

BARRICADED HOSTAGE AND CRISIS SITUATIONS IN SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF RECENT INCIDENTS

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Abstract

Although not common occurrences, schools are occasionally the site of hostage events. The deadliest occurred in Beslan, Russia in 2004. In that situation terrorists held the school under siege for 53 hours before a shootout resulted in the deaths of more than 360 people. In the fall of 2006, an adult intruder entered Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado, and another adult entered West Nickel Mines School in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania the following week. The outcomes were tragic. To date little research has examined school hostage events. Daniels et al. (2007) presented results of interviews with school personnel who intervened to successfully avert injuries in school hostage events. The purpose of this paper is to describe 19 school hostage events that occurred between February, 1998 and May, 2007. All incidents occurred in the United States. Data were obtained by examination of news reports of each incident, and include the following variables: date; time; incident location; offender age and sex; hostages/victims; injuries; deaths; demands; deadlines; escapes; releases; whether or not the school had an armed School Resource Officer (SRO); presence or absence of screening; behavioral changes prior to the incident; weapons; expected outcome; how the incident was resolved; whether or not there was a tactical team; whether or not there was a negotiator; and the negotiation effectiveness. Based on results, the authors offer recommendations for school and law enforcement personnel.

Introduction

School violence takes many forms, from verbal altercations and bullying to assault, robbery, and murder (DeVoe et al., 2004). Considerable attention has been given to bullying, which is often seen as a precursor to the more violent forms of aggression, including school shootings (e.g., Greif & Furlong, 2006; O'Toole, 2000). Following the rash of shooting rampages of the 1990s numerous agencies and researchers studied the problem of school shooters, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (O'Toole, 2000), the U. S. Department of Education (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998), and the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). As a result of these and other efforts much has been learned about school shootings. These studies have focused on adolescent school shooters. Less is known, however, of potentially lethal, yet averted incidents. Also, little attention has been given to other forms of lethal school violence, such as barricaded hostage and crisis situations in schools.

Daniels et al. have been studying two types of averted potentially lethal school violence: averted school rampages and successfully resolved barricaded hostage and crisis situations in schools. Daniels et al. (2007) content analyzed newspaper reports of averted school rampages. Similar to findings of school shootings, they found that the majority of plotters informed one or more people of their intentions and the most common motive was retaliation for being bullied. Unlike schools at which a shooting occurred, the present results

revealed that plots were frequently uncovered as a result of students coming forward and reporting their concerns (breaking the code of silence).

In a qualitative study of averted rampages, Daniels, Volungis, Pshenishny, Gandhi, and Winkler (2007) found that the most commonly discussed preventive theme was the relationships school personnel establish with all students. These relationships were characterized by deliberate efforts to show students dignity and respect. Interviewees further described the importance of these positive relationships when intervening once the plot had been uncovered because suspects were more open during the investigation. Finally, these authors discussed the importance of school-community collaboration in averting lethal school violence.

One form of school violence that has not received considerable research attention is the barricaded hostage or crisis situation. Vecchi, Van Hasselt, and Romano (2005) pointed out that there is some confusion of terms in the literature. They indicated that barricaded hostage situations entail taking one or more people captive “for ‘instrumental’ or tangible reasons” such as using the hostages as leverage for the hostage takers’ demands (p. 535). Barricaded crisis situations involve taking one or more people captive “for ‘expressive’ or intangible reasons” such as an expression of his or her emotional state or intending ultimately to kill the victim (p. 535). The most effective means of resolving these situations is through negotiation. The aims of negotiation differ, however, depending on whether or not a given situation is a hostage or crisis event. Failure to adjust one’s negotiation strategy to reflect the type of crisis may lead to tragic results. It is therefore important to understand that a barricaded hostage situation and a barricaded crisis situation are subsets under the larger umbrella of “captive-taking” wherein a barricade exists that prevents law enforcement officers from directly confronting the perpetrator and the captive is either a hostage or a victim, depending on the motivation of the perpetrator in holding the captive (instrument versus expressive).

To date only two systematic studies of school barricaded hostage and crisis situations have been found in the literature. Daniels et al. (2007b) interviewed school authorities who were directly involved in classroom hostage or crisis events. As with the findings of the previously-mentioned study, participants described the establishment and utilization of positive relationships as the most salient preventive factor. Additional important findings included communicating with the perpetrator in a calm, non-confrontational manner, negotiating for the release of the captives, and training for hostage and crisis events. Reporting similar findings, Daniels et al. (2007a) presented a case study of a school counselor’s response to a classroom barricaded crisis event.

