An Examination of School Shootings and Mental Health:

A Comparative Case Study

By

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Abstract

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School shootings have become more relevant in our society over the past few decades, yet the debate over the cause of these shootings never seems to reach a conclusion. The current study looks at the connection between mental illness and school shootings, as well as the roles that media, gun control, violence, and masculinity play in the common phenomena. Prior literature has debated over the main causes of school shootings, but many researchers state differing opinions regarding the motivations for perpetrators. This study found that severe mental illness is the main cause of school shootings, and while mental illness may be the main explanation, a lack of social capital, alongside male pressure to conform to societal stereotypes, play significant parts as well. 96% of shooters are male, and when addressing the notion of male stereotypes, it is important to note that men, specifically men with mental illnesses, are socialized to not seek help. Other aspects that pertain to the possible causes of school shootings are the immense lack of gun control in the United States and the sensationalization of perpetrators in the media. The combination of all of these factors, with mental illness as the most prominent, contribute to the overwhelmingly sizable problem that has become school shootings. The rate of school shootings only seems to be increasing, and while school shootings may never cease to exist, the United States can certainly decrease the rate at which shootings occur through increased mental health resources in schools.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the victims of school shootings around the world. Thank you for speaking out and working to make our world a better place.

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Chapter 1: Understanding School Shootings

1.1 Introduction

Since I first started my thesis in September of 2017, there have been 66 school shootings. While school shootings have become more of a public concern in the last two decades since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, such shootings have been problematic starting as early as the 1700s. Alongside an immense increase in shootings, there has been a drastic upsurge in mental health illnesses and diagnoses. Given the prevalence of both school shootings and mental health concerns in contemporary society, I have decided to investigate the connection between school shootings and mental health in the United States. Although these phenomena are not new within society, both have become significant concerns given their increased frequency within the last two decades.

Several sociologists, researchers, and studies have made the claim that mental health is not a main factor or indicator in perpetrators opening fire on schools; however, I am arguing that severe mental health concerns are one of the most significant unifying factors of all the perpetrators. It is important to note that this argument does not assert that someone with generalized anxiety disorder or depression, for example, is likely to commit school shootings. This argument does not seek to claim that someone with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia will shoot their peers and teachers. My position is that perpetrators of school shootings are more likely than not to exhibit signs of severe mental health concerns, and that those issues, mixed with social unrest in daily life, lead to greater chances of school shootings. Shootings and mental health issues are difficult to address given the complexities they each inherently have. School shootings are perplexing because they directly relate to other issues, such as gun control laws, bullying, and media frenzies. Mental illnesses are closely linked to genetics, medications, and

socialization. While I maintain that school shootings and mental illnesses are directly related, it is important to remember that there are a multitude of other issues that are difficult to separate from one another but relate to shootings as well.

This topic is important because of the prevalence of school shootings and the lack of mental health awareness in contemporary society. In today's society there are very few days that go by in the news, in the classroom, or in conversation with peers without a mention of either of these topics. They have become part of our daily lives, either in relation to one another or as their own entities, but they are unavoidable. After any shooting occurs, news outlets are fast to make claims about the perpetrators and their mental states. Why is this? Statistics from one report suggest up to 60% of perpetrators since 1970 in the United States alone have shown symptoms of acute paranoia, delusions, and depression prior to opening fire (Metzl and MacLeish 2015); however, this report is discussing mass shootings in general, not school shootings. It is difficult to gauge how many school shooters have or had mental health problems because many shooters are undiagnosed at the time of their shootings and end up taking their own lives after them. While there are often suspicions from psychologists, therapists, family members, and friends regarding the mental state of many shooters, a legitimate diagnosis for the purpose of statistics is difficult to secure and utilize if one has not been made prior to the death of the shooter. In many case studies mentioned hereafter, the majority of perpetrators of school shootings either had a legitimate diagnosis of mental illnesses or warning signs that directly would lead to a diagnosis of a mental illness had it been brought to the attention of a specialist prior to their death.

I am working on the topic of school shootings because I want to establish the connection with mental health so that I can help others better understand a time at which school shootings

and mental health are two major aspects of our contemporary society but are not talked about properly or addressed in the right manner. Because mental health is on the forefront of our media and our minds and school shootings are becoming more prevalent in our society, it is crucial to examine the relationship between the two phenomena. Some experts in the field of health claim that there is no connection between the two, while others say that the connection is significant. I am arguing that there is a connection between mental health and the perpetrators of school shootings given several case studies, such as Columbine, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and Sandy Hook. While my assessment does not include a full summary of policies of either issue at hand, it is important to keep in mind that legislature and the government have the ability to help enact positive changes to help tighten gun control, as well as help those with mental illnesses. There is also the immense likelihood that instating stronger gun control policies will aid in the decrease of school shootings. Because 61% of shooters have documented feelings of depression and 78% of shooters have expressed suicidal ideation or attempts, (Cullen 2016) it is important to note that there is an apparent connection between the perpetrators of school shootings and their states of mental health.

There are several sub-sections that I address in my assessment. I think it is important to cover the top mental illnesses found in shooters, particularly depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. There are also several other illnesses found in specific instances like obsessive-compulsive disorder and paranoia that may have not directly led to shootings but played some role. I will be looking at symptoms and warning signs, as well as resources and therapies that work together to reduce these behaviors. While not all of these diseases are simple to manage, there are examples in every shooting of warning signs that were missed by family, friends, and educators. Had the loved ones of the perpetrators been more aware of the behaviors associated

with their respective illnesses or educated about their severity, there is a chance these shootings may not have occurred.

In addition to addressing the most common mental illnesses, I am also interested in the prevalence of mental health in the media, given that the stigmas of mental illness and the idea of mental health as a scapegoat often appear in the media after shootings occur. While many studies have previously addressed disorders in relation to violence or shootings, they do not always do so in the most positive light. Ann Coulter, a conservative political commentator, once remarked "Guns don't kill people, the mentally ill do" (Abassi 2016). While I assert that there is a connection between mental health and shootings, I do not agree with Coulter's statement to be true. While I think there is a connection between the people who commit school shootings and their mental health, I do not claim that there is a causal connection in that everyone with mental illness is more likely to commit a violent crime. It is important to recognize the way in which the media portrays people with mental health illnesses, especially considering the fact that nearly half of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental health disorder at one time in their lives (Abassi 2016). Therefore, it is not logical to state that people with mental illnesses will kill people since that would imply half of the U.S. population. The way the media comments on mental health is crucial to the way people view that specific population.

There has also been recent discussion about the influence of media on shootings. One significant reason that media has the immense potential to lead to more shootings is through the copycat effect. The copycat effect is defined as "the phenomenon through which violent events spawn violence of the same type" (Coleman 2004:1). Every time a shooter commits his or her violent act, it is prominently displayed on the news for days, or even weeks, after the event. This notoriety given to the shooter often serves as inspiration for the next shooter to begin his or her

rampage. The sheer publicity of any type of violent event on the news can be incredibly damaging to the future of our society. This is not to say that there should not be violent stories on the news, but media outlets need to be extremely careful in the way they publicize violent crime.

The ALERRTCenter at Texas State University has started a campaign called "Don't Name Them," which attempts to influence newscasters from mentioning the perpetrator's name on air in an attempt to avoid sensationalizing them. Members of the campaign believe that "Active shooter research data shows the increase in these events. By encouraging the media to focus less on the suspects and more on the victims, it is hoped that future events can be prevented" (Don'tNameThem.com 2017). They also add that "It appears that yes, national media coverage does end up increasing the frequency of these tragedies… In fact, most press agencies will not report on suicides for exactly this reason… suicides have been shown to be contagious" (Don'tNameThem.com 2017). Knoll (2013) raises the same concerns and ideas by saying:

> The news media has always been in the business of searching for 'the right sort of madness' to capture the public's imagination. This may involve exploiting violent and tragic acts and/or overemphasizing the alleged role of mental illness. A universal media reporting code has been recommended that would cover the tragedy yet reduce the impact of the copycat effect. Most recommendations involve ensuring that the perpetrator is neither glorified nor demonized and generally avoiding much emphasis on the perpetrator. (Knoll 2013)

Given the copycat effect and the sensationalization of shooters, it is crucial that the media is careful when reporting.

I will also do a comprehensive analysis of some of the most well-known, and deadliest, school shootings in the most recent two decades, including Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook. These shootings in particular provide three unique stories that all contain the common theme of mental health that was never properly addressed. I want it to be clear that by no means am I making the claim that all people with any form of mental illness are going to shoot up a school; however, I do maintain that among school shootings, the vast majority of perpetrators

have shared this common thread. Mental health education and awareness is something that is on the rise in the United States, perhaps in response to the recent uprise of accounts of bullying, suicide, and maybe even shootings, yet the topic still seems somewhat taboo.

Through extensive research, it can be seen that mental health concerns often appear to be the most common underlying theme among many perpetrators of school shootings. While other concerns like bullying or lack of social capital are factors that greatly influence the shooters, severe mental health problems seem to be the reason why the perpetrators actively plan and engage in their spree. A person with a mix of disorders, such as schizophrenia, paranoia, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder, has parts of his brain that do not have the ability to engage in rational thinking, planning, or activity. When the perpetrator becomes so hopeless in his life, his lack of stability, combined with his complex state of mental health, is likely what drives him to act irrationally by carrying out a massacre. The most detrimental of school shootings all have one major thing in common: the mental health issues of the perpetrators. It is crucial to note that sometimes a mix of suffering and mental health concerns that are not addressed properly can be lethal.

While mental health is not the sole factor to blame for school shootings, it is likely to be the underlying switch that when combined with bullying and social unrest causes perpetrators to execute such massacres. The importance of the connection between mental health and school shootings is one that is complex, but crucial, to understand. Within the last few decades, the increase in mental health diagnoses alongside the uprise of school shootings are two issues that we cannot ignore as a society.

1.2 Comparing Countries

In 1996, a 43-year-old man opened fire on an elementary school in Scotland, killing 16 five and six-year olds, as well as one teacher, prompting the entire United Kingdom to take a stand against firearms (Dewan and Tarabay 2017). The perpetrator entered the Dunblane primary school armed with four handguns, which were legally licensed to the man, and over 700 rounds of ammunition (Masanzu 2006). Following this school shooting, Gill Marshall-Andrews, the chair of the Gun Control Network (GCN), a network promoting gun control, remarked "It looked like we were going down the American route of gun violence at the time, and it just wasn't what people wanted" (Dewan and Tarabay 2017). This "American route of gun violence" is synonymous with hundreds of deadly massacres that had the ability to be prevented through enacting laws to enforce stricter gun control. The massacre in Scotland had enough power to cause the entire United Kingdom to create new gun laws. The Firearms Amendment of 1997 enforced a ban on all handguns, as well a withdrawal of all gun licenses, in attempt to lessen the connection between gun availability, crimes, and suicides (Masanzu 2006). Over 162,000 handguns were given up by people living in the United Kingdom, and although there are still some guns circulating the population, there has been only one mass shooting in northern England in 2010 since the enactment of these tighter laws (Dewan and Tarabay 2017). The government intervention after the Dunblane primary school shooting proves that with the support of the government positive changes can be made, resulting in a safer environment for the population of the United Kingdom.

In the same year, 35 people were killed in Port Arthur, Tasmania, an island state off of Australia, on May 10th, 1996 (Cukier 2005). Although Australia was previously seeking to enforce stricter gun control laws, this deadly shooting, done with a semi-automatic weapon, pushed activists and the government to band together to create a safe state. Within the year after

the Port Arthur attack, the Australian government made drastic changes to their gun policies,

including detailed background checks and a ban on automatic and semi-automatic weapons

(Dewan and Tarabay 2017). The law, named the National Agreement on Firearms:

> All but prohibited automatic and semiautomatic assault rifles, stiffened licensing and
> ownership rules, and instituted a temporary gun buyback program that took some 650,000
> assault weapons (about one-sixth of the national stock) out of public circulation. Among
> other things, the law also required licenses to demonstrate a 'genuine need' for a
> particular type of gun and take a firearm safety course (Wright 2015).

Unlike other places with radical laws to combat gun violence, the Australian government's

decision to compensate gun owners who turned their guns in proved to be radical; however, it is

unclear if the buyback program actually worked given that the government only recovered one-

sixth of the guns in the population (Dewan and Tarabay 2017). The buyback program may have

been mildly effective in reducing gun-related homicides, but it proved to be rather costly to the

government, making it seem like an unlikely method for the United States to adopt (Wright

2015). Researchers debate if the confiscation program actually reduced gun-related crimes, but

overall the National Agreement on Firearms as a method of minimizing gun violence proved to

be effective.

