

Executive Summary

In the 1990s, youth violence, which had reached epidemic levels in the nation's cities beginning in the late 1980s, took an apparently unprecedented form in rural and suburban middle and high schools across the country. Between 1992 and 2001, 35 incidents occurred in which students showed up at their school or at a school-sponsored event and started firing at their schoolmates and teachers. These incidents, represented most starkly by the incident at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, left 53 dead, and 144 injured.

These incidents shocked the public, partly because so many were killed in single incidents and partly because the targets of the shootings seemed so arbitrarily selected. A third reason is that these incidents occurred in such unexpected places. The previous epidemic of deadly youth violence, which peaked in 1993 and then declined, had occurred among black and Hispanic youth in the nation's most disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and schools. In most of these new cases, communities that had previously thought of themselves as insulated from lethal youth violence discovered that they, too, were vulnerable.

Consequently, Congress requested that the National Research Council study this phenomenon. The Committee to Study Youth Violence in Schools was established in 2001, and its charge mirrored the language in the legislation, which stated:

The National Academy of Sciences [will] conduct a study regarding antecedents of school violence in urban, suburban, and rural schools,

including the incidents of school violence that occurred in Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Fayetteville, Tennessee; Littleton, Colorado; and Conyers, Georgia.

Congress specifically asked that detailed case studies be developed of the circumstances that led to extreme lethal violence in schools. The goal was to use these cases to learn as much as possible about two important questions. First, what could be said about the important causes and consequences of these unexpected, lethal shootings? Second, what actions could individuals and institutions take either to prevent these events from occurring in the first place or to minimize the damage once they began to unfold?

The most important challenge the committee confronted was to choose the particular cases to be developed, a task with both practical and scientific elements. Congress asked the committee to examine "incidents of lethal school violence in *urban, suburban, and rural schools*," but all of the specific cases identified in the legislation occurred in suburban and rural schools between 1997 and 1999. From a practical standpoint, cases could be selected from this list. However, the scientific question before the committee was what was the general class of violence of which these eight incidents were exemplars? When the committee examined the data sources on school shootings from this period, we found urban school shootings, but none that appeared similar to the listed cases. It seemed then that the form of lethal school violence that occurred in the late 1990s might represent a distinct form of lethal school violence—different in its causes and in its effective prevention and control. This possibility made the important scientific question of the relationship between the form of lethal school violence that was concentrated in the inner-city schools, and the seemingly newer form of lethal school violence that erupted in suburban and rural schools in the late 1990s, central to the committee's work.

To more fully answer these questions the committee decided to examine the series of school shootings that began in 1997, not by themselves as a separate phenomenon, but instead *against the backdrop of the broader patterns of violence that had recently affected American society*, especially between 1985 and 1995. This also seemed important for policy-making purposes; that is, it seemed important to keep these particular shootings in perspective. An overreaction to events that were so dramatic and so unexpected, overshadowing the importance of other violence problems, seemed likely. It also was important to look at general trends to understand the relationship between the unexpected outburst of shootings in suburban and rural schools and other forms of both youth and adult violence. The committee was particularly interested in understanding the relationship, if any, be-

tween the earlier epidemic of inner-city youth violence and the later series of shootings by youth in suburban and rural schools.

To meet its charge, the committee commissioned and analyzed six case studies of schools and communities that had experienced incidents of serious school violence in which more than one person was killed or seriously injured in a single attack. Four of these cases involved schools in suburban and rural communities that were listed in the legislation. Two of the cases involved inner-city schools, one of which had experienced two such incidents earlier in the 1990s.

The committee also reviewed the literature on violence as a context for interpreting the cases, especially in terms of what might be causing the incidents we studied and how they might best be prevented. This included review of a very small literature on incidents that looked similar to the ones we were asked to review; the literature on broad categories of violence, including violence in general, youth violence, school violence, and the relationship between violence and suicide; and an emerging literature on some specialized forms of violence that bore some similarity to the incidents we studied, including mass murders, rampage shootings, and "suicide by cop" (e.g., incidents in which individuals seemed to shoot in order to provoke a response by the police). Finally, because there might be some contagion effects in the events we were examining, we looked into studies that explore the contagiousness of violence. The committee's findings, presented below, are based on our analysis of the cases, the data, and the literature review.

THE FINDINGS

The limitations of the available evidence made it impossible for the committee to reach firm, scientific conclusions about either the causes and consequences of the shootings in rural and suburban schools or the most effective means of preventing and controlling them. However, we did develop some hypotheses that seem strong enough to guide action and research while better information is being developed.

