

# THE BYSTANDER —★—

## A More Objective View of School Shootings

Published in the Martinsburg *Journal*, February 17, 2019

Last month, a Letter to the Editor published in the *Journal* responding to my column “Prayer in Private Schools” called my article “damned lies and unadulterated rubbish.” And to prove that the 1962 ban on public school prayer explains why “we have evolved towards a less moral and less just society,” the writer included a list of school shootings, showing very few attacks at “Christ-centered schools,” to illustrate his point.

I had never seen school shootings sorted by this criterion, so I checked the same online source that the writer cited. Not every data base uses the same definition for “mass shootings” or “school shootings.” To see what the statistics were for K-12 schools, I adjusted the total by subtracting attacks at 92 colleges and universities, a military academy and an Indian reservation, 32 shootings on school property related to other crimes nearby, 5 by family members, and 5 that were accidents.

The shootings occurred in a random pattern throughout the United States: suburban Littleton, Colorado, has had a total of three school shootings. One high school in Chicago, where I know for a fact that both teachers and students carry concealed illegal firearms in the building, was one of comparatively few shootings in that city. Many of the shooters were adults who had not even attended the school they attacked; 39 of them committed suicide on the scene, or shortly after. No shootings were reported in Jewish or Islamic schools in the United States.

By these numbers, it’s true there have been far fewer shootings in Christian schools than public schools; by my count there were 11 (4.5% of 242 shootings). Since the pool of private school students is only 10% of the K-12 student population, and pre-selected by their parents for admission, when adjusted for that, the difference is not quite as dramatic as stated.

I probed a little deeper on the subject; if “Christ-centered schools” made a more just and moral classroom, I wondered what religion the shooters were.

# THE BYSTANDER —★—

But I came up with no information on the faith background of any attackers. That allowed me to assume that, since we live in a country where 75% of us identify as Christian, it's likely that a majority of the shooters were Christian, as were the rest of the students and faculty.

A 2002 report issued by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education titled "*The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*" focused on identifying the demographics of school shooters in addition to their pre-attack behaviors. None of the shooters were sorted into religious backgrounds, nor was it mentioned. Of the attackers, 99% were male and 76% white; most were from two-parent families and many were academically successful "mainstream" students; 78% had a history of either suicidal thoughts or attempts, with a documented history of depression. Of those, nearly 3 of 4 had been bullied; revenge was a common theme in most of the attacks. A majority of the shooters "showed interest in violence in movies, video games, or books." Many of the attackers were either on anti-psychotic medications but were non-compliant with them, or suffered side-effects from them that actually caused them to be suicidal or to hallucinate.

This report also noted that Caucasian teens, overall, received mental health care more than twice as often than minority teens, as estimated by the CDC. One could hypothesize that Black and Hispanic students, who account for a small percentage of school shootings despite their higher risk factors, seem to react with less gun violence than white males.

But the conclusion of this study, using sources from the American Psychological Association and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, was that the vast majority of school shootings were due to the effects of bullying, which includes actions such as "making threats, spreading rumors, and attacking someone verbally." If this is true, we should be condemning that type of behavior not only from students but from *adults, including anyone holding the highest office of our federal government.*

# THE BYSTANDER —★—

Shootings at schools has risen exponentially the last 30 years; I could suggest a connection between that and the increased lobbying by the NRA during the same period, but I will not. However, the NRA “applauded” Trumps’ 2017 reversal of an Obama-era rule that would have made it more difficult for those with documented mental health disabilities to purchase guns, even though, as Ann Coulter famously said in 2013, “Guns don’t kill people; the mentally ill do.”

Finally, the consensus on public-school versus private-school shootings is that security is far better in private schools. Perhaps these smaller schools provide more security; perhaps the larger public schools lack, or fail to enforce, security. I would expect that private schools have more staff, discipline and supervision, and that their parents tend to be more involved. But there is no evidence that the “morality” of the school, or its teachings, leads to fewer violent attacks within its walls. This theory, obviously biased towards “Christ-centered schools,” does not begin to understand the complexity of this problem and suggests that the simple solution is to bring back Christian prayer in public schools.

In a sincere effort to avoid misunderstandings while expressing grief at the level of violence we have reached everywhere in this country, I add that all shooting victims---regardless of religion, race, age, gender or any characteristics that would make them a target of someone with a firearm---deserve our commitment to reduce this epidemic of gun violence.

With that, I am quite sure we all agree.