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE
AND
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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JOINT MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, AND THE DIRECTOR, U.S. SECRET SERVICE

Littleton, Colorado; Springfield, Oregon; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas. These communities have become familiar to many Americans as the locations where school shootings have occurred in recent years. School shootings are a rare, but significant, component of school violence in America. It is clear that other kinds of problems are far more common than the targeted attacks that have taken place in schools across this country. However, each school-based attack has had a tremendous and lasting effect on the school in which it occurred, the surrounding community, and the nation as a whole. In the aftermath of these tragic events, educators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, parents, and others have asked: "Could we have known that these attacks were being planned?" and, "What can be done to prevent future attacks from occurring?"

In June 1999, following the attack at Columbine High School, our two agencies–the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education–launched a collaborative effort to begin to answer these questions. The result was the *Safe School Initiative*, an extensive examination of 37 incidents of targeted school shootings and school attacks that have occurred in the United States beginning with the earliest identified incident in 1974 through June 2000. The focus of the *Safe School Initiative* was on examining the thinking, planning, and other behaviors engaged in by students who carried out school attacks. Particular attention was given to identifying pre-attack behaviors and communications that might be detectable–or "knowable"–and could help in preventing some future attacks.

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The *Safe School Initiative* was implemented through the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center and the Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program. The *Initiative* drew from the Secret Service's experience in studying and preventing assassination and other types of targeted violence and the Department of Education's expertise in helping schools facilitate learning through the creation of safe environments for students, faculty, and staff.

This document, the *Safe School Initiative*'s final report, details how our two agencies studied school-based attacks and what we found. Some of the findings may surprise you. It is clear that there is no simple explanation as to why these attacks have occurred. Nor is there a simple solution to stop this problem. But the findings of the *Safe School Initiative* do suggest that some future attacks may be preventable, if those responsible for safety in schools know what questions to ask and where to uncover information that may help with efforts to intervene before a school attack can occur.

Since it began in June 1999, our partnership has been a tremendous asset to each of our respective agencies and vital to the success of this study. It is our hope that the information we present in this final report is useful to those of you on the front lines of this problem–the administrators, educators, law enforcement officials, and others with protective responsibilities in schools–and to anyone concerned with children's safety. We encourage all of you in your efforts to keep our nation's children safe in school and hope this report helps you in those efforts.

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Rod Paige
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education

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This project would not have been possible without the support and guidance that the authors received from several key officials and personnel at the Department of Education and the Secret Service. Absent the expertise and insights of these individuals, the Secret Service's experience in researching and preventing targeted violence could not have been translated into a useful study of targeted school

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE

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Littleton, Colorado; Springfield, Oregon; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas. These communities have become familiar to many Americans as among the locations of those schools where shootings have occurred nationwide in recent years. In the aftermath of these tragic events, educators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals and parents have pressed for answers to two central questions: "Could we have known that these attacks were being planned?" and, if so, "What could we have done to prevent these attacks from occurring?"

This publication, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, is a recent product of an ongoing collaboration between the U. S. Secret Service and the U. S. Department of Education to begin to answer these questions.[1] It is the culmination of an extensive examination of 37 incidents of targeted school violence that occurred in the United States from December 1974 through May 2000.[2]

The Safe School Initiative

Following the attack at Columbine High School in April 1999, the Secret Service and the Department of Education initiated, in June 1999, a study of the thinking, planning and other pre-attack behaviors engaged in by attackers who carried out school shootings. That study, the *Safe School Initiative*, was pursued under a partnership between the Secret Service and the Department of Education, and implemented through the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center and the Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program. In its execution, the *Safe School Initiative* drew from the Secret Service's experience in studying and preventing targeted violence and from the Department of Education's expertise in helping schools facilitate learning through the creation of safe environments for students, faculty and staff.

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The objective of the *Safe School Initiative* was to attempt to identify information that could be obtainable, or "knowable," prior to an attack. That information would then be analyzed and evaluated to produce a factual, accurate knowledge base on targeted school attacks. This knowledge could be used to help communities across the country to formulate policies and strategies aimed at preventing school-based attacks.

Key features of the *Safe School Initiative* were its focus on "targeted" school violence and its adaptation of earlier Secret Service research on assassination for its examination of incidents of school-based attacks.

[1] *This report is an update and expansion of the earlier Interim Report on the Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools, which was released in October 2000. This Final Report supercedes the Interim Report and should be used and referenced in place of the Interim Report.*
[2] *See Section I, "INTRODUCTION: THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE, Methodology," for a discussion of the approach used by the Secret Service to identify incidents of school-based attacks.*

Defining "Targeted" School Violence

The *Safe School Initiative* examined incidents of "targeted violence" in school settings–school shootings and other school-based attacks where the school was deliberately selected as the location for the attack and was not simply a random site of opportunity. The term "targeted violence" evolved from the Secret Service's five-year study of the behavior of individuals who have carried out, or attempted, lethal attacks on public officials or prominent individuals. That study, the Secret Service's *Exceptional Case Study Project* (ECSP), was initiated in 1992 under funding provided by the U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice.

The focus of the ECSP study was an operational analysis of the thinking and behavior of those who have assassinated, attacked or tried to attack a national public official or public figure in the United States since 1949. The ECSP defined "targeted violence" as any incident of violence where a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to their violent attack.[3] The purpose of the ECSP was to generate a better understanding of attacks against public officials that, in turn, would help Secret Service agents in their investigations of threats toward the president and others they protect and in the prevention of harm to these protected officials.[4]

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The ECSP sought to identify what information might be knowable prior to an attack and to better enable intervention before an attack occurred. Findings from the ECSP helped to dispel several myths and misconceptions about assassination.

In addition to the ECSP's particular focus on incidents involving attacks on public officials and prominent individuals, other types of violence in which a victim is targeted specifically include assassinations, stalking, some forms of domestic violence, some types of workplace violence, and some types of school violence. In the case of targeted school violence, the target may be a specific individual, such as a particular classmate or teacher, or a group or category of individuals, such as "jocks" or "geeks." The target may even be the school itself.

The Secret Service Threat Assessment Approach

The findings of the ECSP also led to the Secret Service's development of a more thorough and focused process for conducting threat assessment investigations. As part of its mission, the Secret Service is responsible for protecting the president and vice president of the United States and their families and certain national and

[3] *Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., & Holden, G. (1995). Threat assessment: An approach to prevent targeted violence. National Institute of Justice: Research in Action, 1-7.*
[4] *Fein, R., & Vossekuil, B. (1999). Assassination in the United States: An operational study of recent assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers. Journal of Forensic Sciences, 44, 321-333.*

international leaders, all of whom are referred to as "protectees." The Secret Service provides this protection by means of two distinct yet complementary strategies: the use of physical measures–including magnetometers, armored vehicles, perimeters of armed agents, and canine units–that are designed to both deter potential attacks and serve as protective barriers in the event someone tries to attack; and a second, far less visible component known as threat assessment.

