Unique, Common, and Consistent Characteristics in School Shooters

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Statistics indicate 48% of mass school shootings that have occurred since 2000 were conducted after 2015.

Abstract

Statistics highlight that mass shootings in a school setting have significantly increased since 2015. A substantial amount of research is dedicated to profiling mass shooter typologies, but provide general, broad characteristics. This research focused on categorizing traits to design a checklist for mass school shooters based on unique, common, and consistent traits that decreased generalizability. This also provided valuable insights, triggering further areas to analyze regarding gun legislation, violent fantasies, and linguistical analysis of written works.

Introduction

- From 2000-2019, only 4.63% of shootings that occurred in a school setting were conducted by a mass or active shooter (Wang et al., 2020).
- However, 48% of mass school shootings in the 2000s have occurred since 2015 (Vigderman, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), indicating a substantial increase in the last few years.
- Prior research has focused on a one-size-fits-all profile to determine risk, offering limited support or accuracy.
- To ensure more accurate profiling, this study emphasizes a checklist based on unique, common, and consistent traits.
- Notably, in 2017-2018, 52% of schools reported limited funding for mental health support (Wang et al., 2020).
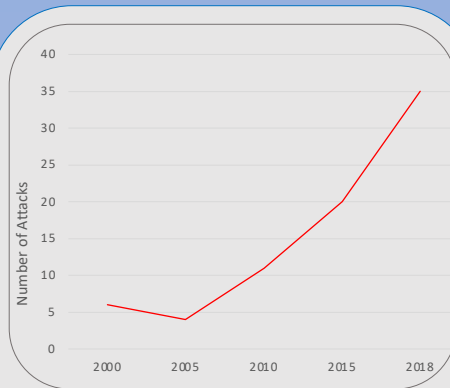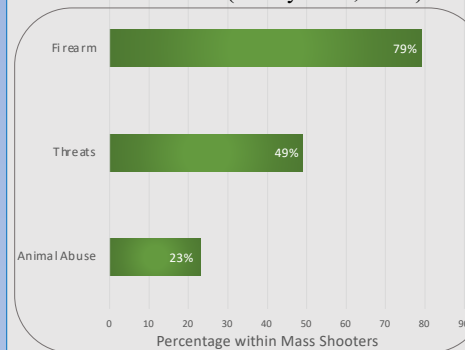

Unique Traits

- One study found that school shooters occasionally work in pairs or are encouraged by peers to conduct the attack (Langman, 2009).
- One study on 23 school shooters found 10 of them had committed animal abuse at one point, 90% of which committed it close-range and on dogs or cats, as compared to smaller animals (Arluke & Madfis, 2014; Arluke et al., 2018).

Common Traits

- Research highlights 49% of school shooters made threats prior to the attack, of which 26% were followed through without changes and 63% altered their plans somewhat (Capellan et al., 2017).
- Prevalent themes left behind in shooters' literary works include themes of paranoia, revenge, victimization, and social rejection (Dutton et al., 2013; Lankford, 2018).

Consistent Traits

- Evidence shows that almost 79% of school shooters acquired a firearm before the attack, versus other typologies who already owned or possessed firearms (Capellan et al., 2018).
- One study identified that school mass shooters are obsessed with planning. Planning is usually conducted through written works, such as manifests, diaries, and online forums (Meloy et al., 2014).

Future Research

Future research should emphasize:(a) validating identified unique, common, and consistent traits of school shooters, (b) linguistical analysis of threats and written literature from school shooters, (c) the role of violent fantasy amongst shooters in relation to planning and threats, and (d) and the relation of gun legislation and acquiring firearms before attacks.

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