

## **'Focus on what can really help: create a positive school climate, build systems of supports, promote information transfer'**

An interview with Eric Madfis

Eric Madfis is a key figure in research on mass shootings in schools. He has been publishing on the topic in academic journals since 2009. He has written three books, two of which have directly addressed ways to prevent this serious crime (Madfis, 2014, 2020). His most recent book, a collection of studies edited with Adam Lankford, was published under the title *All-American Massacre: The Tragic Role of American Culture and Society in Mass Shootings* (Madfis & Lankford, 2023). Here the authors focus on the social and cultural factors that may explain why it is that the United States (US) has the highest number of mass shootings of any country. The emphasis on social and cultural factors such as gender, 'race', and class allows them to overcome the overly limited understanding of mass shootings as the result of individual pathologies. They show that in trying to understand this violence, it is necessary to consider its social and cultural roots.

We had a clear idea to ask Madfis for an interview as soon as proposals to address the problem of mass shootings, which have been heavily criticized in the American context, began to appear in the public debate after the mass shooting at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University on 21 December 2023. This interview is published as a research-informed warning against repeating the same mistakes made by our friends abroad. There is enough knowledge to set up preventive measures in a way that can actually make a positive change. This includes, above all, avoiding the over-securitization and criminalization of university space and those who use it. Instead of security frames and large baggage bans, we need above all to create a positive climate and quality relationships between students and lecturers.

In the present interview, we discuss these proposals and the state of knowledge on mass shootings in general in more detail. Madfis currently serves as a professor of criminal

justice at the University of Washington Tacoma and as the director of the Violence Prevention and Transformation Research Collaborative, which is a new research initiative devoted to the study of causes and prevention of school violence, mass shootings, and hate crimes. Although a sociologist and criminologist by training, Madfis's research draws on a range of disciplines, including psychology and media studies. Particularly noteworthy is his research on the influence of hegemonic masculinity in school mass shootings, as well as on the promise of restorative and transformative justice in preventing shootings and violence in school more generally. These and other topics are also discussed at length in the interview.

We explained to Madfis the circumstances under which we would conduct the interview: what we know about the attack on the Faculty of Arts and the character of the subsequent public debate. We sent our questions to Madfis on 23 December 2023 to be answered together in an online meeting scheduled for 9 January 2024. Then, we transcribed the recording of the interview and edited it. The edited version was sent to Madfis on January 17. He authorized it two days later. This version is presented below. Some passages were previously published in *Deník Alarm*.

**Václav Walach & Petr Kupka: You have been conducting criminological research on mass shootings for over ten years. Can you introduce us to this research? What areas are researchers specifically interested in?**

**Eric Madfis:** Mass shootings are a relatively recent research topic. The first book and the first definitions of mass murders and mass shootings go back to 1985. At that time, no distinction was made between mass shootings and serial killings and other similar phenomena. However, in the last few decades, research on mass shootings has expanded exponentially. This may be due to the increase in mass shootings and fatalities over the past 20 years. Six of the 10 most deadly massacres in all of American history occurred in the last 10 years. There have also been debates about how common mass shootings are in the US versus abroad, but the US certainly has the greatest number and highest share of mass shootings internationally.

One of the key themes of this research concerns the definition of mass shootings. Some definitions have historically said that four or more people must be killed to count as a mass shooting. I argue that this is problematic because you miss a lot of intended cases that did not end up being as deadly – for example, if a mass shooter ended up killing only two people but wounding ten. I do not think that excluding these types of mass shootings is helpful. The motivations and characteristics of the perpetrators are similar. The only difference is the number of dead people. Particularly in cases where fewer or no deaths resulted from averting a massacre, it is vital to include them in order to explore what prevented them and how this knowledge can be used in the future.

Other definitional questions include: does a school shooting have to be committed by a former student or not? Do victims need to be random or targeted?

Then, researchers aim to understand the causes of mass shootings. They mostly examine the profiles of the perpetrators: their demographics, mental health, adverse experiences, motivations, etc. A lot of research also focuses on prevention and intervention. There are many broad debates that seek to understand the phenomenon of mass shootings in all its breadth and complexity.

**VW&PK: Regarding the definitional criteria for mass shootings, how many of these cases that could qualify as mass shootings are not included in the statistics?**

**EM:** There are certainly many such cases. In my research of the averted school shootings that happened in the US over a ten-year period, I detected 195 such incidents. Here too, we may ask what constitutes an averted attack. There have been serious cases where I think an attack would very likely have occurred had it not been stopped. A boy who had an arsenal of weapons in his bedroom, an elaborate plan of attack, maps of the school, lists of who he did and did not want to kill, journals describing his intentions. At the same time, there was another incident where the only evidence available was a list of people that the suspect did not like.