Threat assessment is a process of identifying, assessing and managing the threat that certain persons may pose to Secret Service protectees. The goal of threat assessment is to intervene before an attack can occur. The threat assessment process involves three principal steps–all before the person has the opportunity to attack:

- identifying individuals who have the idea or intent of attacking a Secret Service protectee;
- assessing whether the individual poses a risk to a protectee, after gathering sufficient information from multiple sources; and,
- managing the threat the individual poses, in those cases where the individual investigated is determined to pose a threat.

The Secret Service considers threat assessment to be as important to preventing targeted violence as the physical measures it employs.

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In 1998, the Secret Service established the National Threat Assessment Center, an entity within the Secret Service that is dedicated to continuing efforts agency-wide to better understand and prevent targeted violence, and to share this developing knowledge with other constituencies responsible for public safety and violence prevention. Adaptation of its threat assessment protocols for use in addressing the problem of school-based attacks is the most recent of the Secret Service's initiatives to share this body of knowledge and expertise with other constituencies engaged in developing strategies to address targeted violence issues. In the late 1990s, the Secret Service and the Justice Department's National Institute of Justice joined forces to make information on the Secret Service's threat assessment protocols available to a wider law enforcement audience. *Protective Intelligence & Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials,* released in July 1998, offers state and local police officials insights into the elements of carrying out and evaluating the findings of threat assessment investigations.[5]

In addition, since the release of the *Safe School Initiative* Interim Report in October 2000, personnel from the Secret Service and the Department of Education have given over 100 seminars and briefings on the study to thousands of educators, law

[5] *Fein, R. & Vossekuil, B. (1998). Protective Intelligence & Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials. U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice: Washington, D.C.*

enforcement officials, mental health professionals and others across the United States. Several questions and discussion points raised by seminar attendees have been addressed in this final report.

Finally, the Department of Education and the Secret Service currently are completing work on a guide to investigating and responding to threats in schools. The guide is scheduled for publication in 2002. The guide will include recommendations for investigating and evaluating threats and other behaviors of concern in school; address considerations for developing policies and capacity to support threat assessment efforts in schools; and provide suggestions for approaches schools can adopt to foster school environments that reduce threats of targeted violence.

The Prevalence of Violence in American Schools

Public policymakers, school administrators, police officials and parents continue to search for explanations for the targeted violence that occurred at Columbine High School and other schools across the country, and seek assurance that similar incidents will not be repeated at educational institutions in their communities. While the quest for solutions to the problem of targeted school violence is of critical importance, reports from the Department of Education, the Justice Department and other sources indicate that few children are likely to fall prey to life-threatening violence in school settings.[6]

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To put the problem of targeted school-based attacks in context, from 1993 to 1997 the odds that a child in grades 9-12 would be threatened or injured with a weapon in school were 7 to 8 percent, or 1 in 13 or 14; the odds of getting into a physical fight at school were 15 percent, or 1 in 7.[7] In contrast, the odds that a child would die in school–by homicide or suicide–are, fortunately, no greater than 1 in 1 million.[8] In 1998, students in grades 9-12 were the victims of 1.6 million thefts and 1.2 million nonfatal violent crimes, while in this same period 60 school-associated violent deaths were reported for this student population.[9]

[6] *See, for example, Kaufman, P., et. al. (2000). Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2000. U. S. Department of Education (NCES 2001-017) and U. S. Department of Justice (NCJ-184176): Washington, D. C. Online Vers.: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2001017; Anderson, M., et. al. (2001). School-associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1994-1999. Journal of the American Medical Association, 286, 2695-2702; and, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Committee on Law and Justice and Board on Children, Youth, and Families. (2001). Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice. Panel on Juvenile Crime: Prevention, Treatment, and Control. McCord, J., et. al. (Eds.). National Academy Press: Washington, D.C.*

[7] *Snyder, H.N., & Sickmund, M. (1999). Juvenile offenders and victims: 1999 National Report. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Available online at http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/index.html.*

[8] *U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (1999). 1999 Annual Report on School Safety. Washington, D.C.: Authors.*

[9] *Ibid.*

The findings of the *Safe School Initiative*'s extensive search for recorded incidents of targeted school-based attacks underscore the rarity of lethal attacks in school settings. The Department of Education reports that nearly 60 million children attend the nation's 119,000+ schools.[10] The combined efforts of the Secret Service and the Department of Education identified 37 incidents of targeted school-based attacks, committed by 41 individuals over a 25-year period.[11]

Nevertheless, the impact of targeted school-based attacks cannot be measured in statistics alone. While it is clear that other kinds of problems in American schools are far more common than the targeted violence that has taken place in schools in this country, the high-profile shootings that have occurred in schools over the past decade have resulted in increased fear among students, parents and educators. School shootings are a rare, but significant, component of the problem of school violence. Each school-based attack has had a tremendous and lasting effect on the school in which it occurred, the surrounding community and the nation as a whole. In the wake of these attacks, fear of future targeted school violence has become a driving force behind the efforts of school officials, law enforcement professionals and parents to identify steps that can be taken to prevent incidents of violence in their schools.

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Methodology

The Secret Service and the Department of Education began work on the *Safe School Initiative* study in June 1999. Research protocols employed in carrying out and analyzing the findings of this work reflect an adaptation of the ECSP operational approach to examining targeted attacks against public officials and prominent individuals. Researchers used a similar operational focus for the *Safe School Initiative* to develop information that could be useful to schools in better understanding and preventing targeted violence in school settings. The emphasis of the study was on examining the attackers' pre-incident thinking and behavior, to explore information that could aid in preventing future attacks.

For the purposes of this study, an incident of targeted school violence was defined as any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at his or her school with lethal means (e.g., a gun or knife); and, (ii) where the student attacker purposefully chose his or her school as the location of the attack. Consistent with this definition, incidents where the school was chosen simply as a site of opportunity, such as incidents that were solely related to gang or drug trade activity or to a violent interaction between individuals that just happened to occur at the school, were not included.

[10] *U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics (2002). Digest of Education Statistics 2000; Washington D.C.: Authors*
[11] *Supra note 2.*

Under the study's research strategy, each incident of targeted violence was assigned to a study review team comprised of criminal investigators and social science researchers. At least two reviewers were assigned to each incident.

The Secret Service and the Department of Education made every effort to ensure that the *Safe School Initiative* would produce information that would be useful for school administrators, educators, law enforcement officials and others working with schools. To that end, researchers consulted regularly with experts in the fields of education, school violence and juvenile homicide, among others, in the course of developing the study design and protocols. Feedback from these various experts was incorporated into the final study design.