Japan has one of the lowest gun violence rates in the world with just six gun deaths in

2014, compared to the 33,599 gun deaths in the United States (Low 2017). Japan's low death

rate by guns is not a fluke, but rather a product of strict laws enacted to protect their people. As

early as the 1946, the Japanese government, under the order of the Allied Occupation forces,

prohibited its people from owning guns and swords (Aoki 2017). Although these demands from

the Allied Occupation forces was replaced by the Firearm and Sword Control Law in 1958, the

principles have remained the same, if not more severe. Under the Firearm and Sword Control

Law, firearms, as well as swords, are essentially banned from civilians, and while certain rifles

are allowed for hunting and sport, there are extreme precautions taken before a license is

distributed (Alleman 2000). For those who want to purchase guns, they can only do so after taking an all-day class for gun safety, passing a written examination, and earning a score of 95% or higher on a shooting test (Low 2017). In addition to taking a class and passing the written and shooting examinations, people looking to purchase a gun must also pass a mental health test, as well as a drug test (Low 2017). Failure to pass any of these examinations results in the inability to purchase guns. Gun owners also must retest every three years to ensure that they are still capable enough of owning such a powerful weapon (Alpers and Wilson 2016). All of the restrictions set by Japan are enacted to establish a sense of safety and security within the country.

1.3 A Brief History of School Shootings in The United States

While the Columbine shooting of 1999 seems to be one of the most well-known school shootings, perhaps because of the number of casualties or the media presence and reporting, there is in fact a deeper-rooted history of school shootings that goes back farther than a century before Columbine.

The first reported school shooting occurred on July 26th, 1764, when four American Indian men entered a school house in Greenhouse, Pennsylvania and killed Enoch Brown, the headmaster, as well as eleven children (Crews 2016). What differentiates this shooting from most others that occur in contemporary society is that it was politically driven, as it occurred during Pontiac's War (Crews 2016). There were also many shootings that occurred in the 1800s, but there are few detailed reports about the shootings of this time period. The majority of the shootings during this time also had a limited number of death tolls, perhaps due to the lack of automatic weapons. There were a series of shootings in the first half of the 1900s with no significant number of casualties, but this changed in 1966.

On August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman opened fire at the University of Texas, starting what would soon emerge as an era of school shootings. A former student of the university, Whitman killed his mother and wife, before entering campus grounds, where he stood in the campus clock tower and showered the campus below with bullets from a deer rifle (Stearns 2008). Whitman killed a total of 14 people and injured 31 others (Steans 2008). Although Whitman was killed by police upon their arrival to campus, later autopsy results showed that he had a brain tumor, but doctors are unsure about the influence the tumor had, if any, on Whitman. (Wallenfeldt 2017). Whitman reported having many irrational thoughts, and after seeing a psychiatrist once for his mental state, he decided not to return to see the doctor, despite the doctor's advice to return (Stearns 2008). Some of Whitman's symptoms include "rage, confusion, and violent impulses, which he documented exhaustively in writing" (Wallenfeldt 2017). While there were no documented reports of a legitimate diagnosis for Whitman, signs lead us to believe that there were mental health concerns present.

A 1989 schoolyard shooting in Stockton, California, that appears to parallel the Sandy Hook shooting of 2012, was committed by 24-year-old Patrick Purdy, a man with a long criminal past. Purdy opened fire at the Cleveland Elementary School on January 17th, 1989, killing 5 and wounding 32 with his AK-47 rifle (The Associated Press 1989). A police report written by Nelson Kempsky (1989), the chief deputy attorney general assigned to the case, reported that Purdy had made several suicide attempts, had alcohol and drug dependency problems, and suffered from a low self-esteem (Kempsky 1989). A teacher who was watching the incident explained how Purdy "was not talking, he was not yelling, he was very straight-faced. It did not look like he was really angry; it was just matter-of-factly" (The Associated Press 1989). Purdy's lack of emotion throughout his spree proves to be problematic in itself from a psychological

point of view, in addition to his drug and alcohol problems. Purdy's criminal history, alongside his mental and emotional statuses, just prove how unstable he truly was.

Just a year prior to Columbine, Kip Kinkel opened fire on Thurston High School on May 20th, 1998 in Springfield, Oregon. Kinkel, expelled the day before the shooting on the charge of gun possession while on school property, also decided to kill his parents, in addition to killing two more people on school property and injuring 25 more (Bennett 2012). His motivation for killing his parents was described in a note he left saying that he already had two felonies on record and his parents would struggle in coping with this. Kinkel also mentioned the voices he heard inside his head, as part of his motivation for killing his parents and then his classmates (Logan 2016). Upon arrival to jail, Kinkel was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and is serving his 111-year sentence, making him a unique case as a shooter who did not kill himself during his spree, as suicide proves to be a recent trend of perpetrators (Bennett 2012).

At Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20th, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire on their high school campus, after months of planning a mass shooting. This orchestrated attack is now one of the most well-known school shootings in the United States history, given the number of casualties at 13 deaths and 24 injured (Cullen 2015). Eric and Dylan both had friends, but they were by no means popular, sticking to their small group of outcast friends (Cullen 2015). The boys had a history of crimes, such as breaking into a car to steal technological equipment, and while this incident started their criminal behavior together, the two boys had their eyes set on bigger operations (Larkin 2007:126).

Eric was labeled as the ringleader of many operations, given his confidence and desire to be known. This desire to be known was exactly what occurred post-Columbine, as households across the country and world know his name. Larkin (2007) mentioned that:

> Eric wanted to be a somebody. Alas, in the life of material reality, he was a nobody. Although he was bright and had a critical vision, those virtues were pretty far down the list of attributes admired by his peers, and it was peer recognition that Eric desperately desired… He was going to be taken seriously if, quite literally, it was the last thing he did. (Larkin 2007:137)

Dylan was more reserved and desperate for close friendships, especially when he entered middle school and found himself "near the bottom of the newly evolving peer hierarchy" (Larkin 2007:139). Dylan and Eric met in middle school, right when Dylan was searching for friends. Eric was looking to hate while Dylan was looking for love, and somehow this strange match became a perfect match to create a future massacre.

Post Columbine, Eric was labeled as obsessive-compulsive, depressed, and a psychopath. "Psychopaths are distinguished by two characteristics. The first is a ruthless disregard for others: they will defraud, maim, or kill for the most trivial personal gain. The second is an astonishing gift for disguising the first. It's deception that makes them so dangerous. You never see him coming… it's usually a him - more than 80% are male)" (Cullen 2015:240). Eric's hate for the world and everyone in it propelled him to enact these plans for a killing spree, but no one was really aware of how badly Eric was really feeling given his impressive capabilities to hide his thoughts (Larkin 2007). Dylan, on the other hand, was just looking to hurt himself and end the pain he was feeling; he "had planned to turn the weapon on himself… Dylan was believed to be depressed… and was not a man of action. He was conscripted by a boy who was" (Cullen 2015:187-188). Dylan's lack of meaningful connections and Eric's desire to control those around him made the boys a perfect pair to complete the Columbine shooting of 1999, a shooting which is now used as a benchmark for all the other shootings that followed.

Almost eight years after Columbine, on April 16th, 2007, a fatal shooting occurred on the college campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Seung-Hui Choi, a student at the institute, opened fire killing 32 students and professors in the span of two hours, before finally turning the

gun on himself (An Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights 2016). Cho had a history of exhibiting aggressive behavior, as well as showing unwanted advances toward female peers on several occasions (Davies 2008). He was also noted to be suicidal, and possibly schizophrenic, and after being seen by mental health counselors, Cho was recommended for outpatient treatment, but still remained a student on campus (An Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights 2016). Because Cho had never entered a mental institution, he was able to pass the background checks necessary to purchase guns in Virginia, showing that the "mental health system of Virginia and probably most other states is entirely inadequate to provide the services needed to prevent incidents of this sorts" (Davies 2008:10). If Virginia had stricter mental health or gun control laws, there is a possibility that Cho never could have gained access to the guns he had purchased then used for his massacre. If Cho had been recommended to check into a mental health facility for inpatient therapy, there could have been a different outcome as well.

Cho had also submitted a manifesto to MSNBC on the day of the shooting, describing the pain he felt, as well as his hatred for others, in the form of video tapes and written word (Langman 2014). Cho wrote: "As the time approached, I wished for a last-minute miracle and discard this mission you've given me. Heaven knows I wouldn't hurt a single leaf of a flower. But when the time came, I did it. I had to. What other choices did you give me? All this time… You never know what a human being is capable of doing until you fuck him to the edge" (Langman 2014:17). According to his writings, he felt as if he had no choice but to kill members of his community because of the way he had been treated. There have been public accounts of Cho's mistreatment, only accounts of Cho mistreating other peers and professors at Virginia Tech (An Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights 2016). Cho also had said on his tapes that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the perpetrators of the Columbine shooting, were "martyrs"

and he looked up to Harris and Klebold, making many researchers and reporters question "if Cho was mimicking the attack at the Littleton, Colo., high school" (Healy 2007). Knoll (2013) confirmed that when perpetrators of school shootings were still alive after committing their crimes, the perpetrators often noted that they had been influenced significantly by previous shootings that were displayed throughout the media (Knoll 2013). The problem with copycat effects and media coverage is that it is nearly impossible to avoid reporting such crimes, yet it must be done so in a way that focuses more so on the victims rather than the attackers. Cho had not just mimicked Harris and Klebold, but surpassed the benchmarks of their attack as far as number of casualties.

By presenting just a handful of the hundreds of stories of school shootings prior to Columbine, the literature shows that there is an extensive background of school shootings long before Columbine. According to Cullen (2015) "Pre-Columbine, school shootings were relatively small, simple affairs, short on theatrics: a gun, ammo, a handful of victims" (Cullen 2015:377. Knoll (2013) also noted that "Mass shootings are not new, but since the 1990s, they have taken on a different quality. This quality has been affected by cultural shift, social media, and enhanced media coverage" (Knoll 2013). School shootings also dropped 25% within the three years after Columbine yet seemed to increase again as time passed after 1999, particularly after 2006, when there were four school shootings within a three-week time period (Cullen 2015). Since Columbine, shooters have been trying to replicate the infamy that occurred on April 20th, as seen with the Virginia Tech shooting, among others. As of February 2016, there had been a reported 270 school shootings that have occurred since April 20th, with that number steadily on the rise (Pearle 2016). This number is difficult to exactly quantify, however, due to the number of different definitions of school shootings. Some shootings are discounted because

no one was injured, yet any incidents during which a gun is brought onto school property and fired at people, whether students or teachers, should classify as an attempted school shooting.

According to Klein (2012):

> Over the last thirty years, school shootings have gone from a rare occurrence to a frequent tragedy. From 1969 to 1978, there were 16 school shootings in the United States… From 1979 to 1988, there were 29 school shootings… Between 1989 and 1998, school shootings just about doubled again, to 52; and from 1999 to 2008 they increased again, as 63 new shootings took place… there were 22 in 2009 alone. (Klein 2012:2)

The number of school shootings has grown exponentially within the last few decades, and the problem does not seem to be slowing down, but rather gaining speed. School shootings are an epidemic that have taken the United States by storm, particularly within the last two decades, and the question that we must address is what are the underlying causes of school shootings?

1.4 Literature Review

Many sociologists, researchers, and studies alike claim that mental health does not cause school shootings, yet I assert that there is a connection between the two that suggests otherwise. One study published in 2015 by the National Center for Biotechnology Information noted that "mental health experts and consumers advocates strongly rejected what they saw as the scapegoating of people with mental illnesses - the vast majority of whom, epidemiologic data shows, will never act violently toward others," (Swanson, McGinty, Fazel, and Mays 2015) but they claim the vast majority will never act violently. However, 61% of shooters had expressed feelings of depression and 78% had exhibited suicidal thoughts or attempts" (Cullen 2016:386). Swanson et al. (2015) make a valid point in saying that mentally ill people are often scapegoats for social ills within society, yet in many cases of school shootings, the perpetrators either have a diagnosis of mental illnesses or signs of mental illnesses. Knoll (2013) added that using mental illness to explain school shootings is likely a distraction for other underlying concerns, such as

cultural norms and gender stereotypes (Knoll 2013); however, Newman (2004) notes that "the data drawn from media accounts show that at least 52 percent of offenders suffered from a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder *at the time of the shooting"* (Newman 2004:161). Several researchers have remarked that many shooters had diagnoses, or at least warning signs, prior to the shootings.

In the majority of the studies I have found, the shooters have shown symptoms associated with a diagnosis for depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, either on their own or in tandem with other diagnoses, such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, or eating disorders. Although Swanson et al. (2015) noted that people with mental disorders do not often engage in violent acts, "psychiatric disorders, such as depression, are strongly implicated in suicide, which accounts for more than half of gun fatalities" (Swanson et al. 2015). Another study by Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas (2000) came to the same conclusion when they noted that "while the vast majority of people with these disorders are not violent, there does appear to be a higher risk of violence in this population because of the disordered perceptions, assumptions, attributional biases, and disordered processes of thinking and affect that accompany these diagnoses" (Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas 2000). The characteristics that are associated with many mental illnesses, such as those listed above, correlate with many traits the most well-known shooters have possessed. Shooters often display symptoms of depression and express suicidal ideations. They also often commit suicide, "and current shooters are well aware almost none survive, so virtually 100 percent of them are attempting suicide. Murder suicides. Seen by us as murder, driven in them as suicide" (Cullen 2016:386). The majority of shooters end their lives once they feel as if their sprees are complete, leaving many unanswered questions behind.