I think there is a large portion of relevant cases that would not fit the traditional criteria, let alone the attacks where three, not four, people are killed but do not count as

a mass shooting. Then the cases with less than four deaths remain unexplored. Moreover, some researchers include the perpetrator among the number killed, some suggest not to include them in that count.

Personally, I think such debates are not as helpful as thinking about the intent. If a person intends to kill a lot of people in a single incident, it is a mass shooting (or an averted mass shooting). However, even here we have a one-sided definition. If we are talking just about shootings, we are not including bombings or stabbing that also take place in schools or other locations. I believe a broader definition centering on the perpetrator's intent is helpful.

**VW&PK: We will stay with definitions for a while. There are lot of terms such as averted, attempted, and foiled mass shootings. You have co-authored a study that tries to elucidate these notions (Hawes & Madfis, 2022). Can you tell us what you figured out?**

**EM:** Yes, many terms are used for unfinished mass shootings, often inconsistently. We wrote this study specifically to address this issue by assigning a specific term to different stages of a mass shooting incident based on where it was stopped. We tried to provide a definition for each of the stages in the progression of rampage violence: researched, planned, prepared, initiated, interrupted, attempted, and completed.

*Researched* rampage violence are incidents where perpetrators have researched and gathered information from previous attacks for their own use before their efforts were stopped. *Planned* rampage violence occurs when perpetrators have completed the research stage and moved on to planning their own attack (like deciding the time and location, targets, entry points, etc.) when the plot is discovered and stopped. *Prepared* rampage violence are plots which have passed the research and planning stages and perpetrators have now either acquired or attempted to acquire weapons when they were stopped. Next, an incident would be considered *initiated* rampage violence if the perpetrators have passed the three previous stages and successfully arrived at their targeted location to carry out their plot before they are stopped, and anyone is harmed.

In contrast, *interrupted* rampage violence is when perpetrators have passed all

previous stages and initiated their plot but were stopped or interrupted by anyone other than the perpetrators. An interrupted rampage event results in less than four victim fatalities but has at least one victim injury or fatality. Similarly, *attempted* rampage violence reaches the same stage of completion and victim outcomes as interrupted rampage violence. However, it is distinct in that this act concludes due to actions taken by the perpetrators. In other words, attempted rampage events are stopped by the perpetrator's own hand, for example by suicide or surrender. Finally, *completed* rampage violence represents an event which passes all previous stages and meets the commonly accepted 'mass' threshold of four or more victim fatalities.

So, this was our attempt to be more specific and clearer with definitions and terminology and more inclusive of various forms of averted cases. There is a different definition for a situation where someone planned the attack but is stopped than for a situation where someone made it to the scene of the attack but was stopped before he began to act, etc.

**VW&PK: School mass shootings present just one type of mass shootings. How do these types relate to each other? Are they more similar to each other, or are they rather different?**

**EM:** They share lot of aspects, especially school and workplace mass shootings, which may not be that surprising given that schools are a kind of workplace for students. These cases are often motivated by grievances against specific individuals, but people also often go there to indiscriminately kill as many people as possible. There are also many commonalities with shootings at movie theaters and other public events, or even familicides, where the perpetrators kill members of their family in mass numbers. In the US, the largest share of mass shootings are familicides. But they are the least reported on in the media, in part because they do not take place in a public setting, so there is less public fear.

The perpetrators of mass shootings are typically heterosexual white men who, speaking of individual differences, tend to be people who externalize blame for adverse events. They do not take responsibility when bad things happen to them. Instead, they get mad and blame everybody else. And these are people who have many such events

throughout their lives, which I call cumulative strains (Levin & Madfis, 2009). We know that there are two types of straining experiences. One is long-term, or chronic. But then, shortly before their attack, there is often an acute strain: the so-called last straw.

This condition pertains to many mass shootings. In a school, it might be a particularly bad incident of bullying, a relationship incident like a breakup, or getting suspended or expelled. In work, it might be the termination of a job or not getting the job that they wanted. Most familicides are committed by the father, who often kills family members after his wife threatens to divorce him and take the children with her or something similar. These are pretty common precipitating factors. But that does not mean that mass shootings are spontaneous actions with no planning. In the vast majority of cases, people plan their attacks for extensive periods of time. The Columbine killers, for example, planned their attack for over a year.

