

## Article 90

### **School Shootings and Student Mental Health: Role of the School Counselor in Mitigating Violence**

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#### **Abstract**

This article will provide an overview of the pervasiveness of gun violence in school settings within the United States. The manuscript will provide background information, a review of existing literature specifically addressing the need for more attention on student mental health, and will stipulate interventions that school counselors can use to potentially mitigate gun-related school violence.

*Keywords:* mental health, school shootings, school violence, school counselor

Gun-related violence in schools is a pervasive issue and has greatly increased in recent years, although school shootings have occurred since our country was being formed. The earliest known school shooting in the United States took place in 1764 and was known as the Pontiac Rebellion School Massacre; out of 13 children enrolled in the school, only three survived (Dixon, 2005). During the 19th century, there were 49 K–12 school shootings, 207 K–12 school shootings nationwide throughout the 20th century, and since 2000 there have been 152 K–12 school shootings (K12 Academics, n.d.). As these statistics reveal, school violence has increased by 19% in the 21st century. Stakeholders including parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and students alike are gravely concerned about safety in their schools. From Columbine to Sandy Hook, and most recently Marysville-Pilchuck High School in Seattle, Washington, innocent and vibrant lives are being claimed by senseless acts of gun violence. According to Koch (2012), a student living in the United States, in comparison to the Scandinavian countries of Finland or Sweden, is 13 times more likely to be killed in a gun homicide.

There are several factors that have led to gun-related violence becoming prevalent in schools, which will be addressed in this article. Moreover, previous research has focused on the shooters themselves and their common or unique characteristics as well as

the known causes of school violence. However, there is minimal literature regarding the ways in which school counselors can be proactive in identifying students who may be prone to violence, as well as the strategies that can be utilized to lessen the possibility of school shootings. Thus, this article will discuss the interventions that can be implemented by school counselors to promote a healthy school environment, aid youngsters in emotional distress, and play a crucial role in reducing the potential of violence in schools.

### **Literature Review**

As educators and change agents, counselors can assist in proactively attempting to identify common themes amongst perpetrators and determine preventative measures to decrease gun violence in schools.

#### **Safe Schools Initiative Report: Characterizing the Attacker (All research in this section refers to data from the Safe Schools Initiative Report)**

Although there is a gap in the literature regarding gun violence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education issued *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. The main focus of this report was on identifying and determining pre-attack behaviors, as well as raising awareness regarding alarming communications that may help to prevent future atrocities. The findings revealed that school officials need to be more aware of questions to ask possible perpetrators; especially with students who are posting inappropriate messages on social media, are acting in a withdrawn manner, and are displaying bizarre behaviors. According to Vossekuil et al. (2002), school officials need to be able to rapidly evaluate information that could warn of impending school violence and conduct threat assessments prior to a violent outburst in order for strategies to be put in place. The report also stipulated that 69% of those committing violent acts using a gun within the school setting were between 10 and 19 years of age; and 15% of the gun violence acts were committed by people between the ages of 20 and 29 (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Further, 76% of the perpetrators were Caucasian, 12% were African American, 2% were Native American, and 2% were Asian (Lee, 2013). Approximately two-thirds of the attackers came from two-parent families. The majority of attackers were academically successful students (41%) earning A's and B's in their course work. Many of the attackers wrote cryptic messages, engaged in behaviors that caused others concern or indicated a need for help, or disclosed to peers that they experienced loneliness or anger prior to the attack (Lee, 2013).

In addition, 41% of assailants were considered to be mainstream students, although only 12% had few very close friends. According to the report, the majority of perpetrators showed no significant change in academic performance (56%), friendship patterns (73%), interest in school (59%), or school disciplinary problems (68%) prior to the violent attack (Lee, 2013). Moreover, Vossekuil et al. (2002) reported that 99% of school shootings were carried out by young males. In the majority of school shootings that have taken place, the school shooter carried out the attack alone (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013), and 63% of the students committing violent acts showed interest in violence in movies, video games, or books (Lee, 2013). Vossekuil et al. (2002) reported

that only one-third of attackers (34%) ever received a mental health evaluation and less than one-fifth (17%) were diagnosed with a mental disorder, although 78% of school shooters had a history of suicide attempts or suicidal ideations prior to their attack. Further, Lee (2013) also indicated that many of the attackers (61%) demonstrated a history of suicidal attempts, as well as had a documented history of experiencing symptoms of extreme depression or desperation, prior to an attack.

