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Strain and the School Shooter: A Theoretical Approach to the Offender's Perspective

Jessica Suzanne Palumbo
Eastern Kentucky University

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STRAIN AND THE SCHOOL SHOOTER: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE
OFFENDER'S PERSPECTIVE

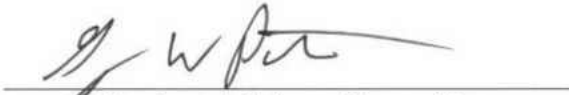
By

Jessica Suzanne Palumbo

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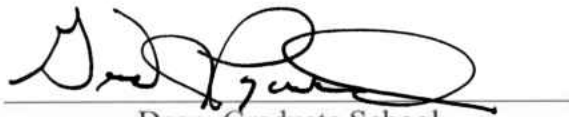
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Date 4-4-16

Strain and the School Shooter
A Theoretical Approach to the Offender's Perspective

By

Jessica Suzanne Palumbo

Bachelor of Science
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, Tennessee
2010

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
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ABSTRACT

To quote the renowned criminologist, Dr. Robert Agnew (1992, p. 69), “there are two major types of behavioral coping: those that seek to minimize or eliminate the source of strain and those that seek to satisfy the need for revenge.” In some cases, those who seek satisfaction for their vengeful feelings can become deadly when healthy means of coping fail; many have turned to violence upon their peers in pursuit of resolution. The inability to properly cope with strain might explain why some individuals commit seemingly inexplicable acts of mass violence such as school shootings.

Incidents such as Columbine have culturally defined the public idea of a school shooting, sometimes creating the image of dark and angry teenagers stalking the hallways of every high school in America, all the while plotting a heinous act of unspeakable violence against their peers. Once a safe environment for learning and enrichment for children, these seemingly random acts of violence deconstruct the sense of security associated with schools. In a society that suffers a pervasive fear of crime, school shootings significantly intensify that fear (Rocque, 2012). The current body of research regarding school shootings focuses more on the side effects of a media-induced moral panic and how they create a greater fear of random violence in an environment that is expected to be safe, rather than the conditions and *mens rea* that contribute to the offenders’ execution of a school shooting (Rocque, 2012). Applying general strain theory to school shooters might be an effective means of explaining potential contributing factors of a school shooting and paving the path for more effective prevention policies.

The purpose of this study is to apply general strain theory to the individual psychological mindsets of offenders who have committed school shootings in order to gain a better understanding of the circumstances and factors which potentially contribute to these heinous acts. Case studies provide the opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of the individual circumstances surrounding each offender and allow for the identification of both singular and cumulative sources of strain. This study will also discuss various sources of strain and demonstrate the effects these factors can have on an individual. Approaching the issue of school shootings from a perspective based on general strain theory supports the notion that school shootings are neither random nor illogical; in fact, the data in this study can be used to provide evidence contrary to the popular belief that school shootings are random and senseless crimes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To quote the renowned criminologist, Dr. Robert Agnew (1992, p. 69), “there are two major types of behavioral coping: those that seek to minimize or eliminate the source of strain and those that seek to satisfy the need for revenge.” In some cases, those who seek satisfaction for their vengeful feelings can become deadly when healthy means of coping fail; many have turned to violence upon their peers in pursuit of resolution. The inability to properly cope with strain might explain why some individuals commit seemingly inexplicable acts of mass violence such as school shootings.

The modern trend of school shootings reportedly began in the 1950s with the actions of a young college student in Pennsylvania who shot and killed a fellow student after several incidents of harassment perpetrated by residents of his dorm (Rea, 2007). This shooting and those that followed at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook, to name a few, resonate on the national level because they changed the way society views school safety. The emotional and physical trauma resulting from these events severely impact those wounded and victimization extends throughout an entire community, permanently scarring the social psyche.

Incidents such as Columbine have culturally defined the public idea of a school shooting, sometimes creating the image of dark and angry teenagers stalking the hallways of every high school in America, all the while plotting a heinous act of unspeakable violence against their peers. Once a safe environment for learning and enrichment for children, these seemingly random acts of violence deconstruct the sense of security

associated with schools. In a society that suffers a pervasive fear of crime, school shootings significantly intensify that fear (Rocque, 2012). The current body of research regarding school shootings focuses more on the side effects of a media-induced moral panic and how they create a greater fear of random violence in an environment that is expected to be safe, rather than the conditions and *mens rea* that contribute to the offenders' execution of a school shooting (Rocque, 2012). Applying general strain theory to school shooters might be an effective means of explaining potential contributing factors of a school shooting and paving the path for more effective prevention policies.

The purpose of this study is to apply general strain theory to the individual psychological mindsets of offenders who have committed school shootings in order to gain a better understanding of the circumstances and factors which potentially contribute to these heinous acts. Case studies provide the opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of the individual circumstances surrounding each offender and allow for the identification of both singular and cumulative sources of strain. This study will also discuss various sources of strain and demonstrate the effects these factors can have on an individual. Approaching the issue of school shootings from a perspective based on general strain theory supports the notion that school shootings are neither random nor illogical; in fact, the data in this study can be used to provide evidence contrary to the popular belief that school shootings are random and senseless crimes.

Sources of strain can be identified in every case examined by this study, a commonality not only shared among the population of school shooters, but the vast majority of the general public as well. However, not all people who experience strain express its effects in a violent manner; in fact, very few actually seek violence against

others. One of the main tenets of general strain theory suggests that it is the cumulative effects of strain, in addition to the individual's perspective, that drives behavior, whether good or bad. Additionally, the influences of a person's immediate social environment play a large role in governing one's behavior. The theory suggests that associations in the school setting may influence behaviors such as drug use, alcohol abuse, or truancy.

Historically, events such as mass murders have gained a large amount of media coverage; coverage which often uncovers a political message. The Oklahoma City Bombing, for example, was intended to deliver the message that the government's actions at Waco and Ruby Ridge were a gross abuse and misuse of governmental force and power (Clinton, 2010). Eric Rudolph's 1996 Olympic bombings in Atlanta, Georgia were also incidents of mass violence which were intended to deliver a political message. Rudolph wrote that the motivation for his actions was "because I believe that abortion is murder, I also believe that force is justified...in an attempt to stop it" (Gross, 2005, p. 9A). School shootings are unique in this regard because the "message" generally is not discernible; if an intended message even existed at all, that is. Therefore, a more in depth examination of the possible causes of school shootings is necessary. By gaining the perspective of these offenders, we can develop a sound theoretical foundation from which to analyze their otherwise inconceivable actions.

The way we define something shapes the way we approach the subject, both in language and litigation. Despite the fact that all murders share a common characteristic in terms of the end result being the loss of life, there are different classifications of both severity and varieties of murderers (Morton, 2008). It is important to distinguish between types of murderers, such as serial, spree, and mass murderers—all which have multiple

victims—because each typology has distinct social stigmas associated with its respective label. For example, serial killers are generally viewed as predators, whereas spree murders are commonly perceived as committing a random string of unrelated homicides (Morton, 2008). Contrary to the idea of a serial killer or spree killer, mass murders generally occur under very different circumstances with very different intended victims.

While there is no official legal definition of school shootings, commonly accepted definitions of mass murders can be used to shape a conceptual understanding of what constitutes a school shooting. One simplistic, yet viable, definition states that an incident can be labeled a mass murder “when an individual kills two or more people at once, rather than singly over time,” (Beirn & Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 283). Overly broad, this definition could be extended to situations that do not necessarily adhere to what is considered mass murder in popular culture. For example, if a person were to murder three victims in a car at a mall parking lot it would likely be labeled a triple homicide rather than a mass murder. The same can also be said of a man who shoots his wife, child, and himself in their home as this scenario would likely be considered an act of domestic violence, despite the fact that it could fall within the bounds of the above definition of a mass shooting. Similarly, the definition used by Levin and Madfis (2009), “a mass murder refers to the antisocial and non-state-sponsored killing of multiple victims during a single episode at one or more closely related locations” is both flawed and confusing. Not only does this interpretation make assumptions about the offenders’ personalities with the word “antisocial,” and places a stigma on persons diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, the term “state-sponsored killing” creates confusion as it is unclear

exactly what is meant by the phrase. Therefore, a more explicit definition is necessary to the conceptualization of not only mass murders, but school shootings in specific.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) classifies a mass murder as “a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident,” (Morton, 2008, p. 8). School shootings can, in turn, be viewed as a special type of mass murder due to the distinctive and exact locations of the incidents. Now referred to as active shooter events or incidents by the FBI, school shootings can be classified as a specific type of mass murder due to the fact that school shootings occur in a single incident, specific location, and for a fixed duration of time, and generally pose no threat to the general public outside of the centralized location. This distinction is necessary to conceptually separate mass murderers from serial murderers, which also include multiple victims, but are generally committed in varying locations over a longer span of time and separate incidents. To further this conceptual categorization, spree murderers claim multiple victims in a generalized location without a significant amount of time between acts (Morton, 2008). Despite the differences, three recurring elements can be identified for multiple-casualty murders: the number of victims, the duration, and the location(s) of the incident(s).

While the FBI’s definition of a mass murder is the most stringent in the spectrum of classification, it is often overshadowed by the multiple cultural conceptions of mass shootings. These conceptions, largely shaped by the media, can contribute to a social climate of fear in the sense that loose interpretations can skew the magnitude of a particular phenomenon. For example, the numbers of occurrences of school shootings

that have occurred in the year 2015 vary greatly from one media source to another. One source claims that there have been 53 school shootings from January – October 2015 (53 School shootings so far this year, 2015), while another claims that there have been 45 in the same time span (Gorman, 2015). Yet another website claims that there have been 142 school shootings since the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, a number that is just under four times the cumulative total number of school shootings which occurred in the thirteen years between 2000-2013 (Washington Times Staff, 2015; Blair & Schweit, 2014).

The differences in media reports can be attributed to the parameters, or definitions, of a school shooting. Many media sources operate under loose definitions, such as “a form of mass shooting involving a gun attack on an educational institution,” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2015) or “an occurrence in which an individual discharges a gun and that incident takes place at an education institution,” (Binder, 2014). These broad descriptions leave a wide gap in which individual interpretation can vary; society understands the general meaning of these loose definitions, but largely disagrees on the details. Conceptually, this phenomenon would be similar to stating that “a piece of furniture with four legs is a chair.” This statement fails to account for the fact that not all four-legged furniture pieces are chairs, such as tables, ottomans, and infant cribs. The above statement also neglects to disclose that there are multiple types of chairs, such as recliners, patio chairs, and gliding chairs. Similarly, the loose definitions of school shootings listed above do not include details such as the number of victims or duration of events. These details are essential in the classification of school shootings because they

not only qualify events as school shootings, but they also conceptually separate the types of mass murders previously discussed.