Considering differences, school shooters obviously tend to be younger. Those who attack random public places, not their former school or their workplace, are more likely to have a history of psychosis, schizophrenia or other psychiatric diagnoses. But overall, I think there are more commonalities than differences across different types of mass shootings. Let alone comparisons to other types of homicide, including single-victim homicide and even serial killings. These are very different types in many respects. For example, most serial killers are sociopaths but very few mass killers are. Many serial killers torture or mutilate their victims, but mass killers almost never do that.

**VW&PK: Most of the research on school mass shootings engages with high schools and elementary schools. Are there any studies on universities, and if so, what do they conclude? Are these acts any different than those in high schools?**

**EM:** While there is much less research about university shootings around the world, there have been a number of university shootings, including prominent cases such as at the University of Texas-Austin, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, or Louisiana Technical College. One of the interesting findings here is that the perpetrators of college mass shootings are more likely to be graduate students than other types of perpetrators (Fox

& Savage, 2009). There was the case of a grad student who went on shooting spree because he was denied a prestigious award (1991 University of Iowa shooting).

One of the reasons for the comparative lack of research on mass shootings at universities may be the legacy of the Columbine attack. It was heavily publicized, people were scared for their kids. There has been a strong institutional and public reaction. But really, I do not know why. It may be also easier to get data from K-12 schools than from colleges. You might expect the opposite given the jokes you sometimes hear about how the field of psychology is not really the psychology of humans but rather the psychology of college students because that is where most psychological research gets data from. But that is not the case here. I have recently been conducting research on threat assessment teams at schools, and there is almost no research on them in colleges and universities. Perhaps it has something to do with institutional bureaucracy, I do not know honestly.

**VW&PK: One of the few known things about the Prague shooter is that he won an award for his bachelor thesis. That made some people wonder why then, since he was apparently successful, he committed such a horrible attack.**

**EM:** That is definitely not typical. Researchers have argued that the reason why the majority of college mass shooters are graduate students is because graduate school stresses you out more. Sometimes you lack family support. And it is a place where you have a lot at stake. Losses mean a lot. But a perpetrator with outstanding achievements is really atypical. Maybe, there were some stressors or stumbling blocks in his more recent life that we are unaware of.

**VW&PK: Another thing that perhaps makes the case unusual is that we know that the perpetrator killed a 30-year-old man and his two-month-old daughter and then killed his own father. Many people are asking, why would someone do something like this? How would you reply?**

**EM:** I think that anyone who would do something that terrible is not exactly mentally healthy. But there are plenty of reasons. In terms of motivations, if people often feel ignored,

emasculated, or disempowered, if they get angry at the world for various reasons, it is often an attempt to achieve infamy or feel manly and tough, to gain recognition in general. We can also talk about media impacts. It is definitely the case that copycats happen. Many mass shooters are obsessed with previous incidents of mass shootings, particularly the Columbine shooting but other cases as well.

But it is actually not that uncommon for mass shooters to have killed a family member or family members before they commit a school shooting or other mass shooting. In the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, a mass shooter killed his mother before the attack. One of the original cases of mass shootings at the University of Texas in 1966 featured the mass shooter killing his mother and wife before climbing the university's tower and shooting people below.

What is uncommon is killing two other people in a few days before. There are often significant distinctions between serial and mass killers. Serial killers usually proceed as follows: they kill someone, then have a cooling-off period, when they return to their regular lives, and then kill someone again. Mass shooters, by definition, do not have this cooling off period. It is usually a single event that results from the gradual accumulation of strains and that ends with the perpetrator committing suicide or surrendering to the police. Killing a family member is typical. Practicing with two random people certainly is not.

**VW&PK: Some people have indeed speculated about that the forest killing was a test of his capability to kill people. But we are more thinking in terms of infamy. Killing a father with an infant, his own father, and then as many people as possible in the most famous faculty in the country seems to be the ultimate horror. Do you think that fame seeking can present a valid explanation here?**

**EM:** Most mass shooters are absolutely fame seekers. According to some research (Silva & Green-Colozzi, 2019), fame seeking mass shooters are increasing. Mass shooters often want to be famous and are explicit about wanting to reach the highest kill count: 'I want to be the deadliest mass shooter ever.' As criminologists, we know something about getting recognition through illegitimate means if other opportunities are closed. You could not



necessarily be internationally famous if you do not have any kind of talent or skills, right? But with a mass killing, you can achieve this status instantaneously.