The Safe Schools Initiative Report also suggested that 71% of the attackers were victims of bullying and 10% of the attackers who were receiving treatment for their diagnosed mental illness failed to comply to take their prescribed psychiatric medications. In regards to bullying, 87% of school shooting perpetrators left behind evidence that they were victims of severe bullying. According to Chung (2012), in addition to many perpetrators dealing with symptoms of depression, several assailants struggled with narcissistic tendencies, rage, and tended to rely upon the psychological strategy of splitting (having extreme ways of thinking). Splitting can be seen in certain personality disorders and can even contribute to rationalizing homicide (Chung, 2012).

In a 2009 study, Wike and Fraser found that school aged mass shooters have a few common characteristics and differences. Traumatized shooters are those that come from dysfunctional homes and have had exposure to both substance abuse and criminal behaviors. Psychotic shooters are those who come from intact families, but may suffer from schizophrenia, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, or another mental illness. Psychopathic shooters are those who were neither abused nor psychotic, but lacked empathy and displayed symptoms of narcissism (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Furthermore, Vossekuil et al. (2002) indicated that the majority of perpetrators had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior in that only one-third of attackers were known to have acted violently towards others prior to the incident (Lee, 2013). The report also specified that the majority of attackers had a difficult time dealing with significant losses and personal failures; almost 98% of the attackers experienced a personal loss prior to the attack (e.g., loss of status, loss of a relationship; Vossekuil et al., 2002). The majority of attacks were pre-meditated in that 93% of perpetrators did not carry out gun shootings impulsively, but rather developed the idea to harm their targets prior to the attack (Lee, 2013). Additionally, 61% of school shooters carried out an attack to get revenge, and 81% of attackers held a grievance against another person at the time of the attack (Lee, 2013).

### **Three Leading Causes of School Shootings**

According to Lee (2013), there are two leading causes of school shootings: bullying (87%), as well as both non-compliance and side effects from psychiatric drugs (12%). Most school shooters claimed or left evidence behind indicating that they were victims of severe and long-term bullying. The majority of bullying victims experienced feelings of humiliation, which resulted in thoughts of suicide or revenge (Lee, 2013). Additionally, of those school shooters who had been prescribed psychiatric medications, 10% displayed medication non-compliance (failed to take drugs prescribed). Many school shooters who were taking psychiatric drugs for their disorder experienced side effects of the drugs prior to carrying out a violent act (Lee, 2013). In fact, there have been 22 drug regulatory warnings on psychiatric drugs citing effects of mania, hostility, violence, and even homicidal ideations (Lee, 2013). There have been at least 27 school

shootings committed by those taking or withdrawing from psychiatric drugs, which has resulted in 162 wounded and 72 students and/or faculty killed (Lee, 2013). However, there has yet to be a federal investigation in the United States on the link between psychiatric drugs and acts of school shooting.

### **Model for Mass Murder in School**

Levin and Madfis (2009) developed a five-stage model to explain the rationale for students carrying out a mass murder at their school. They determined that if school shooters are not hallucinating, then a massacre is representative of a rational, immoral solution. In accordance with Levin and Madfis' model, the five stages include chronic strain (having a range of negative experiences in the school), uncontrolled strain (strain of everyday life is left unchecked with the absence of pro-social relationships), acute strain (loss occurs and is perceived as catastrophic to the attacker), planning stage (time is spent planning a massacre), and massacre at school (students who plan and carry out massacres have access to fire arms). Levin and Madfis indicated that the acts represent a solution to the shooters' damaged sense of self-worth. Many attackers see a shooting as a means of getting others to notice them and a means to assert their masculinity, as many young males feel that a shooting will enable them to regain lost feelings of power, pride, and attention (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

### **School Shootings on the Rise**

There has been a significant increase in school shootings between the 1980s and 2000s. Specifically, school shootings increased from 23 to 179 between the 1980s and 1990s and also increased from 179 to 245 between the 1990's and 2013 (Lee, 2013). According to Lee (2013), there has not been much research conducted in the area of school shootings, despite the dramatic increase in gun violence within schools. Lee's study is composed of literature-based research and uses inductive analysis. The purpose of Lee's study was to find trends and patterns of school shootings in the United States from an educator's point of view. Lee examined school shootings that occurred between the 1760s and 2013 and analyzed 593 atrocities. His study is relevant in that the implications of findings help to increase awareness of the consequences of school shootings, as well as address the pivotal role that educators, specifically school counselors, play in creating safe, healthy, inclusive, and secure school environments (Lee, 2013). Lee (2013) also addressed the importance of counselors collaborating with other stakeholders and family members in order to help students struggling with mental illness receive the help that they need to reduce violence from occurring.

