



No more Newtowns: Here's how we can better predict, prevent and respond to attacks on schools

As a security professional, I wasn't surprised by the news reports that began arriving on my cellphone last Friday morning. After all, it's my job to think about and plan for incidents like the one in Newtown. But as a parent, I was heartsick.

It was impossible to look at the photographs of those children standing outside the school, staring at the chaos unfolding around them, and not imagine the faces of my own kids. Impossible not to think about how the parents of those young victims and survivors would cope with a tragedy certain to haunt them for the rest of their lives.

It's cold comfort to note that the statistical probability of your own child being a victim of such a tragedy is less -- by two orders of magnitude -- than being struck by lightning.

No matter. Our logical minds are of little solace to our emotions in such a moment.

Yet somehow reason we must, calmly and methodically, if we're to prevent more tragedies like Newtown.

As President Barack Obama said in Newtown last Sunday, "If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town ... then surely we have an obligation to try."

So in that spirit -- as both a security professional and a parent -- let me suggest a framework in which to think about school violence and how it might be applied to avert another Newtown tragedy.

The approach I've used with local school districts and other security clients for more than a decade consists of three steps: Predict ... Prevent ... Respond. Taken separately, none of these is fully adequate, but in combination they can help create a powerful deterrent to violence.

Predict

The greatest myth about school violence -- and violence in general -- is that it can't be predicted. News stories typically portray violence as senseless and random, a "black swan" event amid the otherwise predictable activities of our everyday lives. Yet violence is one of the most ancient and deep-seated traits of the human animal, stretching far back into our evolutionary past. Over the course of millennia, humans have used violence, routinely and predictably, to achieve their ends: food, territory, mating rights, social status, independence.

Although (as psychologist Steven Pinker argued in his book "The Better Angels of Our Nature") violence has declined through the centuries, it nevertheless obeys a familiar logic, even in an

event as unusual as a mass murder. Such individuals look to extreme violence to give them a social status, often posthumously, that they couldn't achieve in life.

Those closest to them intuitively understand this. "Adam Lanza has been a weird kid since we were 5 years old," his neighbor and former classmate Timothy Dalton wrote on Twitter. "As horrible as this was, I can't say I am surprised."

In recent decades, a concern for the rights of mentally disturbed individuals has come to override concerns for public safety -- or even for protecting these individuals from themselves. While it's beyond my purview as a security professional to debate the legislation that has led to the deinstitutionalization of millions of mental patients, I do believe that we need to do a better job of treating and monitoring these patients outside a hospital setting.

The fact that potentially violent people aren't institutionalized doesn't make them any less dangerous. And certainly where they are part of the school population itself, they need to be monitored by school authorities as closely as existing law permits.

Although active shooters seldom fit a single profile, individuals with this level of violent predisposition are always identifiable. Moreover, individuals actively moving down the path toward becoming a shooter always telegraph their intentions in much the same way as suicidal individuals issue "cries for help." Most important, once a threat has been identified, there should be a clear process to follow.

Prevent

One of the first rules of security is to "harden the target." That means examining every point of perimeter vulnerability -- in the case of Sandy Hook Elementary School, the plate glass window Adam Lanza shot out to gain entry, which could have been inexpensively secured with plastic safety film.

It also means turning each classroom into a safe room, with heavy locking doors and inaccessible windows. Where necessary, metal detectors need to be installed and staffed with people who know how to use them. U.S. embassies and airports have made tremendous strides since 9/11 in making their structures more secure from attack. That experience needs to be extended to schools and other public buildings.

As important as these physical measures is the need for critical incident response training. Lockdown drills and intruder alert drills are vital and becoming a mainstay in the continuum of most schools' security plans, but the training shouldn't end there. Educators often ask me: "But what do I do if mine is the first class hit?" That's why training in confrontation management, gun disarming and active shooter response should be mandatory in a post-Newtown world. While teachers aren't "first responders" in the sense of having law-enforcement training, they inevitably are the initial responders.

The logic is simple: A school that, on a daily basis, expects to be attacked is the one least likely to be attacked.

Respond

Since Columbine, law enforcement has worked hard to ensure that a situation where police stood outside helplessly as students were massacred never happens again. But, as we saw in Newtown, what happens before help arrives is even more critical. As the grim saying goes, when seconds count, the police are just minutes away.

We need to recognize that, even with an armed school security officer, teachers and administrators have a responsibility to protect their students from physical harm that goes beyond hide and pray. They need to be trained, at least minimally, to respond to critical incidents from a playground melee to an active shooter.

Few events in recent years have done more than the Newtown tragedy to stir people's emotions -- not least my own. But I refuse to allow my longing for a world where malevolent people and deadly weapons don't exist to cloud my thinking about security. Making our schools safer -- by better predicting, better preventing and better responding to violence -- is a long-term process, not a one-time fix.

H. L. Mencken once observed: "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong."

We owe it both to the young victims of Newtown and to our own kids not to be the first to raise our hands, but to get the answer right.

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