

Statistics on Bullying and School Shootings

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INTRODUCTION

Defining and measuring bullying is difficult, with different researchers using different definitions. I consider two categories of behavior as constituting bullying. One is behavior that attacks someone's dignity (teasing, taunting, insulting, mocking, etc.), and the other is behavior that attacks someone's sense of safety (threats, intimidation, physical assaults, sexual assaults, etc.). In addition, there needs to be a pattern of behavior to constitute bullying. Being called "stupid" or "a jerk" one time is not sufficient. (For a discussion of definitions and the challenges in gathering bullying data, see *School Violence: Fears vs. Facts*, by Dewey Cornell.)

Reports of bullying against school shooters have often been highly inconsistent and impossible to corroborate. The data included here represent my best effort to sort out the frequently contradictory claims about which perpetrators were picked on and how severe the harassment was. The statistics are drawn from my study of 48 perpetrators that I present in my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*.

Peer harassment is extraordinarily common; school shootings are extraordinarily rare.

A recent study by the American Psychological Association found that "70 percent of middle and high school students have experienced bullying at some point."¹ There are approximately 55 million primary and secondary school students in the USA.² Seventy percent of 55 million equals 38,500,000 students; this

is how many students are bullied at some point in school. Very, very few of these students will commit a rampage school attack. Two or three school shootings in an academic year seems like a lot, but it means that fewer than one bullied student out of ten million goes on a rampage. Though it might be argued that those who did commit shootings must have been more severely bullied, my review of dozens of school shooters has not shown this to be true. In most cases, the bullying consisted of common verbal taunting and teasing. In only a few cases, such as Gary Scott Pennington, Asa Coon, and Wellington de Oliveira, was the bullying severe.

Not all shooters were picked on.

Based on the available information, many school shooters simply were not picked on. This doesn't mean that no one ever said a rude word to them; it means that there was apparently no pattern of harassment. Of the 48 shooters I studied, I estimate that approximately 40% experienced some kind of bullying. This means, of course, that approximately 60% did not. Even if my numbers are a bit off due to lack of information, this still suggests that approximately half the shooters were not teased or otherwise harassed.

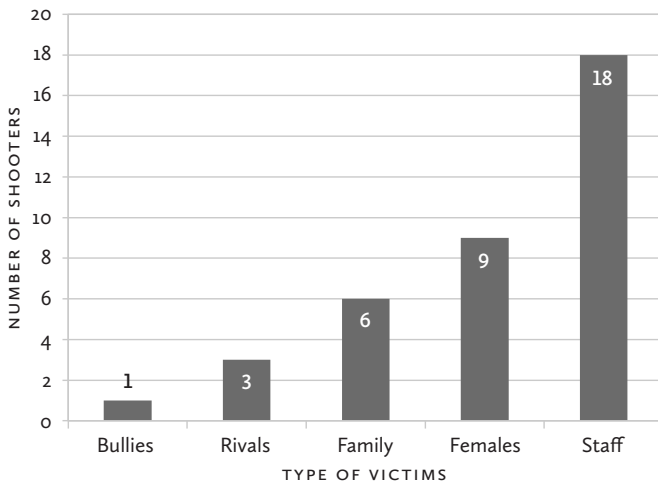
Bullies were the least targeted victims.

Despite the widespread belief that school shooters are motivated by bullying to seek retaliation against their tormentors, this

virtually never happens. Out of 48 shooters, only one shooter tracked down and killed a boy who reportedly had picked on him. This case, however, is ambiguous because the perpetrator, Evan Ramsey, originally simply planned to kill himself. His two friends talked him into killing others, and even gave him a list of people to murder. It appears that without their influence, there would have been no rampage.

A review of the targeted victims of the 48 shooters reveals a surprising pattern. School personnel (staff) and females were the most frequently targeted groups. In some cases, the perpetrators targeted specific individuals they knew, such as an ex-girlfriend. In other cases, females as a group were targeted.

Figure 1: Shooters Who Targeted Specific Victims



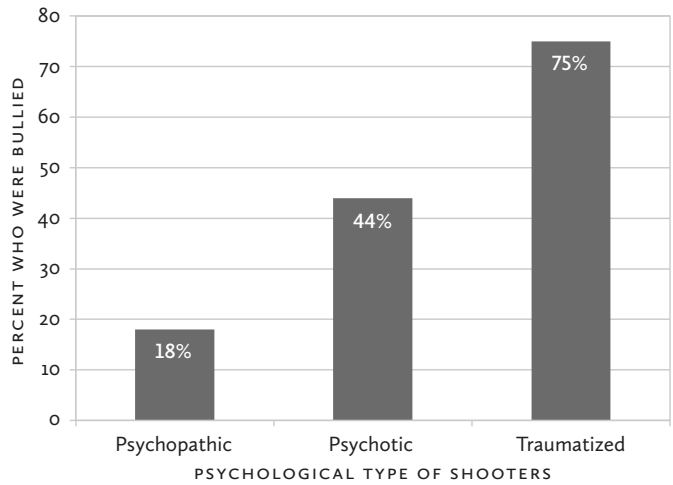
These results suggest that shooters were more enraged by teachers who failed them, administrators who disciplined them, and girls who rejected them than they were by peers who teased them. For more details on victim selection, see the document “Intended and Targeted Victims” on the Edited Data page of www.schoolshooters.info.

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The frequency of bullying varied dramatically across the three psychological types.