The Study Population

Researchers from the Secret Service and the Department of Education initiated their study of targeted school violence with an extensive search for information that would identify incidents of targeted school violence that have occurred in the United States. Beginning with June 2000 and working back in time, researchers explored all relevant, searchable databases maintained in the public domain or available by subscription, such as public news databases and professional publications, to identify incidents meeting the definition of the study population. Researchers also consulted with law enforcement officials and school violence experts to develop leads on incidents of school violence that might meet the criteria for inclusion in the study constituency.

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In the end, researchers identified 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers that occurred in the United States from 1974, the year in which the earliest incident identified took place, through June 2000, when data collection for the study was completed.[12] The school-based attacks included in the *Safe School Initiative* represent all of the incidents of targeted school violence meeting the study criteria that Secret Service and Department of Education researchers were able to identify in that time frame.

Sources of Information on Incidents of Targeted School Violence

Information on each incident of targeted school violence identified by Secret Service and Department of Education researchers was drawn principally from primary

[12] *It is possible that incidents of targeted school violence other than those identified by Safe School Initiative researchers might have occurred prior to the 1974 incident included in the study, or between 1974 and the completion of data collection for the study in June 2000. For example, incidents that met the study definition, but that were not identifiable under the study search strategy, or that were not reported as school-based crimes, would have been unlikely to come to the attention of Secret Service and Department of Education researchers. In addition, incidents of targeted school violence that have occurred since June 2000 were outside the scope of the study.*

source materials concerning the incident. These primary source materials included investigative, school, court, and mental health records.

In addition, study researchers conducted supplemental interviews with 10 of the perpetrators of incidents of the school-based attacks identified by the Secret Service and the Department of Education. These interviews provided researchers with further opportunity to examine the incident from the point of view of the attacker and to "walk through the process of the attack" from its conceptualization to its execution. Insights gleaned from these interviews have been used by the Secret Service primarily in training venues to illustrate particular aspects of incidents of targeted school violence.

Coding of Primary Source Materials.

Each member of the review team assigned to a particular incident independently answered several hundred questions about each case, entering his or her answers to the questions in a codebook. Review team members were instructed to record information gathered from primary sources as it appeared in those sources, and not to engage in interpretation of facts presented.

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Information gathered and reflected in incident reviewers' responses to the coded study questions included facts about:

- the attacker's development of an idea to harm the target, and progression from the original idea to the attack;
- the attacker's selection of the target(s);
- the attacker's motive(s) for the incident;
- any communications made by the attacker about his or her ideas and intent, including any threats made to the target(s) or about the target(s);
- evidence that the attacker planned the incident;
- the attacker's mental health and substance abuse history, if any; and,
- the attacker's life circumstances/situation at the time of the attack, including relationships with parents and other family members; performance in school; and treatment by fellow students.

Information regarding the attacker's demographic characteristics and personal history, including criminal and school history, also were coded. When each reviewer had completed his or her response to the questions, the review team met as a whole to compare responses and produce a single "reconciled" coding of the incident.

Analysis of Responses to the Coded Study Questions

Findings presented in Chapter III of this report reflect researchers' careful analysis of the coded responses to the extensive questionnaire employed in recording information gathered on each of the 37 school-based attacks and 41 attackers that were examined in the *Safe School Initiative*. Researchers were cautious not to overreach in drawing conclusions from this information.

Primary source materials reviewed for the 37 incidents did not provide answers in every case to all of the areas of inquiry covered in the questionnaire. In general, researchers declined to draw a conclusion if information directly responsive to a particular area of inquiry was available for fewer than half of the incidents reviewed.

Moreover, even when answers to a particular coded study question were available for the majority of incidents, these responses collectively did not suggest in all cases a common or shared characteristic. Here again, researchers were cautious not to draw a conclusion in a particular area of inquiry if that conclusion was supported by fewer than the majority of the responses to the subject question.

However, in some cases, researchers believed that the absence of a common or shared characteristic or behavior in the coded responses to inquiries–most notably with respect to the characteristics and behaviors of the attackers–was sufficiently compelling to note those observations as findings as well.

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Organization of the Final Report

The remainder of this report is organized into four chapters. Chapter II: "Characteristics of Incidents of Targeted School Violence," presents basic descriptive information about the attacks examined by the *Safe School Initiative*, including incident, target and victim characteristics. Chapter III: "Findings of the *Safe School Initiative*," describes the conclusions reached by *Safe School Initiative* researchers after careful analysis of the facts and other information collected in the course of the Secret Service's and the Department of Education's study of targeted school violence.

Chapter IV: "Implications of *Safe School Initiative* Findings for the Prevention of Targeted School Violence," will be of particular interest to educators, law enforcement officials and others who are seeking guidance to inform efforts to address the problem of targeted school violence. In this chapter, the authors focus in on 10 key findings of the *Safe School Initiative* that appear to have implications for

the development of strategies to prevent targeted school violence. These findings specifically concern what information was known–or knowable–about these incidents prior to the attack, and that, in turn, might be relevant to efforts to prevent future attacks. Discussion of these key findings also includes consideration of how this information might be applicable to investigating threats and other behavior in schools that may raise concerns.

In the final chapter of this report, Chapter V: "Threat Assessment as a Promising Strategy for Preventing School Violence," the authors offer some concluding observations on how threat assessment protocols might be incorporated into strategies to prevent targeted violence in schools.

Overview of Safe School Initiative Findings

The findings of the *Safe School Initiative* suggest that there are productive actions that educators, law enforcement officials and others can pursue in response to the problem of targeted school violence. Specifically, *Initiative* findings suggest that these officials may wish to consider focusing their efforts to formulate strategies for preventing these attacks in two principal areas:

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- developing the capacity to pick up on and evaluate available or knowable information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and,
- employing the results of these risk evaluations or "threat assessments" in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

Support for these suggestions is found in 10 key findings of the *Safe School Initiative* study. These findings are as follows:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.[13]
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.

[13] *Here the term "profile" refers to a set of demographic and other traits that a set of perpetrators of a crime have in common. Please refer to "Characterizing the Attacker" in Chapter III and to Reddy et al. (2001), "Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools" in the Resources section for further explanation of the term "profile."*

- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

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CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS OF INCIDENTS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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The *Safe School Initiative* found that targeted school violence is not a new or recent phenomenon. The earliest case that researchers were able to identify occurred in 1974. In that incident, a student brought guns and homemade bombs to his school; set off the fire alarm; and shot at emergency and custodial personnel who responded to the alarm.

