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# Victimological Measures for Preventing School Shootings: Expert View

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## Abstract

*The study aims to develop scientifically based victimological measures for preventing school shootings. It is an urgent issue nowadays as there are frequent attacks at educational institutions all around the world. However, it is not only the law enforcement agencies that must ensure the safety and security of citizens but citizens themselves can contribute to their safety. The expert survey method was used in this study. 214 respondents (investigators, interrogators, lawyers, and other practitioners) involved in crime control and prevention were interviewed during the survey. The article describes the most effective prevention measures taking into account the opinion of the respondents as well as the results of the authors' analysis of the incidents which have taken place in the USA, Russia, Germany, and other countries. These measures include socialization of potential offenders; awareness-raising activities involving potential victims (students), highlighting the impropriety of such negative behavior as bullying; installation of classroom door locks; evacuation devices acquired by schools.*

Keywords: School-shooting, Bullying, Victims, Prevention, Socialization, Vigilance, Evacuation.

## Introduction

Numerous violent attacks on educational institutions have become a subject of serious concern in recent years. Such cases were previously characteristic mainly of the US educational institutions; however, they take place all over the world now, including the European countries and Russia. This phenomenon is often referred to as school shooting despite the fact that attacks do not take place only at schools and do not involve the use of firearms only.

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One of the most notorious incidents in the world is the one that happened at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado, on April 20, 1999; it is one of the deadliest mass shootings at the United States educational institutions. It has been repeatedly coppedied in the United States and other countries. According to mass media reports, many of the attackers are members of the so-called Columbine Communities or school shooting fan communities on social networking sites. Although these communities have certain moral standards, violent attacks on schools receive their approval, and the attackers are seen as heroes who have done the right thing. The videos shared on the social networks often have comments supporting and glorifying school shooting. The sociological research by Hawdon, Oksanen and Rasanen (2014) shows that school shooting fans are a permanent phenomenon on YouTube, and the Columbine case still attracts a global following even 15 years after the tragedy.

The EU countries are no exception. In Finland, for example, there were several school shootings in 2007–2008 killing twenty people. Some scholars consider these incidents to be a national phenomenon reflecting both psychological and microenvironment problems although Finland is a country with relatively favorable socio-economic conditions (Oksanen, Kaltiala-Heino, Holkeri & Lindberg, 2015).

In Russia, school shootings were quite rare until recently. Only a small proportion of them involved the use of firearms, which can be explained by the fact that the country has quite strong control over distribution of firearms and there are laws imposing limitations on purchasing guns. However, in 2018 there was an increase in the number of violent attacks with cold arms or firearms, flammable liquids, and other weapons.

In particular, on January 19, 2018, a 15-year-old student of an Ulan-Ude school attacked a group of students with an ax. He then set the classroom on fire with a bottle of flammable liquid. 7 people were injured, with some of them in critical condition. A criminal case was initiated against the attacker based on Part 3 of Article 30, Clauses “a” and “c” of Part 2, Article 105 of the Criminal Code of Russian Federation. The investigation is still ongoing.

One of the recent shooting rampages took place in Crimea in October 2018 when students and employees of Kerch Polytechnic College were attacked by a young man who used a homemade explosive device and a rifle. The investigation is still ongoing, but the media data suggest that the attack was carried out by one of the students. The number of victims exceeded 70 people. The motives of this rampage are to be established.

Regretfully, school shootings are quite numerous worldwide. In this respect, the number of school shootings in the United States exceeds by many times the number of such cases in other countries. There were 154 attacks at the US educational institutions during 2013–2015 (35 in 2013, 55 in 2014, 64 in 2015) (Kalesan et al., 2017).

Armed attacks have also taken place in Germany, Hungary, Canada, Greece, and other countries (Malkki, 2013). In Russia, such attacks do not count for a separate crime in the official statistics; they are classified as murder or attempted murder. Nevertheless, according to mass media reports, there were about 10 school shootings during 2017–2018.

