

How we might begin to reduce school shootings in America



The past two decades have seen a marked increase in both the number and severity of school shootings. Following a meta-analysis of factors common to many of these school shootings, [William Jaynes](#) suggests a number of potential solutions. These include supporting parental involvement with their children, reintroducing character education in schools, and more intelligent gun laws.

There is no question that school shootings represent one of the most disturbing trends in American society today. Prior to 1960 such events were almost unheard of, but in recent years they often take place more than once a week. My primary area of expertise over the last two decades is in conducting meta-analyses. A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject in order to determine the aggregated results of said research. Meta-analyses can help in finding solutions to the problem of school shootings.

Addressing commonalities between shootings

In order for meta-analyses to be helpful in addressing the issue of school shootings, it is important to address what the data show is common between school shootings. The commonalities include listening to exotic anti-social hard rock [music](#), a recent breakup with a girlfriend, a fascination with guns and violence, and a poor or distant [relationship](#) with the shooter's parents. Within this context, meta-analyses that have examined some of the primary factors that influence both constructive and destructive, or anti-social, human behavior can be helpful.

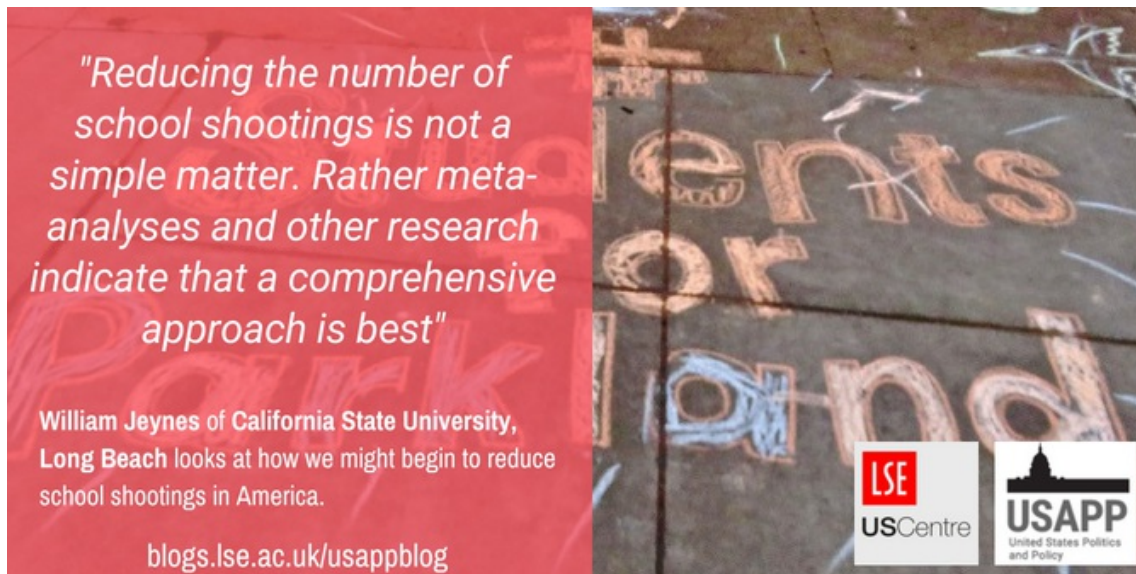
Family factors

Meta-analyses and other types of research consistently reveal that family factors are the most important in explaining student outcomes. It therefore is logical that family variables are, generally, the most important factors in school shootings and the first line of defense in terms of preventing them in the future. Whether it is parental involvement, which is often connected to family structure and the availability of the youth's two parents, parental style (providing love and structured personal guidance), and other expressions of mothering and fathering, parenting is at the forefront of influencing the behavior of youth.

Scholars, political leaders, and educators have conveniently overlooked one of the primary traits that the shooters have in common. Many recent shootings have been committed by youth from fatherless homes. The Parkland attacker was a foster child. The aggressors at Sandy Hook were also from divorced families. Although the recent Las Vegas shooting was not at a school, Stephen Paddock grew up in a house without a father, because his dad was either in jail or running away from the law for most of his life. Dylann Roof, who committed the mass murder at a church in South Carolina, also came from a fatherless home. These statistics should not be surprising, because Cynthia Harper and Sara McLanahan [found](#) that youth that were either mother only- or mother plus stepfather-families were between two and three times as likely to be incarcerated as their counterparts in intact families. The habit of many people is to look to the government for solutions, but in this case the solution could begin in the home.