Previous research has examined only school hostage/crisis events that were successfully resolved. Moreover, this research included interviews only with school and law enforcement personnel who were directly involved with the situations. It is therefore important to continue studying these events from different perspectives. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe 19 school captive events that occurred between February, 1998 and May, 2007 in the United States. This study will begin to answer important questions about a form of school violence for which little is known.

Methodology

A search was conducted of the *Lexus/Nexus Academic* database using the search strings “school & hostage” and “school & barricade.” *Lexus/Nexus* is a database of news reports. We found a total of 19 barricaded hostage and crisis events that had occurred between February, 1998 and May, 2007. We examined 21 variables: Date, Time, Incident Location, Offender Age and Sex, Hostages, Injuries, Deaths, Demands, Deadlines, Escapes, Releases, Whether or not the school had an Armed School Resource Officer (SRO), Presence or Absence of Screening, Behavioral Changes prior to the incident, Weapons, Expected Outcome, How the incident was Resolved, Whether or not there was a Tactical Team, Whether or not there was a Negotiator, and the Negotiation Effectiveness.

Findings

Findings from this study are arranged according to information about the schools and communities, the events, characteristics of the perpetrators, and characteristics of the hostages/victims.

The Schools and Communities

The 19 incidents occurred in 14 states, one in each of the following: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Utah and Virginia. There were two incidents in Texas, and three in both California and Washington State. Populations of the communities in which these schools are located ranged from 806 to 1.2 million (2000 U.S. Census Data), with a mean of 108,767 and a median of 14,523. These populations are somewhat skewed because data were not available for very small towns, so the population of either the county or a neighboring town/township was used.

Barricaded hostage and crisis situations occurred at all three levels of schools, with the majority (12) in high schools, five in middle or junior high schools, and one in an elementary school. One incident occurred in an alternative high school, and one incident occurred in a one-room schoolhouse. School size was determined from 2006 enrollments. High schools had from 72 to 2,571 students, with a mean of 1,237. Enrollments from the middle/junior high schools ranged from 537 to 1,696 ($M = 1,038$), and the elementary school had 728 students. The one-room schoolhouse had an enrollment of 27 students.

It was not clear whether or not schools had resource officers or student screening procedures. However, news reports indicated that seven schools had resource officers (although one was not in the building at the time of the incident). Of the seven SROs, five were employed in high schools and two were in middle/junior high schools. One school did not have an SRO employed. Three SROs were armed at the time, one was not armed, and no mention was made of the remaining three. With respect to student screening, information was available for eight schools. The majority (14) did not have metal detectors. One school had a metal detector, but it was used randomly once per month. Two schools had handheld wands that were used only if officials believed a student was armed, or during large events (such as sporting events).

The Events

The 19 events included in this study occurred between February 1998 and May 2007. Most incidents occurred in the morning (12), and three occurred around mid-day. Three incidents occurred later in the day, around the last period or after normal school hours. Information was not available about the time of day for one incident.

There were various means by which incidents were resolved. The most common resolution was that the offender was talked into surrendering, either by school personnel, police, or trained law enforcement negotiators ($n = 6$). Five incidents were resolved through actions of tactical teams: in three incidents the offender was apprehended and in two the offender was killed by gunfire. Three incidents were successfully resolved through confrontations (police ordering the offender to drop his weapons, or in one case, other students tackling the offender). Two incidents ended when the offender committed suicide. Two incidents were resolved when the offender left the scene, and one incident ended in a murder/suicide.

Negotiators were involved in 11 incidents. In one of these situations, it was the captives who negotiated for their release, and in another the teacher negotiated the release of the students. Of the 11 negotiated events, six were successful, four were not successful (i.e., the offender or others were shot), and one resulted in the release of some, but not all captives. In this incident, the offender was eventually shot while killing a remaining captive.

With the exception of the previously-mentioned offenders being shot by tactical operators, only two additional incidents resulted in injuries of the captives. In one situation all captives had been sexually molested, and in the other five captives were shot and wounded. As to deaths, six incidents resulted in the deaths of the offenders and/or captives. Two incidents ended when the offender was critically shot by police or tactical operators. Two offenders committed suicide. At one school the offender killed one captive as he was being shot by tactical operators. One incident ended when the offender committed suicide after killing five captives.

Offender Characteristics

All offenders in the situations included for this study were males. They ranged in age from 12 to 53, with a mean age of 17.9 years. Two perpetrators were adult external intruders into the schools, while a third was a teenage intruder coming back into his old elementary school. All other perpetrators were students in the schools at which the events happened. Prior to the crisis events, behavioral markers had been noted in 15 of the incidents. Although there were no clear-cut patterns, behavioral markers included being a new transfer student to the school ($n = 3$), treatment for a psychiatric disorder ($n = 3$), recent suspension or expulsion from school ($n = 2$), and leakage (i.e., informing others that there was going to be a “party” that day). Other individuals experienced family or other interpersonal problems (e.g., a recent breakup with a girlfriend, death of mother), dressing in black or camouflage prior to the incident, dropping out of school, home problems, and running away from home. In one situation, the perpetrator, an external intruder, was known to have been “casing” the school the day before the event.