Once defined, legal policies can be developed and implemented for not only the crime, but the threats of crime. The legal separation between theft and robbery, for example, shows that although crimes may be grouped into similar categories, some demand stricter sentencing and punitive measures. Both theft and robbery involve the unlawful acquisition of materials that do not belong to an individual; however, robbery is treated as a more serious crime due to the fact that an individual takes possession of property directly from their victim whereas the victim is not present during a theft. The need for a refined legal definition of a mass shooting is abundant; with multiple victims, intent, and level of public harm and/or danger, mass shootings should be separated from the similar crimes of homicide and domestic terrorism. Concurrently, threatening to commit acts of mass violence should also be separated from the similar crime of terroristic threatening and conspiracy to commit murder.

The goal of this study is to attempt to answer the question of “does general strain theory provide a possible rationalization and/or motivation for the commission of school shootings?” With increasing media attention and resulting public concern in addition to an apparent increase in frequency of these events, the need to understand the individuals responsible for school shootings is more important than ever. It is often the nature of the “court of public opinion” to preemptively condemn wrongdoers with little to no evidence; lacking in compassion, the public need for an answer to why these crimes occur overrides the consideration of the circumstances which plague school shooters. Rather than focusing on the immediate events surrounding a school shooting, this study aims to

analyze the long term effects of adverse circumstances in the shooters' lives. Assembling case studies allows for the necessary and detailed examination of these adverse circumstances, essential to the application of general strain theory, which can be tracked up to several years prior to the shootings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Few studies have been conducted with specific focus on the possible mindsets of offenders responsible for mass shootings. Due to the deceased status of many of the offenders, it is difficult to speculate what might have been going through the minds of these seemingly average people in the moments when they were pulling the triggers. It is possible, however, to examine the knowledge base of the contributing factors to these events. Some of these factors may be associated with types of strain and/or the ability and types of coping measures used by individuals. Therefore, Agnew's (1992) general strain theory may be helpful in explaining the phenomena of mass shootings in addition to providing a filtered perspective which shows how the effects of strain drive behavior.

General Strain Theory

In the words of Joel Best (1999, p.15), a professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, "the fear of random violence means we no longer expect violence to be purposeful." Very few crimes are truly random, however. Nearly every offender has a motivation for his or her crimes just as nearly every individual has a specific reason for his or her legal actions. When this perspective is considered in the instance of a school shooting, it can be deduced that there is likely a specific reason for such a specific and violent crime. The work of Dr. Robert Agnew provides a solid theoretical framework for the hypothesis that strain is a significant motivational factor in the decision to commit a school shooting.

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory focuses specifically on different types of strain, coping with strain, and how exposure and coping mechanisms may lead to crime. To return to the quote used in the first sentence of the introduction, "there are two major types of behavioral coping: those that seek to minimize or eliminate the source of strain and those that seek to satisfy the need for revenge" (Agnew, 1992, p. 69). Additionally, "when adversity is blamed on others, it creates a desire for revenge that is distinct from the desire to end the adversity" (Agnew, 1992, p. 69). These perspectives are paramount to not only understanding the main components of general strain theory, but they are the key to the application of general strain theory to school shootings.

Youth are placed in a unique position in regards to strain; not only do the relationships themselves place significant strain on the individual, but the inability to escape these relationships also adds significant strain. The inability of youth to escape a situation which causes significant negative emotions (e.g., poor home life, bullying in school) may create more strain than an adult in a similar situation would face due to the fact that an adult has a greater ability to escape such situations without fear of punishment for truancy or running away (Agnew, 1992). As stated by Agnew's (1992) general strain theory:

Three major types of strain are described—each referring to a different type of negative relationship with others. Other individuals may (1) prevent one from achieving positively valued goals, (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli (p. 50).

In relation to the failure to achieve positively valued goals, strain can result via the individual's expectations of achievement versus his or her actual achievement, his or her aspirations or goals versus the reality of his or her achievement, and whether the actual results are considered as just or fair (Agnew, 1992). In other words, a point of view is not only unique to each individual when examining how the failure to achieve a positively valued goal causes strain, but the social interactions and influences of others, such as family members, can cause additional strain by also impacting the individual's ability to achieve a positively valued goal. Similarly, strain can result from the removal or threatened removal of positively valued stimuli by the tangible loss itself and/or the apprehension of a threatened loss through the attempted prevention, retrieval, and retaliation of/for the removed stimuli (Agnew, 1992). Lastly, the presence of noxious stimuli creates strain in instances where an individual first perceives stimuli as noxious, and then attempts to circumvent, assuage, or reciprocate the origin of the noxious stimuli (Agnew, 1992).

Agnew, in later years, furthered his theory by adding four main conditions of strain which were more likely to result in criminal behavior than other types of strain: "strains are most likely to result in crime when they (1) are seen as unjust, (2) are seen as high in magnitude, (3) are associated with low social control, and (4) create some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping" (Agnew, 2001, p. 326). It is important to note that the cumulative effects of strain imply that these strains affect one another and combine to have a significant *cumulative* impact on an individual (Agnew, 2001).

The multiple school shootings occurring in recent years, amplified by a significant moral panic, have sparked many debates about issues such as gun control and the treatment of persons with mental illnesses. A wealth of research on mass shootings, youthful offenders, violent gun crimes, and criminological theories exists, yet, it is difficult to find sources where two or more of these categories are discussed as correlating variables in a school shooting. Currently, there is limited academic literature concerning youthful offenders, particularly those who are responsible for school shootings. Therefore, more research is necessary to analyze the potential contributing factors in the events of offenders committing acts of mass murder within their schools. An exploratory, qualitative analysis of these offenders and their crimes using themes from Agnew's (1992) general strain theory may provide a potential explanation and theoretical framework as to why school shootings occur.

Strain as a contributing factor in school shootings

Serving as the main portal for the flow of information between its source and the public, the media has a highly influential role in determining how a societal body will react to different situations. As demonstrated by Young (2009), moral panics create an unnecessary and often inaccurate view of a targeted group. Moral panics are frequently used to provide a scapegoat for the failings of the dominant group, placing the blame for a certain problem on the target so as to distract the public from the true issue and provide a focus point for public outrage. Young (2009) also makes the point that moral panics amplify deviance by creating a hypothetical problem and proceeding to blame everything,

no matter how distantly relevant, on that problem. A frequent myth born through media sensationalism of a school shooting, for example, is that they are random acts of violence, usually caused entirely by the effects of a mental illness in the offender. Upon critical examination, however, these acts are rarely random. In fact, school shootings are usually premeditated and highly calculated, as was the case in the shooting at Columbine (Cullen, 2009; Gaffney, 2012). As demonstrated by Dave Cullen (2009) in “Columbine,” offenders Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold calculated every minute detail of their plan to both detonate bombs and fire guns upon their classmates for a long period of time, with some plans beginning years in advance of the attack. By providing a focal point for society’s fear of crime, moral panics result in the demonization of criminals and their subsequent exclusion from society.

Demonstrating the concept that school shootings are not random acts of violence, but rather calculated attacks, Lieutenant Dan Marcou (2008) introduces five identifiable phases of an active shooter event to the Public Agency Training Council. In the first stage, commonly referred to as the fantasy stage, the individual considering a school shooting will show signs of being preoccupied with mass violence. Individuals in this stage will often express their violent ideation in venues such as artwork, writing, and social media (Marcou, 2008). The individual will then progress to the planning stage, where the details of the event are decided upon. These details include things such as the location, intended victims, and the necessary supplies and the best ways to obtain them. Once a plan is established, the preparation stage occurs when the individual seeks measures to physically acquire the materials necessary for the execution of the plan established in the previous stage. In the event that the individual is a juvenile, firearms

and ammunition are primarily obtained via means of theft; if the individual is of age, however, firearms and ammunition are often legally purchased (NJROIC, 2012). Next, during the approach stage, the individual arms himself/herself and proceeds to follow the method of transportation to the location that was decided upon in the planning stage. Finally, Marcou (2008) describes the implementation stage. In this final stage of a school shooting, the individual becomes an active shooter and brings the ideas, plans, and preparations of previous stages to fruition through physical action.

Many myths concerning how to identify the “warning signs” in an individual before he or she even commits the crime can be found by the dozens in a simple internet search. Myths such as “they want revenge on people who bullied them,” “they do not have many friends,” “they are suffering from a mental illness,” “they have easy access to weapons,” and “they come from broken homes,” among many others, reflect the common misconceptions about school shootings that are echoed and perpetuated by the media (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2001; O’Toole, 2008). In reality, the information that the media reports is generally inaccurate, incomplete, and based largely on hearsay (O’Toole, 2008). While insistent that a “profile” of school shooters does not exist and should not due to the likelihood of discrimination and bias, the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) and National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) have assembled an after-the-fact threat assessment to provide a compilation of potential characteristics that could indicate the probability of a school shooting *only* after a threat has been made (O’Toole, 2008). Composed of four general categories, each with a number of factors and personality traits, the model for threat assessment used by the FBI

provides a valuable insight into the mindset of these offenders, particularly when considered in close conjunction with the fundamentals of Agnew's general strain theory.

The first category of risk assessment as outlined by O'Toole (2008) is personality traits and behavior. Encompassing a wide variety of factors such as leakage (information a potential offender "lets slip"), low tolerance for frustration, poor coping skills, depression, narcissism, alienation, lack of empathy, sense of entitlement, externalization of blame, inappropriate expressions of anger (tantrums, outbursts, etc.), and many others may indicate a personality with a disposition to seek violent means to absolve perceived issues. Each of these characteristics could result in a significant source of strain in combination with other factors and the individual's perception of a certain event. For example, a low tolerance for frustration combined with a sense of entitlement in a situation in which an individual is repeatedly denied a status they desire, such as a member of the school's honor roll, strain could manifest. This would be an example of general strain theory's "...actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals," (Agnew, 1992, p. 47). If the above individual's strain were to be exacerbated by another personality trait, such as the tendency to externalize blame, it is a palpable belief that certain personality types and behaviors can combine to create a cumulative strain which significantly influences an individual's decisions. In instances involving bullying, characteristics such as narcissism and poor coping skills could lead to inappropriate expressions of anger via the strain produced by the individual being treated in a way he/she feels they do not deserve.

