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Trends. When is a Psychological Profile Not a Psychological Profile? The FBI and School Violence

Editor

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Author: Editor

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Lethal violence perpetrated by students in schools continues to be a very low base rate phenomenon in many countries. The low base rate renders it extremely difficult to develop predictors that could then be used to help prevent the violence from occurring. The difficulty is that a low base rate of occurrence leads to unacceptably high rates of false positive errors even when the predictors being used have high degrees of sensitivity.

In this context, a list of "warning signs" Issued by the United States (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) related to likely perpetrators of lethal school violence is most troubling. The list includes over forty items, such as recurrent themes of violence in a student's writing or artwork, resentment over real and perceived injustices, loneliness, an attitude of superiority, and a failed personal relationship.

To its credit, the FBI emphasized that its list was not a profile and that there are no reliable predictors of lethal school violence. The US Attorney General (to whom the FBI Director directly reports) commendably added that the items should not be used to unfairly label and stigmatize children.

However, an FBI spokesperson also stated that the list would help school officials deal with high-risk threats. Another stated that there are observable signs (to lethal school violence). Besides these mixed messages, the organizational and social psychology related to an authoritative agency issuing a set of risk factors strongly nurtures perceptions and accompanying behaviors that the risk factors do, indeed, constitute a profile and will be used to often unfairly label and stigmatize.

In conclusion, an ineffectual attempt to prevent lethal school violence will often lead to a violence of the soul. (See Baker, J.A. (1998). Are we missing the forest for the trees? Considering the social context of school violence. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36, 29-44; Carter, S. P., & Stewin, L. L. (1999). School violence in the Canadian context: An overview and model for intervention. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 21, 267-277; F.B.I. lists caution signs for violence in classroom. (September 7, 2000). *The New York Times*, p. A18; Speaker, K. M., & Petersen, G. J. (2000). School violence and adolescent suicide: Strategies for effective intervention. *Educational Review*, 52, 65-73; The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective. (September 6, 2000). FBI Press Release at <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrm/pressrel/pressrel00/school.htm>; Verlinden, S., Hersen, M., & Thomas, J. (2000). Risk factors in school shootings. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 20, 3-56; Vernberg, E. M., & Twemlow, S. W. (2000). Profiling potentially violent youth: Comments and observations. *Children's Services: Social Policy, Research, and Practice*, 3, 171-173.) (Keywords: FBI, Psychological Profile, School Violence.)