Some people argue, how could that be the case if they end up killing themselves at the end? My answer is that fantasy matters. They get excited when thinking about it ahead of time, and they spend a lot of time fantasizing and planning. Take the Virginia Tech shooting, the shooter killed two people in his dorm room and then sent a giant media package with a lot of pictures and information to NBC News. And only then he went on to commit the mass shooting. NBC News reported all of that and showed those pictures on all their news networks for an extended period of time. They gave him what he wanted.

I have written about this issue (Lankford & Madfis, 2018), and many survivors and victims' families have demanded changes in the media coverage. They should not give the perpetrators what they want. There are other ways to get the word out without their names and faces appearing on TV screens around the world for extended periods of time. You can report on these things more responsibly.

**VW&PK: 'A crazy attack' and a 'crazy shooter,' we have seen even the minister of the interior and other government officials using these terms. Is mental health the main explanation for such mass shootings?**

**EM:** You can encounter such rhetoric in various contexts. I think it is highly problematic for several reasons. First, blaming mental illness is simply too reductionist based on what we know about the causes of mass shootings. And perhaps that is also why it is so popular. You can easily avoid discussing larger structural or policy concerns, namely gender dynamics, racism, gun culture and access, education, politics, and media, if you frame it as an individual pathology. Right-wing politicians employ this rhetoric as a tactic to prevent any conversation about the extremely wide free access to guns in the US. I think it is a political tactic because those same politicians never end up saying: 'Let's have a more robust system of mental health.' They never propose any solutions to address mental health in the country.

Second, using such expressions can certainly be stigmatizing for a large segment of the population. If you are going to perpetrate a mass shooting, you are probably not

particularly mentally healthy. I think that is clear. However, few mass shooters have been formally diagnosed as having psychosis or schizophrenia, though depression and suicidal ideation are the two most common mental health issues found among mass killers. The thing is that these are also two of the most common mental health issues in the general population.

Maybe if we had a public mental health system in the US, it might make a big difference not only in helping the general population deal with these issues, but also for those who eventually become mass shooters. But we do not. Instead, we have rhetoric that does not help anything. It is not that mental health does not play a role. But I think it is often overemphasized and treated outside the policy context, which is the only area where change can be brought about.

**VW&PK: The Czech police disclosed that the Prague mass shooter left behind a letter. How should we think about its possible publication? Would publishing its content be contrary to the general recommendation not to give the perpetrator publicity?**

**EM:** I think it depends how the letter is framed. Some researchers have suggested that there are more and less responsible ways of discussing suicides in media, that you should be careful in not glamorizing it, that you should always put the suicide in context and refrain from presenting it as a solution to any problem. I think that applies to mass shootings as well.

In a study with Adam Lankford (Lankford & Madfis, 2018), we argued in line with the 'No Notoriety' campaign (<https://nonotoriety.com/>) that the media and other actors should not show the perpetrators' names and faces. Manifestos and other documents that help us to understand the crime and its motivation are another matter. These should be made public because it is important to try to find out why someone was brought to the level of committing such a horrific act. There should be public debates around the possible causes and possible interventions and solutions. Certainly, you want to limit the glamorization of the perpetrator, but information on motivations can be useful in preventing mass shootings in the future. I think there is a way to do it responsibly.

**VW&PK:** It is important that you say this because we have seen arguments that it would be best not to talk about the attack at all. Do not publicize anything, even the names of victims. The best thing we can do is to move on. That seems like a pretty perverse twist to the original Don't Name Them message.

**EM:** This is interesting given that, in the US, victim advocates would usually argue that we should know more about the victims. We should not be talking about the perpetrators at all, but we should be talking about the victims. I think we should talk about certain aspects of the attack and the perpetrator, and I would particularly like to see media giving more coverage to the solutions that we know exist based on research (such as that discussed in Madfis & Lankford, 2023). How can we solve these problems? How can we address these issues in a holistic way? Unfortunately, this policy conversation does not happen often enough.

**VW&PK:** This brings us to the subject of your recent edited monograph, *All-American Massacre: The Tragic Role of American Culture and Society in Mass Shootings* (Madfis & Lankford, 2023), which focused specifically on the institutional, social, and cultural factors of mass shootings. What did you find out?