An increase in the amount of gun violence in schools is also attributed to information being more available on the Internet, as well as violence in movies, media, and video games. According to Anderson, Shibuya, and Ihori (2010), exposure to media violence can increase aggression amongst viewers, and youth will be more interested in acquiring and using guns after exposure to gun violence in films. The majority of violent gun acts (60%) committed in schools involves perpetrators who use a pistol (Lee, 2013). In addition, 73% of perpetrators felt resentment or ill will towards at least one of their victims, prior to the act (Vossekuil et al., 2002); 59% of school shootings occurred during the school day; and in 73% of attacks, one or more students and faculty were killed (Lee, 2013). The majority of violent gun acts (47%) were approximately 15 minutes long and

the predominant age range of victims was between 10 and 19 years of age (Lee, 2013). Most of the time after an active school shooting, the media focused on gun control rather than on the shooter's personal or family's responsibility for the act (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014). Typically, mass shootings in the schools are the most difficult to prevent using gun control (Kleck, 2009). Due to the fact that most guns are acquired by family members, guns need to be stored in a place not accessible to troubled youngsters who are struggling with depression, anger, or resentment (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

### **Positive and Negative Constraints: Impact on Student Behavior**

According to Gest, Mahoney, and Cairns (1999), a student's developmental system is composed of positive and negative constraints. Positive constraints incorporate academic success, positive peer and adult relationships, support from adults, and student engagement/involvement, whereas negative constraints encompass academic failure, hyperactivity, antisocial peer relationships, or a lack of supportive networks (Farmer & Farmer, 2001). Students who are lacking positive constraints may be more likely to develop patterns of aggressive behavior due to anger or resentment towards others, a lack of healthy relationships, or academic struggles in school. Thus, in order to further reduce school violence, educators can help students to decrease negative constraints by assisting students who are struggling academically, by encouraging tutoring and mentorship, utilizing a peer pal or buddy system to foster healthy communication and social skills between peers, facilitating groups addressing friendship skills, anti-bullying, and social skills, as well as working with parents and families to increase familial involvement so that students do not feel alone or misunderstood.

Counselors can also assist students in developing more positive constraints in their lives by acting as mentors, reinforcing student involvement in extracurricular activities, teams and clubs, communicating with parents and guardians to enhance family involvement, creating a positive and accepting school climate in which students celebrate their differences, motivating students to promote a connection within the school, and helping students recognize and build upon their strengths in order to achieve their personal goals.

### **Statistics: Mental Health Within the School Setting**

A survey of 9,000 homes reveals that about half of all Americans will meet some sort of diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder at some point in their lifetime, with the age of onset typically occurring during childhood or adolescence (Kessler et al., 2005). The reality is that large numbers of children and adolescents have undiagnosed mental disorders and the majority of those youth whose disorders are properly diagnosed do not receive treatment. Seventy-five percent of students struggling with mental illness do not receive mental health services, and mental health is a key component in students' healthy development (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). Mental health and substance abuse issues occur among today's youth and can begin in early childhood. One in five children from birth to age 18 years has a diagnosable mental disorder (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). One in ten youth have a serious mental health problem that is severe enough to impede upon his/her ability to function at home, in the school or community. Approximately half of all lifetime mental health disorders start by the mid-teens, and the onset of all major mental illnesses happen as early as 7 to 11 years of age (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). As in

education, a racial gap exists, as 31% of Caucasian students receive mental health services for mental illnesses, whereas only 13% of students who are Hispanic or African American receive mental health interventions. Amongst children in the child welfare system, African American children have less access to counseling in comparison to Caucasian students (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). Additionally, school counselors cannot regulate the behaviors and choices of students, but they can implement interventions for students struggling with anger issues and grief, and those who display weak coping skills in order to provide them with techniques and strategies to deal with their emotions in a healthier manner rather than acting out in aggressive or violent ways.