Consequences

The committee found significant and long-lasting harm in each of the communities studied, although the lethal violence took different forms across the urban and the rural and suburban cases. The tragedy and shock of the large numbers killed and injured all at once in the suburban and rural cases still reverberates in those communities. Those closest to the center of these incidents continue to be traumatized; victims' civil suits against the shooters' families and the schools are still pending, and

some bitterness remains unresolved. In three cases, business continues to suffer because of the harm to the communities' reputations.

The inner-city school shootings further shocked already traumatized community residents. Most experienced them as an extension of the gun violence in the neighborhoods of the schools, which in the two cities had claimed many lives over time. So many neighborhood youths had themselves been victimized, or had known other victims, that in one of the cases, young men spontaneously pulled up their shirts to show the researchers their scars from violent incidents. The trauma in both cases radiated from those directly affected to involve the entire city, including the mayor and the city council, in the response. Interestingly, the policy responses in all six cases were more homogeneous than the circumstances or causes seemed to be.

Causes

Although the lethal shooting sprees of the 1990s followed closely on and even seemed to emerge from or be influenced by the earlier violence—and may stem from similar underlying factors—the committee also considers it possible that these events represent a separate strain of violence. While the inner-city epidemic of violence was fueled by well-understood causes—poverty, racial segregation, and the dynamics of the illicit drug trade—the violence in the suburban and rural schools more closely resembles “rampage” shootings that occur in places other than schools, such as workplaces, or in other public spaces.

In these six cases, this idea is supported by the notable differences in the motives of the shooters and the circumstances under which the shootings occurred. In the inner-city cases, the shooting incidents involved specific grievances between individuals that were known in the school community. In contrast, the suburban and rural shooting incidents did not involve specific grievances. These shooters felt aggrieved, but their grievances were a more general and abstract sense of feeling attacked rather than a specific threat by an individual. The grievances of these youth were not understood by those around them. As in rampage shootings involving adults, suburban and rural school shooting cases generally seem to involve youth who have these kinds of exaggerated and somewhat abstract grievances.

Evidence from Trends

Whereas events that could be described as rampage violence are only a small component of all violence and seem to move independently of other forms of violence, the committee found a spike for all kinds of rampage

killings in the late 1990s. This raises the possibility that there may have been some kind of epidemic of rampage shootings in the late 1990s that cut across all ages, including youth. Consistent with this hypothesis is the evidence from the cases that copycat mechanisms, which clearly were at work in at least one of the shootings, also may have influenced two of the other three suburban and rural school shootings examined.

Trend data on school shootings indicated that the school rampage cases listed in the legislation were not in fact new or unique: there had been similar incidents of school violence as far back as 1974. Remarkably, we could not find similar rampage shootings in the nation's inner cities, a fact that surprised the committee. Only three events in inner-city schools across the country met our formal criteria for inclusion in the study. And when we looked closely at these cases, we found that they looked quite different from the cases in the suburban and rural schools.

The Shooters

Looking across the cases, we found that the eight shooters exhibited a number of similar traits. While these are consistent with risk factors for serious youthful violence identified in the literature, this study can do no more than claim them as tendencies or propensities. All were boys. Five had recently begun hanging out with delinquent or more troubled friends. Five had a relatively recent drop in their grades at school. Five had engaged in previous serious delinquent acts and the other three in minor delinquent behavior. Serious mental health problems, including schizophrenia, clinical depression, and personality disorders, surfaced after the shootings for six of the eight boys in these cases. All had easy access to guns. The rural and suburban boys had experience with guns, and one of the urban teens appears to have practiced with the gun he used.

However, there were also some characteristics that are usually thought of as protective. Half of the shooters came from intact and stable two-parent families, and five of the eight were good students, at least until 8th grade. Only three of the shooters struggled with grades or experienced the early school failure that frequently precedes the development of serious delinquent behavior. Only one of the eight shooters was a loner, and only two were gang members. Most had friends, although the quality of the friendships differed. Most of these shooters were not considered to be at high risk for this kind of behavior by the adults around them.

Community and School Environments

The central differences in these cases can be found in community structure. The two urban neighborhoods were characterized by commu-

nity social and physical conditions that research has shown create a milieu for the development of youth violence. Most of the rural and suburban communities did not demonstrate these structural conditions, and in fact three of the four were demographically the opposite—thriving economically, having a high degree of social capital, and mostly free of crime and violence. The committee notes that five of the six communities in these cases had experienced rapid social change, which may produce instability even where the changes are seen as positive ones.