According to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (2016), there are about two million adolescents suffering from depression in the United States; however, many of these teenagers lack a diagnosis, treatment, or medication to help fight against their struggles (Cullen 2016). While 6% of the teenagers in the United States may be suffering from depression, 6% of teenagers are not committing crimes like school shootings therefore "given the number of adolescents who are depressed and suicidal, mental illness cannot be viewed as a straightforward predictor of rampage school shootings" (Newman 2004:60). Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, and Browne (2016) mentioned "offenders in school shooting incidents commonly show symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation… and that 61% of the 41 offenders who carried out school-based attacks had a history of depression and 78% had either attempted suicide or expressed suicidal thoughts prior to the incident" (Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, and Browne 2016). The same study noted that 93% of the offenders that were 18 years old or younger had reported feelings of depression. While I acknowledge that there is a rather significant proportion of that 6% of teenagers who will not commit a school shooting and that not all people with mental health problems will engage in violent acts such as shootings, there appears to be an apparent connection between those who have attacked schools and their mental health statuses.

Newman (2004) makes an important contribution to research about mental health when she notes "improved mental health services may make it easier to identify a depressed boy before he progresses to the stage that [names of shooters] reached. But for every one of these rare cases, there are thousands more children who suffer from depression who would benefit from such an investment" (Newman 2004:272). Even the adolescents who are not at the point of committing a violent crime could benefit from improved mental health services, given that such a high number of teens have reported feelings of depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation. Dave Cullen (2005)

agrees with Newman (2004) saying "We should not be identifying teen depression just because of school shooters. We should do it to slash school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, car accidents, and general misery. But if we are primed to act, this is the answer. Teen depression: the great unlearned lesson of Columbine" (Cullen 2005:387). A significant number of students could benefit from increased mental health support within school systems. In regard to the case of copycat crimes, Knoll (2013) commented that many copycat crimes were enacted by perpetrators with a history of mental health conditions, such as depression, suicidal ideologies, and impulse control problems (Knoll 2013). Perpetrators and copycatters alike seem to have this underlying shared trend of mental health concerns. While mental health was not previously a major concern within public institutions, there has been a massive increase in mental health services and continuing to implement these resources would only better serve our communities.

Eric Harris, one of the two perpetrators of the Columbine shooting, was believed to be a psychopath, deemed as such by psychologists post-shooting. Since his initial diagnosis, however, Larkin (2007) noted that:

> The terms 'psychopath' and 'sociopath' are not used by the psychological profession anymore. The term listed in the DSM IV manual is 'anti-social personality disorder…' The psychological components are a depressed ability to feel empathy and lack of remorse for wrongdoings. Psychopaths lie for sport; the obtain pleasure from deceiving others. (Larkin 2007:149)

Cullen (2015) agreed with Harris's type of diagnosis because of Harris' innate ability to lie, manipulate, and disregard others' feelings (Cullen 2015). In addition to his ability to lie to people, Harris was able to cover up his feelings well and "On the one hand, he covered up his dark side very well; on the other hand, he was foolhardy and lucky that he was not discovered. He was quite stealthy in hiding his activities" (Larkin 2007:129). He was labeled as having depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and anger problems prior to the shooting by a

therapist that he had been seeing, but his issues with mental health proved to run deeper than just depression, obsessive-compulsion, and anger issues.

While checking off a list of feelings for his therapist, it was noted that Eric "marked everything related to distrust or aggression. He checked jealousy, anxiety, suspiciousness, authority figures, temper, racing thoughts, obsessive thoughts, mood swings, and disorganized thoughts. He skipped suicidal thoughts, but he checked homicidal thoughts" (Cullen 2015:218). The notes from his therapist were from March of 1998, a full year before the Columbine shooting, making it quite evident that Eric's list of feelings were not properly addressed, especially given the box he checked that said "homicidal thoughts." Eric attended therapy, but it clearly was not the proper approach for him. In the case of Eric Harris, a student who was identified as having various mental illnesses prior to the shooting, the issue is not with diagnosis, but rather treatment. He was known to struggle with his mental health and he still slipped through the cracks. According to Newman (2004), "few school shooters are diagnosed with mental illnesses before their crimes. Yet many are discovered afterward to be mentally ill. Depression and schizophrenia or one of its variants are particularly common" (Newman 2004:59). This study proves that even having a mental health diagnosis is sometimes still not enough to prevent rampage shootings such as Columbine in 1999.

Another important factor in this analysis is gender. A Follman and Andrews (2015) study noted 94% of the attackers since Columbine in 1999 have been male while Vossekuil and colleagues claimed that 99% of shooters have been male (Follman and Andrews 2015, Paolini 2015). According to Newman, (2004) the vast majority of shooters are white, middle-class boys from small town suburbia, and although there are many characteristics of shooters, so much so

that it is not possible to develop a profile of a "typical shooter," perpetrators have proven to fall

into similar categories (Newman 2004). Cullen (2015) noted that:

> There is no accurate or useful 'profile' of attackers. Attackers came from all ethnic, economic, and social classes. The bulk came from solid two-parent homes. Most had no criminal record or history of violence. The two biggest myths were that shooters were loners and that they had 'snapped.' A staggering 93 percent planned their attack in advance. The path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way. (Cullen 2015: 322-323)

Boys are more likely to commit more violent acts than girls, (Newman 2004) and given the long

history of male socialization, stigma, and gender stereotypes, this is not surprising.

 In Western societies, masculinity is seen as "having power and being in control in

emotional situations, in the workplace, and in sexual relationships. Acceptable male behaviors in

this traditional construct include competitiveness, independence, assertiveness, ambition,

confidence, toughness, anger, and even violence" (Friedrich, Willingham and Frey 2012). These

traits assigned to traditional male behavior fall in line with what a school shooter does in the

sense that he will assert power with confidence and authority through weaponry, likely

displaying anger toward people or society through shooting, and act with complete violence

through enacting a rampage. When discussing manhood along with the motivation behind

shootings, Newman (2004) also notes "most shooters felt trapped and in need of a 'manly' exit"

(Newman 2004:247). The fact that a shooting is considered a "manly" exit proves exactly what is

wrong with gender stereotypes and gendered socialization; when it comes to masculinity,

violence is seen as the accepted and expected norm (Katz, Young, Earp, and Jhally 1999). Levin

and Madfis (2009) agree with Katz et al. and state that "Many attackers see a shooting as a

means of getting others to notice them and a means to assert their masculinity, as many young

males feel that a shooting will enable them to regain lost feelings of power, pride, and attention"

(Paolini 2015). The associations between masculinity, guns, and power reflect ideals within American culture, but they clearly have created a larger issue.

According to Katz, Young, Earp, and Shaley (1999), violence is being de-gendered, and in a New York Times piece in response to the Jonesboro Massacre in 1998, the author commented that boys were almost always the killers in mass shootings within schools, but then failed to mention gender throughout the rest of the article (Katz, Young, Earp, and Shaley 1999). Just because issues are ignored does not mean they are not important, relevant, or problematic. If the perpetrators of school shootings were by majority female, it would be likely that this phenomenon would be considered a gendered problem, but with males committing 94% of school shootings, (Follman and Andrews 2015) media outlets say it just seems to be a problem within society, rather than a gendered problem.

Everything makes logical sense when connecting the typical male stereotype with a male shooter; however, when adding in the component of mental health, the relationship begins to get a little more complex. Freidrich et al., along with many other researchers, have found that, "Men are more likely than women to experience externalizing disorders… such as anger, hostility, aggression, violence, or stealing" (Friedrich et al. 2012:682). In addition to men experiencing these disorders more, it is more common for them to view these negative feelings as acceptable forms of expression because society says these characteristics are common in males. Freidrich et al. also noted that "high levels of masculinity appear to be related to depression in males… Because male gender roles discourage admitting vulnerability, men may resort to substance abuse as a way of covering feelings" (Freidrich et al. 2012:683). The pressure men experience regularly to act in certain ways hinders their personal growth and keeps them from expressing their emotions in a healthy way. Rather than talking with counselors, doctors, or other

professionals, men often revert to unhealthy measures to cope with negative feelings. Many other studies have come to the same conclusion, claiming that men of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds are far less likely than women to ask for help in regards to mental health problems (Winerman 2005). This is likely due to male socialization and gender roles.

Starting from as young as preschool age, males are socialized in a specific manner in which they are told that violence is acceptable and showing emotions is not; in effort to combat this, we need to "shift the cultural baggage that burdens young men in our society" (Newman 2004:272). Glenn Good, a counseling psychology professor at the University of Missouri adequately sums up this problem by saying "I don't think that it's biologically determined that men will seek less help than women. So if that's true, then it must mean that it's socialization and upbringing: Men *learn* to see less help" (Winerman 2005). When boys grow into adolescence, they often lack the necessary skills to handle negative feelings, especially mental illnesses. Klein (2012) agreed when she noted that "Boys... lash out to prove that they can fulfill their narrow gender prescriptions" (Klein 2012:3). It should be no surprise to society when boys with mental illnesses experience severe internal unrest, turning to drastic measures, such as school shootings, as a way to cope with, or express, their feelings. The connectedness between mental illness, school shootings, and gender is one from which our society can learn significant information.

The clear intersectionality among school shootings, mental health, media, social capital, gun control, and gender makes it more difficult to distinguish one problem from another, but it is certain that there is an undeniable connection between school shootings and more serious mental illness problems. The complicated relationships among these aspects of society make school shootings a sociological phenomenon. It is nearly impossible to cease school shootings because

of this intense interconnectedness; however, we have the ability to significantly reduce the number of school shootings that occur annually by increasing mental health awareness in schools or passing stricter in gun laws. By addressing one aspect of this phenomena, there is likelihood that the overall problem of school shootings becomes less frequent, but there is just as much likelihood that a different aspect becomes more intensified. The interconnectedness of these concepts makes it so difficult to dissect the root cause of school shootings, but slowly by untangling common themes from others, it can be understood that the problem of school shootings must be addressed from multiple angles. Sociologically, the notion of school shootings is problematic because it connects various aspects of society, making it nearly impossible to solve.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1 Introduction

After researching school shootings, as well as mental illnesses, in the United States, it has become easier to identify the close relationship between perpetrators of school shootings and their distressed states of mental health. Historically, the more significant school shootings are from the past 25 years. They are so well-known because of the high number of death and wounded rates, as well as the media coverage on the shootings. Although school shootings are not a new problem within the United States, the greater number of casualties and the increased media presence have drawn more attention to shootings over the last few decades. The connection between the mental health of individuals and school shootings is an important one to study, not just because school shootings are a considerable issue for the United States, but also because the rate of those with severe mental health concerns is skyrocketing as well.

While not every shooter can be grouped into the category of 'mentally ill,' it appears after much research that a vast majority of school shooters have some *significant* mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression. Vossekuil and colleagues (2002) noted that "only one-third of attackers (34%) ever received a mental health evaluation and less than one-fifth (17%) were diagnosed with a mental disorder, although 78% of school shooters had a history of suicide attempts or suicidal ideations prior to their attack" (Paolini 2015:2). While 34% of students have received mental health evaluations, and about half of those resulted in diagnoses, there were still another 66% who have not been tested and are not aware of their mental health statuses. Lee (2013) also reported that "many of the attackers (61%) demonstrated a history of suicidal attempts, as well as had a documented history of experiencing symptoms of extreme depression or desperation, prior to an attack" (Paolini 2015:3) Even if students were not

tested, there is a likely chance that these students may have already developed mental illnesses or are at high risk for being diagnosed with mental health problems in the future.

This is not to say that every person with any mental illness will commit an attack on a school, because this is certainly not true, but this is to say that perhaps there is a deeper connection between more severe mental health conditions and a lack of acknowledgment over these conditions. The American Psychological Association makes a valid contribution to the discussion on mental health by saying:

> An individual who shoots many others, and who in so doing may well die, is mentally ill. Perhaps no formal diagnostic category will apply, but it would be easy for any psychologist or psychiatrist to identify some type of disorder that would fit the individual. As a general matter, any behavior that is socially proscribed and causes dysfunction for, or possible death of, the individual constitutes a mental illness. (American Psychological Association 2012)

This is not to say that everyone with mental health concerns is going to shoot their peers or teachers at school, because that simply is not true, but there is a greater underlying connection between individuals with severe mental health concerns and perpetrators of school shootings. Every school district in the country would greatly benefit from an increase in mental health services, especially because teenagers are so vulnerable, but in regards to school shootings, there is more at stake than sensitivity. The vulnerability of high school students makes it more difficult to address the students who are on the verge of a legitimate breakdown. Increased mental health support overall would be a start to focusing on the problem of student mental health. Eric Harris, one of the two perpetrators of the Columbine shooting, was an extraordinary liar, and while people knew that he was depressed, they did not know the extent of his mental health status. Harris was posthumously labeled as a psychopath, a personality disorder that is associated with compulsive lying, lack of empathy, and impaired moral judgment. This psychopathy made it difficult to understand Harris' true feelings and intentions because they were often disguised by

his lies. While preventing every school shooting may not be realistic given the nature and health of some perpetrators, there is hope in reducing the number of shootings to some extent if schools focus more on the mental health of their students.