Another major challenge that schools face in regards to reducing gun violence is the availability of firearms to students. In 2008, the Supreme Court prohibited gun ownership by felons and the mentally ill (Friedman, 2012). However, due to the accessibility of guns, social media, the Internet, and determination, students as well as adults who are suffering from mental illnesses, are still able to obtain firearms. Therefore, now more than ever, attention and focus nationwide needs to be placed on the mental health of the general public, particularly K–12 and college students. Counselors and educators need to acknowledge students who are potentially suffering from a mental illness, offer them the support and resources that they need via an alliance with mental health agencies, and provide workshops for parents in order to raise awareness about the association between mental illness and gun violence. This, in turn, will hopefully help to reduce violent outbursts in the school, as students and their families are educated about mental illness and encouraged to obtain treatment. Although educators cannot control whether or not students gain access to weapons, they are empowered to create a nurturing school environment and build upon the belief that healthy students are more successful academically and personally. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2006), students who receive social-emotional and mental health support are more successful academically and personally.

### **Challenges That Schools Face**

Schools are educational rather than clinical settings and are not authorized to provide treatment services. Schools cannot obtain malpractice coverage, putting them at great risk for liability (Dikel, 2012). An additional obstacle is that many parents have difficulty recognizing that their children suffer from a mental illness, nor do they want them taking medication if they are diagnosed. Consequently, parents may be opposed to their child receiving mental health services. Further, there is a substantial lack of funding and a shortage of school counselors, exacerbating the issue of school violence (National Education Association, 2014), as students may not be receiving the mental health support that they desperately need. Additionally, some school counselors may be hesitant to refer a student to a mental health agency, as there is no mandate that parents are obliged to seek these services.

On the other hand, although constraints and challenges exist, school counselors have the unique opportunity to instill hope and provide support that can lead to monumental changes in the lives of students struggling with mental illness. School counselors have the privilege of educating students, especially those at risk, about the importance of school involvement, fostering their ability to achieve their academic objectives, and helping students to identify and build upon their talents. Counselors can

teach students ways to improve their coping, communication, problem solving, and self-regulation skills so that they make beneficial choices for themselves.

### **Facilitating Counseling Groups: Role of School Counselors in Mitigating Violence**

There are several interventions that school counselors can employ or continue to offer in order to create a safer and more positive school climate and help to reduce the amount of gun violence occurring in the school setting. Due to the exceedingly high percentage of perpetrators who struggle with grief and loss, bullying, depression, anger management, poor problem-solving skills and low self-esteem, there is a rationale and imminent need for school counselors to facilitate counseling groups addressing these topics in the hope of providing these students with the tools that they need to deal with their emotions in a more constructive manner (Vossekuil et al, 2002). Although school counselors may currently facilitate groups addressing these issues, counselors nationwide need to be more aggressive in advocating for the importance of conducting these groups as they could potentially help to identify early on and remedy the concerns of struggling students. Conducting psychosocial counseling groups on topics including bullying, grief and loss, self-esteem and conflict resolution, coping skills, and anger management is also cost effective and could be potentially lifesaving. In doing so, counselors nationwide will be proactive rather than reactive. These groups can teach students to avoid internalizing their negative emotions and pain for long periods of time which leads to eventually projecting and externalizing their inner turmoil in an aggressive fashion (Miller, 2014). There are specific interventions that can be implemented by school counselors in the hopes of reducing gun violence including psychosocial groups addressing bullying, grief and loss, self-esteem and conflict resolution, and coping skills. Each will be addressed below.

#### **Psychosocial Groups Addressing Bullying**

Alexander (2003) found that many perpetrators were bullied for prolonged amounts of time. Therefore, it would be beneficial for school counselors to lead groups addressing the incidence and effects of bullying. School counselors can teach students a variety of techniques that they can use to lessen bullying, including fogging (verbally agreeing with the bully), negative enquiry (challenging what the bully is saying), assertiveness training (using 'I' messages), journaling, and setting specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals to reframe the focus from being a victim of bullying to feeling empowered and taking control of one's life by accomplishing goals (Alexander, 2003). Steering bullying prevention groups can assist students to feel better about themselves and teach them not to suppress negative comments, which in turn will help to create a safer, more inclusive school climate and hopefully diminish retaliatory behaviors.

#### **Psychosocial Groups Addressing Grief and Loss**

According to Vossekuil et al. (2002) and Lee (2013), 98% of perpetrators struggled with a deep personal loss prior to the attack and lacked appropriate coping skills to deal with their loss. Therefore, in hopes of shrinking gun violence, grief and loss groups can be offered to teach students healthy ways of handling their emotions such as

communicating their feelings, journaling (Lee, 2013), using art or music therapy, writing letters, normalizing feelings, exercise, and in the case of death, talking about the ways to celebrate and carry on someone's legacy rather than being self-destructive and displaying venomous behaviors.