**EM:** Our book attempts to explore the reasons why the US has such an enormous number of mass shootings that it surpasses any other country. It draws primarily on the sociology of mass shootings, but there are also contributions from political science, criminology, psychology, history, and media studies. We look at different factors, such as how gender identity relates to the notion of gun violence as a source of power for emasculated boys and men. Although our focus is on American masculinity, I think many of the conclusions apply to all the contexts where mass shootings tend to happen. It is no coincidence that they are not occurring everywhere.

Racism is another factor. Some mass shootings are also hate crimes with specific targets like Blacks, Jews, or immigrants. So, it is important to ask how white supremacy influences those cases. Then, there is American politics, where the issues of political

polarization, corruption, and in-group identification between the Republican party and gun owners play a role. You have to explain why we do not have even the basic gun regulations that the rest of the developed world has. We have talked about the media and how they can inspire contagion and copycat effects in the wake of school mass shootings. The problem of copycat attacks does not only involve traditional media. Much is happening through social media too. We have also talked about mental health. This is really a multi-faceted issue.

Lastly, many changes made in the education system in response to mass shootings have been ineffective and even counterproductive. These include punitive exclusionary responses such as zero tolerance policies based on suspending or expelling kids from the school or imposing other harsh punishments on them even for minor transgressions. The problem is that these measures not only tend to individualize and thus pathologize problems that have apparent social causes, but that they harm the school environment. This in turn decreases the possibilities of one of the most effective institutional forms of prevention. We know that a large number of mass shootings have been averted because of students reporting threats to a responsible school official. If you create a school environment that is generally hostile and that works against positive trusting relationships between the staff and students, you simultaneously limit the chance of students coming to you and reporting what they had heard.

**VW&PK: We will engage with the solutions later. Now let us talk more about some of the factors that you have mentioned. Why is it almost always men who perpetrate mass shootings?**

**EM:** According to the most recent data (Peterson & Densley, 2024), we are talking about 97 percent of mass shootings being perpetrated by cisgender heterosexual males. The answer to why has many facets. One way to tackle it is cumulative strain theory, which I have been working for a while and which has been outlined in this interview before (Levin & Madfis, 2009). The theory speaks of different stages leading up to a mass shooting. I think it is useful to look at these stages through the prism of gender.

In the US but not only there, boys are taught from an early age that aggression is an

acceptable way to deal with problems. I have pointed out how mass shooters tend to be people who externalize problems. This is true to some extent for men in general, while women are more likely to internalize guilt and to self-blame and self-harm when they experience strain. Thus, it is not that boys and men are more likely to struggle with strains than girls and women. The difference is not in the experience itself, but in how we interpret it. And these particular interpretations are to some extent based on differential socialization in terms of hegemonic and normalized gender identities.

Every society has some preferred conceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman. In the US, the normative masculine identity is based on the notion of breadwinner, physical strength and athleticism, a large number of sex partners, etc. If a man is unable to meet this ideal, it produces tensions, strains, that tend to be resolved in culturally prescribed ways, including aggression. It is therefore not surprising that men who feel emasculated turn to violence as a solution. School mass shooters are often people who were not particularly popular, nor did they have many friends or romantic partners. They may have been bullied and picked on. A mass shooting is a way to prove that the shooter is in reality a real man, tough and strong, to which everybody should pay attention.

It also plays a role that men have historically had more access to and training in firearms. If you aspire to kill as many people as possible, this is an important ability to have. There are many more facets, but masculinity is surely an important part of the conversation.

**VW&PK: The US is one of the most class-divided societies in the world. Do you think that socio-economic inequalities somehow influence the high presence of mass shootings?**

EM: I see the connection on several levels. Preferring consumer goods over human life certainly helps to understand why there is such a priority on gun rights in the US. I think this decision is partially rooted in the logic of capitalism and the way of thinking that arises out of it. The same can be observed in ways in which we approach school problems. Instead of helping kids to deal with their problems, they are being kicked out of school. This then can ensure that the school scores better in tests, and it is also a cheaper alternative in the

short-term. But definitely not in the long term, as it only intensifies the problems that had been thus avoided. The current for-profit healthcare system does not give people the support that they need. Many cannot afford basic health care, let alone long-term treatment of mental health issues. The system often puts people in debt and bankruptcy instead. There is a lack of public resources to deal with mental health crises.

America is the extreme hyper-capitalist nation, which clearly exacerbates certain factors that lead to mass shootings. However, it is not just mass shootings. I think that not valuing human relationships and undermining community lead to crime in general.