A common element across school settings was the presence of numerous informal and exclusive student groups. In the urban schools, these were mostly marginal groups—gangs, including criminal gangs, and “crews.” In the rural and suburban schools, they were cliques—some mainstream and some marginal. Membership in these groups determined social status in most of these schools, but there were notable differences in relationships in the different school settings. In the urban cases, the boys’ friendships were embedded in these marginal groups; in the rural and suburban cases, the boys were marginal members of both mainstream and marginal groups.

An important similarity across all of the cases was the gulf between the communities’ youth culture and that of adults. Parents and most teachers had a poor understanding of the children’s exposure to changing community conditions, their experiences in social situations including at school, and their interpretations of those experiences. There was an intense concern among these shooters about their social standing in their school and among their peers. This took different forms in the inner-city and the rural and suburban cases, but for this group of offenders it was similar in that it was almost always about shielding themselves from physical victimization, including bullying or other personal humiliation. Although in most cases the youth had hinted at what was to come, parents and teachers were mostly unaware of the status problems they were experiencing and of their almost universal belief that they had nowhere to turn. In the words of one of the case authors, “the social dynamics of adolescence in these communities were almost entirely hidden from adult view.” Whether or not this is characteristic of most communities is a question that remains unanswered.

Community Responses

With only one exception, the cases were treated virtually identically in the criminal justice system. Six of the eight shooters were charged with the highest offense that could be supported by the evidence, usually first- or second-degree murder, and tried in the adult (criminal) courts rather than the juvenile courts. Most were sentenced to long terms of incarceration.

tion and correctional supervision, with the upper limit of sentences for most ranging from 20 to 60 years. The exception was where state law required the justice system to treat the offenders, ages 11 and 13, as juveniles. Even though there is little room in the adversarial process of the criminal courts for the special problems these boys had to influence the outcome, most residents of that particular community saw adjudication in the juvenile system as unjustifiably lenient treatment, given the nature of the offense.

Instituting or adding to physical security measures was the most common response of the school communities to these shootings in almost every site. In the urban cases, public officials and residents went well beyond security measures to effect improvements in community climate and communication between youth and adults. The rural and suburban communities also took steps to improve communication but did not focus on community climate, tending to explain the incidents as the act of a troubled youth rather than resulting from community-level or social factors that needed attention.

OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

School rampage shootings are rare events that have occurred in middle-class and affluent rural and suburban schools, but they are not found in inner-city schools. They resemble other rampage shootings, especially mass murders, more than other forms of youth violence or urban school shootings. It is virtually impossible to identify the likely offenders in advance; thus, there is no accurate way to develop a profile of students at high risk to commit these kinds of acts.

Little is known about what causes school rampages, so the development of primary prevention mechanisms is difficult. Until more can be learned about causes, case studies such as these can be helpful in identifying some plausible targets of intervention. One approach involves the fact that these young people had such easy access to firearms. Based on these cases—and the fact that all but one of the incidents of lethal school violence involving multiple victims in the United States over the last decade have involved firearms in the hands of children—the committee believes it is necessary to find more effective means than we now have of realizing the nation's long established policy goal of keeping firearms out of the hands of unsupervised children and out of our schools. In addition, there is a need for youth and adults, among themselves and together, to be more sensitive to the often fragile status concerns of young people. Students are often in a position to preempt rampage attacks simply by telling what they know to school authorities, but that requires crossing the gap between the society of youth and that of adults. Specifically, there

is a need to develop a strategy for drawing adults and youth closer together in constructing a normative social climate that is committed to keeping the schools safe from lethal incidents.

The committee notes that conducting empirical studies to establish causal processes leading to these rare and heinous outcomes is not the only scientific approach possible in the search for prevention and control. Case studies like those presented here are essential and appropriate scientific tools for use in seeking for causes and effective interventions, especially in the study of important but rare events such as these school shootings. Only by first carefully analyzing the patterns that exist in the unfolding of these occurrences can one gather the information needed to develop studies from which findings can be generalized.

The committee recommends that new research be undertaken to further improve understanding of the factors that might influence school shootings, particularly school rampage shootings, and to develop knowledge on the impact of interventions. Our specific research recommendations cover further exploration of the precursors to these incidents, including nonlethal violence and serious bullying in schools; illegal gun carrying by adolescents; the signs and symptoms of developing mental health problems in youth in grades 6–10; the effects of student attacks on teachers; and the effects of rapid change in increasingly affluent rural and suburban communities on youth development, socialization, and violence. Evaluation studies should include programs targeted at thwarting planned school shootings. Evaluations of security measures and police tactics in responding to school shootings are also needed.