The second category discussed in O'Toole's (2008) risk assessment involves the interpersonal relations of the offender's family. Elements such as a lack of parental

boundaries, little or nonexistent discipline and/or supervision, weak intimate bonds, and failure to address concerning behavior can significantly influence the mindset of a youth and contribute to the development of the troubling personality traits and behaviors described above. As Agnew (1992) explains, youth are in a unique social position which can result in a significant amount of strain upon the individual, due to the fact that they are not always able to escape the noxious stimuli presented by a poor family environment; assuming that the offender perceives his/her family environment as a negative environment. As the risk assessment suggests, some offenders may find that an antipathetic family environment enables the development of a plan to conduct a school shooting and other delinquent activities (O'Toole, 2008). Following the concept that an offender is satisfied with his/her family environment and is, therefore, not subject to the strain mentioned by Agnew, the role of family dynamics can significantly impact the offender's behavior in the sense that it becomes easier to execute plans of a school shooting due to a relatively low risk of apprehension and discipline. However, in the event that the offender does hold positive family life in a position of high regard and it does not meet expectations, according to Agnew (1992), significant amounts of strain result and are particularly stressful to more youthful offenders than to more mature offenders in similar situations.

The third major factor discussed in the FBI's threat assessment is school dynamics. It is essential, O'Toole (2008) argues, to have an intimate knowledge of the specific environment the youth traverse on a daily basis. Information such as the school's disciplinary practices, curriculum, population diversity, use of class ranking systems, and policies for handling student conflicts are all necessary elements for the

evaluation of a school's institutional culture, which can have a profound impact upon its students. For example, in a school that places high value on above average test scores, students who are successful are likely to have positive associations with their teachers and peers, an attachment with their school, and, in the case of class ranking systems, easily identify how they compare to their peers. A student whose test scores are below average, however, is likely to experience strain, according to general strain theory, in the failure to achieve the positively valued goal, instilled by his or her school's culture, of achieving above average test scores. Strain could also result if the school in this example uses disciplinary practices such as study hall by either removing positively valued stimuli (whatever activity study hall replaces) or the presentation of noxious stimuli (study hall itself), or both, depending upon the student's perception.

As another example, a school's policies on student conflict, particularly incidents of bullying, can contribute significantly to the risk of a school shooting (O'Toole, 2008). Mishandling and/or ignoring the presence of bullying in a school environment cultivate strain in not only the victims themselves, but bystanders as well. Bullying victims are subject to strain via the potential for all three major types of strain identified by Agnew (1992). Institutional policies that do little to deter bullying among students are also a unique source of strain under general strain theory due to the *perceived threat* bystanders encounter. As Agnew (1992, p. 50) states: "Other individuals may (1) prevent one from achieving positively valued goals, (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli." While witnesses to incidents of bullying may not suffer direct physical harm, such as the case with the bullying victim, strain still results via the

perceived threats mentioned above. A school that fails to address bullying not only fails to alleviate the strain at the individual level, but at the group and population levels as well.

Last to be examined by O'Toole (2008), social dynamics heavily influence the perspective and outlook of an individual; a factor which is particularly important when the individual is youthful. As a reflection of their social environments, youth can be significantly impacted by several elements, including their peers, television, books, movies, and video games. When compiling a risk assessment, it is necessary that the social life of the student in question be examined in great detail for peer or media sources that could indicate a positive association with violent ideation (O'Toole, 2008). For example, if academic success and moral conduct are viewed as positively valued goals to an individual whose immediate peer group and various pop culture influences conflict with the attainment of those goals, then, per general strain theory, strain could result through both the failure to achieve a positively valued goal and the presentation of noxious stimuli (Agnew, 1992).

Social Climate

Perhaps a source of strain unique today's society, there is a significant struggle to establish an individual identity in a rapidly changing and unsure social environment. It can be hypothesized that the lack of security in school, work, home, and social life can lead to a diminished sense of self and confidence due to the fact that people are a product of the material conditions in which we live; making a youth especially susceptible and easily impacted by bullying. When youth lack adequate and healthy coping mechanisms

to deal with the world around them, strain can intensify and manifest in ways unique to the current social climate. For example, Dr. Peter Gray (2015) discusses the recent increase in crisis calls to counseling centers at universities across the nation for “problems of everyday life.” Gray (2015) describes incidents such as two students who summoned the police, and subsequently sought counseling, due to the presence of a mouse in their apartment and a student who reportedly felt traumatized because her roommate had called her an offensive name. As another example of the lack of pliancy in today’s youth, the Yale “crybullies” have garnered national attention for their outrage over the university’s failure to ban potentially offensive Halloween costumes from the campus (Kimball, 2015). According to media reports, several students at Yale’s Silliman College rallied, became verbally abusive, cried, and demanded the resignation of the university’s president over the issue because of his failure to create a homey, comforting environment in which they felt safe (Kimball, 2015).

Due to the lack of coping skills created by what Gray (2015) refers to as a “helicopter society,” parents and school administrators alike are forced to tread delicately around the fragile emotional states of their charges. Our “helicopter society” limits youths’ abilities to learn and grow independently, away from the presence of authority figures; yet, when the newest dangers and violence are reported every day, it is difficult for many parents to let their children wander far from their protection. As a result, “students haven’t developed skills in how to soothe themselves because their parents have solved all their problems and removed the obstacles,” as stated by the former president of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (Gray, 2015). Without coping mechanisms, youth are unprepared for life outside of the

safety and comfort of their homes; school administrators are also unprepared for groups of adults who do not know how to be adults. Many teachers and professors have reported fears of assigning too much homework or issuing low grades and have had to handle the emotional breakdowns of students who refuse to accept that their work was poor quality, placing the blame of failure upon their teachers (Gray, 2015).

As Young (2007) demonstrates in “The Vertigo of Late Modernity,” society has become technologically absorbed to the extent that the social realm has become so dependent on the online world that physical interactions have become a foreign concept to today’s youth. This creates a similar uncertainty and fear to that of moral panics in the sense that the media is teaching people to fear other people. With the degradation of traditional social institutions, such as family and school, youth have not only lost the stability of identity provided by these traditional sources, but their ability to develop identity through traditional means. Therefore, we are raising a generation that has been influenced and cultivated by the media’s socially exclusive tactics, which has taught them who they should be, how they should act, and who should be included or excluded based on highly materialistic ideals (Young, 2007). These materialistic ideas are largely engraved upon our culture via aggressive advertising. Combined with the fact that most jobs are now short term, low paying positions, strain can be significant in the form of failure to achieve a positively valued goal. In the instance that a certain item is heavily advertised and viewed as a “status symbol,” individuals who assign positive value to that item, but are unable to afford it, may experience strain of varying levels, depending on the magnitude of the assigned positive value.

In keeping with Agnew's theory, social exclusion, as an indirect form of bullying, can affect a number of realms within an individual resulting in emotional and psychological strains which heavily impact that individual's social behavior. Additionally, direct forms of bullying can have an equally harmful effects and increase strain within a youthful individual (Bannink et al., 2014). There are four types of bullying, as identified by Bannink et al. (2014, p.1), which play a significant role in the development of negative emotions and mental disorders in youthful victims and help create a volatile social atmosphere in many of the nation's schools: "physical (e.g., assault), verbal (e.g. threats), relational (e.g. social exclusion), and indirect (e.g. spreading rumors)." With the advent of social media, certain types of bullying have become more prevalent. Verbal, relational, and indirect bullying are far more common forms of bullying due to the ability of the bully to maintain anonymity; from behind a keyboard, the bully may or may not be identified and, therefore, may or may not be apprehended. The cyber world allows bullying behaviors to flourish with no regulation and little risk of punishment.

One noteworthy conclusion of Bannink and colleagues' (2014) study is that there is a strong correlation between the contribution of bullying to mental health problems and gender. However, contrary to the expectation that bullying affects males and females similarly, it was found that both traditional and cyber bullying were not significant factors in the development of mental illness in males, whereas females displayed a strong relationship between bullying and mental illness (Bannink et al, 2014). Furthermore, a study conducted by Schnieder, O'Donnell, Stueve, and Coulter (2012) demonstrates that the prevalence and venue of bullying differ by gender; whereas reports of cyber bullying

among females were much higher than males, the occurrence of traditional bullying was reported around the same level for both genders and victimization reports of all forms of bullying decreased as the subjects progressed in grade level.

The implications of studies such as these serve to debunk the common media myth that school shooters suffer some form of mental illness that causes a sudden “snap” or mental break, which drives them to the commission of acts of mass violence in their school. While the media myth does support the belief that these acts are random, the work of Joel Best and several others demonstrate that few crimes are truly random; for the most part, offenders have a very specific mindset and a number of contributing factors and justifications for their actions. Again, Agnew’s general strain theory provides a more substantial foundation for understanding the actions of youthful offenders. In his own words, Agnew states that “Strain theory...is distinguished by its focus on negative relationships with others and its insistence that such relationships lead to delinquency through the negative affect-especially anger- they sometimes engender,” an essential concept which elevates strain theory over other socially based deviance theories (Agnew, 1992, p.49). This statement is supported by the examination of active shooter typologies described by Dr. Peter Langman (2010).

In his 2010 article, Dr. Peter Langman proposes that there are differences among school shooters themselves. By demonstrating that social influences such as bullying and poor familial relationships are frequently observed in the lives of many youth while the occurrence of a school shooting is uncommon, Langman highlights many of the same perspectives found in general strain theory. The concept that an individual’s perspective is essential to understanding their behavior, for example, is a key tenet of both general

strain theory and Langman's work. Utilizing case studies, Langman proposes that there are three distinct typologies of school shooters: traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic (Langman, 2010). It is important to note, for the purposes of this study, that an individual's background and behaviors which are identified in Langman's (2010) typologies are not sufficient enough evidence to declare an individual traumatized, psychotic, or psychopathic. Rather, by using these typologies, a conceptual classification system allows for a deeper understanding of these individuals from a psychological point of view. Langman (2010) also cites a risk assessment conducted by the FBI; a resource which has been previously discussed in this study¹. In the risk assessment, emotions of anger and sadness in addition to behavioral problems and social maladaptation were common elements identified to increase an individual's risk for the commission of a school shooting (O'Toole, 2008). These risk factors, as O'Toole states, should not be taken as absolute characteristics of school shooters; however, they are frequently discovered among individuals who have already committed a school shooting in a post-event threat assessment.