The culture of individualism, which legitimizes economic inequalities, also contributes to the emergence of mass shootings. People are often made isolated, lacking social supports, and getting angry at the world. They can explain their anger and frustration with many different discourses, but few Americans attribute it to socio-economic inequality and capitalism. But in my opinion, these troubles are related to people's alienation and the anger that they feel.

**VW&PK: In Czechia, it is repeated ad nauseum that we will never prevent mass shootings. Is every effort really doomed to failure in advance?**

**EM:** That is something you can hear in the US, too. People say: 'Oh, there are always going to be these mass shootings. There's nothing you can do about it.' I think this is too fatalistic and simply untrue. I have mentioned the research on averted school shootings. There are many measures that do not work: zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, see through backpacks, random locker searches, arming teachers, etc. Not only do these not work, but they often make things worse, degrading the school climate and exacerbating the school to prison pipeline. However, there are also successful solutions, which I discuss in my book *How to Stop School Rampage Killing* (Madfis, 2020).

First, the vast majority of cases are characterized by something called 'leakage.' For example, students who intend to commit an attack will tell others. Sometimes they try to make them accomplices. Sometimes they try to warn them. Sometimes they threaten them. In any case, they let others know about their plans. And basically, every averted shooting

was a result of students hearing about it and reporting it to their teachers, school administrators, even school resource officers. Hence, it is crucial to have a positive climate in schools. Students must feel safe and comfortable in this environment and trust the adults there. Because if they do not, if they feel that the climate is overtly punitive, that the discipline is racially biased, that they have no say in the school, then they are less likely to report things. This is true in the case of school shootings, but also in the case of bullying, sexual assaults, or domestic violence.

The second solution that I deem essential is based on my research with people involved in averting a school shooting. I interviewed principals, teachers, school resource officers, arresting officers, school counselors, and school psychologists about how they averted these incidents and how they assess whether to take a threat seriously. I found that they used two types of criteria. Many of the more traditional risk assessment criteria were seen as less helpful. Asking questions such as, 'Did they not like school?,' 'Did they dress differently?,' 'Did they wear black clothes?,' 'Did they wear trench coats?,' 'Did they have tattoos?,' 'Did they play violent video games?' is unhelpful because they are either empirically unsound or unrelated to mass shooters. Many kids do not like school, dress differently, or play violent video games and they never end up being violent at all.

More promising are threat assessment criteria, which they use to evaluate the substance of the threat itself. There are many ways to do it, but generally the point is to determine the extent to which the threat can be seen as realistic. Threatening to blow up the Moon is not realistic. But if a student is threatening to kill someone in school, has the list of specific people, has taken actions to launch the attack such as getting weapons, gaining access to them, or practicing shooting in the family's backyard, that is something that you should pay attention to. The school officials saw them as more relevant and treated them more seriously whether or not they fit a profile of 'white male loner' or had various vague 'warning signs.'

I think that a threat assessment team can be an efficient instrument to avert school shootings and other forms of violence. These have to be trained people who know what they are doing and who can oppose a tendency to overreact so that they do not punish kids for

minor infractions unnecessarily (see also Madfis, 2016). There is ample evidence that these teams can help maintain or improve the school climate as opposed to measures that are more likely to criminalize students or securitize the school environment than anything else. I think that they can really work and prevent many incidents.

**VW&PK: Can you tell us more about how these teams work?**

**EM:** Threat assessment teams are entrusted with assessing the substance of the threat and finding alternative solutions to students' problems. It can be a change to their educational plan, additional mental health support, or helping to resolve conflicts between students in the manner of restorative justice. My experience suggests that these teams really try to address such issues, and research seems to confirm it. Major reductions have been reported not only in violence, but also in school suspensions and expulsions and even in the racial disproportionality of punishment. This stems from the fact that these teams often have checks built in their procedures and that their members undergo specific training. The outcomes are remarkable. They outperform many other policies, particularly those based on criminalization and securitization.

Regarding the team composition, it is usually a multidisciplinary team led by a school administrator, which also encompasses a school psychologist, sometimes a teacher, but often a school resource officer or local police officer. In the US, it is common for threat assessment teams to include the police. The situation is different in Germany, which is the only other country I know of that has introduced threat assessment teams in response to a number of school shootings. Particularly interesting is the Berlin Leaking Project. There are also researchers interested in this issue at universities around Germany (Leuschner et al., 2011). And it is interesting that although they do not have police on their teams, outcomes seem similarly positive, but more data are certainly needed here.