Through a comparative case study of three major school shootings, Columbine High School, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and Sandy Hook Elementary School, it has become clearer as to exactly what happened on each day, as well as the commonalities and differences among the attackers throughout their childhoods, adolescence, and mental health histories.

2.2- Columbine High School

Eric Harris, age 18 at the time of the attack, was born into a white, two-parent family with an older brother. Harris' dad was an Air Force pilot, so the family moved around often, making it difficult for Harris to plant solid roots within a community. Once the family moved to Littleton, Colorado just three years prior to Harris opening fire in his high school, Harris met Dylan Klebold, the second half of the infamous Columbine pair. While Harris had a small group of friends, he was certainly not popular by anyone's accord, especially after "Sophomore year [when] he tried an edgier look: combat boots, all-black outfits, and grunge. He started shopping at a trendy store called Hot Topic and the army surplus store...He grew boisterous, moody, and aggressive" (Cullen 2015:146). Harris's shift in outer appearance and attitude coincided with one another, and he began constructing violent video games on his computer, while also keeping a diary, detailing his anger towards the world. Eric was mad at everyone and looking for the best way to display his emotions, hoping to destroy the world through his escapades.

Harris was not just angry or suffering from bad days; he was clinically depressed. While psychologists no longer use the term psychopath today, in 1999, post-Columbine, many doctors

and researchers alike used the label 'psychopath' to describe Harris and his behaviors. One characteristic in particular of psychopaths that was strong displayed by Harris was his ability to lie and deceive others. On the outside Harris was putting up a front of someone who struggled with anger issues and depression, but no more than other teenagers. He was even attending therapy and taking medication as a way to help alleviate his anger and outbursts. On the inside, however, Harris was bubbling over with hatred and animosity toward everyone, especially himself. The school principal noted that Harris was the type of student that adults and teachers loved because he told them exactly what they wanted to hear and that he was charming (Cullen, 2015). These characteristics are common within psychopaths in the sense that they have the ability to deceive others. Cullen also noted that "Harris' pattern of grandiosity, glibness, contempt, lack of empathy, and superiority read like the bullet points on Hare's Psychopathy Checklist...Psychopaths follow much stricter behavior patterns than the rest of us because they are unfettered by conscience, living solely for their own aggrandizement" (Cullen 2004). Harris' authentic self could really only be seen through his journal, that was not recovered until after the shooting. Because his journal was not found until after the shooting, it was difficult to match Harris' psychopathic tendencies with his behavior, given that these psychopathic tendencies were not fully known by others. Harris' actions did not match up with his true feelings, and this disconnect made it much easier for Harris to dupe his family, peers, and teachers.

Dylan Klebold grew up in Colorado with his two parents and older brother, just like Harris. At the time of the Columbine shooting, Klebold was 17 years old. Although his parents attended the Lutheran church, Klebold also had Jewish roots as well, and the family practiced both religions. Klebold was very intelligent, even from a young age, and after a few years at a public elementary school, Klebold transferred to Governor's Ranch Elementary, where he

participated in a program for gifted students. He had acquaintances but was longing for close friends. Klebold found the transition to middle school to be difficult and "Loneliness was the crux of the problem, but it ran deeper than just finding a friend. Dylan felt cut off from humanity" (Cullen 2015:174). Once Harris met Klebold, his sadness and pain subsided temporarily, but the friendship was simply not enough to permanently eradicate Klebold's feelings of loneliness. It was more than just loneliness; it was a state of severe depression. Klebold was the more reserved boy in the infamous pair, but he enjoyed tagging along on adventures with Harris. The missions that the two boys participated in together, such as stealing video equipment from a van, gave Klebold a sense of belonging and Harris a sense of worth. Both boys lacked social connections, but they were quickly bound together out of need. Once they began devising the shooting that became Columbine, there was no separating the two.

Posthumously, Klebold was labeled as depressed, as well as suicidal, due to examinations of his actions and writing. He was overwhelmed with his existence and his "mind raced night and day: analyzing, inventing, deconstructing...Dylan's head was bursting with ideas, sounds, impressions- he could never turn the racket off...suicide was consuming him" (Cullen 2015:173). His struggle was so intense and so deep that he was unable to think about anything other than the end of his life. Klebold had even written about his ability to purchase a gun from a friend, as a means of ending his own life, yet it was not until Klebold and Harris began discussing their deeper feelings that they devised the plan that would help take care of Harris' hate for the world and Klebold's hate for himself. Cullen (2015) also notes that "Dylan Klebold was not a man of action. He was conscripted by a boy who was" (Cullen 2015:188). Cullen, as well as many other researchers, authors, and doctors, believe that Harris was the main person behind the attack, and that Harris utilized Klebold's weaknesses to his own advantage. Klebold needed a friend, an ally,

and Harris needed an accomplice. Both boys were able to gain something from the other, creating a relationship of dependence.

Cullen (2015) stated that a staggering "93 percent [of perpetrators] planned their attack in advance. The path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way" (Cullen 2015:322-323). Given that the vast majority of shooters devise their attacks prior to the event, it would seem as if shootings would be easier to stop; however, Harris and Klebold kept their plans mostly to themselves. They told few trusted peers, mainly as a way to secure guns, but the rest of the attack was planned solely between the two boys, as told in detail in their secret journals. In today's society it is common for students to make off-handed remarks such as "I have so much homework I want to die" or "I just want to kill him;" however, most people never take these threats seriously because the people who makes these claims are usually joking. The nature of these statements makes it difficult to know when these threats are legitimate or when they are just exaggerated comments. In the case of Harris and Klebold, no one ever expected that the boys were serious, especially because of Harris' expertise in covering up his intentions. Harris and Klebold not only intended to shoot up the school, but they also made homemade bombs, which they wanted to detonate in the cafeteria during their attack. Harris and Klebold wanted to destroy their community, leaving behind a legacy for others to follow.

On the morning of April 20th, 1999, Harris and Klebold set out for Columbine High School, with the full intentions of killing hundreds of classmates and teachers. At 11:19 in the morning, Harris and Klebold set down their duffel bags, filled with homemade bombs, yet when the bombs failed to detonate, the boys fired rounds in the school cafeteria, before moving onto the school library. Given that the homemade bombs failed to go off, hundreds of lives were saved within the school, yet Columbine is still remembered for its deadly impact. At 12:02, the

boys entered the library, where they shot more students, and at 12:08 they turned their guns on themselves, ending their lives, leaving their families, their school, and the world behind to make sense of the massacre that two boys had created. In their wake, the boys left twelve students and one teacher dead, and twenty-four others injured. The entire attack was less than one hour, but the impact of that one hour will be remembered for centuries to come.

2.2A - Columbine and the Media

Within minutes of the media receiving word of the shooting, several news outlets were on the scene of the crime, reporting various different versions of the story. As media has become more prevalent in our society, with the increased use of smart phones, laptops, iPads, tablets, and social media, access to the news has become faster and in higher demand than ever before. Columbine is perhaps one of the most noteworthy school shootings in history, not just because of the number of casualties, but also because of the approaches taken by reporters and news companies immediately after the attack. This was truly the first school shooting that was documented by the media in such depth, with news reports airing for months post-shooting. Columbine not only influenced Littleton, Colorado, but also on a much larger scale it shifted the way the media portrays negative events, such as massacres. While Muschert and Carr (2006) studied school shootings in relationship to their importance nationally, they found that the importance of school shootings as a social problem was first noted in 1997, two years before Columbine (Muschert 2007), but "the analysis revealed that the socially constructed rampage shooting problem peaked around 1999, roughly coinciding with the 1999 Columbine shootings in Colorado" (Muschert 2007). The Columbine shooting was really the first time where parents, children, and community members alike experienced a culture of fear surrounding school shootings, and this is largely due to the media.

The media is powerful in that it allows people around the world who are not present at an event to feel as if they are on site, experiencing everything that is happening while it is occurring. In the event of a school shooting:

> Most people experience school shootings as a mess-mediated phenomenon, rather than directly. While the problem of school-related shootings occurred across history, it was the intense media coverage of the famous incidents, including ... Littleton, that created the public perception of school shootings as an emergent and increasing social problem. (Muschert 2007)

There is no doubt that school shootings are a relevant problem in contemporary society, more so than they were over the last few centuries, but perhaps the media is perpetuating more fear in the public than necessary. Media outlets want viewers and readers. Displaying violence and instilling fear are two ways for outlets to keep people engaged with what they are producing. To a large extent, reporters are looking to sell their stories, so if that means they can hyper-focus on certain aspects of a shooting, such as the possible affiliations of a shooter, like the Trench Coat Mafia, or the experiences of the shooter as the victim of bullying, they will do so, even if what they are reporting is not always true. This can be seen with the case of Columbine.

The 1999 Columbine shooting became the most televised and most watched event of the entire year, (Birkland and Lawrence 2009) and "the national television networks devoted more airtime to Columbine than to any other school shootings" (Addington 2003). Throughout the months following the shooting, media outlets sifted through the many possible motives for the shooting, and the most common motive that was talked about throughout these reports was popular culture (Birkland and Lawrence 2009); however, Cullen (2015) cites throughout his extensive work on Columbine that "cultural influences also appeared weak. Only a quarter [of school shooters] were interested in violent movies, half that number in video games-probably below average for teen boys" (Cullen 2015:323). Another reason attributed to the shooting was gun access, which proves to be the most common notion cited throughout every shooting, with

little change in gun control policy, which will be touched upon later. While popular culture and gun availability were widely focused on at the time of the shooting, and still are frequently mentioned decades later, the media spent a great deal of their efforts focusing on the weak points of their attackers, namely their lack of social connections and friends.

Often times the media looks for reasons as to why perpetrators carry out their attacks. With Harris and Klebold, their lack of social capital was often cited as motivation because they were often targeted by the jocks for being different or weird (Cullen 2015). Reporters who appeared on the scene of the crime immediately after the shooting were claiming that the attack was carried out by three members of the Trench Coat Mafia, a group of social misfits who were recognized by their long, black trench coats. However, after further investigation, it became quite clear that Harris and Klebold were not associated with the so-called club and that they were the only two students directly involved in the shooting. While Harris was friends with a member of the Trench Coat Mafia, he, nor Klebold, were involved with the group. The media began circulating rumors of the involvement of the Trench Coat Mafia, as well as the idea that there was a third shooter, while neither was true. Reporters were not wrong when they told viewers that Harris and Klebold were wearing long, black trench coats during their attack, but they did so because Harris believed it looked "cool" (Cullen 2015). It can be understood why there was a connection to the Trench Coat Mafia because "the two shooters wore trench coats during the attacks, were also characterized as misfits, and reportedly targeted jocks in the attack, this explanation was soon accepted as "fact"" (Mears, Moon, and Thielo 2017). Cullen (2015) described the news reports on Columbine as "a gross caricature of how they saw it, and of what they thought they had described" (Cullen 2015: 159). The media does not always portray the

facts, either because they want to attract viewers or because they legitimately do not know the truth, but in the end, it can be concluded that media often skews reality.

The media also mentions mental health on the news, but does not do so in a productive, or fair, manner. Jeffrey Sumber, a psychotherapist, noted that "When a tragic or violent act happens, the news media tends to exaggerate mental illness and depict it negatively...the person's mental illness is portrayed as something dark and dangerous" (Tartakovsky 2016). Because reporters often show mentally disturbed people rather than people who have mental illnesses, a strong unfavorable stigma is often associated with mental illness. When the news repeatedly shows people with mental illnesses in an untrue or exaggerated light, it makes those with similar behaviors feel as if they are crazy. Misconceptions about mental illness, particularly in regards to the mental state of men, often prevent them from addressing behavioral or mental concerns. Most people with mental illnesses are not violent, but when it comes to school shooters, they are often people with severe mental health concerns that result in violent behavior. It is not the average person with depression or anxiety that engages in a school shooting, but rather a person with intense behaviors like psychopathy or a mix of mental illnesses that when grouped together and go untreated impairs one's state of mind. It would be extremely beneficial to schools and families alike to focus more of their time and energies on mental illness within their students.