In line with O'Toole's assessment, Langman (2010) assembles and analyzes case studies on individuals who have committed school shootings in previous years. The most common type of shooter Langman's study identifies is the psychotic shooter; five out of Langman's ten case studies fell within the parameters of the psychotic-type shooter. Next most common according to Langman (2010) is the traumatized shooter, who is likely to

¹ For more information, see O'Toole, M. (2008). *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*. Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI Academy: Quantico, Virginia.

experience all three forms of abuse identified in his study: physical, sexual, and parental substance abuse. In fact, two out of the three traumatized shooters selected for a case study had suffered all three forms of abuse with only one subject experiencing two forms of the aforementioned abuse. Three out of ten case studies were reported to have been the traumatized-type shooter. With only two out of ten studies classified in the least common group, the psychopathic-type shooter appears to possess characteristics of certain personality and/or mood disorders. Interestingly, both shooters in this category possessed all three of the characteristics identified by Langman: narcissism, lack of empathy, and sadism.

If Langman's (2010) typologies are examined with the elements of general strain theory in mind, strain can be identified in all three typologies. According to Langman (2010), the traumatized school shooter was likely to have been emotionally neglected and abused in many forms. Not only could the abuse itself result in multiple strains, but emotional neglect could turn this type of shooter towards "people-pleasing" behaviors in an attempt to achieve the positively valued goal of having friends, making his/her parents happy, or reducing the risk of further harm. Following Dr. Langman's (2010) claim that the traumatized school shooter is often coaxed or pressured into committing the act by friends, noxious relationships in the shooter's immediate social environment play a large role in the behavior of this type of school shooter. Langman (2010) also states that the psychotic-type school shooter is often plagued by intense fear and paranoia, common side effects of untreated mental illness. The behaviors of these shooters followed a logical path based upon an initial irrational perspective.

Langman's (2010) case study of Michael Carneal revealed that he was under the impression that "demons were going to hurt him and/or his family" and that he often refused to sleep in his own bed in favor of the living room couch and occasionally "smuggled kitchen knives into his bedroom for protection," (p. 4). Strain can be identified in Carneal's individual perception as the threat of the removal of positively valued stimuli, presenting as the demons that were going to hurt him and/or his loved ones. Under this perspective, Carneal's actions are rational; the strain of anxiety and fear caused by the perceived threat of losing positively valued stimuli resulted in actions designed to prevent that loss, such as hiding knives in his bedroom.

Lastly, the psychopathic-type shooter described by Langman (2010) is also likely to suffer from a mental illness or personality disorder. Unlike psychotic-type shooters, however, the psychopathic-type is more likely to experience feelings of intense anger and/or aggression in addition to lacking the ability or desire to control them. As stated earlier, Agnew claims the strength of general strain theory in the effects of noxious relationships due to "its insistence that such relationships lead to delinquency through the negative affect-especially anger- they sometimes engender," (Agnew, 1992, p. 49). Based on Langman's (2010) case studies, the psychopathic-type shooter generally has an entitled and grandiose self-perception, which generally leads to inappropriately skewed levels of anger and aggression when the shooter feels that their position has been challenged. Andrew Golden, for example, was reportedly severely angered by being subject to a conversation with a teacher who was attempting to discipline him. Golden's parents, or immediate social environment, had him moved to a different class after the incident (Langman, 2010); an action which supported Golden's grandiose and entitled

perception. As defined by Agnew's general strain theory, strain is "relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated," (Agnew, 1992); when that individual's perception is that he or she should be valued above others, as in the case of Andrew Golden, strain drives logical and rational behaviors toward achieving the positively valued goal of being revered within the individual's immediate social environment.

Based on the work of Kalish and Kimmel (2010), masculinity and power may also be significant sources of strain on offenders who commit acts of mass murder which culminate in suicide. Kalish and Kimmel (2010) demonstrate that the "typical" assailant in school shootings has changed since 1982, with most offenders being young, Caucasian, and located in the suburbs and rural communities of a certain area (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). The authors demonstrate that, historically, offenders in cases of mass murder are usually male and attribute a self-sense of masculinity to the likelihood of an individual resorting to a school shooting; oftentimes, the offenders are bullied or treated poorly in school, which is perceived as an insult or threat to their masculinity (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010).

By applying Agnew's general strain theory to Kalish and Kimmel's (2010) article, it can be inferred that threats to a youthful male's masculinity are more likely to invoke anger than threats against a female's femininity (with females being more likely to feel depression and self-loathing rather than anger towards others), and threats to masculinity are a significant source of strain in a youthful male (Agnew, 1992; Kalish &

Kimmel, 2010). The strain of threats to masculinity is especially significant in young males due to the fact that “adolescence is the time for them to prove themselves to be men..., and should they falter, they are often thought to be homosexual. The taunt of calling a young man gay is thought to be the worst insult a young man can face” (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010, p. 458).

Recurrent themes of strength and power have been associated with masculinity and have been named as the cause of conflicts among mankind for thousands of years, even dating as far back as ancient Roman civilizations and earlier (Mayordomo, 2011). As demonstrated in their book, Pogrebin, Stretesky and Unnithan’s (2009) interviews with violent gun offenders yielded results that suggest that firearms are perceived as a tool of power and are often used to achieve subordination and status from other people. In fact, the offenders who were interviewed for the book proposed that the threat associated with a firearm keeps victims from getting hurt and the victims, if they respond properly, comply with the offender’s wishes and, therefore, are not harmed (Pogrebin et al., 2009). When considered in the context of a youthful offender in a mass shooting, it is reasonably logical to draw connections between the strain of having one’s masculinity threatened, the use of a firearm to establish a position of power over others, and the need to dispel the resulting anger upon those who caused it (schoolmates).

In the time since Agnew’s (1992) work, many others have attempted to qualify even more types of strain under the basis of the general strain theory. One example of

this is found in the work of Stogner and Gibson (2010), who propose that “those who suffer frequently from minor health problems and lack resources to afford proper medical care are expected to experience elevated levels of health-related strain, negative emotional affect, and report engaging in more delinquent acts” (p. 1150-1159).

Additionally, Matthews (2011) adds that self-complexity is another significant factor of strain in an individual. Matthews (2011) defines self-complexity as “the number of self-aspects a person finds meaningful or important to them as well as the degree of overlap in how the individual views himself or herself within these aspects;” (p. 863-902) and demonstrates that an individual who has low value in themselves, such as often occurs in a victim of bullying or poor home life, has a higher level of strain and is, therefore, more likely to resort to deviance as a result of strain. Perhaps key to understanding an offender’s response to strain is how the offender *perceives* that strain, a concept which also lies at the heart of Blumer’s theory of Social Interactionism.

Originating from the work of George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, Herbert Blumer is credited with developing the term “symbolic interactionism,” a phrase used to describe the phenomenon of meaningful interactions between human groups in social settings and the effects of these interactions on individual behavior (Blumer, 1969; Blumer, 1980). Not to be confused with Mead’s theory of social behaviorism, in which the mind and the self-develop and govern behavior via social control, Blumer (1980) proposes that meaningful social interactions are key to the development of an individual’s self-identity and that how that meaningful interaction is perceived determines behavior (Baldwin, 1985). Individual perception of meaningful social interaction is an essential

tenet of Agnew's (1992) general strain theory as well. The way a youth perceives his or her family dynamics, for example, plays a significant role in whether or not the family is or is not a significant source of strain. Similarly, interactions with authority figures, such as teachers and administrators, could impact an individual's behavior for better or worse depending upon the value (positive or negative) to which the individual assigns each interaction. To borrow from both Blumer (1969) and Agnew (1992), if the individual values positive interactions within a family unit that presents as a noxious relationship, not only is the individual likely to experience all three of the major types of strain outlined by general strain theory, but, according to both theories, the individual is likely to respond to negative stimuli in a negative manner.

Lin & Mieczkowski (2011) measure stressful life events in the past 12 months at the ordinal level through a list of events in which subjects responded yes or no, assigning one for yes and 0 for no with a higher score indicating the more severe the level of strain. Parental strain is also measured at the ordinal level using a Likert scale to judge the subjects' feelings of neglect and/or rejection from their parents through statements such as (1) "My parents think I am a bad kid," (2) "My parents are unfair to me," (3) "My parents demand too much," (4) "My parents do not understand me," and "My parents do not respect my opinion," with possible response categories between never (1) and often (4) (Lin & Mieczkowski, 2011). The strain resulting from subjects' beliefs about their teachers were measured at the same level using similar questions and response categories as the measure of parental strain. Victimization, measured at the ordinal level, is gauged through a Likert scale of four statements: (1) "Being beaten up by other students," (2) "Being blackmailed by other students," (3) "Someone steals your personal items/money,"

and (4) “Someone robs you,” with the possible response categories ranging between never and often, as with the parental strain measure (Lin & Mieczkowski, 2011).

Subjective strain is measured by first dividing subjects into two categories, low/moderate strain and high strain, and then using the sum of each subjects’ response to each objective strain to obtain a quantitative measure of strain for each individual subject (Lin & Mieczkowski, 2011). The spurious variable of mental illness is accounted for through means of self-report, review of case reports, court documents, and interviews with family and/or friends of each subject.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Question

Through the concepts introduced in the literature review, there is a clear need to explore factors that contribute to school shootings. The purpose of this study is to address the research question, “does general strain theory provide a possible rationalization and/or motivation for the commission of school shootings?” Many theories and studies are devoted to analyzing youthful offenders, mass murder, and multiple theoretical causes; however, most fail to associate each concept and potential cause to one another. Through close application of Agnew’s general strain theory, it can be hypothesized that strain plays an important role in the execution of a plan to commit a school shooting.