Looking at bullying among school shooters as a group is not as revealing as examining the issue across the three psychological types of shooters. The result of this approach demonstrates that psychopathic shooters were the least victimized and traumatized shooters the most victimized, with psychotic shooters falling in the middle.

Figure 2: Shooters Who Were Bullied

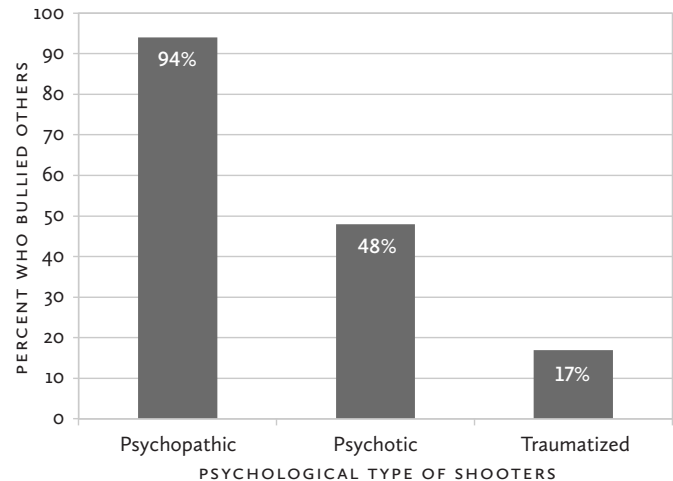


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Many school shooters bullied people.

The fact that school shooters often bully others is rarely attended to, but approximately 54% of the perpetrators harassed, intimidated, threatened, or assaulted people prior to their attacks. The rate at which they did so, however, varied across the three types of shooters.

Figure 3: Shooters Who Bullied Others

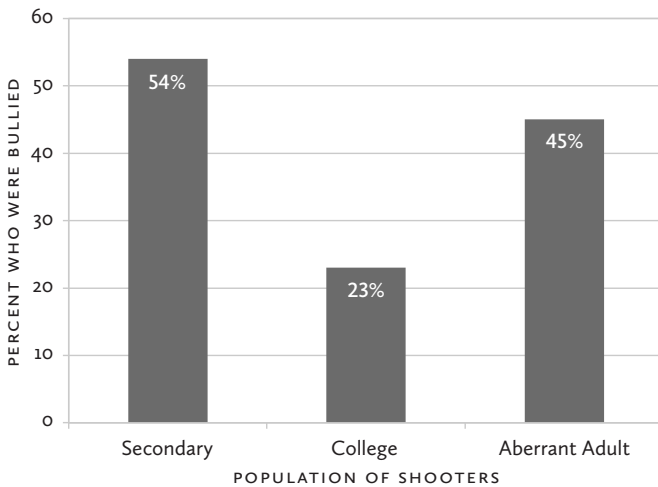


Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that bullying cannot be meaningfully discussed as if school shooters are a homogeneous population. There are significant differences in who victimizes, and who is victimized by, their peers depending on the psychological type of the perpetrator.

Bullying also varied across populations of shooters.

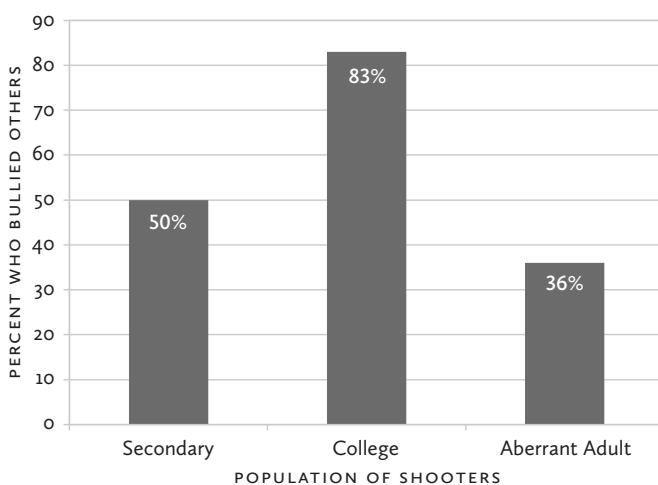
Perhaps not surprisingly, bullying appears to have been most prevalent among secondary school shooters. It was much less frequent among college shooters. Its role with aberrant adult shooters is difficult to determine because the peer harassment often occurred years before their attacks. Though it was not a recent trigger for violence, the suffering endured in childhood may have left deep scars and lingering rage.

Figure 4: Shooters Who Were Bullied



Not only were college shooters the least bullied; they were the most likely to bully others. This includes perpetrators who were students as well as those who were university employees.

Figure 5: Shooters Who Bullied Others



The connection between bullying and school shootings is elusive. Certainly, harassment may contribute to perpetrators' rage and/or depression. At most, however, it is but one factor among many that cause rampage attacks. Even those shooters who were most severely bullied, such as Pennington and Coon, did not target kids who picked on them. In fact, both targeted teachers who gave them unacceptable grades. This indicates the complexity in sorting out the possible impact of peer harassment on the perpetrators' motivations.

NOTES

For more information on bullying and school shootings, see my two books, *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, and *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*, as well as several articles available at www.schoolshooters.info — “Eric Harris: The Search for Justification,” “Luke Woodham: The Search for Justification,” “The Search for Truth at Columbine,” and “Charles Andrew Williams: Sorting Out the Contradictions.”

- 1 American Psychological Association, “Bullying: A Module for Teachers.” <https://www.apa.org/education/k12/bullying.aspx>.
- 2 National Center for Education Statistics. “Fast Facts.” <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>.