### **Psychosocial Groups Addressing Self-Esteem and Conflict Resolution**

In accordance with Vossekuil et al., (2002), the majority of perpetrators have poor self-worth due to being victims of bullying or lacking many pro-social relationships, as well as displaying ineffective conflict resolution skills. Thus, it would be advantageous for school counselors to provide groups addressing self-worth and conflict resolution to help students struggling with these issues to enhance their self-concept, teach them to love and accept themselves, emphasize the importance of positive affirmations, teach students to voice rather than internalize negative comments, and encourage students to identify their strengths and positive attributes to build upon their inner resources in order to achieve their goals (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Additionally, conflict resolution groups are helpful to teach students how to problem solve, reduce social aggression related to low school attachment (Wike & Fraser, 2009), and overcome challenges with other students in a peaceful and non-confrontational manner through using clear and direct communication, and peer mediation, to resolve problems verbally rather than utilizing physical aggression (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

### **Psychosocial Groups Addressing Coping Skills**

According to Miller (2014), it is beneficial to form groups addressing coping skills that teach students proactive ways to cope with their emotions, thoughts, and feelings for students struggling with depressive symptoms. Coping is a response to physical or cognitive stressors. Coping skills are abilities that enable people to effectively respond to adversity (Johnston, 2014). Groups addressing coping skills can teach struggling students to identify their stressors, as well as to learn helpful ways to cope with their stressors so that they do not react in a volatile way towards others or engage in self-harming behaviors. Moreover, many millennials or those from Generation Y have been so impacted by technology, including playing video games and using social media to communicate, that it has impeded upon their ability to connect with others effectively (Miller, 2014). As a result, many students are stunted emotionally and experience a detachment from others. Therefore, it is paramount that counseling groups exist to address coping skills, in order to educate and provide students with information about the importance of having open interpersonal communication, rather than only communicating through technology (Saidi, 2012).

### **Counseling Interventions: Role of School Counselors in Mitigating Violence**

In addition to conducting psychosocial groups addressing critical topics that impact gun violence, counselors can also implement a variety of other interventions including breaking down codes of silence, incorporating responsive intervention tactics, engaging in consultation, conducting student mental health screenings, promoting safe and secure learning environments, utilizing threat assessments, partnering with local mental health agencies, teaching students about self-regulation, and encouraging families



to monitor social media accounts. Each of these interventions will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **Breaking Down Codes of Silence**

Codes of silence tend to provide protection for potential assailants and also characterize school climates of mistrust (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Students who are aware of a potential attack are more likely to come forward if there is an anonymous way to do so, if students' concerns lead to visible and hasty action, and if disclosures are discreet (Wike & Fraser, 2009). School counselors can collaborate with other key stakeholders regarding ways in which students can safely report their concerns, without worrying about being identified. Counselors can teach students about the importance of directly communicating with adults, if they possess information regarding a potential violent threat to prevent a tragic event from occurring.

### **Incorporating Responsive Intervention Tactics**

In addition to encouraging students to break down their codes of silence and encouraging them to disclose any information involving a potential threat, counselors can also implement responsive interventions of behavior. Students may be aware of a threat yet fail to bring it to the attention of an administrator, teacher, parent, or police officer. Although counselors are typically collaborating with other key stakeholders, including teachers and administrators, when conducting responsive interventions of behavior, counselors specifically need to educate bystanders about their role in preventing school shootings, including addressing the importance of not bullying someone, reporting to the faculty if a student is being bullied, and taking action rather than being a bystander to help prevent tragedies from occurring (Lee, 2013).

### **Consultation: Establishing Resources for Troubled or Rejected Students**

Counselors must consult with other school staff, as well as family members, to discuss social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Consultation between school counselors and staff members regarding classroom concerns and modifying school wide approaches to behavior, as well as developing positive behavioral supports and interventions, is necessary (National Association of School Psychologists, 2006). Counselors can also consult and work in conjunction with classroom teachers on developing interventions to assist students who have chronic behavioral issues or emotional needs. The interventions can include behavioral modification plans, a reward system, anger boxes, integrating self-love, self-acceptance, and positive self-affirmations into the classroom curriculum, and urging teachers to provide leadership roles to struggling students, thus enabling them to act as role models and affording them a sense of empowerment and accomplishment.