## Literature Review

It should be noted that there are a lot of scientific studies on the causes of attacks, prevention issues, social consequences of attack incidents, etc. The authorities, the press,

and the public start discussing prevention issues every time an attack takes place. But these discussions do not often come to action, and even if they do, the measures introduced do not achieve the desired effect. It is often proposed to tighten gun control in the United States, but these proposals evoke strong resistance from gun rights advocates. Studies by (Van Sparrentak et al., 2018; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2017) give a comprehensive review of the scientific literature on the viewpoint of the opponents; therefore, there is no need for going into detail in this paper. However, it should be noted that criminals in Russia (including those who attack schools) still manage to illegally get access to firearms although Russia is a country which has exceptionally strict gun control laws. Consequently, tightening the restrictions for purchase and possession of firearms is unlikely to have a significant impact. More than that, explosive and flammable substances that represent an even greater public hazard can be made with materials obtained in a legal way.

The most common prevention measures taken by the authorities in most countries are equipping schools with metal detectors, improving school security measures, and armed security guards in institutions (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Anderson, Allen & Jenkins, 2015). However, we support the opinion that such measures are absolutely ineffective and they contribute rather to creating a false feeling of security than to decreasing real risks (Crawford & Burns, 2015). Metal detectors detect the amount and type of the metal present, and they can prevent carrying prohibited items into an institution only if the security guard takes proper action. The problem with their use lies in the fact that after some time of checking, the guards become less vigilant or even deaf to the device. It is also necessary to take into account the time of checking. In case of government agencies, e.g. courts, each person who enters the building is checked with a metal detector which takes an average of 1 to 5 minutes. The number of people in educational institutions is much higher. Thus, checking all students of one secondary school grade can take about forty minutes. So, one can only imagine what getting to a school building will be like in the morning hours. Finally, a person who has been studying at the same institution for several years knows very well how to get into the building escaping the checkpoint. Thus, the human factor reduces the effectiveness of metal detectors to almost nothing.

Improving the quality of the security staff (more security guards, recruitment process, etc.) does not seem to be an effective method either. The aim of the security protection is primarily to neutralize the threat coming from the outside, not from the inside. It is quite difficult even for an experienced guard to determine who of the students has intent to commit an attack. The scholarly literature also suggests that the attack is always sudden and unexpected, so it is impossible to react in a proper way (Nedzel, 2014).

A lot of scholarly articles on school shootings have been published in recent years (Wombacher et al., 2018; Brown, 2018). However, one has to admit that the victimology aspects of school shooting do not receive enough attention either in theory or in practice. Thus, some scholars in their research stress the importance of studying the victims of the attacks and the possibilities for their rescue in a school shooting or any other mass violence incident. Peterson & Silver (2015) see empathy as one of the key factors as it allows you to collect the necessary background information about the victims and perpetrators.

Some scholarly articles focus on the defining characteristics of victims. The studies conclude that the attacks are random and anyone can become a victim (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Volokh, 2000). On the other hand, there are also studies which show that

the probability of becoming a victim of a school shooting is not at all as random as it may seem at first sight. In fact, gender, nationality, race, age, relationships with perpetrators and many other factors are of great importance (Madfis, 2017). There are also studies which examine socio-demographic data related to victims and define their common features (Krouse & Richardson, 2015). Another scholarly research discusses the geographic location of educational institutions (Kaufman, Hall & Zagura, 2012).

Effects of the attacks on victims have also been thoroughly studied. The concept of moral panic of the public (Schildkraut, Elsass & Stafford, 2015) and description of the victims' personality in the media (Christenson, 2014) were given an in-depth analysis. The issue of compensation to and rehabilitation of the victims of such incidents is also noteworthy, and it should take into account the responsibility of the state (Heaton, Waggoner & Morikawa, 2015). Some scholars conducted a deep study on the impact of mass shootings on the mental health of citizens. They found out that psychological repercussions extend beyond direct victims (which depend on many factors) to the surrounding community, especially in small cities and countries (Shultz et al., 2014; Turunen & Punamaki, 2014).