The thousands of pages written about Columbine have been quite thorough. In the nineteen years that have passed since April 20th, 1999, researchers and scholars alike have published significant research about the fateful day that has become infamous in contemporary society. While much of the research published was quite comprehensive, more so than the other cases that will be discussed, there seemed to be a lack of information about Harris and Klebold's past with the criminal justice system. While the boys were arrested and put into jail for one night

in 1998 for breaking into a van and stealing equipment from inside, it was seen as a petty crime, where they were sentenced to attend a class and partake in community service. Perhaps this moment, though, had greater indications to the path the boys were about to take. Past research did not fully explore this potential connection. Aside from Cullen's work (2015) there also did not appear to be much in-depth research about the mental health states of either Harris or Klebold. This may have been done as a way to make the perpetrators seem like monsters, rather than as two high school students struggling with their mental health. Harris had been on medication for depression and had seen a therapist, yet these avenues were not fully analyzed in much of the research published, aside from Cullen's comprehensive work *Columbine,* where the mental health states of Harris and Klebold were fully scrutinized.

Perhaps the reason why the mental states of Harris and Klebold were not touched upon as much in the earlier research relates to the fact that mental health was not as significant within society in the late 1990s and early 2000s as it is now. A greater focus on mental health can be seen throughout the research of Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook. Researchers may not have been as educated about the topic or they may not have been aware of its prevalence in connection to the shooting. The connection between school shootings and mental health is one that is perhaps more recent, but has certainly become stronger, and studied more, since Columbine. More recent work published relating to Columbine notes the possibility of the link between shootings and mental health, but the earlier work neglects to mention it. This shows a change in how society addresses topics like mental health. Although the discussion about mental health is fairly new, it is important. The negative stigma surrounding mental health may definitely be used as a way to shape the way people view perpetrators of shootings, viewing them as monsters, rather than people who need help. Because such a negative stigma surrounds mental health issues, the

concerns may not be discussed, but society is now more aware that ignoring problems does not make them disappear. People are likely afraid to confront their own challenges because of the light shed on mental health in the media, yet these issues must be talked about and resources must be provided or else a greater number of societal problems, like shootings, may arise.

The majority of the research regarding Columbine is qualitative, which seems to be the most beneficial way to address an epidemic with so much descriptive retelling and recounting. Throughout interviews, photographic evidence, and news reports, the state, country, and even the rest of the world, were able to see the massacre that was the Columbine shooting. Qualitative research is crucial in covering cases like school shootings because of how in depth and detailed it allows researchers to go, enabling them to gain insight into the attack from survivors, family members, teachers, and even the perpetrators if they are still alive or left behind journals or notes. Much of the research regarding Columbine came from interviews with survivors, family members, and friends of the perpetrators, but much of the content that was analyzed actually came from the journals and computers of Harris and Klebold. By using Harris and Klebold's journals and computers, researchers were able to gain greater insight into their personal thoughts, helping to construct the story of their lives prior to the attack. These personal accounts were far more reliable than any other type of research conducted because they were first person accounts from the attackers themselves, rather than stories or recounts from family, friends, or reporters. Overall, the qualitative approach proves to be the best method for researching and reporting on an event like Columbine.

2.3 Virginia Polytechnic Institute

Born into a Korean American family, Seung-Hui Cho had the opportunity to live the American dream after his parents uprooted their family from South Korea to America when Cho

was eight years old. Prior to moving to America, the Cho family lived in South Korea in a poor neighborhood (Brantlinger 2013). Cho displayed unique behavior for a child. He spoke to no one; not to family, not to friends, and not to strangers. Cho's parents were concerned by his "pronounced bashfulness...Relatives thought he might be a mute. Or mentally ill" and an uncle noted that "The kid didn't say much and didn't mix with other children (Kleinfeld 2007). The lack of social skills displayed by Cho throughout his childhood would prove to be relevant later on in his life. His family was concerned but many were thrilled upon learning that the family was moving to the United States, where they believed Cho would have the opportunity to gain the confidence and skills necessary to blossom (Kleinfeld 2007).

Upon arrival in America, his immigrant parents worked tirelessly in a laundromat to provide a life filled with success for Cho and his older sister, but Cho could not find such success. He was diagnosed with selective mutism, as well as severe social anxiety disorder, during his middle school years, which explains his lack of verbal communication as a child (Lyttle 2012). Following the 1999 Columbine shooting, Cho's teachers reported that they had seen suicidal ideation throughout his writing, and after a mental health screening, Cho was diagnosed with depression and began taking an antidepressant (Lyttle, 2012). After taking the antidepressant for a year, the doctor stopped prescribing Cho the medication because he seemed to be doing better (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009). Perhaps Cho was doing better due to his medication, so stopping medication was likely foolish. His sister was thriving at Princeton University, yet Cho was struggling to survive socially in high school, where he was mixed in with hundreds of other students, who teased Cho for his scrawniness, accent, and shy nature (Kleinfeld 2007). His parents believed that his academic accomplishments in high school

would give him the confidence to succeed in college, yet when Cho arrived at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, nothing changed for him. Rather, his social problems were heightened.

During a creative writing class, Cho was often the author of dark and disturbing pieces. In addition to the obscure nature of his schoolwork, Cho had some bizarre hobbies as well. He was dismissed from his creative writing class after the professor discovered him taking photographs of his female peers, essentially stalking them (Shuchman 2007). Cho's suitemates were also concerned about his behavior, writing a letter to their resident advisor about his threatening demeanor (Kleinfeld 2007). The campus police became involved as well, after several female students reported Cho for sending them unwanted text messages and emails (Kleinfeld 2007). Upon texting a suitemate that he wanted to commit suicide, the campus police became involved once more, sending Cho to a campus therapist for mental health counseling. The counselor brought Cho to the state Department of Mental Health, where some researchers claim that the counselor declared Cho as mentally ill and others say he was diagnosed as depressed but not a harmful threat to his peers (Shuchman 2007 and Brantlinger 2013). He was then admitted to the hospital.

After being admitted to the hospital for one night, Cho was discharged by a judge, who ordered outpatient treatment for the struggling student (Kleinman 2007). Cho never actually received the outpatient treatment in which he was ordered to attend. It is believed that the university's counseling center never followed up with Cho because "the school's counseling center did not accept "involuntary or ordered referrals for treatment"… and even students with "thought disorders" were treated only if they were willing to be served" (Shuchman 2007). The Safe Schools Initiative Report said that in their study, "10% of the attackers who were receiving treatment for their diagnosed mental illness failed to comply to take their prescribed psychiatric

medications" (Paolini 2015:3). Anyone can be recommended for treatment or medication, but by no means does that mean they are required by law to attend or utilize the help they are given. The Virginia Tech newspaper also noted in 2007 that the university counseling center was struggling to hire a new psychiatrist to replace the last psychiatrist who had left the campus. A decade later, Virginia Tech now has one full-time psychiatrist to serve the entire student body, comprised of 27,000 students (Shuchman 2007). One full-time psychiatrist cannot serve the entire population of the school, making it appear that Virginia Tech did not learn much after the infamous shooting that took place on their campus. The Virginia Tech counseling center did not always share their records with the student health services center, making an unusually large gap between the two service centers. This gap is perhaps one of the main reasons Cho's mental health concerns did not raise greater concern among the faculty at the university (Shuchman 2007).

Throughout the month of March, Cho had been reported to have frequented the PSS Range, an indoor shooting range in Roanoke, where Cho purchased four magazines of ammunition after spending an hour shooting at targets (Kleinfeld 2007). Reports from various members of the Roanoke community claim they remember seeing Cho at Dick's Sporting Goods or Wal-Mart, where he bought hunting knives, more ammunition, and sunglasses (Kleinfeld 2007). Cho was able to purchase two guns, violating federal law. Because he was deemed dangerous to himself, but not to his peers, and was ordered to outpatient therapy, Cho should not have been able to buy a gun according to federal law (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009). While Virginia is a state that requires mental health information to be sent to a federal database, the fault is that "Virginia law did not clearly require that persons such as Cho- who had been ordered into outpatient treatment but not committed to an institution be reported to the

database" (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009:2). A change or tightening in Virginia Law could have potentially prevented the Virginia Tech massacre from occurring.

On the morning of April 16, 2007, nearly eight years after the Columbine High School shooting, Seung-Hui Cho opened fire on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Around 7:15 that morning, Cho entered a co-ed dormitory, West Ambler Johnston Hall, where he first fired shots at student, Emily Hilscher, and then at the dormitory resident advisor, Ryan Clark, who attempted to aid Hilscher (Kleinfeld 2007). Both students were dead in the following hours of the attack. After leaving the first dormitory, Cho returned to his own room, and he changed his soiled clothes, deleted his emails, and removed his computer hard drive. Two hours after first opening fire, Cho appeared at the post office, where he sent much of his writings and video recordings, his manifesto, to NBC News (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009). His submission included 23 pages of text, photographs, and videos, all explaining his hatred for his peers and human alike. His manifesto even mentioned Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine perpetrators, and Cho said "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to f*** you thousand folds for you Apostles of Sin have done to us" (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009:3). He then left the post office and arrived back on campus at Norris Hall, an engineering and mechanics building.

At around 9:40, Cho opened fire in a classroom in Norris Hall, killing the professor, along with nine other students. After his spree in the first room, Cho went across the hall to another classroom. In this room, Cho killed the professor, four more students, and injured six more. Continuing his escapade, he tried to enter two more classrooms, but the doors were barricaded, leaving Cho unable to cause more harm to the university; however, Cho was able to shoot through the blocked doorway, landing bullets into the body of a professor, who was also a

Holocaust survivor, eventually killing him, as well as another student (Kleinfeld 2007). He had a similar problem down the hall with another barricaded doorway, but he was able to break into the room, killing a student who tried to take down Cho, in addition to another professor and ten more students. Apparently unhappy with his death tolls and with hundreds of bullets left to shoot, Cho tried to head back down the hallway, where he attempted to re-enter several classrooms. Most of the rooms had since been barricaded as students were trying to save their fellow peers inside. Within ten to twelve minutes after he began his spree in Norris Hall, Cho turned a gun on himself and shot himself through the temple, ending his life. During his attack on Norris Hall, Cho ended up killing 30 people and injuring 17 more for a total of five staff members and 27 students killed, 17 students wounded from gunshots, and six students wounded from jumping out windows to escape Cho's wrath (Bowman 2007).

While Columbine was the first school shooting that received significant media attention, Virginia Tech received immense attention as well, given the number of casualties that Cho caused, the manifesto he mailed to NBC, and the mentions of Harris and Klebold, which show some influence of the copycat effect. Similarly to Columbine, the media quickly skewed the events of the shooting. Initial reports cited that the spree was a direct result of a fight between Cho and his romantic interest Emily Hilscher, but many peers have since claimed there was no relationship between Cho and Hilscher. In fact, Hilscher did not even know Cho personally (Kleinfeld 2007). It is understandable that media outlets like to give their viewers answers as soon as possible, but spreading false information does a significant disservice to the public, often creating a massive moral panic. Another critique of the case work study stems from the inability to obtain many clear answers about Cho's mental health. While proving to be imperative to understanding the shooting, mental health records for Cho were difficult to obtain, especially

with his childhood in South Korea and the set of ever-changing laws regarding mental illness in Virginia. Mental health records are not necessarily easy to gain access to, yet in the case of Cho, his mental health status, especially during his time on campus, seems imperative to understand when trying to paint an entire picture of the shooting. In order to provide a more complete overview of Cho's story, it would have been helpful for research to discuss more about the cultural struggles he faced as a young South Korean man in America, trying to achieve the American dream. While Cho's sister succeeded in creating an idyllic life per her parents' requests, Cho struggled essentially from boyhood. The pressure that comes with being an immigrant is one that is often explored in case studies regarding various other topics and delving into that issue could have provided a more comprehensive analysis of Cho's internal struggles.

The research regarding the Virginia Tech shooting is very similar to the research from the Columbine shooting. It is largely centered around qualitative data, such as interviews with family members, roommates, police and campus safety officers, peers, and professors. Just like Columbine, Cho's accounts were the most helpful in determining his personal feelings, as well as his need for revenge against mankind. By submitting his manifesto, complete with pages of text and video messages, reporters and researchers alike were able to break down and analyze Cho's intentions and underlying feelings. When researchers were able to gain access to his mental health and hospitalization records, those were also carefully scrutinized for content analysis. Just like Harris, Cho submitted disturbing work for his writing courses, which were also interpreted, leading to the understanding that Cho was not the most emotionally or mentally stable. The majority of the data analyzed for this case study were done through the methods of content analysis from Cho's own work and interviews with others, allowing researchers, reporters, and readers alike to garner a comprehensive understanding of Cho.

