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Are Hawaii schools safe?

Knowing the warning signs of potential violence can be an effective tool in stopping it

By Brad Klontz and June Ching
Special to the Star-Bulletin

AMERICA has been shocked by the devastating violence at Virginia Tech last week that left 33 students and professors dead. An ocean away, Hawaii residents join the nation in our feelings of grief and anger at this tragic and senseless loss of life. The sounds of gunshots, images of bleeding victims and interviews with grieving relatives fill our television screens and weigh heavily on our hearts and minds.

Statistics show that even in the face of the highly publicized recent multiple-victim homicides in schools, fewer than 1 percent of child murders actually occur at school. Even so, we can't help but wonder whether or not our own students and educators are safe from this type of horrific, targeted violence. While new details regarding the shootings and personality and behaviors of the shooter emerge every hour, so grows our sense of fear and trepidation about our own vulnerability.

So what causes violent behavior in young people? There is never a simple explanation, nor a single reason someone commits a violent act. We do know that violence is typically used to express feelings, used as a form of manipulation and control, or used to retaliate against others for some real or imagined hurts. Those who become violent often develop an excessive preoccupation with violence, have difficulty expressing or controlling their emotions, and might fantasize that violent acts will earn them some form of acknowledgment or respect.



Brad Klontz and June Ching

RECENTLY, the U.S. Secret Service, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, studied school shootings focusing on the shooter's pre-attack communications and behaviors. They found that while no specific personality profile can predict who will engage in targeted school violence, there are some common characteristics that can aid in the prevention of future incidents. For example, school shootings are rarely impulsive acts and are most often planned in advance. While perpetrators usually do not make direct threats to their targeted victims, often one or more adults have had significant concern about the shooter's behaviors prior to the incident. In most cases, other students were aware of the perpetrator's preoccupation with violence and his plan to commit violent acts before he took action.

The American Psychological Association offers additional warning signs of people who might be at risk for perpetrating violent acts:

- » anger outburst and trouble controlling anger on a daily basis;
- » escalating physical fighting or being combative and threatening others regularly;
- » significant vandalism or damage of property;
- » increased drug or alcohol usage, which serves as a disinhibitor of intense anger;
- » engaging in increased risk-taking behavior;
- » detailed plans to execute violence (e.g., expressed to friends or revealed in compositions, journals or on Web sites);
- » announcing plans or threats to hurt others;
- » pathological delight in hurting animals;
- » carrying a weapon, fascination with weapons or easy accessibility to firearms.

If you see these warning signs in someone and worry about your safety or the safety of others, don't ignore your concerns. Tell someone you trust and ask for help. This could be a law enforcement officer, security personnel, teacher, family member, psychologist, coach, friend or guidance counselor. Protect yourself by not spending time alone with people who show these warning signs. If you are worried about being the victim of violence, ask for protection. Do not resort to violence yourself.

While no one can predict with certainty the future actions of anyone, identifying students at risk for violence and intervening early can help reduce the risk of violence in our schools.

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