Academic literature also contains a sufficient amount of research related to the responsibility of the victims themselves. It is necessary to carry out a detailed investigation of perpetrators' social relationships in the school they attended, as the perpetrators deliberately chose it as the scene of their violent act. When it comes to social dynamics, the primary factor discussed in the literature is the perpetrators' perception of themselves as victims of physical or verbal bullying prior to their attack (Sommer, Leuschner & Scheithauer, 2014). In particular, the impact of bullying and humiliation on the part of future victims which could provoke a further attack is investigated in (Björkqvist, 2015; Sabian & Bass, 2017; Evans, Fraser & Cotter, 2014).

Thus, there is some research investigating the victimology issues of school shootings, but it is still focused mainly on the personality characteristics of victims or on the problems of survival of victims in an ongoing attack.

On the other hand, the activities aimed at prevention of possible crimes are seldom discussed in academic literature. The time intervals between the attacks are analyzed by Arslan & Olsen (2016); their findings can be used to increase the safety of potential victims. Some scholars draw the attention to the social roots of the problem as perpetrators often have antisocial behavior or just stay outside any social control (Oksanen et al., 2013; Meloy et al., 2015). Others point out the importance of interaction between students and law enforcement officials as this reduces the likelihood of racial intolerance, bullying, and humiliation (Jennings et al., 2011). These findings are confirmed by our study as well, in particular, that it is necessary to timely report about the planned crimes. It is also necessary to stress the importance of the teacher's role in school shooting incidents. The results of this research can help to raise awareness among teachers, parents, students, and school administration of the dangers of armed attacks. They can also help when one has to choose a behavior pattern in case of an attack (Lee, 2013).

Some other victimology issues related to prevention of such crimes are also examined in the scientific literature (Bondü et al., 2013; Hoffmann & Roshdi, 2013).

In our opinion, victimology issues related to prevention of school shooting deserve more attention. In fact, victimological prevention measures can be quite effective, given

the fact that they have some advantages over crime prevention strategies. First of all, such measures usually do not require substantial financial investment, which allows carrying them out at a larger scale. Secondly, they are aimed at an independent targeted object – the victim, who is usually not taken into consideration. Finally, since school shootings are, primarily, attacks on an individual, it is reasonable to assume that individuals themselves can neutralize the reasons for committing crimes against them.

### Methodology

This study aims at developing scientifically based victimological measures for preventing school shooting. The expert survey method has been employed as a methodological framework of the study. The survey respondents work for crime prevention organizations; they are investigators, interrogators, district police officers, lawyers, and legal experts. A total of 214 people were interviewed. The respondents were asked to answer one question: What victimological measures can be effective to prevent school shootings according to your experience? The respondents could give an unlimited number of answers. In addition to the expert survey method, we analyzed and compared the data relating to school shooting incidents. The data were collected from criminal investigation files, scientific literature, and publications in mass media.

The approval of the Ethics Committee of the Vyatka State University (the equivalent of IRB approval) was obtained on January 30, 2018 to protect the rights of respondents. This was done well in advance of the start of the expert survey.

### Results

Figure 1. Victimological measures to prevent school shooting attacks suggested by experts