The *Safe School Initiative* identified 37 incidents involving 41 attackers that met the study definition of targeted school violence and occurred between 1974 and the end of the 2000 school year.[14] These incidents took place in 26 states, with more than one incident occurring in Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee.[15]

Analysis of the study findings identified the following characteristics of incidents of targeted school violence:

- In almost three-quarters of the incidents, the attacker killed one or more students, faculty or others at the school (73 percent, n=27[16]). In the remaining incidents, the attackers used a weapon to injure at least one person at school (24 percent, n=9). In one incident, a student killed his family and then held his class hostage with a weapon.
- More than one-half of the attacks occurred during the school day (59 percent, n=22), with fewer occurring before school (22 percent, n=8) or after school (16 percent, n=6).
- Almost all of the attackers were current students at the school where they carried out their attacks (95 percent, n=39). Only two attackers were former students of the school where they carried out their attacks at the time of those attacks (5 percent, n=2).
- All of the incidents of targeted school violence examined in the *Safe School Initiative* were committed by boys or young men (100 percent, n=41).[17]
- In most of the incidents, the attackers carried out the attack alone (81 percent, n=30). In four of the incidents, the attacker engaged in the attack on his own but had assistance in planning the attack (11 percent, n=4). In three incidents, two or more attackers carried out the attack together (8 percent, n=3).

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[14] See Appendix B for a list of the dates of the incidents of targeted school violence examined by the Safe School Initiative.

[15] See Appendix A for a list of the locations of the incidents of targeted school violence studied under the Safe School Initiative.

[16] "N" refers to the number of attackers that corresponds to the reported percentage. Unless indicated otherwise, when the finding pertains to total attackers all N's are out of a total of 41. When the finding pertains to total incidents (i.e., school-based attacks) all N's are out of a total of 37 incidents.

[17] While all the attackers in this study were boys, it would be misleading to read the findings of this study as suggesting that a girl could not or would not carry out a school-based attack. For example, an incident occurred after the completion of this study in which a girl shot her classmate at a parochial school in Williamsport, Pa. In addition, a well-publicized school shooting that occurred in San Diego, Calif., in 1976 was carried out by a woman. The San Diego incident was not included in this study because the attacker was not a current or former student of the school where she conducted her attack, but, rather, lived across the street from the school.

- Most attackers used some type of gun as their primary weapon, with over half of the attackers using handguns (61 percent, n=25), and nearly half of them using rifles or shotguns (49 percent, n=20).[18] Three-quarters of the attackers used only one weapon (76 percent, n=31) to harm their victims, although almost half of the attackers had more than one weapon with them at time of the attack (46 percent, n=19).

Target and Victim Characteristics

Perpetrators of incidents of targeted school violence chose a range of targets for their attacks, including fellow students, faculty and staff, and the school itself. These incidents were usually planned in advance and for most part included intent to harm a specific, pre-selected target, whether or not the attacker's execution of the incident, in fact, resulted in harm to the target.

Target and victim characteristics identified by the *Safe School Initiative* were:

- In over half of the incidents (54 percent, n=22), the attacker had selected at least one school administrator, faculty member or staff member as a target. Students were chosen as targets in fewer than half of the incidents (41 percent, n=15).
- In nearly half of the incidents, the attackers were known to have chosen more than one target prior to their attack (44 percent, n=16).
- Most attackers had a grievance against at least one of their targets prior to the attack (73 percent, n=30).[19]
- In almost half of the incidents (46 percent, n=17), individuals who were targeted prior to the attack also became victims (i.e., individuals actually harmed in the attack). However, other individuals at the school, who were not identified as original targets of the attack, were injured or killed as well. Among these non-targeted individuals, over half were other students (57 percent, n=21) and over one-third (39 percent, n=16) were school administrators, faculty or staff.

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[18] *These percentages include all weapons used (i.e., discharged) in the attack, and therefore total more than 100 percent.*

[19] *For the purposes of this study, "grievance" was defined as "a belief that some other person or organization is directly or indirectly responsible for injury or harm to self and/or someone whom the subject cares about."*

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS OF THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE

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The findings of researchers' analysis of the 37 incidents of targeted school violence that were examined under the *Safe School Initiative* fall generally into five areas:

- characterizing the attacker;
- conceptualizing the attack;
- signaling the attack;
- advancing the attack; and,
- resolving the attack.

The findings in each of these areas are presented and explained below.

Characterizing the Attacker

Finding

There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.[20]

Explanation

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Although all of the attackers in this study were boys, there is no set of traits that described all–or even most–of the attackers. Instead, they varied considerably in demographic, background and other characteristics.

- The attackers ranged in age from 11 to 21, with most attackers between the ages of 13 and 18 at the time of the attack (85 percent, n=35).
- Three-quarters of the attackers were white (76 percent, n=31). One-quarter of the attackers came from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American (12 percent, n=5), Hispanic (5 percent, n=2), Native Alaskan (2 percent, n=1), Native American (2 percent, n=1), and Asian (2 percent, n=1).

The attackers came from a variety of family situations, ranging from intact families with numerous ties to the community, to foster homes with histories of neglect.

- Almost two-thirds of the attackers came from two-parent families (63 percent, n=26), living either with both biological parents (44 percent, n=18) or with one biological parent and one stepparent (19 percent, n=8).
- Some lived with one biological parent (19 percent, n=8) or split time between two biological parents (2 percent, n=1).
- Very few lived with a foster parent or legal guardian (5 percent, n=2).

[20] *Supra note 13.*

For those incidents for which information on the attackers' school performance was available, that information indicates that those attackers differed considerably from one another in their academic achievement in school, with grades ranging from excellent to failing (n=34).

- The attackers in the largest grouping were doing well in school at the time of the attack, generally receiving As and Bs in their courses (41 percent; n=17); some were even taking Advanced Placement courses at the time of the incident or had been on the honor roll repeatedly.
- Fewer of the attackers were receiving Bs and Cs (15 percent, n=6), or Cs and Ds (22 percent, n=9).
- Very few of the attackers were known to be failing in school (5 percent, n=2).

Attackers also varied in the types of social relationships they had established, ranging from socially isolated to popular among their peers.

- The largest group of attackers for whom this information was available appeared to socialize with mainstream students or were considered mainstream students themselves (41 percent, n=17).
- One-quarter of the attackers (27 percent, n=11) socialized with fellow students who were disliked by most mainstream students or were considered to be part of a "fringe" group.
- Few attackers had no close friends (12 percent, n=5).
- One-third of attackers had been characterized by others as "loners," or felt themselves to be loners (34 percent, n=14).
- However, nearly half of the attackers were involved in some organized social activities in or outside of school (44 percent, n=18). These activities included sports teams, school clubs, extracurricular activities and mainstream religious groups.

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Attackers' histories of disciplinary problems at school also varied. Some attackers had no observed behavioral problems, while others had multiple behaviors warranting reprimand and/or discipline.