Strain is operationalized as “relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated,” with objective strains referring to “events or conditions that are disliked by most members of a given group,” and subjective strain being the “events or conditions that are disliked by the people who are experiencing (or have experienced) them,” (Agnew, 2001, p. 320-321). Using the composite measure assembled by Lin & Mieczkowski (2011), objective strains such as a stressful life event, parental strain, teacher strain, and victimization are less influential than subjective strains on deviant behavior, yet are also important to study in order to understand the cumulative effects of strain. Lin & Mieczkowski’s (2011)

operationalization of strain and the psychosocial concepts introduced in their study can be used to retrospectively identify similar characteristics in deceased subjects.

Procedure

Case studies of offenders allow for in-depth examination of the shooters' life circumstances and identification of multiple sources of strain. In their 2014 report, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, the Federal Bureau of Investigations assembles cumulative, quantitative data on all incidents of mass shootings in the US between 2000-2013; data which include details such as locations, casualties, law enforcement response, survival/death of shooters, and gender of the shooters (Blair & Schweit, 2014). These incidents fell within the parameters of the previously discussed definition of a mass murder and are evaluated on a multi-faceted level.

By utilizing Appendix A of the FBI's report, a list of 39 school shootings was assembled from the comprehensive, color-coded list of all 160 active shooter events included in the study (Blair & Schweit, 2014). From this pool of active shooter events that have occurred at educational institutions, two cases can be excluded due to the fact that they were not incidents in which a student sought violence upon his or her peers. These cases were excluded due to the intended targets of the shootings; rather than the peer-on-peer violence that is being examined by this study, the two excluded shootings were directed towards non-students and were motivated more by interpersonal disputes than the cumulative effects of strain. A purposive sample of ten case studies, drawn from the remaining thirty seven incidents described in the FBI's report provide a sufficient

representation of the population (shooting incidents) for qualitative analysis and the application of Agnew's general strain theory. All statistics in this section, however, are calculated based on data from all thirty seven cases rather than the selection of case studies due to the limited size of the population.

In the selection of case studies from the assembled list, it was important to include as wide of a variety as possible, therefore, a variation of shooter ages, locations, and public interest are selected. Due to the predominantly male population of shooters, it was especially important to include a case study involving a female shooter in order to demonstrate the applicability of general strain theory. Of the six female mass shooters identified by the FBI, only two occurred in educational environments, with one shooting being excluded from the list of thirty seven shootings; this shooting occurred during a department meeting and was not perpetrated by a student expressing violence towards his/her peers. The selection of cases consisted of organizing the school shooting events from appendix A of *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013* chronologically (Blair & Schweit, 2014). The sample of case studies was then selected in a manner in which the broadest variety of variables were represented, such as age of the shooter, year of shooting, geographical location, and gender of the shooter.

After selecting ten case studies for further analysis, media reports were used to gather more specific information on each individual shooter. Variables such as family dynamics, social atmosphere, personal relationships, mental status, and drug usage gathered from multiple media sources provide qualitative data. Due to the subjective nature of general strain theory, qualitative data is essential for application of the theory.

List of Case Study Subjects

- Charles Andrew Williams, Jr., age 15. Santana High School, 2001.
- Peter Odighizuwa, age 43. Appalachian School of Law, 2002.
- James Sheets, age 14. Red Lion Junior High School, 2003.
- Christopher Williams, age 26. Essex Elementary School, 2006.
- Seung Hui Cho, age 23. Virginia Polytechnical Institute, 2007.
- Latina Williams, age 23. Louisiana Technical College, 2008.
- Mark Stephen Foster, age 48. Inskip Elementary School, 2010.
- Robert L. Butler, Jr., age 17. Millard South High School, 2011.
- Adam Lanza, age 20. Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012.
- Thomas Michael Lane, III, age 17. Chardon High School, 2012.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Summary of all Incidents Listed 2000-2013

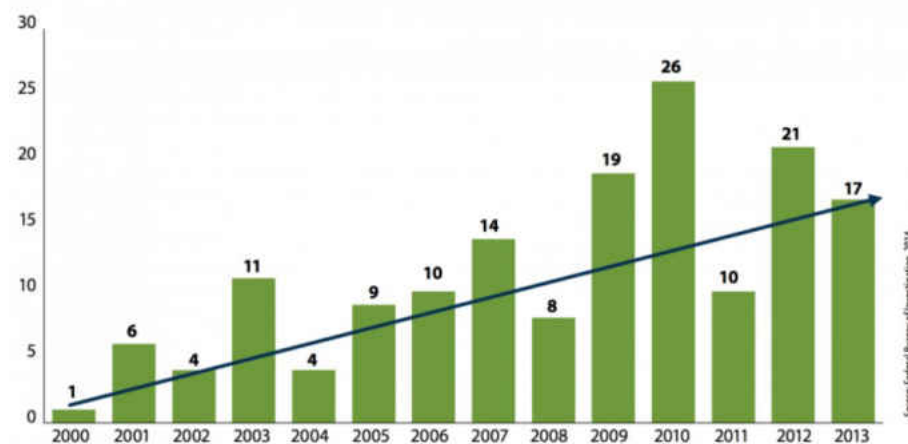
An analysis of the shooters' ages yields a mean age of 24, with a median age of 18 years old. Between the years of 2000 and 2013, 37 shootings occurred with the year 2006 having the highest number of shootings (six total incidents); the years of 2010, 2012, and 2013 reported the second highest number of shootings, with five incidents occurring in each year. Three incidents occurred in 2003 and the years of 2001, 2005, and 2007-2009 each had two shootings per year. Finally, the years of 2002, 2004, and 2011 had a single shooting per year. With more than half of the incidents occurring post-2007, the data indicate a slight increase in school shootings between 2000 and 2013. This upward trend of school shootings is consistent with the FBI's analysis of all active shooter events, which is demonstrated in the 2014 report on 160 mass shootings. Of the four deadliest mass shooting incidents identified by the study, two were school shootings: Virginia Tech, in which 32 were killed in 2007 and 17 were wounded and Sandy Hook, in which 27 were killed and two were wounded in 2012 (Blair & Schweit, 2014).

As Table 1 (below) demonstrates, there has been a positive trend in the number of active shooter events between the years of 2000 and 2013 with a peak in the year 2010, in which 26 active shooter events encompassed by the study occurred, and an average of 11 incidents per year overall. It is important to note, however, that the average number of active shooter events in the first seven years increases from six to 16 in comparison to the second seven years when examined concurrently, rather than consecutively. During

these 160 events, there were 486 fatalities and 557 victims wounded overall, excluding the shooters. In regards to the offenders, all but two incidents involved a single shooter and only six offenders were female. In the following section, each case study will be summarized with specific attention devoted to the identifiable sources of strain outlined in general strain theory in addition to a loose classification of shooter typology.

Table 1

**A Study of 160 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 - 2013:
Incidents Annually**



Source: Blair, J.P. & Schweit, K.W. (2014). A study of active shooter incidents, 2000-20013. Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2014.

CHAPTER V

CASE STUDIES

#1 Charles Andrew Williams, Jr., age 15. Santana High School, 2001.

At age 15, Charles Andrew Williams Jr. killed two people and wounded thirteen others at his high school, beginning in a bathroom and progressing out into a hallway. At age three, Williams' parents divorced; however, he was described as being well behaved, good natured, and under the care of a loving father at their home in Maryland. Upon moving to Santee, CA, Williams reported that he was bullied and his academic performance declined sharply. Williams was allowed to spend a summer in Maryland with his friends where he became involved in drugs. He was also a victim of sexual abuse via his mother's boyfriend. Williams spoke of his plan to commit a shooting at his school, yet his friends did not believe he was serious and frequently harassed him via insults and peer pressure (Dickey, 2013).

All main tenets of general strain theory are identifiable in this case. The presence of noxious stimuli are found in Williams' friends introducing him to drugs, bullying in Santee, and pressure to follow through on his thoughts of committing a school shooting. After divorcing his father when Williams was 3 years old, his mother and step-brother moved away. Williams would seldom see either of them. The divorce itself could provide a source of strain depending on the conduct of Williams' parents; if the separation was not amicable, the environment in which Williams lived could have possessed multiple noxious stimuli such as yelling, arguing, and violence. Also presenting as noxious stimuli, the strain caused by the sexual abuse Williams suffered at the hands of his

mother's boyfriend years later could have had a role in Williams' motive to commit a school shooting. In an interview with Williams from prison in 2013, journalist Fred Dickey asked Williams how the sexual abuse played a role in the shooting. Williams responded "when something like that happens to you, if you're not willing to stop that, then you'll just roll over for anything," suggesting that Williams felt that he should have done something to end the abuse. Declining schoolwork and the desire to belong to a Christian social group despite the contrast with his then-current social group can result in strain in the form of failure to achieve the positively valued goals of having good grades and becoming a member of a desired social group. The loss of his mother and step-brother could also cause strain as a result of the removal of positively valued stimuli. Williams would qualify as a traumatized-type shooter under Langman's (2010) typology; the multiple occurrences of one source of strain and trauma throughout his life could result in a significantly detrimental cumulative effect.

#2 Peter Odighizuwa, age 43. Appalachian School of Law, 2002.²

The day before Peter Odighizuwa entered Appalachian School of Law and killed three and wounding an additional three, Odighizuwa had a meeting with the dean who informed him that he was being dismissed from the college for his failing grades. Odighizuwa had previously been dismissed for his poor academic performance and had experienced difficulty bettering his grades for over a year prior to the shooting. It has been reported that the school had been aware of Odighizuwa's potential danger to others; however, it is not clear whether his diagnosis as a paranoid schizophrenic was disclosed

² The shooter's name is recorded in the FBI's "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013" as Peter Odighizuma. However, it was discovered through research that the shooter's name is actually Peter Odighizuwa.

to school officials. Described by some as reserved and introverted, some students report that Odighizuwa frequently became combative when challenged by others in the classroom (Kahn, 2004; CBSNEWS.COM Staff, 2002).

Perhaps the most overt source of strain, Odighizuwa's dismissal from Appalachian School of Law on the night preceding the event could result in strain in the form of both the removal of a positively valued stimuli and the failure to achieve a positively valued goal if, in his individual perception, he attached a positive value to his education. The actual dismissal from the school could also be interpreted as a noxious stimulus as Odighizuwa was quoted as repeating "I have nowhere to go," (CBSNEWS.COM Staff, 2002). If Odighizuwa believed he had no place to go, the dismissal would have had a significant negative impact upon his life. Using Langman's (2010) typology, the presence of paranoid and schizophrenic tendencies classifies Odighizuwa as a psychotic-type shooter. If the thought of having nowhere to go is viewed as one drawn from his reported mental illness, strain could potentially motivate actions to prevent his dismissal from the school by eliminating the person who informed him that he would no longer be eligible to continue his education. This is supported by the fact that the dean of the school was among the deceased victims, in addition to a professor and another student.