The most important social issue that has arisen as a result of the Virginia Tech shooting, other than mental health, centers around the idea of identity as an immigrant. As a South Korean immigrant, there was significant discussion surrounding South Korea's response to the shooting. In various opinion articles from South Korea, residents expressed concern that the shooting would in turn create attacks on South Korea from America as a retaliation method (Jung 2007). Many also expressed the fear that this shooting would generate racial prejudices about South Koreans from Americans, causing racial divides between the groups (Jung 2007). Other news pieces highlighted that Cho had severe mental health concerns and those problems were to blame, rather than his nationality (The Associated Press 2007). South Korea is a country that focuses heavily on national identity taking precedence over the individual identity, so in this case, many South Koreans were concerned about their country's identity in the wake of tragedy (Breen 2014).

According to Brantlinger (2013), "Race, class, and gender were all factors, or cultural and social *reasons*, that help explain the Virginia Tech massacre. Seung Hui Cho's inability to find hopeful, upwardly aspiring positions for himself in the American social field may have exacerbated some irrational, perhaps insane, streak in his individual makeup" (Brantlinger 2013). Cultural identity plays a large part in the Virginia Tech shooting because this aspect of his identity proved to be an immense struggle faced by Cho on a regular basis. As someone who always struggled to fit in socially, it did not help for Cho to be labeled as an outsider due to his cultural identity or status as an immigrant. Cultural identity, social capital, and mental health problems proved to be seemingly more than Cho could handle, leading him down a dark path of destruction.

2.4 Sandy Hook Elementary School

On December 14th, 2012, another fatal school shooting occurred in Newtown, Connecticut at the Sandy Hook Elementary School; however, what separates this shooting from many of the other notorious school shootings is that the perpetrator, 20-year-old Adam Lanza was not a student at the school at the time of his attack. It appears that in the majority of the more significant shootings of the last few decades, the shooter or shooters have been students who were currently enrolled at the school in which they attacked. The number of people killed, the lengthy list of mental health concerns, and the fact that an elementary school was targeted has led to the Sandy Hook shooting becoming one of the most well-known school shootings around the world. The phenomena that has become the Sandy Hook shooting is one in which the public was extremely interested.

Adam Lanza was born on April 22, 1992, and he grew up in Exeter, New Hampshire, with his mother, father, and older brother. Concerns about Lanza began when the boy was barely a few years old. After being tested by professionals, the reports claimed that Lanza "fell well below expectations in social-personal development…Evaluators concluded that AL (Adam Lanza) presented with "significantly delayed development of articulation and expressive language skills"" (Egan, VosWinkel, Ford, Lyddy, Schwartz, Spencer 2014:16). Starting as early three years old, Lanza appeared to be different than his peers, not only developmentally, but socially as well. He spoke in his own language that others could not comprehend, and he could not properly convey his intentions and feelings (Egan et al. 2014). In preschool, Lanza had an individualized education plan (IEP) to help provide the necessary support he needed to advance his language skills. After an independent evaluation from a hospital in 1997, the report noted "that AL may have had a sensory integration disorder, and that he displayed "many rituals" in his

behavior. Significant speech and language support was recommended… and work with an occupational therapist certified in sensory integration therapy" (Egan et al. 2014:17). Lanza continued to struggle. He displayed repetitive behaviors, was extremely overactive, did not like to be touched, and was not very social with his peers in group settings. The reported also claimed that:

> While AL appeared to achieve some developmental milestones within the normal time periods, he had both fine and gross motor delays during preschool years, as well as a number of problems with repetitive behavior, lack of participation in groups, sensitivity to smells, and intolerance of touch and certain textures. He was observed to hit his head repeatedly. (Egan et al. 2014:18)

The symptoms of sensory integration disorder fall in line with those of autism, generalized anxiety disorder, and attention deficit disorder (McCormick, Hepburn, Young, Rogers 2016). Lanza's delays and abnormal behaviors were hindering his social abilities in school, which proved to be problematic as he got older. Because he had a difficult time speaking, articulating, and expressing himself, he could not form solid or meaningful connections with his peers.

In 1998, the Lanza family moved to Connecticut, where Lanza enrolled in Sandy Hook Elementary School. Although he was struggling to communicate, both verbally and in writing, Lanza was involved in several activities such as cub scouts and baseball (Breslow 2014); however, Lanza later admitted that he was only involved in such activities because that is what his mother wanted for her son (Egan et al. 2014). Lanza transferred schools for 5th and 6th grade, leaving Sandy Hook and beginning school at Reed Intermediate School in Newtown (Breslow 2014). Reports claim that Lanza was succeeding academically and doing better socially, yet still struggled initiating conversations (Egan et al. 2014). It was around this time in 2002 where Lanza's parents separated, and it seemed that Lanza's behaviors began to become more worrisome.

Reports noted that "more red flags for developmental and mental health concerns remained or emerged. AL began perseverative hand washing, avoiding contact with other people, and becoming increasingly fearful. By fifth grade, AL had written and submitted "The Big Book of Granny"- a significant and violent text" (Egan et al. 2014:31). In all three case studies that are being discussed, the perpetrators have submitted some violent and disturbing documents for school, which proves to be a telling sign of their mental states, yet there was limited action taken in any of the cases, preventing anything constructive from occurring. The Report of the Office of the Child Advocate (2014) also said that "mental health professional contributing to this report determined that the content of "The Big Book of Granny" can only be described as extremely abhorrent and, if it had been carefully reviewed by school staff, it would have suggested the need for a referral to a child psychiatrist or other mental health professional for evaluation" (Egan et al. 2014:32). The lack of attention paid to Lanza's creative writings just shows how action could have been taken but simply was not because of oversight of the writing or lack of knowledge about how to handle such a situation.

In sixth grade, Lanza exhibited more signs of severe anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder, yet despite his academic success, Lanza was withdrawn and unhappy (Egan et al. 2014). In seventh grade, he transferred mid-year from Newtown Middle School to a Catholic school, Saint Rose of Lima, and Lanza became obsessed with religion, but after eight weeks of attending the Catholic school, he was once again miserable and withdrew from the school before the end of the year (Coleman 2015). By the time Lanza was supposed to enter eighth grade, there are conflicting reports about the status of his education. Some reports claim that Lanza did not actually attend school at all during his eighth-grade year, while other reports claim he started the year back at Newtown Middle School but after a few short weeks had to be hospitalized for

anxiety episodes, lack of sleep, and immense weight loss (Egan et al. 2014 and Coleman 2015).

Lanza was committed to Danbury Hospital at the end of September in 2005 for evaluation, where

he was diagnosed formally with anxiety disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and obsessive-compulsive

disorder (Coleman 2015). Lanza's mother declined the offer for Lanza to receive more

evaluations and therapy, claiming that she just wanted to take her son home, where he was most

comfortable. This decision by Lanza's mother was likely an immense disservice to her son,

preventing him from receiving crucial help. Despite being homeschooled for the rest of his

eighth-grade year, Lanza actually succeeded academically, and when the time came for the

following school year to begin, Lanza enrolled back in public school at Newtown High School

for ninth grade in 2006 (Coleman 2015).

The same problems that Lanza previously faced in school were still present, making it

difficult for Lanza to successfully make it through a school day. His persistent handwashing, fear

of germs, dislike for social interactions, and high level of anxiety were all distractions throughout

the day (Egan et al. 2014). His constant state of anxiety led to sleepless nights and a decreased

appetite, which only hindered Lanza's development. One positive aspect that came out of high

school for Lanza was his involvement in technology club. Lanza began socializing with others

and making progress toward engaging in discussions and conversation (Breslow 2013). Lanza

then took more time off during the spring of his tenth-grade year due to his anxiety and stress,

and instead of his traditional classes, he worked on an independent study. Due to the intense

tutoring he received each week, Lanza accumulated enough credits to graduate high school at the

end of eleventh grade, despite his inconsistency in schooling.

A doctor's record from a 2008 well-visit notes that Lanza was "receiving "no meds, and

no psych." Under the heading "Development," next to sub-headings for "school," "after school

activities," and "peer relations," nothing is written except for "10th grade." The record notes that he was 112 pounds and almost 5 feet, 10 inches tall, suggesting possible anorexia at this time" (Egan et al. 2014). Lanza was not reaching the typical benchmarks socially, developmentally, or physically, all of which should have been red flags for his parents and doctors, yet Lanza still was not receiving professional guidance in regards to therapy, medication, or treatment. His doctor even checked off "well child/normal growth and development," on his chart, which seems to be the opposite of what was occurring.

Lanza enrolled in Norwalk Community College in 2009 following his early graduation from high school but dropped out after one semester of classes. Lanza's mental health was quickly deteriorating, as his anxiety heightened and his obsessions and compulsions became more debilitating than ever before. Also, at this point Lanza was rarely replying to his estranged father's emails, since his parents' divorce was finalized shortly after his high school graduation. He spent more and more time alone in his room on the computer, playing World of Warcraft or Dance Dance Revolution, rarely taking the time to eat or spend time with his mom. During his time on the computer, Lanza spent a significant portion of his screen time researching and posting about school shootings and guns. Both of Lanza's parents were interested in firearms, attending gun shows and collecting pieces, making Lanza no stranger to weaponry. He often edited Wikipedia pages on well-known shootings, such as Columbine and Virginia Tech, and he frequented shooting game websites as well (Coleman 2015). Lanza even corresponded with an internet friend regarding his fascination in shootings, stating "My interest in mass murdered [sic] has been perfunctory for such a long time. The enthusiasm I had when Virginia Tech happened feels like it's been gone for a hundred billion years. I don't care about anything. I'm just done with it all" (Egan et al. 2014:100). While shootings and mass murders used to be of great interest

to Lanza, his lack of enthusiasm for anything at this point in his life was concerning and a considerable warning sign associated with severe depression and suicide. He spent the next few years at home locked in his room alone while ignoring all responsibility, falling into a deeper depression and losing more weight. Lanza had access to an arsenal of guns, as well as the knowledge about the firearms, and that, mixed with his interest in shootings, proved to be a fatal combination, not only for Lanza, but also for the community of Newtown.

On the morning of December 12th, 2014, twenty-year-old Lanza shot his mother inside their home. He then took off to Sandy Hook Elementary School, where he fired off his first round of gunshots at 9:34. His first round of shots enabled Lanza to enter into the locked school doors after his bullets left a hole in the door large enough for Lanza to crawl through (Gorosko 2013). Lanza's first two murders were the school principal and school psychologist, then he shot and injured two more office workers, as they were all on their way to figure out what the commotion was by the front door (Sedensky 2013). Lanza entered two separate classrooms, firing off dozens of rounds, killing a total of four adults and twenty children with a semi-automatic rifle (Gorosko 2013). After his spree, Lanza took out a pistol, which he promptly turned on himself in one of the very classrooms in which he had just committed mass murder (Sedensky 2013). The first call to the police was made at 9:35, just after Lanza first fired off bullets, but because he had a semi-automatic weapon, he was able to fire off many rounds before the police arrived on scene no more than five minutes later. Another six minutes passed before the police entered the school (Sedensky 2013). The entire massacre took a total of eleven minutes.

While Lanza's shooting was devastating because of the large number of casualties committed, the media was most drawn to fact that Lanza shot up an elementary school. The news

displayed sobbing children in parking lots, a site that is difficult to erase from one's mind. Because the shooting occurred in a place with so many young children, the media outlets reported the case slightly differently than how they would have done otherwise. The pieces that were put out for the public tugged on heart strings across the world. Given that the majority of the victims were minors, the reporters had to be very careful with their tactics, yet they were hounding children shortly after the shooting to hear their accounts. Reporting school shootings is important, but when a six-year-old child is trying to process the events that occurred, the last thing he or she needs is to give an interview. The lack of respect given to such a vulnerable population was astounding. Similarly to the other cases, the reporting of false information proved to be prevalent. The news first claimed the shooter inside was 24-year-old Ryan Lanza, Adam Lanza's brother. They also claimed that Lanza's mother was a teacher at the school, a fact that later proved to be false as well. In an attempt to provide information quickly, the media outlets often make critical mistakes in their research and reporting. Also, like the Virginia Tech case, Lanza's medical records were difficult to obtain, as were his school records, making it difficult to track his path exactly. It is quite clear, however, that he did not receive proper medical care and that his education was sporadic at best.

The research regarding Newtown is qualitative, mostly centering around interviews with past teachers, acquaintances, doctors, and family members of Lanza. The brother and father also gave reports but the validity is questionable because Lanza had very limited contact with either of them. Given that Lanza was essentially reclusive during his last few years of life, there were very few people, if any, that knew exactly what was happening within the four walls of Lanza's bedroom. There were many warning signs that Lanza displayed from childhood through adolescence that were enough to cause worry to anyone that interacted with Lanza, but he

became shut off from the world so much so that no one knew how he was progressing- if he was progressing at all.