- Nearly two-thirds of the attackers had never been in trouble or rarely were in trouble at school (63 percent, n=26).
- One-quarter of the attackers had ever been suspended from school (27 percent, n=11).
- Only a few attackers had ever been expelled from school (10 percent, n=4).

Most attackers showed *no marked change* in academic performance (56 percent, n=23), friendship patterns (73 percent, n=30), interest in school (59 percent, n=24), or school disciplinary problems (68 percent, n=28) prior to their attack.

- A few attackers even showed some *improvements* in academic performance (5 percent, n=2) or *declines* in disciplinary problems at school (7 percent, n=3) prior to the attack. In one case, the dean of students had commended a student a few weeks before he attacked his school for improvements in his grades and a decline in the number of disciplinary problems involving that student in school.

Finding

Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.

Explanation

Almost three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident (71percent, n=29).[21]

In several cases, individual attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that was long-standing and severe. In some of these cases the experience of being bullied seemed to have a significant impact on the attacker and appeared to have been a factor in his decision to mount an attack at the school.[22] In one case, most of the attacker's schoolmates described the attacker as "the kid everyone teased." In witness statements from that incident, schoolmates alleged that nearly every child in the school had at some point thrown the attacker against a locker, tripped him in the hall, held his head under water in the pool or thrown things at him. Several schoolmates had noted that the attacker seemed more annoyed by, and less tolerant of, the teasing than usual in the days preceding the attack.

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Finding

A history of having been the subject of a mental health evaluation, diagnosed with a mental disorder, or involved in substance abuse did not appear to be prevalent among attackers. However, most attackers showed some history of suicidal attempts or thoughts, or a history of feeling extreme depression or desperation.

Explanation

- Only one-third of attackers had ever received a mental health evaluation (34 percent, n=14), and fewer than one-fifth had been diagnosed with mental health or behavior disorder prior to the attack (17 percent, n=7).

[21] *It is important to note that the way in which information was gathered for the Safe School Initiative did not permit researchers to determine the exact proportion of attackers who had been victims of bullying specifically. Moreover, not every attacker in this study felt bullied.*
[22] *The Safe School Initiative's approach to gathering information concerning incidents of targeted school violence did not permit researchers to determine conclusively whether the experience of being bullied--or perceptions that they had been bullied--caused the attacker to engage in targeted school violence.*

- Although most attackers had not received a formal mental health evaluation or diagnosis, most attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts at some point prior to their attack (78 percent, n=32). More than half of the attackers had a documented history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate (61 percent, n=25).
- Approximately one-quarter of the attackers had a known history of alcohol or substance abuse (24 percent, n=10).
- The only information collected that would indicate whether attackers had been prescribed psychiatric medications concerned medication non-compliance (i.e., failure to take medication as prescribed). Ten percent of the attackers (n=4) were known to be non-compliant with prescribed psychiatric medications.

Finding

Over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence, through movies, video games, books, and other media (59 percent, n=24). However, there was no one common type of interest in violence indicated. Instead, the attackers' interest in violent themes took various forms.

Explanation

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- Approximately one-quarter of the attackers had exhibited an interest in violent movies (27 percent, n=11).
- Approximately one-quarter of the attackers had exhibited an interest in violent books (24 percent, n=10).
- One-eighth of the attackers exhibited an interest in violent video games (12 percent, n=5).
- The largest group of attackers exhibited an interest in violence in their own writings, such as poems, essays or journal entries (37 percent, n=15).

Finding

Most attackers had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior.

Explanation

- Fewer than one-third of the attackers were known to have acted violently toward others at some point prior to the incident (31 percent, n=13).
- Very few of the attackers were known to have harmed or killed an animal at any time prior to the incident (12 percent, n=5).
- Approximately one-quarter of the attackers had a prior history of arrest (27 percent, n=11).

Finding

Most attackers were known to have had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.

Explanation

Most attackers appeared to have difficulty coping with losses, personal failures or other difficult circumstances. Almost all of the attackers had experienced or perceived some major loss prior to the attack (98 percent, n=40). These losses included a perceived failure or loss of status (66 percent, n=27); loss of a loved one or of a significant relationship, including a romantic relationship (51 percent, n=21); and a major illness experienced by the attacker or someone significant to him (15 percent, n=6). In one case, the attacker, who was a former student at the school where the attack occurred, was laid off from his job because he did not have a high school diploma. The attacker blamed the job loss on the teacher who failed him in a senior-year course, which kept him from graduating. He returned to the school a year after leaving the school, killed his former teacher and two students, and then held over 60 students hostage for 10 hours.

For most attackers, their outward behaviors suggested difficulty in coping with loss (83 percent, n=34). For example, the mother, the brother and a friend of the attacker who lost his job each had commented that the attacker became depressed and withdrawn following the lay-off. The friend also reported that he knew that the attacker blamed his former teacher for his problems and had begun planning how to retaliate.

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Conceptualizing the Attack

Finding

Incidents of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts.

Explanation

Several findings of the *Safe School Initiative* indicate clearly that the school-based attacks studied were rarely impulsive. Rather, these attacks typically were thought out beforehand and involved some degree of advance planning. In many cases, the attacker's observable behavior prior to the attack suggested he might be planning or preparing for a school attack.

In nearly all of the incidents for which information concerning the attacker's conceptualization of the attack was available, researchers found that the attacker had

developed his *idea to harm* the target(s) before the attack (95 percent, n=39). The length of time that attackers held this idea prior to the actual attack varied considerably. Some attackers conceived of the attack as few as one or two days prior to advancing that attack; other attackers had held the idea of the attack for as long as a year prior to carrying it out. For those incidents where information was available to determine how long the attacker had an idea to harm the target (n=33), the analysis showed that a little over half of the attackers developed their idea for the incident at least a month prior to the attack (51 percent, n=17).

In addition, almost all of the attackers *planned* out the attack in advance of carrying it out (93 percent; n=38). Moreover, there was evidence from the attacker's *behavior* prior to the attack that the attacker had a plan or was preparing to harm the target(s) (93 percent, n=38). For example, one attacker asked his friends to help him get ammunition for one of his weapons; sawed off the end of a rifle to make it easier to conceal beneath his clothes; shopped for a long trench coat with his mother; and cut the pockets out of the coat so that he could conceal the weapon within the coat while holding the weapon through one of the cut-out pockets. That attacker had a well-known fascination with weapons and had told his friends on several occasions that he thought about killing certain students at school.

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The length of time between the planning and execution of the attacks also varied considerably for the targeted school violence incidents studied. Some attackers developed their plans on the day of their attack or only one or two days prior; others developed their plans between six and eight months prior to the attack. In cases where there was information available to establish the date planning began (n=29), analysis of available information revealed that most of the attackers developed a plan at least two days prior to the attack (69 percent, n=21).