Furthermore, counselors can consult with family members and stipulate resources regarding the characteristics of mental illness, available treatments, as well as arranging referrals to community agencies. A concerted effort is necessary to address the social and emotional needs of students. A partnership could be established between schools and community agencies to develop protocols for assessing the mental health needs of students, especially those who express suicidal ideations and symptoms of depression or

anger. Counselors establishing routines, as well as emergency modes of communication, is vital to help students in need (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Moreover, there are counseling resources, specifically programs that can be implemented to strengthen the school climate and be particularly beneficial to students who are struggling emotionally. *The Second Step Program* utilizes group modeling, anger management, and group discussion, to increase students' social competence, decision-making ability, goal setting, and empathy levels. Lessons are based on interpersonal situations and include presentations on photographic images showing specific social situations. School counselors can then guide discussions about what is taking place in the situation and how individuals can best respond to these incidences (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

*The Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP)* is one of the first school delinquency prevention projects, which began in 1981. The goal of the project was to study pathways that lead to both positive and problematic behavior. The study was expanded in 1985 and included 808 fifth-grade students from different schools in Seattle. The researchers conducted interviews with the participants through 2009 on topics including substance usage, delinquency, dropping out, risky sexual behavior, and changes in health. The project worked to address factors related to delinquency, as well as on positive youth and adult development. The *SSDP* can be facilitated by school counselors and helps students to enhance their self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and enables them to decrease their suicidal ideations (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

*The Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways Program (RIPP)* can be utilized by school counselors to help students to improve their conflict resolution skills. It is a school-based violence prevention program developed for middle school-aged students and can be used concurrently with peer mediation programs. Students are encouraged to use a social cognitive problem-solving model in order to identify and choose non-violent alternatives to deal with conflict. The program emphasizes behavioral repetition of the social-cognitive problem solving model, experiential techniques, and didactic modalities. There are 16 sessions addressed over the school year, which focus on violence prevention, conflict resolution, friendship skills, and teaching students how to transition to high school successfully (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, 2014).

### **Focus on Student Mental Health Through Screening**

According to the National Education Association (2014), there is a dramatic need to focus more on mental health within the school setting, in addition to school and mental health counselors collaborating on screening and counseling students who are mentally ill. Four million children and teens in the United States suffer from a severe mental illness and 21% of children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2010). Although it is important to recognize that the majority of people struggling with a mental illness are not dangerous, mental health treatment and screenings can help to prevent gun violence for many individuals who have suicidal thoughts or feelings of depression (American Psychological Association (APA), 2013).

Screening, evaluation, identification, and referral for students exhibiting emotional disturbance is critical to decreasing gun violence in schools. Between 12% and 27% of students may suffer from a mental disorder including depression, anxiety, or

suicidal ideation, but only one sixth of these students receive mental health interventions (Weist, Rubin, Moore, Adelsheim, & Wrobel, 2007). Conducting mental health screenings in schools is worthwhile as it provides assistance to students suffering from mental health issues and enables schools and agencies to work together to ensure overall student wellness in order to promote their academic, social/emotional, and vocational success (Weist et al., 2007). Mental health screening opportunities allow counselors to identify students who are at-risk of suffering from a mental illness and helps counselors connect students and their families to outside agencies to obtain the help they need so they do not feel alone, isolated, and misunderstood.

### **Promoting Safe and Secure Learning Environments**

The National Education Association (2014) requires all schools to promote safe and secure learning environments for its students. Schools can be equipped with adequate structural defenses and proper technology in order to safeguard against danger, including metal detectors, if deemed necessary. School counselors can help to develop school climates that are supportive, welcoming, inclusive, and promote connectedness and cohesion by celebrating diversity, specifying a zero tolerance policy for bullying, and by facilitating student workshops and assemblies on topics including anti-bullying and emotional self-regulation. If students do possess information about a student who could be a potential threat, they need to be reassured to disclose this information to a trusted adult in the school. Most importantly, a school's personnel must be ready to respond to information students bring forward about a potential threat in order to safeguard the welfare of the school.

Further, enabling students to communicate their thoughts and concerns can help to prevent school violence. Counseling professionals can take preventative measures against future outbursts via early intervention, before students' emotions overpower their behaviors and reactions. Additionally, school counselors can facilitate workshops to promote effective school discipline and positive behaviors and develop safety efforts with crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery to ensure that crisis training plans reinforce learning and are consistently practiced (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). Moreover, it is imperative that counselors are enabled to identify students at risk who are struggling with a mental health issue and, at times of emotional distress, have the capacity to act out aggressively (Washington, 2013), in order to protect their safety and the safety of others. Counselors help all students to build necessary skills and overcome barriers to learning and development. School counselors can provide students in need access to mental health services that may not be available elsewhere, which helps to reduce disruptive behavior and improve academic achievement and attendance (Cowan et al., 2013).