**VW&PK: This all sounds great, we just still cannot shake the question, do we really need this in a country with a very low crime rate and a single instance of a mass school shooting? Are we not already securitizing schools too much if we introduce a scheme promoting**



**assessing students as to whether or not they present a realistic threat?**

**EM:** We should keep in mind that mass shootings and even all shootings in schools are extremely rare events. I have talked about that fact that mass shootings are increasing, but they are increasing based on a very low rate. Students are still more likely to be hit by lightning than to be the victim of a school shooting. In many respects, schools are some of the safest places for kids. However, this has not prevented a number of negative measures from being introduced in the US. This is the context where I am arguing for threat assessment teams, which constitutes an improvement to the contemporary state of school safety. In Florida, they have mandated armed guards in every single school even though research shows it is unlikely to produce positive results.

If you have low rates of violent behavior and lack the legacy of harsh punishment, threat assessment teams may be unnecessary. But I also think that this measure can be beneficial overall. All schools have some level of bullying and aggression in intimate relationships. These teams can also be adjusted to be less about threat assessment and more about conflict resolution. Restorative practices can work wherever people harm each other. Embedding them more deeply in school routines can improve not only the relationships in a school but also in the larger community.

Some people think that restorative justice is just another word for ignoring the problem and doing nothing if a student does something harmful. I would say it should be the opposite. In fact, much research reveals that it is one of the best ways to deal with conflicts in schools because it clearly communicates what actions are wrong, while giving the person who did harm a chance to repair what he or she damaged. So, there is accountability and concrete solutions, and these are crucial if people are to feel that they are important members of the community.

**VW&PK:** You have repeatedly stated that certain security measures present a bad solution. In Czechia, we are also witnessing proposals to introduce security frames (metal detectors) or a ban on taking large bags to universities. There is a lot of talk about 'soft targets.' What does research say in this regard?

**EM:** There is a lot of debate around this issue, which is in part ideological. The emphasis on security technology and the regulation of routines allows us to avoid questions about the ways in which society is organized and the possible impact of wider social and cultural factors. Let alone the fact that school security is a multimillion-dollar industry, with massive conferences where all kinds of the most sophisticated products are sold. Particularly in the aftermath of shootings, school officials often want to respond quickly. They buy these products not out of bad will, but rather because they give the impression of an immediate solution. Research shows it is not that simple.

Some studies have found that there are successful measures. For example, having a lock on the classroom door serves as a good protection. Some perpetrators can try to shoot through the lock but that has not happened very frequently. And you can be sure that this is not going to criminalize people and change the school climate for the worse. But there are other more dramatic measures such as metal detectors. These are quite expensive and tend to change the climate a lot. In order to go through them, students have to line up ahead of time. It can take an hour or more to pass. Then there are measures such as random locker searches, drug sniffing dogs, or other extreme measures that make the school look more like a prison than an educational facility.

I think we should always ask, what are these measures going to do with the overall school environment, are they going to harm it? As I have said, mass shootings are rare events. And there is no obvious contradiction between a positive school environment and safety. In fact, an environment where students feel comfortable and can focus on learning can be the most effective way to ensure safety. This is what you need to maximize, not prison-like conditions.

Security technology and soft targets come from routine activities theory, which gives a limited picture of why crimes occur. The theory always assumes a motivated offender and primarily explores how we can change the dynamics of the environment itself to reduce the opportunities to carry out his/her intent. It thus abstains from asking, how does someone become a motivated offender? What does make people so angry that they want to kill everyone in their school? These questions are important because once they are at that point,

it is quite difficult to stop them.

Thus, there are sensible changes to the environment that can be made. But there are also awful ways in which you create more problems than solutions. Trying to securitize things too much can have contradictory effects. Threat assessment teams and restorative practices, on the other hand, can positively intervene in the process of becoming a motivated offender.

**VW&PK: What does research say about the role of police in school mass shootings?**

**EM:** Both Republicans and Democrats have contributed to massive increases in funding for the police presence in schools. In the US, such police officers are often called 'school resource officers.' Looking at the research in this area, there have certainly been cases where school resource officers and other armed guards have stopped attacks and prevented the shooters from killing more people. However, what I think is problematic is the idea that having a police officer in a school will deter shooters and ensure that they never happen. This is not the case at all. First, mass shootings have taken place in settings with school police, such as the attacks at Columbine and Virginia Tech. In many cases, perpetrators planned how they would incapacitate the police officers first and then commit the attack. Whether or not they would be able to do that is another question. But the police presence was definitely not a strict deterrent.