Revenge was a motive for more than half of the attackers (61 percent, n=25). Other motives included trying to solve a problem (34 percent, n=14); suicide or desperation (27 percent, n=11); and efforts to get attention or recognition (24 percent, n=10). More than half of the attackers had *multiple* motives or reasons for their school-based attacks (54 percent, n=22). In addition, most of the attackers held some sort of grievance at the time of the attack, either against their target(s) or against someone else (81 percent, n=33). Many attackers told other people about these grievances prior to their attacks (66 percent, n=27).[23]

[23] *Supra note 19.*

Signaling the Attack

Finding

Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.

Explanation

In most cases, other people knew about the attack before it took place. In over three-quarters of the incidents, at least one person had information that the attacker was thinking about or planning the school attack (81 percent, n=30). In nearly two-thirds of the incidents, *more than one* person had information about the attack before it occurred (59 percent, n=22). In nearly all of these cases, the person who knew was a peer–a friend, schoolmate, or sibling (93 percent, n=28/30). Some peers knew exactly what the attacker planned to do; others knew something "big" or "bad" was going to happen, and in several cases knew the time and date it was to occur. An adult had information about the idea or plan in only two cases.

In one incident, for example, the attacker had planned to shoot students in the lobby of his school prior to the beginning of the school day. He told two friends exactly what he had planned and asked three others to meet him that morning in the mezzanine overlooking the lobby, ostensibly so that these students would be out of harm's way. On most mornings, usually only a few students would congregate on the mezzanine before the school day began. However, by the time the attacker arrived at school on the morning of the attack, word about what was going to happen had spread to such an extent that 24 students were on the mezzanine waiting for the attack to begin. One student who knew the attack was to occur brought a camera so that he could take pictures of the event.

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Finding

Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

Explanation

The majority of the attackers in the targeted school violence incidents examined under the *Safe School Initiative* did not threaten their target(s) directly, i.e., did not tell the target they intended to harm them, whether in direct, indirect or conditional language prior to the attack. Only one-sixth of the attackers threatened their target(s) directly prior to the attack (17 percent, n=7).

Finding

Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

Explanation

Almost all of the attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the attack that caused others–school officials, parents, teachers, police, fellow students–to be concerned (93 percent, n=38). In most of the cases, at least one *adult* was concerned by the attacker's behavior (88 percent, n=36). In three-quarters of the cases, at least three people–adults and other children–were concerned by the attacker's behavior (76 percent, n=31). In one case, for example, the attacker made comments to at least 24 friends and classmates about his interest in killing others kids, building bombs or carrying out an attack at the school. A school counselor was so concerned about this student's behavior that the counselor asked to contact the attacker's parents. The attacker's parents also knew of his interest in guns.

The behaviors that led other individuals to be concerned about the attacker included both behaviors specifically related to the attack, such as efforts to get a gun, as well as other disturbing behaviors not related to the subsequent attack. In one case, the student's English teacher became concerned about several poems and essays that the student submitted for class assignments because they treated the themes of homicide and suicide as possible solutions to his feelings of despair. In another case, the student worried his friends by talking frequently about plans to put rat poison in the cheese shakers at a popular pizza establishment. A friend of that student became so concerned that the student was going to carry out the rat poison plan, that the friend got out of bed late one night and left his house in search of his mother, who was not home at the time, to ask her what to do.

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Advancing the Attack

Finding

In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

Explanation

Although most attackers carried out their attacks on their own, many attackers were influenced or encouraged by others to engage in the attacks. Nearly half of the attackers were influenced by other individuals in deciding to mount an attack, dared or encouraged by others to attack, or both (44 percent; n=18). For example, one attacker's original idea had been to bring a gun to school and let other students see

him with it. He wanted to look tough so that the students who had been harassing him would leave him alone. When he shared this idea with two friends, however, they convinced him that exhibiting the gun would not be sufficient and that he would have to *shoot at* people at the school in order to get the other students to leave him alone. It was after this conversation that this student decided to mount his school attack.

In other cases, friends assisted the attacker in his efforts to acquire a weapon or ammunition, discussed tactics for getting a weapon into school undetected, or helped gather information about the whereabouts of a target at a particular time during the school day.

Finding

Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

Explanation

Experience using weapons and access to them was common for many attackers. Nearly two-thirds of the attackers had a known history of weapons use, including knives, guns and bombs (63 percent, n=26). Over half of the attackers had some experience specifically with a gun prior to the incident (59 percent, n=24), while others had experience with bombs or explosives (15 percent, n=6). However, fewer than half of the attackers demonstrated any fascination or excessive interest with weapons (44 percent, n=18), and less than one-third showed a fascination with explosives (32 percent, n=13) prior to their attacks. Over two-thirds of the attackers acquired the gun (or guns) used in their attacks from their own home or that of a relative (68 percent, n=28).

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Resolving the Attack

Finding

Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

Explanation

Most school-based attacks were stopped through intervention by school administrators, educators and students-or by the attacker stopping on his own. In about one-third of the incidents, the attacker was apprehended by or surrendered to administrators, faculty, or school staff (27 percent, n=10) or to students (5 percent, n=2). In just over one-fifth of the incidents, the attacker stopped on his own or left

the school (22 percent, n=8). In a few incidents, the attacker killed himself during the course of the incident (13 percent, n=5).

Just over one-quarter of the incidents were stopped through law enforcement intervention (27 percent, n=10). Law enforcement personnel discharged weapons in only three of the incidents of targeted school violence studied (8 percent, n=3).

Close to half of the incidents were known to last 15 minutes or less from the beginning of the shooting to the time the attacker was apprehended, surrendered or stopped shooting (47 percent, n=16).[24] One-quarter of the incidents were over within five minutes of their inception (27 percent, n=9). The fact that it was not through law enforcement intervention that most of the targeted school violence incidents studied were stopped appears in large part to be a function of how brief most of these incidents were in duration.

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[24] *Information on incident duration was not available for seven of the incidents (19 percent).*

CHAPTER IV

IMPLICATIONS OF SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE FINDINGS FOR THE PREVENTION OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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After careful review of the case histories of the 37 incidents of targeted school violence examined under the *Safe School Initiative*, 10 key findings were identified that highlight information that may have been known or knowable prior to school-based attacks and that therefore might inform some type of intervention in or prevention of future attacks. In this chapter, the authors discuss the implications that these findings may have for schools and communities in developing strategies for preventing targeted violence in schools.

In focusing in on these findings for their potential relevance to the development of prevention and intervention strategies, the authors acknowledge that these findings may raise other issues for consideration in addressing the problem of targeted school violence beyond those noted here. Moreover, the authors recognize that the conditions, circumstances and facts underlying the findings highlighted here may not manifest themselves in the same way in every school. Schools and communities therefore are in the best position to determine whether and how these findings and the implications suggested may apply to their particular problems and needs.