#3 James Sheets, age 14. Red Lion Junior High School, 2003.

James Sheets, age 14, armed himself with 700 rounds of ammunition prior to the shooting event; however, the only two fatalities of the incident were the principal and himself. Sheets was reported to have been experiencing depression, meeting with a

school counselor, and had been the subject of a home-visit from the local children's services agency. Sheets was also described as an introvert (Landauer, 2012a). Sheets was visibly upset and angered by a recent break up with his girlfriend. His biological father was absent from his life. He had also run into some minor trouble, but was generally well behaved. Mixed opinions of Sheets from his peers suggest that he had difficulty fitting in (Landauer, 2012b).

Two of general strain theory's main sources of strain can be identified in the case study of James Sheets. First, sheets experienced a depression which made him feel as though he had dissatisfied the expectations of those in his immediate social environment (Landauer, 2012a). By assigning positive value to the expectations of others, strain could be caused by Sheets' perceived failure to achieve the positively valued goal of pleasing the people he valued. Second, the removal of a positively valued stimulus could have introduced strain through means of losing his girlfriend. The cumulative effects of feeling inadequately successful, feelings of social exclusion, and the loss of a positively valued relationship could have played a significant role in Sheets' commission of a school shooting. Despite the presence of depression, Sheets can be classified as a traumatized-type shooter due to the impacts of his absent biological father, the undisclosed reasons for his meetings with a school counselor, and the home visit from the children's services agency.

#4 Christopher Williams, age 26. Essex Elementary School, 2006.

The night of August 23rd, 2006, the girlfriend of Christopher Williams ended their relationship, seeking an order of protection against Williams, indicating the presence of

violence or the threat thereof. In the early afternoon hours of August 24th, Williams traveled to the home of his former girlfriend's mother, Linda Stewart Lambesis, where he shot and killed her. He then proceeded to travel to Essex Elementary, where his ex-girlfriend, Andrea Lambesis, was a teacher. School was not in session, minimizing the number of potential victims, however, Williams killed a total of two people and injured an additional two. While he did not encounter Andrea, another teacher and Linda Lambesis were among the dead and a second teacher along with a person present at a friend's home where Williams fled after the shooting were wounded. Williams attempted suicide by shooting himself twice, but was not fatally injured and taken into police custody (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Perron, Darren, 2010).

While this appears as a domestic issue gone awry, general strain theory can be used to rationalize Williams' actions. The break-up with his girlfriend on the night preceding the incident suggests that the most significant source of strain in this case is the result of Williams losing a positively valued stimulus, or his girlfriend. This is also supported by the actions of both Andrea Lambesis and Charles Williams. After the shooting, Lambesis reported that her relationship with Williams had been normal, with no issues. In the months leading up to the shooting, Williams became increasingly repressive toward Lambesis and developed a peculiarly keen interest in films in which women are victimized. These behaviors can be indicative of the psychopathic typology of shooter; while his attitudes and presence of mind cannot be attested, the reports from Lambesis show a marked change in Williams' behavior.

#5 Seung Hui Cho, age 23. Virginia Polytechnical Institute and State University, 2007.

At age 23, Seung Hui Cho killed thirty-two and injured seventeen at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), where Cho was a student. It is believed that Cho suffered from significant mental illness; however, it is unknown what illness plagued the shooter for most of his life. Predating the family's arrival in America from Korea, he was described as withdrawn and odd; barely speaking from childhood on and, when he did speak, his comments were markedly strange and never in full sentences. Due to Cho's reserved nature and speech, he experienced bullying throughout his school years in America. In the Korean-American community in which Cho lived in Virginia, his parents were also seen as unusually reserved and withdrawn. The community valued success, publishing a list of local Korean-American students accepted into Ivy League universities and reinforcing the goal of becoming a business owner; Cho's father, however, never progressed from his entry-level position at a dry cleaning business and his mother accepted a position in a school cafeteria to provide the family with insurance. Cho's sister, however, did attend Princeton (Kleinfield, 2007).

During his attendance at Virginia Tech, Cho's personality and idiosyncrasies were dominant in the few interactions he had with others. Teachers, roommates, and classmates all felt unnerved by Cho's bizarre demeanor and grandiose delusions. Cho often spoke of his, admittedly imaginary, extra-terrestrial girlfriend who worked as a supermodel, for example. He also reported to his roommate over Thanksgiving break that he had dined with the president of Russia and claimed that he and the president had been raised together in Russia, despite his Korean heritage. In the days leading up to the

shooting, Cho's usual routine showed slight changes, such as an increased intensity in his exercise regimen and he had been waking up progressively earlier. On the day of the shooting, Cho assembled a package of mixed media, including videos and a 1,800 word statement, which he mailed to a major broadcasting company. In this media-bundle, Cho is quoted as saying "you have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience...you had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today...you forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours," (Kleinfield, 2007).

Although Cho's case study proved difficult in the application of general strain theory, potential sources of strain can be extracted from the information above. Perhaps the most significant, mental illness could have caused strain in the form of noxious stimuli; either the mental illness itself could have presented noxious stimuli (i.e. grandiose delusions), or the social reaction and rejection of Cho due to his unusual aura causing both the failure to achieve a positively valued goal, if he valued friendship, and the presentation of noxious stimuli (i.e. bullying). In the quote above, Cho demonstrates that, in his perspective, he was victimized and vulnerable, leaving him with no option other than taking action to defend and/or stand up for himself. Cho could also have experienced strain in the failure to achieve a positively valued goal by performing at a lower level than his sister while living in a community that prized success. The low-income jobs of his parents may have also contributed to Cho's strain in the failure to achieve a positively valued goal based on the lifestyle Cho felt he deserved. Using Langman's (2010) typology, Cho qualifies as a psychotic-type shooter. While he

possesses qualities that can be found in the psychopathic-type shooter, Cho's delusions and unusual speech patterns could be indicative of schizophrenia.

#6 Latina Williams, age 23. Louisiana Technical College, 2008.

On February 8, 2008, Latina Williams killed two fellow classmates before turning her gun on herself. Williams was reported to have been homeless and living in her vehicle while attending nursing school at Louisiana Technical College. She was estranged from her family and placed a call to a crisis counselor the morning of the shooting, expressing to the counselor that she intended to commit suicide. While there are no specific indicators of mental illness, the police report that Williams had shown signs of being paranoid and "losing touch with reality," (WAFB News Station, 2008).

While Latina Williams' case is considered atypical due to her gender, the Louisiana Technical College shooting is indistinctive among the shootings of her male counterparts. General strain theory remains applicable in this case despite the shooter's gender. For example, Williams' homelessness could have caused strain in the failure to achieve suitable accommodations in addition to the removal of the positively valued stimuli of her home prior to living in her car as well as the noxious stimuli of being homeless and the immediate social environment associated with a life without a home. If Williams attached a positive value to attending nursing school, achieving the goal of graduation and subsequent pressure to do so could have also added to the strain Williams was experiencing. Williams could also experience strain in the form of failure to achieve a positively valued stimuli, presentation of noxious stimuli, or the removal of a positively valued stimuli via the estrangement from her family depending upon Williams'

individual perception of her family. Williams' call to the crisis center on the morning of the shooting could have been precipitated by a cumulative effect the multiple strains in her life. Due to the lack of evidence supporting the idea that Williams was suffering from a mental illness, it cannot be said with certainty that her mental state was a contributing factor in the commission of this school shooting. However, if Williams had been suffering from a prolonged and untreated mental condition, strain could still result from the symptoms of her condition in the form of noxious stimuli. Based upon the information above, Williams can be classified as a traumatized-type shooter due to the estrangement with her family (and contributing factors) and her homeless status (and contributing factors).

#7 Mark Stephen Foster, age 48. Inskip Elementary School, 2010.

Though Mark Stephen Foster entered Inskip Elementary on February 10, 2010 with a firearm and discharged an unspecified number of rounds, no one lost their life that day. Only the principal and assistant principal were wounded. Foster had been informed earlier that day that he would not continue his job as a fourth-grade teacher at the elementary school. It has been reported that Foster was prone to aggressive outbursts and had previously had complaints lodged against him; students had reported that Foster yelled at them, told them to shut up, and was "mean," (Alapo, Jacobs, & Lakin, 2010). Upon investigation into Foster's personal life, the school discovered family discord, property disputes, and a general opinion of distaste of Foster among his family and acquaintances. A family member, who has retained anonymity, informed the school about a month prior to the incident that Foster was dangerous. It was also known that his

mother had requested that Foster not attend her funeral. Foster was quoted as claiming that he'd "been under pressure recently," (Alapo, Jacobs, & Lakin, 2010).

The discord among family and property disputes listed above could have impacted Foster by causing strain in the form of the presentation of noxious stimuli; if Foster valued his family prior to their falling out, the recent discord could have resulted in noxious relationships between him and his family members. Foster also could have experienced strain at the hand of his mother's request that he not attend his funeral, which could be viewed as either a noxious relationship or the failure to achieve the positively valued goal of being in attendance at her funeral. There is also evidence of strain caused by the removal of a positively valued stimulus; as Foster was released from his job just prior to the shooting, it can be reasonably argued that he positively valued his job and was distraught at the loss thereof. While there are no reports of behavior overtly indicative of the presence of a mental illness, Foster's proclivity for angry outbursts can classify him as a psychopathic-type shooter. Foster is classified under this type of shooter due to his response to being told he was dismissed from his job; leaving the office and re-entering the school with the intention of shooting those who had fired him shows not only a vile temper, but a disregard for human life.

#8 Robert L. Butler, Jr., age 17. Millard South High School, 2011.³

Robert L. Butler, Jr., age 17, killed the assistant principal and wounded the principal. He later committed suicide, after leaving the scene. Butler's parents were

³ The shooter's name is recorded in the FBI's "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013" as Richard L. Butler, Jr. However, it was discovered through research that the shooter's name is actually Robert L. Butler, Jr.

divorced and he was sent to live in Omaha, NE, after encountering persistent school and disciplinary issues with his mother in Lincoln. Butler was sent to live with his father, a police officer, in the hopes that his problems with tardiness and respecting his mother as a parental figure would diminish under his father's care. Butler had been suspended from school days before the shooting for driving his car on the football field. He was viewed by others as bright and funny, with no indication that he would commit such a crime (Abourezk, 2011). Butler was also reported to have been under the influence of a synthetic drug similar to marijuana referred to as K2.