Just like the other cases, Lanza had a history with mental illness, though his was the most extensive by far. He had a complex crisscrossing of diagnoses, from sensory-integration, to Asperger's, to obsessive compulsive disorder, to anorexia, and to depression, but he was not seeking out the help necessary to succeed. Perhaps with this case more than the others, the news focused so much so on Lanza's mental illnesses likely because his target of children was more appalling than any other school shooting that had been previously published. With the victims so young, it seemed that Lanza was being attacked more harshly than any other perpetrator, with his mental health at the center of it all.

The qualitative research methods used to study these three separate cases provides the personal detail and the depth needed to fully comprehend the lives of the perpetrators and the events of the day. The content analysis done on the writing, recordings, and computer history of the perpetrators provided some key information on their intentions, feelings, and plans for their shootings, proving to be the most effective aspect of the research, While the interviews were important, there were many instances where information did not match up, making it difficult to figure out exactly what occurred on the day of the event or in the perpetrators' lives. The prominence of the media was helpful in reporting the events of the actual shooting, but often skewed important information, making it unreliable. Also, depending on the source of news, the reports differ because of the polarizing views of many news stations and newspapers. Analyzing medical records was rather helpful in regards to the mental health aspect of the perpetrators, but they were often hard to obtain given patient protection and confidentiality; however, many records were made public after the initial reports were completed and publicized by researchers.

While all of the shootings occurred within the last two decades, Columbine has the most information published. Reports have been written and re-written about the subject and new information keeps arising because of the time that has passed since the event. In the case of Sandy Hook, the shooting is only five years old, so the public reports are still being written and revised, and it is also likely that more information will become public as time continues to pass. The considerable work published regarding each of the three cases was imperative in analyzing and understanding of the perpetrators.

Chapter 3: Theory

3.1 Introduction

School shootings and mental health are two issues that are directly related in the sense that many of the school shooters within the last several decades have suffered from severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychopathy. When mental illness is mixed with a lack of social capital and other societal pressures, like male stereotypes, many men feel that the only way to escape their problems is through violent acts like shootings. School shootings, especially when they end in suicide by the perpetrator, can be viewed as "manly exits," but in reality, school shootings are measures for avoiding greater suffering by the perpetrator. The lack of social capital experienced by the majority of shooters creates an intense sense of loneliness, making many shooters feel as if they have no reason to live. This loneliness, in part with symptoms from some of the more common mental illnesses, such as delusions or emotional swings, are a dangerous combination, resulting in irrational behavior. While the topics of school shootings and mental health are two that have become more focused on within the recent decades, there are several theories from sociology that relate directly and indirectly to the intertwining problems.

3.2 Anomie

A common experience for many perpetrators of school shootings is a feeling of anomie, a term coined by sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1897 book *Suicide.* When referring to anomie, Durkheim is describing a feeling of normlessness, a lack of social direction, or a state of deregulation (Carls 2017). In the cases of the perpetrators studied, they all lacked a sense of social direction and purpose due to a mix of severe hindrances of mental health problems, lack of social connection with peers, and an overall feeling of hopelessness within their lives. The

combination of these circumstances created tremendous and immeasurable feelings of anomie, leading to the perpetrators carrying out such vicious attacks on those around them, eventually ending their own lives through suicide.

In *Suicide* (2005), Durkheim covers four different types of suicides: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. The first type of suicide, egoistic, stems from a "lack of integration of the individual into society. The stronger the forces throwing the individual onto his own resources, the greater the suicide-rate in the society in which this occurs" (Durkheim 2005:XIV). Durkheim also notes that egoistic suicide can occur even with some integration with family, but it is important to understand that with a stronger connection people have to their community, the more their egoistic tendencies are suppressed. With the case of Adam Lanza, he had very weak ties to society. Even from a young age, Lanza lacked the social skills necessary to form connections with peers and family members. This, alongside other factors, likely propelled Lanza into a depressive state, in which he spent the majority of his time alone in his room locked away from the outside world. He had severed relationships with his father and brother, and while he lived at home with his mother, he had minimal contact with her as well. Lanza's suicide falls perfectly into Durkheim's classification of an egoistic suicide.

Seung-Hui Cho's shooting and suicide also seem to fall under the category of Durkheim's egoistic suicide. As an immigrant in America, Cho started at a natural disadvantage socially, but even before moving to America, Cho struggled with making friends and communicating his feelings. As Cho progressed through school, his social skills did not improve, hindering his ability to feel connected with greater society. A psychiatric study of five mass murderers who survived their shootings found that:

> The subjects had all been bullied or isolated during childhood and subsequently became loners who felt despair over their social alienation… they believed others to be generally

rejecting and uncaring. As a result, they spent a great deal of time feeling resentful and ruminating on past humiliations. The ruminations subsequently evolved into fantasies of violent revenge." (Knoll and Annas 2016:84-85)

In regard to most school shooters, it seems that their deaths fall under egoistic suicide considering their immense lack of social capital and networks. This lack of social capital may in part be due to their states of mental health because in many cases, like with Lanza, he was so immersed in his own world that he could not interact with others.

Altruistic suicide, described by Durkheim as "where the individual's life is rigorously governed by custom and habit… that is, it results from the individual's taking his own life because of higher commandments, either those of religious sacrifice or unthinking political allegiance" (Durkheim 2005:XV). While this type of suicide is still common today in social groups like the army, it is less common in cases of school shooters because that would imply that the perpetrators had such a strong sense of dedication to another group of people. The majority of school shooters seem to lack this sense of devotion to anything.

The third of Durkheim's categories of suicide is caused by external factors. Anomic suicide "results from lack of regulation of the individual by society… The individual's needs and their satisfaction have been regulated by society… When this regulation of the individual is upset so that his horizon is broadened beyond what he can endure, or contrariwise contracted unduly, conditions of anomic suicide tend toward a maximum" (Durkheim 2005:XV). A sudden significant adjustment placed upon an individual can be enough to drive them to suicide if dramatic enough. Such adjustments can relate to a change in financial status from wealth to poverty, or even vice versa. Not knowing how to handle such a considerable transition puts high stress on those affected, and in some cases that transition is enough to lead to suicide.

A fourth category of suicide, fatalistic suicide is considered to be the opposite of anomic suicide, and it is the least common of all suicides in contemporary society. This type of suicide

historically could have been associated with slavery, in which people's lives are so highly regulated. The intense inflexibility of the lives of some drive them to end their lives. When rules become so oppressive, suicide may feel like the only control people have over their lives. While this type of suicide is not very common in contemporary society, the idea of yearning for control in repressive institutions is quite common. Many students find the monotony of the education system and of the classroom to be rather oppressive. The same notion applies to social structure in high school, where it can be difficult to change social status. These rigid social constructs of society can be so oppressive that students feel the need to end their own lives.

3.3 Social Capital Theory

Another lens to utilize throughout this analysis of school shootings is social capital theory, a theory that addresses the importance of "investment of social relations with expected returns in the marketplace" (Lin 2007:19). Social capital can also be defined as the "interpersonal relationships, institutions, and other social assets of a society or group that can be used to gain advantage" (Dictionary.com 2018). In essence, social capital is about connection. The United States prides itself on being a country of individuals, but this emphasis on individuality may be doing a great injustice in terms of social capital theory. This notion of individuality has changed the United States since the 1970s. In the past 50 years, memberships in community groups such as the Boy Scouts, religious social groups, and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) have declined and are now at an all-time low (Putnam 2000). People are not as engaged with their communities as they once were, lacking social contact and connection more than ever, and since the 1970s, social capital has been on the decline (Putnam 2000). Social capital is important in society because it fosters a sense of trust and togetherness between people, enhances overall health and happiness, and helps improve institutions like schools and offices.

In the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, social capital theory certainly played a part in their killings and suicide, but not in the traditional sense. Social capital can have negative effects, however, in the sense that groups with significant social cohesion and high social capital can become exclusive, particularly in school settings. Harris and Klebold both felt like outsiders at school, and while they had a small group of friends and coworkers, they felt as if they were on the outside of the larger social scene at Columbine High School. Klebold, in particular, wanted to feel a sense of connection to his peers, but he simply did not find any bonds that he felt strongly about. His connection to Harris was likely an attempt for Klebold to gain reciprocity and mutual respect, for which Klebold desperately yearned. Cullen (2015) noted the importance of a friend like Harris for Klebold in the sense that Klebold was not a man of action, but when he felt important due to Harris's actions, he would have done anything to maintain their friendship. Klebold was labeled as "near the bottom of the newly evolving peer hierarchy," (Larkin 2007:139) which made it more difficult for him to shed that label and gain confidence to establish friendships. Perhaps if Harris and Klebold had felt as if they were friends with the "popular kids" and "jocks," or more on the inside of the social scene, they never would have fired shots at Columbine High School. The exclusivity shown by such groups made Harris, and especially Klebold, feel unwanted at Columbine, causing them to seek attention in non-traditional ways.

In many cases, shooters utilize their schools as a platform to make a greater statement. Students often feel as if school, with endless homework, monotonous schedules, and exclusive social groups, is the most oppressive of all institutions, and the only way to gain control over this institution, a place where they do not have control, is to seize the power. Reaping the benefits

that come from social capital seems especially important in high school, where adolescent

development, identity, and self-esteem are blossoming.

Connections and belonging are crucial in high school, during which:

> Social relations are expected to reinforce identity and recognition. Being assured of and recognized for one's worthiness as an individual and a member of social group sharing similar interests and resources not only provides emotional support but also public acknowledgment of one's claim to certain resources. These *reinforcements* are essential for the maintenance of mental health and the entitlement to resources. (Lin 2007:20)

Harris and Klebold ultimately had no reassurance or reinforcements of their social worth because

in the kingdom of high school, the popular kids viewed them as having negligible worth. In order

to feel as if they were valuable, Harris and Klebold altered the place where they felt worthless

and turned it into a space where they had all of the power.

3.4 Network Theory

Another idea that relates to social capital theory in regards to school shootings is the

notion of network theory. According to Katz, Lazer, Arrow, and Contractor (2004), "A social

network consists of a set of actors ('nodes') and the relations ('ties' or 'edges') between these

actors. The nodes may be individuals, groups, organizations, or societies" (Katz, Lazer, Arrow,

Contractor 2004:324). Social capital essentially comes from social networks so the two theories

relate immensely, utilizing the two ideas as a way to calculate the maximum connection to the

community that a person has. The network of a student may be his or her friends, family,

classmates, and teammates because that is with whom he or she interacts and is connected to

regularly.

Network theory can be explained as "a structured way of conceptualizing and measuring

external ties and their impact. Ties may spring from individual group members or from the group

as a whole. Tie may connect groups or members to external individuals, groups, or resources"

(Katz, Lazer, Arrow, Contractor 2004:324). Essentially, social network theory looks at the types of connections in a person's life, and in the case of school shooters, they often lack positive social relationships with peers and family. The social network that people are a part of can measure capital in the sense that capital can be gained from social networks (Social Network Analysis Theory and Application 2011:1).

People who lack networks, therefore lack capital, are often on the outskirts of the social scene, particularly in a school setting. It can be detrimental for a person to go throughout school without friends, confidantes, or even close family members to help him, and it is likely that social unrest will arise within the person. In the case of Dylan Klebold, Cullen (2015) mentioned that loneliness and depression were the center of Klebold's problems, but had Klebold had friends, he likely would not have been as lonely. If Klebold had friends prior to meeting Harris, the two may never have devised a plan to shoot Columbine High School. With the Sandy Hook case, Adam Lanza never had many friends, battling with social anxiety and a slew of other mental health issues. He barely interacted with the outside world, shutting out his family and turning to the occasional friend online, but Lanza's brief online communications hardly count as strong social capital. Once a person feels alienated from the community, it becomes immediately easier for him to create a catastrophic event, such as a mass shooting, that leaves that community feeling as disoriented as the perpetrator once felt.

3.5 Hirschi's Social Bond Theory

Hirschi's social bond theory states that "If the social bond is firmly intact for an individual, there will be no pattern of delinquent behavior. Conversely, if the social bond is weakened, or absent, juvenile delinquency can be expected" (Thompson and Bynum 2016:103). Essentially, Hirschi is saying that those individuals with strong social bonds have less of a reason

to be delinquent because they have more to lose if they get in trouble due to their criminal behaviors. In most cases, school shooters ultimately have nothing to lose when they begin their attacks, but perhaps if the ties to their communities were stronger, they would fear losing those connections and not engage in reckless or damaging behaviors.

Hirschi explains four elements that connect a person to others within society and prevent them from entertaining delinquent activity; he says these four pieces are attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Thompson and Bynum 2016). Attachment can be described as how one feels towards other people and how one would conform because of his relationship with others. Commitment relates to how an individual acts in regards to obtaining higher positions like a career or relationship, which are conventional desires to a conformist. Involvement is how invested an individual is to wanting to achieve conformity. Belief relates to how strongly one feels about conforming to the larger society and how much he values social norms. The more attached, committed, and involved an individual is, as well as the more they believe in the morality of societal norms, the more likely they are to respect conventional laws (Thompson and Bynum 2016). In most instances, the attackers of these shootings lack attachment to others, commitment to bettering themselves, involvement in wanting to please the majority, and belief in social norms.

