When It Gets Gangsta: An Examination of Gang-related K-12 School Violence Perpetrators

by

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Introduction

This article resulted as part of a comprehensive and on-going research project investigating the causes of K-12 school violence and disturbance in America. *Gang-related* school violence perpetrators are defined as those who were identified (*i.e.,* self-identification and/or law enforcement identification) involved in the "gang lifestyle" and committed their acts of violence as part of such lifestyle on school grounds or at school functions. This article is a summary of the findings in regard to this type of offender. It is extremely interesting that this type of offender seems not to suffer from many of the issues (*e.g.,* mental health problems, child abuse, and low self-esteem) that other types of school violence perpetrators (*e.g.,* traditional type offenders) do in regards to views of self and others. Moreover, they appear often to be the type of school violence offender who is most worried about the consequences of their actions upon innocent bystanders and their own loved ones.

Methodology Subjects and Research

Between 2008 and 2012, all publicly available lists and news reports were scoured to obtain a population of names of perpetrators who committed violence on Kindergarten to 12th grade school property or at a school function since the 1700s (approximately 500+ incidents initially identified). Then the deceased, released, un-adjudicated, and otherwise un-locatable individuals were eliminated from the sample (decreasing cases to approximately 120 incidents). Finally, state correctional systems were extensively searched to determine the number of these offenders who were still alive, incarcerated, and able to

be contacted. This resulted in a list of 78 school violence incidents and offenders who committed their acts of violence in 33 states across the United States between 1979 and 2011.

Next, descriptive data from publicly available secondary sources (*e.g.*, court transcripts, news reports, journal articles, etc.) related to the resulting 78 identified incarcerated perpetrators of school violence (mostly *school shooters*) were gathered. This was conducted to analyze their acts of school violence and to the aftermaths of their acts to develop a comprehensive portrait of K-12 school violence in the United States. It was also to provide this profile through the separating of them by "type" of school violence perpetrator for more in-depth analysis. From extensive review of the cases, surveys, and interviews, four (4) types of offenders were identified:

Traditional School Violence Perpetrators
        (42 of the 78 offenders in this sample)
Gang-related School Violence Perpetrators
        (24 of the 78 offenders in this sample)
Associated School and/or Mentally Ill School Violence Perpetrators
        (7 of the 78 offenders in this sample)
Non-Associated and/or Mentally Ill School Violence Perpetrators
        (5 of the 78 offenders in this sample)

Traditional school violence perpetrators were defined as those who were current students and essentially "striking back" at the students and school which they attended at the time of the violent act. *Gang-related* school violence perpetrators were defined as those who were identified (self-identification and/or law enforcement identification) involved in the gang lifestyle and committed their acts as part of such lifestyle on school grounds or at school functions. In contrast, *Associated* or *Non-Associated and/or Mentally Ill* school violence perpetrators were identified as offenders who were generally much older and targeted a school of which they may (*Associated*) or may not have (*Non-Associated*) any past or current involvement. These are either past students who returned to their former school to commit a violent act or targeted a school in which they had no association, but targeted it for other reasons (*e.g.,* as a symbol of innocence or revenge against society as a whole).

Survey Instrument

It was determined early in the study that a *projective technque* was the survey method to be used given the research population (*i.e,* incarcerated individuals, many facing the appelate process and/or denying their guilt). It was determined that this would be the most effective way to help the respondents' unconscious speak, without directly commenting on their own criminal cases and/or culpablity. Often, respondents are assumed to hold things back in order to protect their *self-image* in a research situation. When

investigated by means of a projective technique, focus is moved away from the respondent and "projected" at hypothtical others and/or situations/scenarios. Therefore, respondents are supposed to *open up* to the survey purpose and actually reveal more about themselves than if asked directly. This is very often the case when conducting research about the alleged criminal behavior of an individual.