Strain can be expressed in the form of the removal of positively valued stimuli when one examines factors such as the loss of his friends and school in Omaha caused by Butler's move to Lincoln. The loss of his home life with his mother could also have produced strain via the loss of a positively valued stimulus. As reported by Abourezk (2011), Butler posted the following statement on Facebook just prior to the incident:

Everybody that used to know me I'm sry but Omaha
changed me and (expletive) me up and the school I know
attend is even worse ur gomna here about the evil
(expletive) I did but that (expletive) school drove me to this
I wont u guys to remember me for who I was b4 this ik I
greatly affected the lies of the I families ruined but I'm
sorry. goodbye.

This statement is indicative of not only the positive value Butler attached to his home and school in Lincoln, but also the negative perception of Omaha; a strong distaste for Omaha

and his school there can be viewed as the presence of a noxious stimuli in Butler's perspective. Additionally, Butler's suspension from school could have caused strain in the presence of noxious stimuli. Butler can be classified as a traumatized-type shooter due to the combined multitude of change in his life circumstances and the cumulative effects of strain.

#9 Adam Lanza, age 20. Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012.

After Seung Hui Cho at Virginia Tech, Adam Lanza committed the second deadliest school shooting between the years 2000 and 2013. On December 14, 2012, Lanza began at his home, fatally shooting his mother before progressing to Sandy Hook Elementary School. Lanza shot open the locked school doors and proceeded to kill an additional twenty-six people and wounding two before committing suicide. With the exception of six adults in the school, Lanza's twenty other victims were six and seven year-olds. In a report drafted by the Office of the State's Attorney in the State of Connecticut, a navigation unit (GPS) found in the home revealed that in the days leading up to the shooting, Lanza had traveled various routes that led him by local schools, including Sandy Hook Elementary School. On the day prior to the shooting, Lanza began at his home, traveled to the Sandy Hook area, and returned home; a twenty-three minute round trip. A search of Lanza's home revealed a fixation with violence; particularly school shootings. Items such as explicit photographs of deceased victims of violent crimes, multitudes of articles on mass shootings, a check from his mother intended for the purchase of a firearm, images of himself posing with guns held to his head, videos depicting self-inflicted gunshot wounds, and an enactment of children being shot among a number of other concerning items (Sedensky III, 2013).

In regards to Lanza's social life, his behavior was equally as odd as his physical environment. Lanza's significant evidence of an untreated mental illness is detailed in the State Attorney's report on the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, reaching back as far as Lanza's experiences in the fifth grade. Sometime between the fifth and seventh grade, Lanza shifted from being perceived as a quiet, good student to abnormally withdrawn and fixated on violence; attributes primarily identified in his writings. The relationship between Lanza and his father deteriorated, eventually becoming reduced to electronic communication and culminating in Lanza's failure to respond. It has been reported that Lanza was bullied in his school years due to his personality and physical appearance. Lanza had a history of seizure activity and was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a disorder that can include issues such as social maladaptation, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and anxiety. Also noted in the report was Lanza's lack of empathy and his inability to differentiate between the literal and the figurative. Lanza's condition eventually progressed to the point at which his mother was unable to work due to his needs; Lanza did not allow anyone to enter his room, engaged in excessive hand washing, changed clothes multiple times a day, and had specific dietary idiosyncrasies. It had been recommended by medical professionals that Lanza take medication, remain among his peers, and receive tutoring to help with his difficulties. None of these recommendations appear to have been enforced (Sedensky III, 2013).

A significant portion of Lanza's time and life, in addition to his mother's, was spent attempting to alleviate the anxiety and obsessions he suffered as a result of his condition(s). Using the framework of Agnew's general strain theory, it can be suggested that the most significant source of strain, from Lanza's personal perspective, was his

struggle with the effects of his reported mental illness. Not only could his anxiety and obsessions cause strain in the presentation of noxious stimuli, but his inability to relieve these symptoms could also result in strain caused by the failure to achieve a positively valued goal. Lanza's obsession with school shootings appears to be the only reported preoccupation with violence⁴, (Sedensky III, 2013). When Lanza's mother left him alone for three days prior to the shooting, returning on December 13th, it appears that Lanza used the lack of supervision to bring his plan to alleviate his obsession with mass violence to fruition; evidenced by his drive to the Sandy Hook area the day before the shooting (Berger & Santora, 2013). Strain is also represented by noxious stimuli in the presence of bullying and estrangement from his father. Though Lanza's notable lack of empathy could possibly be indicative of a psychopathic-type shooter, his feelings of anxiety in addition to his suffering from mental illness provide a stronger grounding to classify him as a psychotic-type shooter.

#10 Thomas Michael Lane, III, age 17. Chardon High School, 2012.

Thomas Michael Lane, III, age 17, fired upon his peers in the cafeteria just before school began. Lane, who had been sitting at a table alone, drew his weapon and proceeded to approach another table, shooting three students in the backs of their heads; three students died and three were wounded. Lane had reportedly exhibited a long-time history of juvenile delinquency prior to the shooting; he attended an alternative school intended for students with behavioral/emotional, academic, and family issues. In high school, Lane parted company with his group of friends due to his transitioning through a

⁴ While several video games containing graphic/violent content were discovered in the home, it is important to note that they were popular titles likely to be found in the collection of many video game enthusiasts.

“Goth phase,” (Johnston, 2012). Additionally, it has been reported that Lane’s family had a long history of disruption; however, details of the alleged broken family’s issues have not been released. One of Lane’s victims had also recently started dating his ex-girlfriend. Lane was chased from the school building by a coach and quickly apprehended by authorities.

The loss of positively valued stimuli, such as his girlfriend and social group, can be identified as a source of strain in Lane’s life. The presentation of noxious stimuli, evidenced by the reports of familial issues, could have also played a significant role in Lane’s actions. Lane’s attendance at the alternative school and history of juvenile delinquency could not only have been noxious stimuli in themselves, but attempts to relieve the strain caused by the loss of his girlfriend and friends, among other noxious stimuli present in his life. Additionally, the actual disciplinary actions for Lane’s delinquent acts could have added to the strain in the form of another noxious stimulus. Through the concepts introduced in Langman’s (2010) typology, Lane can be classified as a traumatized-type shooter. With a long history of family discord, juvenile delinquency, and general disciplinary issues, it can be reasonably suggested that the repeated trauma and strain experienced by Lane had a significant and cumulative impact upon not only his decision to commit a school shooting, but his life as a whole.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Case Study Analysis

Essential to the perspectives introduced by this study, general strain theory provides valuable insight into the mindsets of school shooters. By examining factors such as life circumstance and interpersonal relationships, it has been demonstrated that a lengthy build-up of multiple strains can significantly contribute to an individual's commission of a school shooting. Contrary to media portrayals of antisocial boys with mental illnesses who reach a sudden breaking point without reason, the application of general strain theory illuminates the cumulative effects of strain as a form of slow burn rather than an explosion. As the table and analysis below demonstrate, there appears to be common sources of strain among the ten case studies. The table below contains the data obtained through the analysis of the ten aforementioned case studies. Among the ten subjects studied, the presentation of noxious stimuli and the removal of positively valued stimuli were the most common sources of identifiable strain. In eight out of ten subjects, or 80 percent of the sample group, both common sources of strain have been identified. In 60 percent of those studied, the failure to achieve a positively valued goal has been observed. Only one case study presented with a single identifiable source of strain, which was the removal of a positively valued stimuli. This data supports general strain theory by demonstrating that there are often multiple sources of strain in an individual's life; however, it is the cumulative effects of strain that motivate an action.

Table 2. Sources of Strain and Shooter Typology.

Failure to Achieve a Positively Valued Goal	Presentation of Noxious Stimuli	Removal of Positively Valued Stimuli	Typology
X	X	X	Traumatized
X	X	X	Psychotic
X		X	Traumatized
		X	Psychopathic
X	X		Psychotic
X	X	X	Traumatized
	X	X	Psychopathic
	X	X	Traumatized
X	X		Psychotic
	X	X	Traumatized
6	8	8	Totals

In addition, support is provided for Langman’s (2010) data on the three shooter typologies. As evidenced by the table above, the psychopathic-type shooter is the least common in a sample of ten shooters with only two case studies classified in the group; a measure which is consistent with the findings of Langman’s study. While Langman identified five psychotic shooters and three traumatized shooters, this study has identified five traumatized and three psychotic shooters. This difference could be accounted for by the choice in case studies, the five-year time lapse between studies, or both. The apparent increase in the proportion of traumatized shooters serves to again strengthen the foundation of general strain theory; this data seems to suggest that there has been a reduction in subjects fighting with mental illnesses while there has been an increase in subjects who are suffering from the effects of cumulative strain.

While any number of casualties which result from any form of mass violence are great tragedies, statistical analysis of these fatalities yield far lower numbers than expected. Of the 486 cited deaths in active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013,

only 117 deaths in the years studied were the result of a shooting in locations where education was the primary purpose of the institution (Blair & Schweit, 2014). The two incidents accredited with the highest number of fatalities, the Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook school shootings with 32 and 27 deaths respectively, account for approximately half of the 117 school shooting-related deaths in the thirteen years studied (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Accounting for these unusually high-fatality cases, the average number of deaths per incident was approximately four people; however, if the two high-fatality cases are excluded as outliers, the average number of deaths drops to around two people per incident, with 58 total deaths among the thirty-five school shootings. These statistics are especially significant due to the FBI's previously discussed definition of a mass murder consisting of a number of deaths greater than or equal to four in an ongoing incident. In fact, only seven incidents qualify under this definition, meaning that thirty school shootings cannot be classified as mass murder; a fact which supports the need for school shootings to be defined even further.