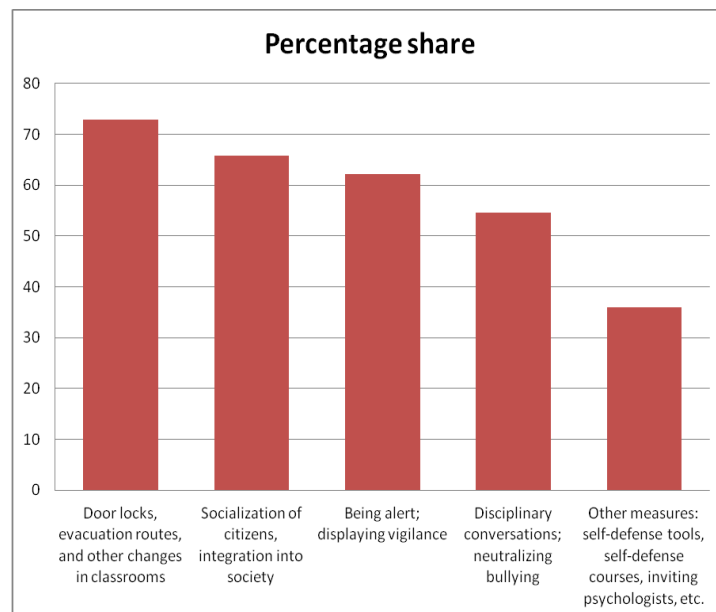


Figure 1 presents the experts' responses. Despite the fact that the answers were quite diverse, one can see that some of them were more common. The experts have shown certain unanimity in the choice of the victimological prevention measures. The majority of the responses related to the classroom equipment, socializing citizens, disciplinary conversations, and cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

The experts also mentioned some other less popular methods which are consolidated and presented as the last indicator in the Figure. Among them are self-defense tools, self-defense courses, consulting a psychologist, arming teachers, regular mental health assessment, and some others.

## **Discussion**

Despite the fact that the measures aimed at increasing the security of educational institutions were mentioned by the majority of experts, we consider it necessary to start the discussion with a different measure. The study does not rely only on the survey data. If we analyze the survey results combined with the analysis of the criminal investigation files and press publications, we can suggest that the most effective measures are the ones taken by the potential victims and aimed at socializing the potential attacker. It should be noted that the decision to commit an armed attack on an educational institution is premeditated and well thought over which is confirmed by most cases we have studied in the press and investigation files. Offenders need some time before becoming convinced of their decision to commit an attack. During this time, an offender starts to believe that the people around them deserve to die, and they become indifferent to the fate of other people.

We assume that socialization measures can help a person to get to know the positive aspects of the society and the people around. These people stop being faceless targets for shooting; that means it becomes more difficult to commit acts of violence against them.

The age of a potential attacker is also of importance. According to the scholarly data (Gerard et al., 2015), the average age of a school shooter is 16-19 years old, which is confirmed by the data from different school shooting incidents, including the ones investigated by us. Young people are not mature either mentally or socially yet. Studies show that people at this age do not fully comprehend what death is, what social consequences it implies (Trnka et al., 2017). They do not see their own death as a final event, let alone the death of those around them. In this sense, socialization activities allow them to see different aspects of other people's lives and to understand and develop their relationship with other people.

The measures for socialization are designed for quite an extended time frame, and it is almost impossible to determine the person whose actions need to be prevented. Consequently, the measures for socialization should be applied whenever possible and for all. If applied properly, they have no negative consequences.

The USSR had a developed system for integration of young people into the society on a massive scale, largely thanks to the pioneer movement. Teenagers, including those from disadvantaged families, did not get out of the public eye, and their participation in social activities was strongly encouraged. In other countries, such as the United States, the Scout movement, which has not lost its significance up to now, performs the same function. In China, social control has traditionally played a significant role involving parents, educational institutions and the teaching staff (Cretacci et al., 2018). Thus, the state should

develop a system of social control and integration of young people into society, but this will require a significant amount of time and other resources. In addition, in a democratic society, the authorities cannot make citizens participate in the process of socialization by force. Yet, voluntary participation does not usually mean broad population coverage.

Speaking of the need for victimological measures for socialization, we should take into account whether it will be possible for potential victims (teachers and students) to implement them.

The educational process is usually organized as individual or group work. The second option seems to be more preferable in terms of victimological prevention. In fact, both educational and social goals are achieved when students of one institution work together in small or large groups. A student who displays an antisocial attitude has to join other students to solve a task, which is supposed to have a positive impact on how they will treat each other in future. During the educational process, a teacher can change the composition of groups in accordance with the tasks set. This approach seems to be quite simple to implement and does not require any additional effort or financial investment. In fact, the authors of this article have implemented the above approach in teaching for a long time.