The "Prevention of School Violence Questionnaire" was constructed and administered in this fashion. This was a 200-question scenario-based survey, entitled, "School Violence Prevention Questionnaire," distributed in early 2013 to the 78 identified incarcerated school violence perpetrators who committed acts of violence across the United States between 1979 and 2011. This survey questionnaire was developed in late 2012 with assistance from Dr. Angela W. Crews of the *Themis Center for Justice Policy, Practice, and Research* (Huntington, WV). Dr. Crews also established the initial database for this research. The database was restructured and collection and analysis of the surveys was conducted by *The Veritas Group, LLC* (Huntington, WV).

With this questionnaire, respondents were asked to put themselves *in the shoes of* John/Jane, a person similar to themselves at the time they committed their acts of violence and to answer questions about John's/Jane's thoughts, feelings, and experiences at four different time periods: 1) *prior to deciding to commit violence*; 2) *after the decision to commit violence and during the planning phase*; 3) *during the act of violence*; and 4) *immediately after the act of violence*. For each part of the survey, respondents were asked if this hypothetical person agreed or disagreed with a statement provided. The level of agreement with the statement posed was rated 0 to 4 with the following options for response:

John/Jane is *definitely not* thinking, feeling, or experiencing this
John/Jane is *probably not* thinking, feeling, or experiencing this
I am *not sure* whether John/Jane is thinking, feeling, or experiencing this
John/Jane is *probably* thinking, feeling, or experiencing this
John/Jane is *definitely* thinking, feeling, or experiencing this

All 78 offenders received a survey with 36 of them agreeing to participate in this research and responding with their completed survey. This resulted in following final sample for survey responses:

Traditional School Violence Perpetrators
(18 of the 36 offenders in this sample)
Gang-related School Violence Perpetrators
(13 of the 36 offenders in this sample)
Associated and/or Mentally Ill School Violence Perpetrators
(4 of the 36 offenders in this sample)
Non-Associated and/or Mentally Ill School Violence Perpetrators
(1 of the 36 offenders in this sample)

Study Limitations

Conducting any type of research in regards to school violence and disturbance occurring in K-12 American schools is extremely difficult. Moreover, the findings from said research can be misleading sometimes at best. There are many reasons for this being with the fact that no system for recording and enumerating individual acts of crime existed until 1933, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Uniform Crime Report* was developed. Most early information on school disturbance and problems is primarily anecdotal or simply not available, with even the very definition of "school" has changing over time. Further, many forms of individual aggression, such as juvenile misbehavior, were not a matter of great public concern and attention until 1960s. It was not until 1970s that many school districts started keeping comprehensive data on student criminality on their campuses.

Throughout history, even definitions of what constituted school disturbance have varied. Reporting procedures have varied, and continue to vary, among school districts across the United States. Obviously, local school administrators have historically played down their problems to give the impression that they controlled their school situation completely. Finally, most researchers involved in this type of research only use and depend on the data and information gained from others and never do their own field research.

The potential limitation for this particular study is that various conclusions are drawn from a small sample of respondents. 78 incidents examined out of over 500 events, and 36 survey respondents out of 78 identified offenders. There could also be concerns over the timespan of 1979 to 2011 (*i.e.,* no "recent" cases examined). Moreover, in regards to the gang-related sample, only 24 of the 78 offenders in this sample were indented as being gang-related, and of that number only 13 consented to completing the survey instrument.

It is argued that these limitations are minimized due to several factors. First is the fact that as of early 2016, no other study has surveyed nor interviewed as many perpetrators or examined as many events. The *Federal Bureau of Investigations' Threat Assessment Team* (1999) did not interview any actual perpetrators directly and only examined case studies of 14 schools where shootings had occurred following the Columbine High School shooting (CO) as the foundation for their extensively utilized report entitled, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*.

This limitation is also minimized given the extensiveness of the survey instrument (involving 365 variables) and other interviews and mailing contacts. As for the dates of events examined, incarcerated offenders are not generally a population which desires to discuss their past actions except to plead their innocence. This is very much the case for those who are involved in current types of appeals and post-conviction relief hearings. Due to these facts and ethical

considerations, the most recent incarcerated individual whom it was felt was at a point to discuss these issues was from late 2011.

Findings

The following is an overview of the findings of this research as it relates to the *gang-related* school violence perpetrators and incidents of violence

The School

The first part of the overview deals with the factors involved in this type of school violence as it relates to this type of perpetrator.