Policy Implications

It is important to note that the sources of strain discussed in this study can be present among any number of the general public, most of whom would never consider committing an act as violent as a school shooting. Due to this fact, it is nearly impossible to establish a profile of school shooters before the event; doing so could result in dangerous social stigmas, discrimination, exclusion, and undue violence or aggression towards people who only appear to fit the profile. Conversely, if an individual has already been dwelling on the idea of committing a school shooting, undue judgments and the consequences of being socially labeled as a person who *might* commit a school shooting

could increase the strain on the individual and motivate the actual commission of the shooting. The information gathered here is intended to show that many factors are comingling at the time of the incident and that there is no single “type” of person prone to committing a school shooting. By analyzing the perspective of those who do commit school shootings, it may become possible to preemptively neutralize the contributing factors, or strains, before the incident takes place; possibly even before the shooters’ plans can move past the fantasy stage.

The first step towards the prevention of school shootings lies in understanding why they are committed; an understanding which is heavily dependent upon examining the offenders’ perspectives. In order to achieve an accurate interpretation of the phenomena of school shootings, the selection and analysis of a sample of offenders is an important step in the research process. The ideal method would include studying a group of offenders of any gender who have been involved in or committed acts of mass violence, particularly school shootings. Unfortunately, the ability to collect new information directly from these offenders is severely limited because the population of surviving offenders is extremely small due to the fact that many acts of mass violence culminate in either suicide or the use of lethal force by law enforcement officials. Access to this population is further complicated by the age (juvenile status) and incarceration of many of the offenders. Consequently, interviews of the victims and/or friends and family published by various media sources become a valuable resource for the examination of the lives and personalities of these offenders.

Officers Alan Saylor and Robert Pearl of the University of Kentucky’s Dignitary Protection Team provide a number of services, such as location-specific risk assessments

and active shooter response training, for the campus community. These services provide a number of benefits by bringing awareness to the threat of school shootings and providing faculty, students, and fellow University of Kentucky police officers with valuable procedures to follow in the event of an active shooter incident (A. Saylor & R. Pearl, personal communication, December 4, 2015). Officers Saylor and Pearl give numerous presentations around the campus which are aimed at teaching the “survival mindset,” a set of ideas and actions which are designed to inform the community of what to do if they find themselves in the midst of an active shooter event⁵. The presentations teach survival skills such as the differences between concealment (hiding from the shooter) and cover (protects and conceals), when to shelter in place versus when to attempt escape, and how everyday items like backpacks loaded with textbooks can be used as a form of improvised body armor (A. Saylor & R. Pearl, personal communication, December 4, 2015). Also covered by the active shooter presentation is the law enforcement response and training programs all officers at the University of Kentucky undergo.

As previously discussed, the actions of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris at Columbine in 1999 made a significant impact upon the way our society sees schools. Parents became afraid to send their children to school, administrators struggled to find ways to protect their students, and law enforcement was forced to adapt to a new type of threat. As Officers Saylor and Pearl explain, the law enforcement response to active shooting threats changed things such as common equipment; most officers are now armed with rifles, in addition to their handguns, rather than shotguns. The reason for this, according to Saylor and Pearl, is due to accuracy; the distance of most school hallways

⁵ More information can be found at <http://www.uky.edu/police/active-shooter-training.html>.

can span several meters, making a rifle the weapon of choice over other types of weapons because of its accuracy over longer distances (A. Saylor & R. Pearl, personal communication, December 4, 2015). Also adopted by the University of Kentucky around 2000 or 2001, in response to public requests for active shooter response procedures, is the department-wide training in rapid deployment. The rapid deployment training uses paramilitary tactics that teach one major, overarching goal: to stop the situation as safely and quickly as possible. This training, according to Officers Saylor and Pearl, is a fairly standard program in institutions across the United States. Effective response policies are essential to containing any situation; however, rapid deployment and similar tactics are especially critical in active shooter events due to the fact that most incidents elapse in a timeframe of only ten to fifteen minutes (A. Saylor & R. Pearl, personal communication, December 4, 2015; Blair & Schweit, 2014).

While it is not encouraged to approach a gunman, there have been situations in which shooters who have been confronted have ceased firing or laid down their arms altogether. In the case studies outlined in the previous section of this study, for example, Thomas Michael Lane and Peter Odighizuwa provide prime examples of this phenomenon. The Chardon High School community was well prepared for an active shooter incident due to emergency drills. However, while students and teachers fled the cafeteria for better shelter, Coach Frank Hall rushed Lane. Hall succeeded in chasing Lane out of the school, preventing further casualties; being caught off guard, Lane was unable to continue shooting, reload his weapon, and seek out more victims, who were barricaded in classrooms (Warsinskey, 2013; Johnston, 2012). Similarly, Peter Odighizuwa laid down his weapon at Appalachian School of Law when approached by

fellow students with military and law enforcement backgrounds. Odighizuwa was detained by these students until first responders arrived on the scene. Based upon the number of shooters who successfully or who have the intention to commit suicide as the culmination of a school shooting, it can be suggested that the act of interrupting the execution of an offender's long-premeditated plan catches him or her off guard. By doing the opposite of what is expected, it appears that confrontation distracts some shooters; a distraction which results in hesitation and the possible opportunity to overcome the offender. It is important to reiterate the fact that it is not encouraged to confront a gunman; in all situations, it is best to put as much distance between yourself and the gunman as possible, seeking adequate cover if escape is not possible.

Through the information gathered in this study, it can be suggested that strain plays a significant role in an individual's actions. By understanding the behind-the-scenes factors, we can propose policies designed to combat sources of strain before an event such as a school shooting occurs. Teaching effective coping skills to today's youth, for example, could provide individuals with the ability to autonomously manage sources of strain without the "strike the enemy before they strike me" mentality that many school shooters appear to possess. Difficult as it may be, it can be beneficial to allow a child to face adversity in order to not only learn how to handle complex emotions, but to help the child gain self confidence when faced with challenging situations.

Revising policies on the policing of social climates within schools could also have an impact on the reduction of school shootings. From monitoring areas where students gather in large groups more stringently to enforcing a "no tolerance" stance on bullying with heavier punishments for the instigators, deterring students from bullying one another

could greatly reduce the strain caused by social violence. Lastly, receiving threats of a school shooting should always be treated as credible and be given a response with prevention in mind.

Many of the school shooters included in this study and others gave some form of warning *before* they committed the act. Calls to crisis centers, whispered rumors among friends, alarming “good-bye” social media posts, and violent writings and/or artwork generally preceded these events, almost as if the shooters wished to be stopped from doing something they felt that they had to do. In these cases, spreading awareness and providing a procedure for the student body to follow when these threats are first discovered could prevent a school shooting. Establishing policies and procedures for continued monitoring and measures such as suspension and counseling for those who have been apprehended for making threats would also reinforce prevention efforts.

By viewing mental illness as one of many sources of strain rather than a singular cause for behavior, not only can we reduce the stigma on mental illness, but we can see the overall effects of cumulative strain as the motivation for behavior. Much like the common phrase “you can’t see the forest for the trees,” devoting attention to sole sources of strain allows for the identification of individual components, but this approach also limits the ability to understand how each component interacts with one another to contribute to the overall problem.

It is important to note that strain has many forms and multiple individuals react differently to various stressors. Therefore, developing and implementing a uniform procedure to treat and reduce the effect of individual and cumulative strains on all

individuals would be difficult. Nevertheless, understanding that strains and poor coping mechanisms can lead to violent acts could be useful in identifying at-risk youth that could benefit from programming that would teach them better coping skills.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with any exploratory study, there are limitations with this research that should be mentioned. First, the purposive sampling method used to select the ten cases examined does not allow for generalization of the results to the full population of known school shooters. Census studies or large probability samples in future studies would be helpful in determining if the results found here are representative of the population. This study is also limited by the deceased, juvenile, and incarceration status of many of the school shooters. Deceased offenders are unable to explain their actions in their own words; therefore all of the information that can be gathered about the shooter and his/her life circumstances is second-hand and cannot be verified by the shooter. When offenders are deceased, it can never be known for certain if there was one major motivation for committing the shootings, many cumulative strains that suddenly became too much, or if a motivation completely unrelated to strain was present at the time of the shootings. The few school shooters who survived after the offense are often under the age of 18 and/or incarcerated (regardless of age). These factors can make it extremely difficult to secure interviews to obtain first-hand accounts. Without the ability to obtain primary data, this study is entirely reliant upon secondary and, in some instances, tertiary data which could compromise the accuracy and reliability of the study.

Despite the limitations to this study, the information presented herein can be used in many different ways within the criminal justice and education systems. For example, when the research and statistics on the average number of deaths per shooting incident are compared to the commonly accepted definition of a mass murder, as found in the Case Study Analysis, there is clear justification for the separation of school shootings from the scope of mass murders. The fact that most school shootings do not fall within the definition of a mass murder not only creates legal justification for a distinction between the two types of incidents, but the information provided by this study also can be used to create a structure for that definition. While the commonly accepted definition of a mass murder details variables such as the number of deaths, time span, and location, the data presented here suggests that the definition of a school shooting should be focused more on variables such as intent and location.

Taking a proactive approach to school shootings, identifying the most common sources of strain (presentation of noxious stimuli and the removal of a positively valued stimuli) could provide parents and educators with an understanding of the challenges in their students' lives. Teaching coping mechanisms targeted to combat major sources of strain, for example, could prove to be invaluable to school safety throughout the nation. Additionally, encouraging positive peer-to-peer interactions by providing students with information about the cumulative effects of strain could significantly impact an individual's immediate social environment; many youth are uncomfortable approaching their parents or school officials with their problems and turn to their friends. Debunking media myths and presenting procedures through community awareness programs can arm the community with life saving information. Awareness programs could include the

support found in this study for the idea that shooters who are caught off guard do not know how to react, such as the case with Peter Odighizuwa and Thomas Michael Lane, buying valuable time for students to fight or flee.

While it is not the intention of this study to mitigate the suffering of school shooting victims or defend the actions of school shooters, it is important to examine these crimes from multiple angles to achieve a greater understanding of the motivations and contributing factors behind the actions. In order to achieve this higher level of understanding, particularly in light of the deceased status of many of the offenders, it is essential to attempt to view the life circumstances through the eyes of the offenders as they are central characters in the commission of these acts. These offenders, just as their victims, are the sons and daughters of loved ones within a community; with no definitive way to determine a victim from an offender until *after* the crime has been committed. By using empathy to see individuals in these situations as both a victim *and* the offender, we are able to rationalize and conceptualize these seemingly senseless acts of extreme violence.

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