Weapons included guns, knives, and other incendiary materials. The most frequently employed weapon was a single gun (11 incidents). Guns ranged from an air rifle to .22 caliber handguns, shotguns, rifles, and automatic handguns. Two suspects used both a gun and a knife, and two brought one or more guns and incendiary materials (e.g., gun powder, lighter fluid). One individual brought a gun and a stun gun; one person brought two knives, and one suspect claimed he had a bomb, although it was later determined that he did not. Finally, one perpetrator used a toy gun.

In 15 incidents one or more captives were released at some time during the event. Suspects primarily released people as a result of negotiations, although some released captives who had certain characteristics (i.e., all women were released, or all students). More information about captive characteristics is presented below.

Perpetrators made specific demands in six of the 19 incidents. One suspect demanded that the teacher lock the door, and that he be allowed to remain alone with one of the captives for one hour (a female hostage). One student demanded the teacher’s car keys, another demanded a car, and a third demanded a van with a full tank of gas. One suspect demanded to talk with the principal, and another demanded that the police “back off.” Finally, one student had planned to demand money and a helicopter, but the incident ended before he could make the order. In only two incidents were deadlines specified by the perpetrator. Interestingly, these were the two incidents that involved adult external intruders into the school. One perpetrator, at around 3:30 p.m., gave a deadline of 4:00 p.m. The other’s deadline was only two seconds, and then he began shooting.

The perpetrators’ expected outcomes were specified in 10 of the crises. Most outcomes included the death of one or more hostage/victims and/or the death of the perpetrator. Two individuals expected to commit suicide (including “suicide by cop”), and one planned on killing a teacher before committing suicide. One person merely expected to die. In addition, one suspect planned to rape and then kill one of the captives. Three perpetrators intended to use the captives as a means of escape (running away or escaping abusive homes). One student intended to scare others, and one seemed to want to gain attention.

Victim Characteristics

Captives were taken in 18 of the 19 events, and one constituted a lone-barricade situation, wherein the student locked himself in a classroom. Across the 18 incidents 243 people were taken as captives. In the majority of the events, the captives were students (16 of the 19 incidents). Often these included students and the teacher of an entire class. In most cases it was an entire class that was held captive ($n = 10$, involving approximately 194 students). In four situations only female students were held (involving 21 students), and in three events only males were held (four students). In 13 events, teachers were included as captives, with the majority being women (six women, three men, and four gender unspecified). Finally, administrators were held in two crises.

A total of approximately 153 captives escaped during eight events. This number is not completely accurate because in one incident the report was that “a few” students escaped, and in another the suspect fired his weapon into the ceiling of the cafeteria and approximately 130 students fled the room at that point. Most escapes occurred in the early confusing moments of the event (this occurred in two incidents, but constituted about 140 people). In two incidents a few people escaped when the police arrived or during the chaos experienced during a tactical entrance into the room. There was insufficient information in the remainder of incidents to determine how or when captives escaped.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to shed light on one form of school violence that has received very little research attention; namely, school barricaded hostage and crisis situations. The results are particularly important in light of the events of late September and early October of 2006, wherein an armed intruder entered Platte Canyon High School and took six young women captive before taking his life when police forcibly entered the classroom. One week later another armed intruder entered a one-room schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and killed five student captives and himself, before police could effectively intervene.

Examination of news accounts of school barricaded hostage and crisis situations provides a general overview of the scope of these events. We described important features of 19 school crisis events related to the schools and communities in which these events occurred, the events, characteristics of the offenders, and characteristics of the captives. Several conclusions may be drawn from these data.

School barricaded hostage crises can occur in any type of school and any community size. As indicated, these events occurred in communities of less than 800 and with more than one million people. No school level is immune from this form of violence: We studied events that took place in a one-room school house, elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. There were no clear patterns with respect to school safety measures. School resource officers (SROs) were mentioned for only seven schools, and only five appeared to have metal detectors.

These findings are similar to what has been found about schools at which a shooting took place. Specifically, there was a perception prior to the rash of school rampages in the 1990s that smaller schools and those in rural communities were immune to the lethal violence of big cities. However, that perception was shattered when people realized that lethal school violence can occur at any school in any community (e.g., Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004) following shootings in such innocuous places as Moses Lake, Washington, Pearl, Mississippi, and Jonesboro, Arkansas. Results of this study clearly indicate that a barricaded hostage crisis event can occur in any community across any grade level of school. The implication is that all schools need to be prepared for handling armed intruders and have a safety plan in place should such an event arise.