Additionally, school counselors are encouraged to provide professional development and formulate an inclusive school culture. School counselors can provide professional development as they may be the stakeholders responsible for facilitating groups and workshops addressing bullying, crisis intervention, prevention of violence, mental health, classroom management, and safety (National Education Association, 2014), as doing so will promote inclusivity, engagement, and reduce the likelihood of violence. School counselors can train students to become peer mediators, facilitate groups addressing conflict resolution, diversity, and character education, and develop

constructive problem-solving skills amongst students so that they can resolve their problems in a productive rather than destructive manner.

Further, school counselors can work to strengthen school attachment amongst students. According to Wike and Fraser (2009), school counseling interventions aimed at increasing school bonding and connectedness, fostering trust between staff and students, increasing student involvement, and eradicating social stratification are important in reducing gun violence in schools. Students need to be invested in the school community. School counselors can help to develop extracurricular programs that mandate student participation, which helps contribute to a sense of belonging and decreases feelings of alienation and hostility (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

### **Collaborating With Stakeholders: Utilizing Threat Assessment Strategies to Help Reduce Gun-Related Atrocities**

In order to be more responsive to any potential school shooting, school counselors along with other stakeholders, can ask the following questions to determine the extent to which a student has the potential to carry out a violent act: What has the child said? Does the child have any gripes? What do their friends know? Do they have access to weapons? Are they depressed? Additionally, educators need to be aware of students who have complaints about other students or faculty and to conduct behavioral observations of these students (Lee, 2013), as 81% of perpetrators had a grievance at the time of their attack. By gathering information and asking certain questions, counselors, educators, parents, and students can help to identify a possible school shooting by a student who could be a potential threat (Lee, 2013).

In addition to collaborating with other school stakeholders, school counselors can also form partnerships with local mental health agencies to ensure that students who are struggling are receiving the outside help that they need. Collaboration is a key component for school counselors, as they are not certified to make diagnoses (Dikel, 2012). School counselors need to network with mental health professionals and refer at-risk students to seek treatment as well as raise awareness in schools regarding students who are in pain and need treatment. School personnel can then make referrals to outside agencies, which can diagnose and treat clients suffering from a mental illness.

### **Counselors Educating Students: Self-Regulation, Impulse Control, Personal Responsibility, and Social Information Processing**

According to Harms (2012), in a study conducted by the University of Chicago in partnership with Chicago Public Schools, violence prevention programs addressing self-regulation; one's capacity to alter his or her behavior, impulse control, personal responsibility (taking ownership of behaviors), and social information processing (the ability to infer the intentions of others) helped to reduce youth violence within the schools significantly. Self-regulation is an especially important skill as it allows students to recognize that they can be flexible in changing negative behaviors to more positive ones. Self-regulation encourages students' social conscience to take precedence over their own impulses, encouraging them to make healthier choices (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008).

## **Encouraging Families and Administrators to Monitor Social Media Accounts to Combat School Violence**

Fifty-five percent of youth ages 12–13 and 82% of youth ages 14–17 use social networking sites. Youth and teens utilize a variety of sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, to share information instantaneously with their friends and peers (Wallace, 2014). Many students post comments on social media regarding their emotions, feelings, overall mentality, and potential plans to carry out a violent act involving guns. Therefore, it would be advantageous for school counselors to communicate with fellow students and families about the importance of monitoring and reporting any alarming postings that may indicate if a student has intentions of hurting themselves or others. Families need to be aware of the type of material that their children are posting and are exposed to. Many school districts today are partnering with technology companies so that they have access to monitor students' postings on social media Web sites (Wallace, 2014). The technology companies are able to access logs, view what students record, and the sites they have posted, ultimately eliminating anonymity and holding students accountable for their actions. Monitoring also allows counselors, families, and districts to intervene and take preventative measures, prior to a crisis, to ensure improved safety for all students.

### **Discussion**

This paper contributes to the overall literature in that it addresses the significance of student mental health; particularly for those struggling with an untreated mental illness within the school setting, and its impact on potential gun violence. Seventy-five percent of students struggling with mental illness do not receive treatment (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). Research has shown that a majority of perpetrators have been victims of bullying, possess low self-esteem, lack coping skills, display ineffective anger management skills, and have poor problem solving skills (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Additionally, the leading causes of gun violence in the school setting include bullying, medication non-compliance, and side effects of psychotropic drugs. There are several challenges that schools face including the fact that there is a lack of funding for schools, which can lead to a lack of school counselors or adequate resources to help students struggling with a mental illness. Additionally, counselors cannot mandate students struggling with mental illness to receive outside services nor can they prevent students struggling with mental health issues from purchasing firearms.

