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## INTRODUCTION

- ◆ The United States has seen a surge in deaths associated with school shootings in recent years.
- ◆ Between January to May 2018 alone there were 40 school shootings in the U.S., 22 of which resulted in deaths (FBI, 2019).
- ◆ One of the most significant questions asked after a school shooting tragedy is what drove the shooter to commit the crime?
- ◆ These are legitimate questions that need practical answers, and it is, therefore, essential to understand the psychological characteristics of school shooters.
- ◆ In theory, screening for potential shooters could help identify individuals (1) with a psychological diagnosis such that treatment can be provided, and (2) at risk for school shootings such that preventive measures can be enacted.



## PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS

- ◆ Both mental health professionals and law enforcement have unsuccessfully attempted to create a single profile of school shooters thus far (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
- ◆ There is no one type of individual or pattern that can be deemed as a potential shooter.
- ◆ Common characteristics have been found in some previous shooters, including displaying signs of mental instability, isolating themselves from society, dealing with a catastrophic loss, and having easy access to weapons especially guns (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
- ◆ Most perpetrators were white adolescent boys who came from middle-class socioeconomic settings (Daskalopoulou, Igoumenou, & Alevizopoulos, 2017).
- ◆ Previous research has found school shooters to show signs of depression, personality disorder, paranoia, lack of impulse control and lack of empathy (Ioannou, Hammond, & Simpson, 2015).
- ◆ Researchers also suggested that school shooters who suffered from depression had difficulty taking any kind of criticism, anticipated rejection and were suspicious of people's motives towards them (Ioannou, Hammond, & Simpson, 2015).



## PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS

- ◆ A case study suggested that in some cases the shooter made contact with a mental health professional before their act of shooting and was not assessed for risk or not deemed at risk by their therapist (Ioannou, Hammond, & Simpson, 2015).
- ◆ Suicidal ideation was another common characteristic found in school shooters.
- ◆ In a study examining 41 school shooters from around the world, 78% of school shooters had either attempted suicide or spoken of taking their own lives at some time before the shooting (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
- ◆ Feelings of depression and anger along with suicidal ideation suggests some shooters resort to desperate measures by committing acts of murder and then taking their own lives (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
- ◆ Internalized anger makes them believe they have nothing to lose and conducting this act is their last resort (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
- ◆ Bonanno and Levenson (2014) noted that 71% of their sample of school shooters had been bullied.
- ◆ School shooters may also consider themselves to be loners; having this notion of being separated from others went far beyond feeling isolated, sad or lonely (Gerard et al., 2015).
- ◆ They felt extreme sadness and that they did not belong or fit in with others (Gerard et al., 2015).

## ROLE OF EASY ACCESS TO GUNS

- ◆ The other most defining characteristic of a school shooter is their easy access to firearm(s). The fact that these guns are acquired either from a family member who is a gun owner or purchased legally makes avoiding mass shootings difficult (Rubens & Shehadeh, 2014).
- ◆ The Columbine shooters, Virginia Tech Shooter, Sandy Hook shooter and the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooter all purchased or acquired their guns legally.
- ◆ Although the U.S. has the highest number of gun-related homicides amongst high-income nations for the age group of 15 to 24-year-olds, the debate about gun control remains an emotional and political one (Rubens, & Shehadeh, 2014).
- ◆ Lack of research on violence related to firearms in American society is a significant cause for this debate (Rubens & Shehadeh, 2014).
- ◆ U.S. Congress passed laws whereby the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention is no longer allowed to fund or promote gun control, but with the increase in deaths from mass shootings, the need for evidence-based research is more pressing than ever (Rubens & Shehadeh, 2014).
- ◆ It is neither practical nor feasible to screen for potential school shooters.
- ◆ Some argue that by implementing stricter laws, making it harder for individuals to acquire firearms and get a gun license, by having due process and a thorough and complete background check and renewals, it may be possible to ensure that firearms do not end up in the hands of potential perpetrators (Rubens & Shehadeh, 2014).