With regard to the events included in this study, several important findings emerge. First, the majority of offenders were students enrolled in the school at which the event took place. In only three of the 19 situations was the offender an external intruder. The majority of crises occurred in the morning hours, suggesting that

this is the time of day when school personnel need to be especially alert. This is not to say that school personnel should drop their guard after lunch because several situations happened later in the day. The most common means by which incidents were resolved was through verbal strategies, including students, teachers and other school personnel, and law enforcement negotiators talking the offender into surrendering. In almost all incidents captives were unharmed. Indeed, of the 19 incidents six ended in the death of the offender (either tactically or by suicide) and two resulted in injuries and deaths of captives. Interestingly, in these two situations the offenders were external intruders into the schools.

Hostage/crisis negotiation has been indicated as one of the most effective police interventions (Regini, 2002). Vecchi et al. (2005) articulated the goals and strategies of crisis negotiation. In particular, the goals include establishing communication and developing rapport, buying time, defusing intense emotions, and gathering information. The negotiator uses validating communication skills to accomplish these goals. These skills include active listening, empathy, and rapport to effect behavioral change. In many of the school barricaded hostage crisis situations we studied the events were resolved before law enforcement negotiators arrived on the scene. As previously indicated, it was often the students, teachers, or administrators who negotiated the release of captives and the surrender of the offender. An important area for future research will be to interview these untrained individuals and ascertain what skills they utilized.

Some light has been shed on the issue of captive behavior during school barricaded hostage events (Daniels, Bradley et al., 2007b). In particular, one teacher described remaining calm and complying with the demands of the offender when he entered her classroom with a gun. When the offender ordered everyone into the back of the room the teacher stated "I just said, 'okay,' and um so we just went and sat in the corner and we all just sat there quietly." This use of remaining calm and complying with demands was seen as an essential element of the successful resolution of the situation.

In this study all offenders were male and prior to 15 (79 percent) events the offenders exhibited some form of behavioral marker that something was not right or different. The most commonly employed weapon was the gun, although other weapons included knives and explosive/incendiary devices. Offenders released some or all captives in 15 incidents. Offenders made specific demands in only six (31.2 percent) situations. Thus, it appears that the majority of situations were expressive events (Vecchi et al., 2005).

Although there are some striking commonalities across offenders in this study, we must caution law enforcement and educators against profiling. Profiling is problematic for four reasons: First, the intention of criminal profiling is to work backwards from a crime scene to try to narrow down the pool of suspects (Hicks & Sales, 2006). There is no evidence that attempting to predict future criminal behavior by a set of warning signs or personality characteristics is accurate. Second, given the low frequency of school barricaded hostage crises, it is impossible to establish a base rate from which an accurate picture of a hostage taker/barricader can emerge. Thus, the likelihood false negatives is extremely high (i.e., we cannot assume that every male student who begins dressing in fatigues, has problems at home, and has recently experienced an interpersonal loss will come to school armed). Third, and relatedly, profiling has been criticized as a violation of students' rights (Dwyer et al., 1998). Finally, there is no accurate profile of a school shooter (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002); therefore, as an extension of potential lethal school violence, we conclude there is no accurate profile of a school hostage taker/barricader.

There were no common themes that we could ascertain about the captives in this study. Most captives were students, although teachers and administrators also were held. Approximately 63 percent of the captives escaped in these situations. Although not included in the present data, there is some indication that captives experience an array of reactions. For example, captives often report lingering psychological problems such as Acute Stress Disorder and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (Giebels, Noelanders, & Vervaeke, 2005). Moreover, some captives may experience positive feelings towards the offender during the event, although in

crises in which the captives were injured no such positive reactions were reported (Giebels et al., 2005). Thus, we recommend that following a school barricaded hostage crisis practitioners must be prepared to work with a wide array of emotional reactions in a non-judgmental way (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, in press).

Barricaded hostage and crisis events constitute one form of potentially lethal school violence, yet these situations have not received much attention from researchers. This paper represents one initial response to this need. The authors are presently engaged in systematic research that will continue to uncover needed information about this type of crisis event in schools. Specifically, we are in the early stages of a study of juvenile school hostage takers. In this study we will conduct intensive interviews with juveniles who held their schools under siege. Ultimately, we will be able to develop recommendations for school and law enforcement personnel to increase the likelihood that they will intervene successfully in school barricaded hostage and crisis events.

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