

School shootings and street violence: How they're alike and different

January 14 2016, by Jeff Grabmeier

The two types of youth gun violence couldn't be more different, but the ways to prevent them remain largely the same, according to a new report by some of America's top violence researchers.

School rampage shootings and street shootings by youth differ in dramatic ways: They are done by different types of youth for different reasons, and often have very different risk factors.

"It is amazing how different school shooters are from street shooters," said Brad Bushman, the lead author of the report and a professor of communication and psychology at The Ohio State University.

"But the basic approach to preventing them is very similar. It starts with making the prevention of youth [violence](#) a national priority."

Bushman co-authored the new report with 11 other violence experts from universities across the country. They all co-wrote a report for the National Science Foundation on what is known and not known about youth violence.

This new report, which summarizes and updates the NSF document, appears online in the journal *American Psychologist*.

Bushman said that the type of youth who become school shooters are nearly opposite of those who commit street shootings.

Nearly all school shooters are white, rural or suburban, and middle class. Street shooters are often black, poor, and live in the inner-city.

Street shooters often have lengthy arrest records and use handguns that they obtained illegally. School shooters usually have multiple weapons, including semi-automatic or automatic rifles, which were purchased legally and often obtained from family members.

"Street shooters don't want anyone to know what they did - they want to hide," Bushman said. "Mass shooters want everyone to know."

And for mass shooters, their violence is often designed to be the end of the line for them: They often kill themselves, whereas street shooters rarely commit suicide.

Given all the differences between street shooters and school shooters, it might appear that the causes are completely different. But that's not true, Bushman said.

"The causes of [gun violence](#) in youth are complex. There are usually multiple factors acting together no matter what kind of shooting is involved," Bushman said.

Some factors - like social rejection from peers - seem to be more related to school shooters. Other factors, like poverty, appear to play a larger role in street shootings.

But many factors, like family influences, personality traits, exposure to media violence, and access to guns play a role in both types of youth gun violence, Bushman said.

Bushman has extensively studied the role that a steady diet of media violence has on aggression and violence in youth.

Particularly in school shootings, the role of [violent video games](#) is often debated, particularly because so many offenders were shown to be obsessed with "first-person shooter" games, where the player is the killer.

"We can never say that playing violent video games is the one cause of a youth going on a shooting rampage," Bushman said.

"But there is a lot of evidence that exposure to [media violence](#) increases aggressive behavior. And evidence suggests such exposure may be a contributing factor to violent behavior, even if it isn't the main factor. The main factor is probably easy access to guns."

Because youth violence has so many causes, preventing it also requires a multifaceted approach. Many of the solutions are well-known, if not often implemented, such as strengthening families, minimizing violent media effects, reducing youth access to guns, and improving school climates.

But Bushman said tools that make it possible to search large quantities of online data have opened new doors for predicting youth violence.

"It is possible to sift through Facebook and Twitter posts to determine if individuals are showing signs of violent behavior," he said.

"There are concerns about privacy. We have to make sure that when we do this kind of data mining that we only use data that is publicly available."

Bushman said improving school climate may be one of the biggest steps we can take to prevent [youth violence](#).

Often, taking a high-security approach is not the best option. Metal

detectors and security guards can make students feel fearful and mistrustful.

"You want students to trust parents and teachers and feel like they can talk about possible threats they hear about without ruining someone's life," he said.

"Zero-tolerance policies for speech are not helpful. Many kids won't report threats they hear if they know a fellow student could be expelled for what could be an idle or non-serious comment."

Bushman said that both school rampage shootings and everyday street violence need more attention from lawmakers and the public than they currently receive.

"We can't begin to solve the problem of [youth](#) gun violence if we don't make the issue a major national priority."

More information: "Youth Violence: What We Know and What We Need to Know," by Brad Bushman, PhD, The Ohio State University; Katherine Newman, PhD, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Sandra Calvert, PhD, Georgetown University; Geraldine Downey, PhD, Columbia University; Mark Dredze, PhD, and Daniel Webster, ScD, Johns Hopkins University; Michael Gottfredson, PhD, University of California, Irvine; Nina Jablonski, PhD, The Pennsylvania State University; Ann Masten, PhD, University of Minnesota; Calvin Morrill, PhD, University of California, Berkeley; Daniel Neill, PhD, Carnegie Mellon University; and Daniel Romer, PhD, University of Pennsylvania, *American Psychologist*, published online Jan. 14, 2015.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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