

Conflicts with teachers are risk factor for school shootings

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As part of the TARGET project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, researchers at Freie Universität Berlin conducted a systematic literature search of all the available studies dealing with school shootings. The aim of the analysis was to clarify which social dynamics in the social network of perpetrators can be observed in advance as playing an important role in school shootings. Up to now, researchers had assumed that bullying between peers and the social exclusion of the perpetrators were the most prominent factors in school shootings. This study shows, however, that in many cases conflicts with teachers seemed to be a decisive factor in the school shooting cases investigated.

Researchers within the subproject of the TARGET research network analyzed 37 studies referring to a total of 126 attacks in 13 countries (USA, Canada, Germany, Finland, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, Bosnia, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Thailand). Detailed information about social dynamics was found in 67 different case reports. The results of the study along with comments by national and international experts were now published in the latest issue of the *International Journal of Developmental Science*.

The study found that 88 percent of the perpetrators had experienced problems and conflicts in their social lives and that 85 percent had been marginalized. A closer examination of these conflicts and forms of marginalization reveals that only a minority of close to 30 percent of the perpetrators were the victims of physical bullying by peers. However,

slightly more than half (almost 54 percent) of the perpetrators had experienced forms of rejection by peers in the school environment. These numbers are lower than previously assumed and reported in some studies. It is also interesting that 13 percent of the perpetrators had been involved as perpetrators in bullying before the [school shooting](#) took place. Almost one-third of the offenders had experienced forms of rejection or disappointment in love affairs before the shooting - for some offenders, this was the only problem in the relational context of the school.

The biggest surprise for the researchers was that 43 percent of the perpetrators had had problems, conflicts, or unjust experiences with teachers and school representatives before they went on the school shooting spree. Researchers in the Berlin Leaking Project at Freie Universität had already found that problematic teacher-student relationships were involved in the development of seven German school shootings; these findings were also published in the current issue of the *International Journal of Developmental Science*. The current study has demonstrated that in the United States, the perpetrators had also had prior problems and conflicts with teachers. This fact has not yet been studied closely and has found little public attention. Nevertheless, the perpetrators of shootings in the United States were more often influenced by conflicts between peers (bullying) than their German counterparts.

The scientists were able to identify differences from previous studies with regard to the social position of the subsequent offender in the social environment of the school. While 48 percent of the offenders were referred to by others as "loners," only 24 percent of the self-descriptions of the perpetrators confirmed this description. Another revealing finding is the fact that 43 percent of the offenders had friends and were not as socially isolated as had been indicated in previous studies.

Ultimately, the researchers drew the conclusion that in the various cases, very different [social dynamics](#) were at play. Since none of the social risk factors previously discussed in the research were present in all the cases, it is not possible to identify one particular risk factor as a necessary precondition. Rather, researchers must continue to place more emphasis on different types of perpetrators as well as different developmental histories. In addition, the study demonstrates the methodological problems of previous research on school shootings. For example, many studies rely solely on media reports, there are no comparative studies available, and most of the findings are based on the re-evaluation of a few prominent cases, such as the attacks in Columbine or Emsdetten, while less prominent cases are not included. Thus, the study also draws critical attention to the "causes" for school shootings previously discussed in public.

More information: Sommer, F., Leuschner, V., & Scheithauer, H. (2014). "Bullying, romantic rejection, and conflicts with teachers: The crucial role of social dynamics in the development of school shootings - A systematic review." *International Journal of Developmental Science*, 8, 3-24. [DOI: 10.3233/DEV-140129](https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-140129).

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