As for the students, who may become potential victims, it is quite enough for them to be vigilant. While a teacher works with a group of students only from time to time, students contact each other every day, not to mention communicating after classes. Consequently, they are more likely to notice any negative changes in a person's behavior. It is known that people are more emotionally closed in the modern urbanized society, but if a person becomes more emotionally closed, it seems to be appropriate to find out the reasons for such changes in an informal way. If a person's behavior becomes potentially dangerous, students should report to the law enforcement agencies or at least to the educators. In November 2018, one of the students of Omsk State University named after Dostoevsky planned an armed attack on the institution; fortunately, it was prevented thanks to a timely report to the police.

65.8% of the respondents in the expert survey also believe that socialization measures can be effective.

The research on the perpetrator's personality suggests that many of them were exposed to bullying or other forms of humiliation from other students. According to Gerard et al. (2015), the share of such attackers is 70–80%. Previously, bullying took place only in the real surrounding environment, but at present we can witness the fast spread of cyber-bullying which is no less dangerous. So, there is a kind of inversion of roles when potential victims have a bullying attitude towards the future attacker. The analysis of school shooting incidents has shown that bullying can bring a person into committing an attack, although it is not always an immediate cause of the crime.

With reference to the above, rejection of any kind of abuse, bullying or humiliation is a necessary prevention measure. One can exclude these negative phenomena by calling for and encouraging civilized behavior and, to a lesser extent, by taking legal action against bullies. In turn, explaining to students the possible consequences associated with a violent revenge of the victim of bullying can have a significant impact. It can be done in various ways: memos, discussions, etc.

54.6% of the respondents in the expert survey consider that the above measure is effective.

The immediate and most important task during an ongoing school shooting attack is to minimize the number of victims. Some simple measures can facilitate their rescue. The analysis of the incidents has revealed that the attackers start using the weapons inside the premises, not outside. The attack itself does not last long as the law enforcement agencies try to stop the attacker or the attacker commits a suicide. Consequently, the classroom doors should be equipped with locks, which can help to keep the attacker back or even avoid an attack as he may try to find an easier target due to a lack of time. At the same time, it is reasonable to prepare evacuation routes through windows, although this can largely depend on the type of a classroom. There are also some evacuation devices and equipment used in case of fires. The school administration should consider acquiring such devices.

The majority of respondents (72.9%) in the expert survey consider that it is necessary to improve evacuation procedures.

## **Conclusion**

Victimological measures can be effective in preventing school shootings. Moreover, they have some advantages over crime preventive measures: namely, low economic costs and treating victims as independent participants of crime prevention. They do not require support of the state authorities; potential victims can implement these measures on their own.

Measures for socialization of potential offenders should become the basis of crime prevention. Both historical experience and expert surveys suggest their effectiveness; at the same time, they are quite simple to take and do not require much effort or financial investment. In particular, it is necessary to create a scout movement in those countries where it does not exist, and it should be developed and supported in the countries where it already exists. It is also advisable to implement group work (in small and large groups) during the educational process when appropriate.

Vigilance and timely reporting of a planned crime may be of crucial significance in terms of prevention of an attack. It is also necessary to explain that reporting a crime is not a bad action in the eye of the public as adolescents and students often believe so.

Awareness-raising activities involving potential victims (students) are also an effective measure. They should aim at showing the impropriety of such negative behavior as bullying, abuse, humiliation, etc. It is necessary to highlight such social consequences of negative behavior as violent revenge reaction. Traditionally, informing and explanatory work are carried out by means of memos and group discussions. These simple methods are applied in many institutions and they should not be disregarded. However, the effectiveness of explanatory work can be increased through the use of modern communication media, for instance, interactive videos or computer games.

Installing locks on classroom doors and acquiring evacuation devices can significantly reduce the number of victims if an attack takes place. This measure is effective as such crimes do not usually last long and the offender tries to find the easiest targets, thus these measures can help to stop the attacker.



The described victimological measures, despite their possible high efficiency, should not be applied apart from the crime prevention measures. Their implementation combined with the preventive work with potential attackers can contribute to effective prevention of school shootings.

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