Location and Time of Events of School Violence Incident

Most *gang-related* offenders in this study committed their acts in the Midwest: East North Central Region (*i.e.,* Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin). Almost all violence was committed in high schools in urban areas of these states. The months of January, October, and November experienced the greatest number of these types of violent acts and they almost all occurred on Mondays. The vast majority of this type of school violence happened immediately following the school day. This was mostly due to the fact that targeted rival gang members were assaulted on school grounds as they left school for the day.

Incidents by U.S. Census Bureau Regions	Midwest: East North Central Region (i.e., Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin)
Type of Developed Environment	Urban
Month of Incident	January, October, and November
Day of Week	Monday
Time of School Day	Immediately following school day

The School Environment in Which They Occur

Most *gang-related* school violence occurred in public high schools and, given this timeline and sample of incidents, had no school resources officers or metal detectors in the school. This violence most often occurred at very large schools with very large numbers of potential victims, but still had the traditional 12 to 20 students per teacher in the classrooms. In total opposite of the traditional type offender, these offenses most often occurred at schools where the White populations of students was less than 10% and where minority populations were 91 to 99% in the student body.

Level of School	High School
Public vs. Private School	Public
Was SRO Present At Incident?	No

Were Metal Detectors Present At Time of Incident?	No
Student Population	1301+ students
Faculty Student Ratio	12 to 20 students per teacher
% of White Students	2 to 10%
% of Black Students	91 to 99%
% of Hispanic Students	0 to 1%
% of Other Students	0 to 1%

The School Violence Event

As with many other types of offenders, this offender had a specific target in mind and ultimately informed others of why they committed their act. They often planned no more than 24 hours in advance and their primary motivation was based in some aspect of the gang lifestyle. Most of their violence occurred some place inside the school grounds, most often in the school parking lot. Their attack lasted less than 3 minutes and involved 1 to 5 shots fired. Almost all fled the scene to be arrested at a later time. This is the one type of offender who most often went unidentified or arrested sometime after the violent event.

Why Was School Chosen?	Specific target(s) at school
Stated Reason for Incident	Yes
Length of Planning Period	24 hours or less
Was Event Gang-Related?	Yes
Informed Other of Intentions	May or may not inform others of plans
Did Shooter Have Co-Conspirators?	No
Did Perpetrator Have List Of Targets?	May or may not have list of targets
If List Existed, How Many On List?	1
Targets: Individual, Group, Multiple, or Random	Individual target
Location of Incident in School	Inside school grounds
Length of Incident in Minutes	1 to 3 minutes
Number of Shots Fired	1 to 5
How Did Incident End?	Flee scene and arrested later

The Perpetrator

The next section examines in more detail this particular type of offender.

Who is the Perpetrator?

Most *gang-related* offenders were current students at the school where the violence occurred, but were generally older. They were most often Black males from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds. Most were of average build and in the 11ᵗʰ grade. They were most often the youngest child in their family and had no other siblings at home but may have over 5 if they did.

Relationship to School	Current student at school
Age of Perpetrator	19
Sex of Perpetrator	Male
Race of Perpetrator	Black
Socioeconomic Status of Perpetrator	Lower
Grade at Time of Incident	11ᵗʰ grade
Body Build of Perpetrator	Average
Birth Order of Perpetrator	Youngest
Number of Siblings Living With Perpetrator	0

Perpetrator's Traits and Issues

Possibly undiagnosed, this type of offender most often had no evidence of prior mental health issues and were not taking any prescribed medicine at the time of their violence. They were living with a single mother and may or may not have had any signs of significant family dysfunction. There were generally no signs of parental abuse in the home. Generally they were not involved in religious activities and may or may not have had any recent school difficulties or student disciplinary issues. The vast majority were not bullied, but for those who were, their intelligence or socioeconomic status was the reason.