The 10 key findings that the authors believe may have implications for the development of strategies to address the problem of targeted school violence are as follows:

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- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely are sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

The Implications of Key Study Findings

Key Finding 1

Incidents of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts.

Implications

Students who engaged in school-based attacks typically did not "just snap" and then engage in impulsive or random acts of targeted school violence. Instead, the attacks examined under the *Safe School Initiative* appeared to be the end result of a comprehensible process of thinking and behavior: behavior that typically began with an idea, progressed to the development of a plan, moved on to securing the means to carry out the plan and culminated in an attack. This is a process that potentially may be knowable or discernible from the attacker's behaviors and communications.

To the extent that information about an attacker's intent and planning is knowable and may be uncovered before an incident, some attacks may be preventable. However, findings from the *Safe School Initiative* suggest that the time span between the attacker's decision to mount an attack and the actual incident may be short. Consequently, when indications that a student may pose a threat to the school community arise in the form of revelations about a planned attack, school administrators and law enforcement officials will need to move quickly to inquire about and intervene in that plan.[25]

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Key Finding 2

Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack. In most cases, those who knew were other kids–friends, schoolmates, siblings, and others. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult.

Implications

First and foremost, this finding suggests that students can be an important part of prevention efforts. A friend or schoolmate may be the first person to hear that a student is thinking about or planning to harm someone. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, those who have information about a potential incident of targeted school violence may not alert an adult on their own. Schools can encourage students to report this information in part by identifying and breaking down barriers in the

[25] *The Department of Education and the Secret Service have prepared a companion work to the Final Report, Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates. This guide is scheduled for publication in May 2002. The guide will include recommendations for investigating and evaluating threats and other behaviors of concern in school; address considerations for developing policies and the capacity to support threat assessment efforts in schools; and provide suggestions for approaches schools can adopt to foster school environments that reduce violence.*

school environment that inadvertently may discourage students from coming forward with this information. Schools also may benefit from ensuring that they have a fair, thoughtful and effective system to respond to whatever information students do bring forward. If students have concerns about how adults will react to information that they bring forward, they may be even less inclined to volunteer such information.

In addition, this finding highlights the importance in an inquiry of attempts to gather all relevant information from anyone who may have contact with the student. Efforts to gather all potentially relevant pieces of information, however innocuous they may appear on their own, from all individuals with whom the student has contact may help to develop a more comprehensive picture of the student's ideas, activities and plans. In the end, investigators may find that different people in the student's life have different pieces of the puzzle.

Key Finding 3

Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

Implications

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This finding underscores the importance of *not waiting* for a threat before beginning an inquiry. The *Safe School Initiative* found that most attackers in fact did not threaten their target directly and some made no threat at all. Instead, other behaviors and communications that may prompt concern, such as hearing that a child is talking about bringing a gun to school, are indicators that the child may pose a threat and therefore should prompt the initiation of efforts to gather information.

School administrators should respond to all students who make threats. The lack of response could be taken by the threatener as permission to proceed with carrying out the threat. In the end, however, it is important to distinguish between someone who *makes* a threat–tells people they intend to harm someone–and someone who *poses* a threat–engages in behaviors that indicate an intent, planning or preparation for an attack. Those conducting inquiries should focus particular attention on any information that indicates that a student *poses* a threat, regardless of whether the student has told a potential target he or she intends to do them harm.

Key Finding 4

There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

Implications

The demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially. Knowing that a particular student shares

characteristics, behaviors, features or traits with prior school shooters does not help in determining whether that student is thinking about or planning for a violent act.

The use of profiles in this way likewise is not an effective approach to identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted school violence at school or for assessing the risk that a particular student may pose for a school-based attack, once a particular student has been identified. Reliance on profiles to predict future school attacks carries two substantial risks: (1) the great majority of students who fit any given profile of a "school shooter" will not actually pose a risk of targeted violence; and, (2) using profiles will fail to identify some students who in fact pose a risk of violence but share few if any characteristics with prior attackers.[26]

Rather than trying to determine the "type" of student who may engage in targeted school violence, an inquiry should focus instead on a student's *behaviors and communications* to determine if that student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. Rather than asking whether a particular student "looks like" those who have launched school-based attacks before, it is more productive to ask whether the student is engaging in behaviors that suggest preparations for an attack, if so how fast the student is moving toward attack, and where intervention may be possible.

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Key Finding 5

Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

Implications

Several key findings point to the fact that kids send signals–both directly and indirectly–to others regarding their problems. The boys who engaged in the targeted school violence examined by the *Safe School Initiative* were not "invisible" students. In fact nearly all of these students engaged in behaviors–prior to their attacks–that caused concern to at least one person, usually an adult, and most concerned at least three people.

This finding highlights the range of behaviors in a student's life that may be noticeable and that could prompt some additional probing by a caring adult. A student's family, teachers, friends and others may have information regarding aspects of a student's behavior that has raised concern. As was true in some of the incidents covered in this study, individuals in contact with the attacker may have observed something of concern about that student's behavior, but not of sufficient concern for them to notify anyone in a position to respond.

[26] *Please refer to Reddy et al. (2001), "Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools: Comparing risk assessment, threat assessment, and other approaches," for a full discussion of assessment approaches currently available to schools. The full citation for the article is listed in Appendix C of this document.*

Educators and other adults can learn how to pick up on these signals and make appropriate referrals.[27] By inquiring about any information that may have prompted some concern, an investigator may be able to develop a more comprehensive picture of the student's past and current behavior, and identify any indications that the student is intent on or planning to attack. However, discretion should be exercised in determining whom to talk to about the student, so as not to alienate or stigmatize the student of concern. A significant challenge facing schools is to determine how best to respond to students who are already known to be in trouble or needing assistance.

Key Finding 6

Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.

Implications

Many students, not just those who engaged in school-based attacks, experience or perceive major losses in their lives. Most students who face a significant loss, or who have difficulty coping with such a loss, are not going to be at risk for a school-based attack. However, information that indicates a student is facing or having trouble dealing with a significantly difficult situation may indicate a need to refer the student to appropriate services and resources.

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In cases where there is concern about the possibility that a student may engage in targeted violence, attention should be given to any indication that a student is having difficulty coping with major losses or perceived failures, particularly where these losses or failures appear to have prompted feelings of desperation and hopelessness. An inquiry also should anticipate changes in the life of a troubled student, and consider whether these changes might increase–or decrease–the threat the student poses.

