

Case Study: Parkland High School Shooting

Rachael Riggs

National American University

Henley-Putnam School of Strategic Security

PRO690 - Advanced Threat Assessment

Bruce H. Guggenberger

May 2023

Case Study: Parkland High School Shooting

Executive Summary

School shootings can best be prevented by having the right people adequately trained in how to handle an individual exhibiting signs of a problem via their mental state, restricting access to guns, addressing issues of bullying within the school, providing support to individuals that need it and finally having protective measures in place, physical barriers and trained individuals ready in the event a shooting were to commence.

Background

The Parkland, FL, school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School occurred on Valentine's Day of 2018. 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz opened fire in the school, killing fourteen students and three staff members. (Mier, 2022)

After the arrest of Cruz, he began evaluations with a forensic psychologist. The interviewing psychologist, Dr. Charles Scott, labeled him as having an anti-social personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, a history of conduct disorder, and malingering. (Sharp, 2022) Cruz told Dr. Scott that he had chosen Valentine's Day because he "had no one to love." (Mier, 2022)

Their parents adopted Nikolas and his brother Zach Cruz when they were young. Their father passed away from a heart attack. A few months before the shooting in Parkland, the boys unexpectedly lost their mother to complications with the flu. Zach told officers during interrogations that Nik was often teased and felt at fault as if he should have done more to help him out. (Contrera, 2019)

In the years growing up, deputies responded to 23 incidents at the Cruz residence and eighteen of these involved Nikolas. Most of the calls related to fights, throwing rocks at a kid during a fight, throwing his mother against the wall, and once he had shot a chicken with a BB gun. In 2016, Nikolas began posting to social media about his interest in "shooting up the school." Deputies passed this information on to the school resource officer, and it is unclear if anything transpired from the information. (Rose & Booker, 2018) Five months before the shooting, he wrote, "I am going to be a professional school shooter," and "I am going to go on a killing rampage." Just days before the massacre, he posted, "My goal is 20 people. My location is Stoneman Douglas in Parkland, Florida. It will be a big event" (Sharp, 2022). This post was among many that never got the attention they should have received.

On the day of the shooting, an armed school resource officer was on duty. This officer never entered the building. Many law enforcement officers, upon arrival, did not enter the building either, and deputies did not try to confront the shooter, giving Cruz more time to cause harm, resulting in further loss of life. (Rose & Booker, 2018)

Despite multiple signs and warnings, no one took action to prevent the tragedy. Zach believes Nik's fate could have been different if someone intervened. Zach has since started an anti-bullying organization inspired by Nik called We Isolate No One or "WIN." WIN has a 24-hour hotline to report bullying; the company then reports the bullying incident to the caller's school, and then if the problem is not resolved, they pursue legal action against the school. (Contrera, 2019)

Case Evaluation

There are a few key points that this incidence of a school shooting emphasizes and raises awareness that these issues need to be handled differently. The most prominent issues are *guns, mental health and bullying, and proper training*. The key points are as follows:

1. School bullying is a massive problem for our youth and our children's schools. 19% of students in a study report they have been victims of bullying in the prior 12 months. 7% of students reported not attending school because of fear of threats or bullying. Only a tiny portion of these incidents are ever reported. (Cornell, 2020) In a school counselor survey, 87% of school shooting perpetrators were bullied prior to the shooting. (Hicks, Carter, Berry, Noble, & Winkelman, 2020)
2. As witnessed in the Parkland massacre, when a person exhibits unstable mental states, this should be taken seriously. Cruz stated his state of mind in multiple online posts, which should have received investigation. A person's mental health is a leading cause of school-based violence. One should observe the mentality of students, and when a person exhibits signs that their mental health may not be in the best state, this individual needs monitoring through threat assessments, interviews, as well as through counselors and interviews with family.
3. Most school shooting perpetrators are under the legal age to purchase a gun. The issue with guns comes down to access. Firearms must always be securely locked and only accessible by the registered owner. Besides laws limiting gun ownership, registered owners must take responsibility for weapons in the home. One cannot kill by a gun if they do not have a gun to access.
4. School staff members, student resource officers, counselors, threat assessment teams, and law enforcement must receive adequate training to handle situations such as mass shootings.

Solutions/ Strategies

Strategy 1: Schools need to work to reduce school bullying and harassment, first by providing awareness campaigns, making safe ways for students to report bullying, and creating a team to help them cope with and eliminate bullying in their lives.

Strategy 2: Protective strategies should be mandatory, such as a dedicated threat assessment team, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and a well-trained and armed law enforcement officer on the premises at all times.

Strategy 3: Parents and Schools should maintain a close relationship facilitated by the school. The school or law enforcement should educate parents and the community and reinforce the necessity of locking up any weapons in the home.

Strategy 4: All school staff members should be required to undergo training, the school resource officer should receive specialized training, and schools must acquire a well-trained and dedicated threat assessment team. Proper training for all law enforcement officers should also ensure they are ready and equipped to deal with a shooting. Under no circumstances should a shooter be able to continue their rampage when there is a safety officer or a staff member able to intervene based on proper training.

Conclusion

A profile of a school shooter cannot be defined because of the vast differences between each case and person. However, we can break it down to a few key issues affecting almost all school shooting incidents. These include the need for more robust gun control and protection, providing the proper training to the necessary people, addressing bullying in schools and finding ways to eliminate or minimize the bullying, as well as providing support to those affected and being aware of a person's mental state conducted by a proper threat assessment done by the threat assessment team. (Carter, 2019)

Schools are primarily responsible for maintaining these strategies and ensuring the best and correct way to handle each strategy is utilized. After the schools, local law enforcement needs to ensure that they are doing their part with the public and the schools, being actively involved in both and providing support to the schools as needed. Both organizations need to strengthen the community and the students through their support. The first way to do this is by going through the proper training.

References

Carter, S. L. (2019). Examining the Acceptability of School Shooting Prevention Strategies among School Counselors and Other School Personnel. *Journal of Counselor Practice*, 10(2), 51–69. doi:10.22229/eta1022019

Contrera, J. (2019, January 25). His brother confessed to gunning down 17 people in Parkland. But he's the only family Zach Cruz has left. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2019/01/25/his-brother-confessed-gunning-down-17-people-parkland-hes-only-family-zach-cruz-has-left/>

Cornell, D. G. (2020, February). Threat assessment as a school violence prevention strategy. *Criminology & Public Policy*. Retrieved from <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.nauproxy01.national.edu/c/1mit4r/viewer/html/tepv2y4xtz>

Hicks, J., Carter, S., Berry, S., Noble, N., & Winkelman, L. a. (2020). School Counselors' Perceptions of School Shooting Causes and Protocols. *JOURNAL OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT COUNSELING*, 6(3), 166-180.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2020.1835417>

Mier, T. (2022, October 3). Parkland School Shooter Trial: He Chose Valentine's Day Because He Had 'No One to Love.' *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/parkland-school-shooter-trial-nikolas-cruz-1234604459/>

Rose, J., & Booker, B. (2018, March 1). Parkland Shooting Suspect: A Story Of Red Flags, Ignored. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/28/589502906/a-clearer-picture-of-parkland-shooting-suspect-comes-into-focus>

Sharp, R. (2022, October 3). Nikolas Cruz's chilling reason for ending Parkland shooting as he says he targeted victims over 'nasty look.' *The Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/nikolas-cruz-s-chilling-reason-for-ending-parkland-shooting-as-he-says-he-targeted-victims-over-nasty-look/ar-AA12y32M>