Evidence of Prior Mental Health Issues	No
Taking Medications for Mental Health	Not at time of incident
Evidence of Physical Health Issues	No
Parental Situation at Time of Incident	Single mother
Any Evidence of Family Dysfunction?	May or may not have family dysfunction
Any Evidence of Physical Parental Abuse or Neglect?	No
Any Evidence of Sexual Abuse?	No
Marital Status of Perpetrator at Time of Incident	Single
Perpetrator Involved Regularly In Religious Activities?	No
Evidence of School Disciplinary Problems	May or may not have had school disciplinary problems
Any Evidence of Recent School Difficulties?	May or may not have recent school difficulties
Any Evidence of Perpetrator Being Bullied?	No
If Bullied, Why?	Intelligence and socio-economic status
Any Evidence of Recent Broken Relationship?	No
Perpetrator on Drugs/Alcohol at Arrest?	No
Perpetrator Possessed Drugs at Arrest?	No

Any Evidence of Past Drug or Alcohol Use?	May or may not have had prior drug and alcohol use
Any Evidence Perpetrator Regularly Watched Violent Movies?	No
Any Evidence Perpetrator Read Violent Books?	No
Any Evidence Perpetrator Played Violent Video?	No
Any Evidence Perpetrator Writing/Drawing Material with Violent Themes?	No

Most had no significant alcohol or other drug abuse problems at the time of their crime, but may have in the past. Most did not have a significant unhealthy interest in violent music or other types of media and almost never expressed their thoughts in the form of violent writings or drawings.

Characteristics of Weapons Used and Injuries Incurred

As with all types of offenders they had ease in locating a weapon to use most often obtaining one from a friend or associate. They generally had one weapon, very often a 9 mm pistol with 2 to 10 rounds available. They had not killed or injured anyone immediately prior to their act, and most often did not kill an individual at the school but did severely injure at least one by stander.

Were Weapons Readily Available To Shooter?	Yes
Where Was Gun/Weapon Obtained?	From friend
Number of Weapons	1
Rounds of Ammunition Available	1 to 10
Types of Weapons Used	9mm pistol
Number of Potential Victims	2 to 10
Killed or Injured Anyone outside School before or After School Incident	No
Number Killed	0
Number Injured	1

Charges, Trials, Pleas, Convictions, and Sentences

This type of offender most often received 1 to 5 different charges and sought a jury trial. They most often did not accept a plea bargain and did not use any type of mental health defense. They most often received multiple criminal charges for their act(s) and most likely eligible for parole at a later time. They generally received a minimum of 16 year, but up to 75 years.

Number of Different Charges	1 to 5
Type of Trial	Jury Trial
Was There A Plea Bargain?	No
Not Guilty By Reason Of Insanity as Defense at Trial or In Plea Agreement	No
Guilty but Mentally Ill As Defense at Trial or In Plea Agreement	No
Conviction Counts	1st Degree Murder, Weapons Charges, and Other Charges
Number of Conviction Counts	2 to 4 difference charges
Original Sentence Received	Terms of years
Minimum Number of Years Sentenced	16 to 20
Maximum Number of Years Sentenced	41 to 75
Eligible for Parole	Yes

The Thoughts

The final section is an overview of this type of offender's thoughts and feelings *before*, *during*, and *after* their act of school violence.

Before the Decision to Commit Violence

Prior to planning their acts of violence, most *gang-related* school violence perpetrators had issues with being anti-authority, frustrated easily, and very impulsive. They had a lack of self confidence in dealing with other students and in their school performance. They were unsure of their role with friends, but did feel as if they were seen as leaders and role models by others. This type of offender most often did not feel ignored by others, but if they did, it was by their family members. They may also feel isolated from others and disrespected by labels such as being troublemakers. They most often were not bullied nor were bullies, but felt as if very often punished unfairly by others. There may have been various types of physical abuse and emotional abuse which came from family members. If sexually abused it was often by a stranger who had access to them as a child. Often they were be dealing with the loss of a family member at the time of their violence. Their motivations for their violence were most often to gain revenge for a friend who was harmed and/or to seek respect from friends or associates. Obviously they had heavy involvement in the gang lifestyle combined with deep seeded feelings of hatred for their home life and others in their life.