Key Finding 7

Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

Implications

Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. Nevertheless, in a number of the incidents of targeted school violence studied, attackers described being bullied in terms that suggested that these experiences approached torment. These attackers

[27] *See "Early Warning, Timely Response," listed in Appendix C of this report, for more information about how to identify students who may need assistance.*

told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault.

The prevalence of bullying found in this and other recent studies should strongly support ongoing efforts to reduce bullying in American schools.[28] Educators can play an important role in ensuring that students are not bullied in schools and that schools not only do not permit bullying but also empower other students to let adults in the school know if students are being bullied.

Key Finding 8

Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

Implications

Access to weapons among some students may be common. However, when the idea of an attack exists, *any* effort to acquire, prepare or use a weapon or ammunition may be a significant move in the attacker's progression from idea to action. Any inquiry should include investigation of and attention to weapon access and use and communications about weapons. Attention should also be given to indications of any efforts by a student to build a bomb or acquire bomb-making components.

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The large proportion of attackers who acquired their guns from home points to the need for schools and law enforcement officials to collaborate on policies and procedures for responding when a student is thought to have a firearm in school. In particular, schools should be aware of the provisions of the Federal Gun-Free Schools Act, which requires that all schools expel students who bring a gun to school and should report all violations to local law enforcement officials.[29]

Key Finding 9

In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

Implications

This finding highlights the importance of considering what prompting or encouragement a student may receive from others in his life that influences his intent, planning or preparations for a potential attack. Any investigation of potential targeted school violence should include attention to the role that a student's friends or peers may be playing in that student's thinking about and preparations for an

[28] *See, for example, Nansel, T., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R., Ruan, J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behavior among U.S. youth. Journal of the American Medical Association, 285, pp. 2094-2100.*
[29] *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title IV, Part A, Subpart 3, Section 4141.*

attack. It is possible that feedback from friends or others may help to move a student from an unformed thought about attacking to developing and advancing a plan to carry out the attack.

Key Finding 10

Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention and most were brief in duration.

Implications

The short duration of most incidents of targeted school violence argues for the importance of developing preventive measures in addition to any emergency planning for a school or school district. The preventive measures should include protocols and procedures for responding to and managing threats and other behaviors of concern.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THREAT ASSESSMENT AS A PROMISING STRATEGY FOR PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Taken together, the findings from the *Safe School Initiative* suggest that some future attacks may be preventable. Most incidents of targeted school violence were thought out and planned in advance. The attackers' behavior suggested that they were planning or preparing for an attack. Prior to most incidents, the attackers' peers knew the attack was to occur. And most attackers were not "invisible," but already were of concern to people in their lives.

In light of these findings, the use of a threat assessment approach may be a promising strategy for preventing a school-based attack. Educators, law enforcement officials and others with public safety responsibilities may be able to prevent some incidents of targeted school violence if they know what information to look for and what to do with such information when it is found. In sum, these officials may benefit from focusing their efforts on formulating strategies for preventing these attacks in two principal areas:

- developing the capacity to pick up on and evaluate available or knowable information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and,
- employing the results of these risk evaluations or "threat assessments" in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

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Threat Assessment and Targeted School Violence Prevention

Threat assessment, as developed by the Secret Service and applied in the context of targeted school violence, is a fact-based investigative and analytical approach that focuses on what a particular student is doing and saying, and not on whether the student "looks like" those who have attacked schools in the past. Threat assessment emphasizes the importance of such behavior and communications for identifying, evaluating and reducing the risk posed by a student who may be thinking about or planning for a school-based attack. The Department of Education and the Secret Service currently are completing work on a publication that will provide school administrators and law enforcement officials with guidance on planning and implementing a threat assessment approach within school settings.[30]

In relying on a fact-based threat assessment approach, school officials, law enforcement professionals and others involved in the assessment will need tools, mechanisms and legal processes that can facilitate their efforts to gather and analyze information regarding a student's behavior and communications. For example, school and law enforcement personnel should be offered training regarding what information to gather, how to gather and evaluate it, and how they might try to intervene in cases where the information collected suggests a student may be planning or preparing for a school-based attack.

[30] *Supra note 25.*

Several states have enacted legislation that makes it easier for schools to share student information with law enforcement agencies and others who are trying to determine whether a student might be moving toward a school-based attack.[31] Localities and states may wish to explore such options for supporting threat assessment components in schools and facilitating sharing information across school, law enforcement and community systems participating in the threat assessment process.

Finally, educators can play a part in prevention by creating an environment where students feel comfortable telling an adult whenever they hear about someone who is considering doing harm to another person, or even whether the person is considering harming themselves. Once such an environment is created, it will remain important that the adults in that environment listen to students and handle the information they receive in a fair and responsible manner.

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[31] *See "Legal Issues" in Appendix C of this report for listings of documents that include descriptions of state statutes in this area.*

Appendix A
INCIDENTS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE, BY STATE

Appendix B
INCIDENTS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE, BY YEAR

Appendix C
RESOURCES

Contact Information

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INCIDENTS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE, BY STATE

STATE	TOWN OR COUNTY
Alabama	Lanett
Alaska	Bethel
Arkansas	Jonesboro, Stamps
California	Anaheim, Napa, Olivehurst, Palo Alto, Redlands
Colorado	Jefferson County (Littleton)
Florida	Lake Worth
Georgia	Conyers, Scottsdale
Idaho	Notus
Iowa	Manchester
Kansas	Goddard
Kentucky	Grayson, Union, West Paducah
Massachusetts	Great Barrington
Mississippi	Pearl
Missouri	DeKalb, Patterson
Montana	Lewistown
New Mexico	Deming
New York	Olean
North Carolina	Greensboro
Oklahoma	Fort Gibson
Oregon	Springfield
Pennsylvania	Edinboro
South Carolina	Blacksville
Tennessee	Fayetteville, Lynville
Texas	Austin
Virginia	Virginia Beach
Washington	Moses Lake
Wisconsin	Wauwatosa

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INCIDENTS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE, BY YEAR

YEAR	MONTH AND DAY
1974	December 30
1978	May 18, October 15
1985	January 21
1986	December 4
1987	March 2
1988	December 14
1989	October 5
1992	May 1, May 14, December 14
1993	January 18, December 1
1994	May 26, October 12, November 8
1995	January 23, October 12, November 15
1996	February 2, February 8, March 25, September 25
1997	February 19, October 1, December 1, December 15
1998	March 24, April 24, May 19, May 24
1999	April 16, April 20, May 20, November 19, December 6
2000	May 26

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Boys and Violence

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Related Research

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Web Sites

United States Department of Education . . . . . .www.ed.gov
United States Secret Service . . . . . .www.secretservice.gov

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Fax: 202-406-6180
Web site: www.secretservice.gov/ntac

United States Department of Education
Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-6123
Phone: 202-260-3954
Fax: 202-260-7767
Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS

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