Although there are difficulties that counselors confront, they do have the ability to educate students, facilitate groups on topics such as bullying, grief and loss, coping skills, anger management, conflict resolution, and self-esteem in order to teach students ways to manage and regulate their emotions constructively, as well as raise students' awareness about the importance of peacefully resolving conflicts and self-care. This training will equip them with proactive coping skills that they need in order to deal with their emotions in a constructive and healthy manner, rather than demonstrating aggression or choosing gun violence to deal with their rage. It is imperative that school counselors and educators take proper preventative measures by creating safe and inclusive school climates, helping students to increase positive constraints in their life (family and peer support/school engagement), encouraging students to come forward and disclose

information regarding potential threats, screening students, identifying at-risk students, performing threat assessments with key stakeholders, emphasizing the significance for families to monitor social media usage, teaching students about self-regulation and controlling impulsive behaviors, and collaborating with mental health agencies and families in order to provide students with the necessary resources to prevent future school calamities from occurring.

### **Implications for the Field**

Due to the prevalence of gun violence within the school setting, counselors must network and partner with mental health professionals at outside agencies, screen potentially at-risk students, encourage parental involvement, and work closely with other stakeholders to identify students who are at risk of committing violent acts.

Moreover, it is vital that school counselors conduct individual and group sessions addressing socialization skills, self-regulation, impulse control, conflict resolution, anti-bullying, problem solving, anger management, and self-worth. These psychosocial groups will enable students to learn ways to communicate effectively and resolve problems in a peaceful manner, develop greater self-control, acquire assertiveness skills, and provide students with a toolbox of competencies to utilize. Counselors can help students learn to process their emotions using healthy and productive techniques rather than detrimental methods. In addition, school counselors must be aware of existing community resources to provide referrals to students and their families for mental health evaluations and treatment options. Furthermore, it is supremely important that counselors work to de-stigmatize, normalize, and educate students and families about mental illness and available options, so that they are more receptive and likely to seek necessary treatment.

Lastly, this paper also raises counselors' awareness that many of the perpetrators are above average students (Lee, 2013). This substantiates the fact that academic performance is not indicative of emotional intelligence, as it was reported that many of the attackers felt isolated, alone, and angry; lacked communication skills; and experienced resentment towards their victims *prior* to the onset of the violent attacks.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In the future, additional research needs to be carried out on existing laws regarding gun control and their impact on violence in schools. Additionally, it would be beneficial to have further research conducted on which specific counseling interventions are most effective in reducing the likelihood of violence within the school setting. Moreover, research needs to be conducted on the most effective procedures for partnerships with mental health agencies in order to offer a more comprehensive approach to assisting mentally ill students.

Further, it would be advantageous to determine whether or not a strong correlation exists between school counselors' practices and a decline in gun violence. If a strong correlation is found, the findings may reinforce the necessity of employing additional counselors in each school. It would also be helpful to conduct further research

on the benefits of mental health screenings in schools in assisting students in receiving and accepting the treatment that they need.

### **Conclusion**

The statistics regarding the significant increase of gun violence within the school setting is staggering and alarming. Fundamentally, schools have been created to be safe havens for students and faculty, where everyone can feel protected and work in a climate that is conducive to learning. When violent acts, including gun shootings, take place, trust and security is compromised, leaving faculty and students feeling defeated and traumatized. Therefore, in order to ensure the well-being of all students and faculty, it would be beneficial for a bridge to be built between schools and mental health agencies so that students suffering from a mental illness, and those struggling individuals who have access to firearms, receive the help and treatment that they require. Mental health screenings are imperative in helping counselors and educators to identify at-risk students and ensure that they are referred for appropriate treatment so that they do not externalize their negative emotions in brutal or sadistic acts. School counselors have the unique and essential role of ensuring that all students are successful academically, emotionally, behaviorally, and personally. It is therefore essential that school counselors working in conjunction with students, their families, other educators, and community organizations identify the students who are experiencing extreme emotional distress. Moreover, school counselors are in the unique position to assist students to deal with their angst and use proactive measures to help them ease their pain and work to prevent them from inflicting harm on themselves and others.

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