View of Self	Anti-authority, frustrated easily, and impulsive
Lack of Self Confidence	With other students and school performance
Unsure Of Role	Unsure of role with friends
Perceived As a Leader	Feels they are seen as a leader
Perceived Importance	Feels they are important to others

Feelings of Being Threatened	Feels threatened physically by others
Feelings of Being Ignored	Does not feel ignored
Needs Ignored	Feels ignored by family
Feelings of Being Ridiculed	Feels Ridiculed for family status
Feelings of Not Being Valued	Feels not valued by teachers
Issues in Suffering	Depression, being alone, and low self-esteem
Isolation	Feels Isolated from family
Disrespect	Feels Disrespected by other students
Feeling Labeled	Labeled as an outsider by many
Feelings about Parents	Unsupported by parents
Bullying	Not a bully
Punished Unfairly	Feels Punished by parents and teachers
Physical Abuse	By a family member
Sexual Abuse	By a stranger
Emotional Abuse	Report from a family member
Influences	Influenced by media
Under The Influence	Marijuana
Dealing with Loss	Loss of a family member
Fighting	Fighting with other students
Seeking Revenge	Seeking revenge for harm to friend
Seeking Personal Respect	Seeking respect from friends
Gang Involvement	Very heavy gang involvement at all levels
Happiness Issues	Hating home life, other students, and everyone

Planning the Violence

Unlike the other types of offenders, *gang-related* had the greatest concern and worry about their loved ones as they planned a violent event. Their primary motivation at that point was to get revenge upon another, but they were still very nervous about their pending act.

Concerned about during planning stage	Worried about loved ones
Thoughts about Plans	Getting revenge
Second Thoughts about Plans	Feeling nervous about plans

During the Violence

This type of offender did not want to die during their violent event, but was concerned over the potential they did have in dying. They had mixed feelings of being powerful and panic at the same time during the event. This type of offender was most often worried about future ramifications for loved ones as they committed their act.

Thoughts about Death	Had fear of own death
Negative Feelings	Feeling powerful
Not In Control	Feeling panic

Worried About	Worried about loved ones

The Aftermath

After the incident, most *gang-related* school violence perpetrators still blamed the victim for their actions. They did begin to realize the reality of what they did and their situation and begun worrying about if they will ever be released from prison.

Placing of Blame for Act	Blames victim for act
Feelings about Reality	Realizing the reality of their situation
Thoughts about Future	Worried about ever getting out of prison
Views of Self	Feels it was all a dream
Negative Feelings about Act	Worried that he missed an intended victim
Negative Feelings about Self	Worrying about being sent to prison

Conclusion

Very interesting things to consider when examining the *gang-related* school violence perpetrator. While no one would ever encourage an individual to join a gang, it does appear that these individuals, besides the criminal aspect of their lifestyle, were some of the most well-adjusted individuals who committed an act of school violence. They were found to be the most to be worried about their loved ones and unintended victims in this entire sample. They seemed to have a type of social support and brotherhood that none of the other types of offenders have in their lives.

This type of offender, just like most of the other types of school violence perpetrators, believed that their act of violence must occur. Although, for this type of offender, it is most often seen as just a simple by-product of the lives they lead. They did not want to die and targeted only one individual to attack. They will injure the fewest bystanders in most cases in that they do have one target in mind. They also did not take hostages and left the scene, thus removing the threat, as quickly as possible.

As with almost all types of offenders examined they felt very powerful during their act of violence and almost always blamed their victim for the assault. As expected their violence occurred in larger high schools with very high percentages of minority students. These schools were almost always in urban areas.

For the *gang-related* offender, the school offered more than just the location of a rival or an identified target. A very high percentage of these types of events involved gang members coming onto K-12 school campuses seeking victims for robberies. Students just getting dropped off at school or waiting to be picked up after school made up a significant portion of this type of offenders victims.

For schools, *gang-related* violence is an extremely difficult problem to deal with. This type of threat is internal and external. Periods before school, lunch, and after school are times when school officials must be vigilant in monitoring the school campus. This when outside gang members often target their rivals and invade a school property.

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