Character education in schools

The decision by the US Supreme Court-in a series of three cases in 1962 and 1963- to remove Bible and prayer from the public schools had a dramatic impact on the extent teachers gave character instruction. What happened in the aftermath of the 1962-1963 Supreme Court decisions to remove the Bible, in particular, is that there was a *de facto* removal of character education as well. As a result of these decisions, schools became very reluctant to teach love, forgiveness, and other qualities, for fear that even one parent would complain that Christianity was being taught.



“Tam High Vigil for Parkland School Shooting” by Fabrice Florin is licensed under CC BY SA 2.0

For many years, the vast majority of educators believed that character instruction was the most important part of the school curriculum. The character curriculum included important issues such as resolving conflicts with other people, how to forgive one who has done you harm, and how to act as a peacemaker in a conflict. Many accounts have been written by people personally victimized by the school shooters and they speak of the aggressors as people who hold grudges, lack love and kindness, are not equipped to resolve conflicts.

In the 1800s DeWitt Clinton was the president of the largest organization of schools in America. He emphasized character instruction above all. After educating countless thousands of students he [declared](#):

Of the many thousands who have been instructed in our free schools in the City of New York, there is not a single instance known of anyone being convicted of a crime (p. 54).

Such a laudatory report would be unheard of today. Instead, Americans talk of school shootings.

Clearly, the United States has become more diverse since 1962 and 1963. Therefore, a Judeo-Christian paradigm would be inappropriate. However, there are certain values that virtually every person from each culture is agreed on, unless they are in prison or a sociopath, e.g., honesty, sincerity, respect, and responsibility. Educators can teach these qualities in a character instruction program.

People need to be unafraid of the terms “normal” and “abnormal” and send a student for help, when it is needed

A number of the school shooters had a long history of bizarre or threatening behaviors that were not reported to the school officials and law enforcement, when they should have been. For example, Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech attacker, and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, of the Columbine massacre, had been constantly threatening to either kill or do substantial bodily harm to countless numbers of their fellow students. On Harris’ website he [asserted](#), “My belief is that if I say something it goes. I *am* the law, if you don’t like it you die. If I don’t like you or I don’t like what you want me to do, you die.” He also [declared](#), “I will rig up explosives all over a town and detonate each of them at will after I mow down the whole {expletive} area”. Harris also [wrote](#) in Dylan’s handbook, “God I can’t wait until they die. I can taste their blood now.... You know what I hate? MANKIND! Kill everything....kill everything”.

In the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, Seung-Hui Cho killed 33 people. For two years before the killings. Cho accused his fellow students of literally being guilty of cannibalism and committing genocide, which frightened his peers regarding what he might do next. Lucinda Roy was head of the English Department at Virginia Tech, when the incident happened. In her book [No Right to Remain Silent](#) (2009), Roy shared that Virginia Tech mental health guidelines were more concerned about protecting Cho’s privacy rather than the safety of the university students.

If this nation is to see a decrease in school shootings, the words “normal” and “abnormal” need to re-enter the nation’s vocabulary. People need to realize that there is still “right” and “wrong” and that the idea that *everything* is relative is a myth. Until the country faces that reality, the shootings will only continue.

A time of reflection needs to return to the schools

Before the U.S. Supreme Court decisions of 1962 and 1963 mentioned earlier, that removed prayer from the public schools, a time of reflection was allowed in the schools. In 1995 Bill Clinton made a speech in Vienna, Virginia, just outside Washington D.C., in which he criticized public schools for not allowing moments of silence used for reflection in a way that is consistent with the child’s personal belief system. Such exercises can help a student conquer stress, handle their emotions better, and give them a sense of peace. As a result, acts of violence will be less likely to occur.

Intelligent gun laws

Ironically, most of the marching against school shootings has focused on passing laws that make it illegal for young people to possess guns. This is unfortunate, because laws are already on the books that make this illegal. New gun control laws may help reduce killing using firearms among adults, because such laws are often not on the books. However, anti-gun laws among youth are already widespread throughout the country. The problem is that the vast majority of the attackers procure their guns either from older friends or parents. Hence, if one wants to curb the flow of guns to youth, then the key is to pass laws that target those who willingly give or sell guns to youth and those who show negligence in their care of guns, so that it is clear that youth can easily gain access and load them. It is also unwise only to focus only on guns, because an increasing number of these acts of violence involve explosives, which potentially can be used to kill larger numbers of people than guns.

Reducing the number of school shootings is not a simple matter. Rather meta-analyses and other research indicate that a comprehensive approach, as I’ve described, is best. Meta-analyses indicate that the solutions begin in the family followed by having character education, being unafraid to report abnormal behavior, having a moment of silence in the schools, and introducing properly targeted gun laws. Such a comprehensive approach will help stop the bleeding, literally.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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