Furthermore, we need to consider the overall impact. The police presence tends to significantly increase the school to prison pipeline. Many studies describe how, once police make decisions about discipline, they are more likely to see student acts as a crime problem rather than a discipline issue. They are more likely to arrest kids or lead them into the juvenile justice system. That is definitely a major concern for having police officers in schools.

We can also talk about arming people in schools more generally. There have been some public mass shootings that have been averted by an armed citizen. But there are actually no cases where this has happened in a school setting. The whole idea about a good guy with a gun coming in and saving the day is much more complicated than people often

think.

First, if people are not extensively trained for active shooting situations, many innocent people get shot. This is what simulations have revealed about what would happen in often chaotic scenes. Second, there have been incidents such as the one in Arizona in 2011, where US representative Gabby Giffords was shot and an armed civilian, along with several unarmed civilians, helped to stop the shooter. But then, when the police arrived at the scene, they thought that the armed civilian who helped stop the attack was himself the active shooter and they almost killed him. If you are on the scene where you have many armed people, you do not know for sure who the shooter is going to be. There is a potential for disaster. So, a good guy with a gun is not always a particularly helpful solution.

**VW&PK: What is known about the relationship between gun control and preventing or decreasing the prevalence of mass shootings in schools?**

**EM:** The data are a bit complicated here. In the US, the data concerning access to guns are not always clearly collected or easy to analyze. That said, I think it is unequivocal that the US has more guns than anywhere else in the world, more guns than people, and we have the highest rates of school shootings and mass shootings. Clearly, there is a correlation, if not clear evidence for causation.

There are different ways to limit access to firearms. One is through red flag laws, which entrust the police with the power to take your guns away if there is evidence of a substantial threat to yourself or to others. In Washington state, this power extends to juveniles: if a juvenile makes a threat, their parents have to lock away their guns or make them otherwise inaccessible to their kids. There is a lot of evidence that it is useful. We know that most school shooters get their guns by taking them from their parents, and they tend to tell other people about their intent. So, this provision can be useful in some contexts. Other basic reforms can be made to deny access to people with criminal records or profound mental health issues, or even the establishment of nationwide registries like were created in Germany and New Zealand after they experienced mass shootings.

There is some evidence that gun control can be successful (see Reeping, 2023; Fridel,

2023 for reviews of this literature). One could argue to limit access to guns simply because they are so much more lethal than other types of weapons. There was an upsurge in mass stabbing in China a decade ago. Often older adults came to elementary schools and attacked kids with knives or axes. There were a lot of injuries but very few fatalities. You just would not have the same with a firearm. It is not as easy to kill so many people without them. However, gun control cannot be the only solution. After all, there are harsher rules in the European Union than in the US, and yet mass shootings still occur.

**VW&PK: Some (e.g., Latzer, 2021) say that gun control is ultimately futile because there are so many guns in the US that everyone can get one illegally. Should we not then do as much as we can to stop reaching the similar situation in Czechia, where the number of guns is still small but growing?**

**EM:** I think this argument about the futility of gun control has been discredited in a number of ways. It is funny that you will never see these people making a similar claim about other types of crime. They never say that we cannot do anything or create any new laws because there will always be gang violence, for example. At the same time, there is a leftist critique of the idea that we should abolish the private ownership of guns. Anarchists and others argue that cramping down on gun ownership today will be particularly harmful to people on the left, which is similar to arguments that the Black Panthers made decades ago. I have mixed feelings about this. But as a mass shootings researcher, I rather think that it cannot be denied that the countries that have addressed this problem via making access to firearms more difficult just have better outcomes in terms of the prevalence of mass shootings and violence rates.

**VW&PK: Based on your knowledge of the current state of research on mass shootings in schools, what would you recommend responsible officials in Czechia to do and not to do?**

**EM:** First of all, follow the research. Look at what works and pay attention to that. Abstain from overreacting because this can be counterproductive. Criminalizing and securitizing everything have been proven not to help. Focus on what can help more generally. Try to

create a positive climate in schools through building systems of support through mental health or other channels and encourage reporting. There are different ways to do it. There are different models of threat assessment teams, different practices of restorative justice. Take what fits your environment best and build systems of support and positive environments to address conflicts and support people so that they do not get to the point of wanting to kill themselves and lots of other people.

*The interview was conducted by Václav Walach and Petr Kupka from the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ostrava. The interview, a version of which was originally published in Deník Alarm, was edited for space and clarity.*

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