In the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, it was apparent that the two boys did not have a strong social bond. When discussing Harris' experience throughout high school, Cullen (2015) stated that "Sophomore year he tried an edgier look: combat boots, all-black outfits, and grunge. He started shopping at a trendy store called Hot Topic and the Army surplus store… He grew boisterous, moody, and aggressive" (Cullen 2015:146). Harris's desire to stand out from his peers shows that he did not want to act or dress like everyone else. He made an active effort to

stand out, showing that conformity was the opposite of what he wanted to achieve. Just a few months before the attack, the two boys broke into a van, stealing video and computer equipment. This act also shows the strong desire to stand out given that spending time at the county jail is far from a normal activity for a traditional high school student. It can be argued that Harris and Klebold were yearning to differentiate themselves from their peers and greater society through acts of purposeful defiance.

Other instances, like the case of Seung Hui Cho, show a less intentional form of going against the ideals of larger society. Cho struggled to communicate with his peers, given his selective mutism, and his lack of social skills made it difficult for Cho to make friends. His classmates perceived him as weird and scrawny with an accent that was difficult to understand (Kleinfeld 2007). Although he was succeeding academically in high school, he was struggling to survive socially. Once enrolled in college, Cho became even more of a social outcast after stalking several of his female classmates, and he was reported to campus safety (Shuchman 2007). Cho had a less than favorable reputation around campus due to his stalking, disturbing writing in class, and public expressions of suicidal ideation. This reputation put Cho further on the outside of the social scene, which gave him no reason to care about society. Perhaps if Cho had made a few friends in college, he may have felt a stronger sense of responsibility or belonging to his community, preventing him from engaging in the shooting; however, Cho lacked such connections, leading him to acts of deviance.

3.6 Life Course Perspective Theory

The life course perspective theory addresses how "chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people's lives from birth to death," (Hutchinson 2014). This theory proves to be extremely relevant in looking at how several factors

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of the perpetrator's lives led to the eventual shootings that occurred. This theory is especially important to address when looking at school shooters because of the concerns that are more surface level than mental health. Bullying, lack of social capital and friendships, and family conflicts are all significant parts of a person's life. When combined with mental illness, these seem to be problematic enough to drive a person to extreme measures, and while this is not excusable, it is important to note. Chronological age, relationships (which were already touched on in the subsection of social capital), common life transitions, and social change are all significant aspects of life, and a failure to normally engage with any of these parts at any given time proves to be detrimental.

While addressing chronological age in regard to school shootings and mental health, it is important to address that 95% of school shooters are current students at the school and about 70% of the shootings are enacted by minors under the age of 18 (United States Secret Service and Department of Education 2002). Students in adolescence are arguably one of the most vulnerable populations given that "no other developmental stage is characterized by more dramatic changes… studies indicate that the brain, not hormones, is responsible for teens' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Roaten and Roaten 2011:3). The underdevelopment of the human brain at this young age can partly explain why chronological age is so important in looking at the complexities of school shootings. Adolescents often make impulsive decisions and poor choices, in large part because their brains have not fully developed yet. This is no excuse for minors to shoot their peers and teachers at school, but it is important to notice about the age of many school shooters.

Paolini (2015) says "Approximately half of all lifetime mental health disorders start by the mid-teens, and the onset of all major mental illnesses happen as early as 7 to 11 years of

age," and this time period of adolescence is exactly when we see the majority of school shooters taking aim on their peers (Paolini 2015). The most common time period for a schizophrenia diagnosis in males is in the late teens or early twenties, right on target with the average age of a school shooter (Johns Hopkins University 2018). Suicide is also considered to be one of the leading causes of death in people ages 15-24 (Johns Hopkins University 2018). Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, and Brown (2016) noted in their study that 93% of the school shooters they interviewed, who were 18 years of age or younger, reported feelings of depression (Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, and Browne 2016). Gerard et al. (2016) also mentioned that 61% of the 41 school shooters they interviewed had a history of depression and that 78% had expressed suicidal thoughts or tried to commit suicide (Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, and Browne 2016). Given that men specifically are so vulnerable to schizophrenia, other severe mental illnesses, and suicidal ideation at such a young age, it fits perfectly with the idea that chronological age, mental health, and school shootings are all interrelated.

The transition to high school is one that is particularly difficult for many adolescents, yet it has been noted that the perpetrators of Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook all had exceptionally traumatic or troubling experiences in high school. These shared experiences may explain why life course transitions particularly played a role in their shootings, as well as many other shootings around the country. Columbine happened while Harris and Klebold were still students in the high school, but Cho and Lanza were no longer in high school at the times of their shootings, which is important to note. Cho and Lanza still struggled with the transition to high school, and college, which may have played a role in their deep-rooted pain that led to their shootings. School shootings are not spur of the moment decisions; in fact, Cullen (2015) wrote that "Our best asset is time. These boys don't 'snap,' they smolder" (Cullen 2015:386). This

means that any pain or trauma that occurred when the boys were younger may certainly play an active role in the decision to follow through with a school shooting. He also writes that "A staggering 93 percent planned their attack in advance. The path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way" (Cullen 2015:322-323). Harris, Klebold, Cho, and Lanza all seem to have been seething with anger since they were young boys, and the significant transition to high school may have just been another contributor to their overall misery.

Relating back to age, students spend the majority of their adolescence, particularly their time in high school, learning in the classroom, engaging with peers and teachers, and forming strong friendships; however, some high school experiences are better than others. This broad spectrum of experience helps to explain why the high school journey can lead to troubling outcomes for some students. For those students who have a less than ideal time in high school, each day can feel torturous, and if mixed with the right conditions, such as severe mental health problems, the result could be a school shooting within the walls of the place that made them feel most insecure.

Adam Lanza was periodically homeschooled between the ages of 14 to 18 due to extreme generalized anxiety and debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder. Although Lanza did attend a traditional high school for short periods of time, he often had to drop out and continue schooling at home due to the severe stress he became accustomed to regarding school and social interactions. His anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder were controlling his every day actions, making it nearly impossible for Lanza to make it through the day at a traditional high school. The fact that Lanza attempted to return to traditional schooling several times must have been a troublesome transition each time he re-entered high school. An already overwhelmed

student, Lanza must have sent his apprehension and anxiety skyrocketing each time he chose to return to public schooling, until he finally decided not to return to public school at all.

Seung Hui Cho experienced a different type of transition than Lanza but one that also proved to be difficult nonetheless. When Cho moved from South Korea to the United States at the age of eight, he had already experienced years of obstacles. Although Cho struggled with communication and expressing feelings as a child in South Korea, his problems heightened upon moving to Virginia. Cho struggled with major depressive disorder, severe anxiety disorder, and selective mutism, which made it even more challenging for him to acclimate to a new country and school. The uprooting from South Korea to America only seemed to amplify Cho's struggles as a young boy, resulting in his inability to handle any more suffering, while increasing his desire to make others feel his intense personal pain.

3.7 Differential Identification Theory

Lanza and Cho, although quite different in their backgrounds and attacks, shared a significant commonality that tie not only their two cases together but also with the Columbine attack. Both attackers cited Columbine as an influential aspect to their own shootings. Daniel Glaser's differential identification theory suggests that people can learn crime indirectly through influences other than personal connection to criminals. Glaser (1956) says that "The theory of differential identification, in essence, is that *a person pursues criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable* (Glaser 1956:440). Differential identification theory is important in looking at crime and delinquency because Glaser, along with other scholars and researchers, look at the relationship between the criminal and those he is looking to for influence, whether real or imaginary.

Finley (2007) mentions that "in differential identification theory, the process of becoming a criminal is primarily guided by a set of psychological factors that steer an individual's desires toward emulation of criminal roles rather than non-criminal interpretations" (Finley 2007:70). In the case of each shooter, the process of becoming a criminal was greatly influenced by those who engaged in criminal activity before them. Cho and Lanza explicitly cite Columbine, as well as Harris and Klebold, as inspiration for their own attacks, and Lanza also mentions the influence of Cho in his own attacks.

Part of the reason that the media has begun to change their reporting methods is to reduce the chance of the copycat effect, which is defined as "the phenomenon through which violent events spawn violence of the same type" (Coleman 2004:1). After any shooting, news reporters flock to the school in hopes of sharing the story with the world. Giving details about the perpetrators, their lives, and the types of weapons they use only gives rise to the potential of more shootings in the future. Media coverage of shootings and suicides increases the likelihood that more tragic events will follow suit; these events are known to be contagious, especially once the media gets ahold of the story and spreads it rapidly (Don'tNameThem.com 2017). Many shooters walk through the hallways of school as unknown but shooting their classmates and teachers instantly makes them known to everyone. This infamy is what shooters crave.

Finley (2007) makes an important addition to the notion of differential identification theory when she says that "Individuals can just as easily identify with distant figures or mass media personas as they can with real people in interactive social settings. This aspect of differential identification makes the theory practical for use in explaining the impact of television, comic books, video games, and other media on juvenile violence" (Finley 2007). While Finley mentions the importance of comic books and video games, Cullen (2015) says that

when looking at school shooters in general "Cultural influences also appeared weak. Only a quarter were interested in violent movies, half that number in video games- probably below average for teenage boys" (Cullen 2015:323). This is important to note that violent books and video games may not be in direct relation to school shootings, but rather it is through the displays of real violent acts, such as school shootings, on the news that cause a spike in additional shootings. It is through differential identification theory that young, troubled students learn about such methods of mass destruction, planting the seeds for future massacres.

Due to the prominent display of the Columbine attack on the news, Cho was able to learn in depth about Harris and Klebold in the decade before his own attack. Cho even mentioned Harris and Klebold in his manifesto when he said "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to f*** you thousand folds for you Apostles of Sin have done to us" (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Addendum 2009:3). This specific mention of Harris and Klebold as martyrs in Cho's manifesto, his parting words to the world, just shows the influence they had over Cho. Cho also says their suicides, as well as his own, were meant to be sacrifices to scar and hurt those who were most damaging to them. Had it not been for the media replaying the violent attacks of Harris and Klebold and memorializing their actions, Cho never would have had their infamy to live up to or their life paths to follow. Cho likely would have had other examples to learn from, but Harris and Klebold were his idols because of the significant destruction they caused in their high school.

While Lanza often fixated on topics for a brief period of time, the only topics he appeared interested in for an extended period of time were school shootings and firearms. In his isolated states, Lanza would spend his time researching school shootings and guns, while also playing violent video games online. In addition to his research and games, Lanza trolled the internet,

editing the Wikipedia pages for both the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings, as well as other lesser-known shootings. Given that the internet was Lanza's main source of socializing, he often corresponded with acquaintances from his gaming websites. While speaking with one friend, Lanza told him "My interest in mass murdered [sic] has been perfunctory for such a long time. The enthusiasm I had when Virginia Tech happened feels like it's been gone for a hundred billion years. I don't care about anything. I'm just done with it all" (Egan et al. 2014:100). Lanza's spiral into deep depression made him feel as if he did not care about anything anymore, yet the one topic that remained of interest to the young man was school shootings. He learned from the actions of Harris, Klebold, and Cho, and while the lessons taught by the other boys were not by any means socially acceptable, Lanza felt a connection to them and followed suit.

3.8 Technological Determinism

Karl Marx's theory, technological determinism, delves into technology and social change, stating that "technological change drives social change but at the same time responds discriminatingly to social pressures" (Smith and Marx 1998:2). In the last few decades, the influence of media and technology has proven to be significant on modern society. Technological change has shaped social change in the sense that society has changed modes of communication, as well as ways to spread news. Through the increased use of cell phones, computers, television, and social media, society has evolved but not necessarily for the better.

According to Smith and Marx (1998), "A sense of technology's power as a crucial agent of change has a prominent place in the culture of modernity... Anyone who has witnessed the advent of the computer, for example, knows a great deal about how new technology can alter the very texture of daily life, and has gained this understanding as more than a bystander" (Smith and Marx 1998:IV). This sense of power is immense and hard to combat. Technology has shifted

the way people communicate every day, as well as how and when they view shared knowledge from news outlets. Media and technology play two different parts to this entire equation: technology as a means of changing the methods of socialization and media as a means of spreading information regarding shootings. Both parts are integral to evaluate when discussing school shootings.

In the past few decades, the importance of technology, especially to the younger generations, has grown immensely. To the four attackers of the three cases studied, technology played considerable roles in their lives. For Harris and Klebold, technology was less important than for Cho and Lanza, given that technology was not as advanced in the late 1990s as it was in the next few decades. Harris began creating video games on his computer, then later posting those games online for others to play and critique. People who played Harris' games have reported that the hallways resembled the hallways of Columbine, possibly showing that Harris was foreshadowing his massacre. Harris was essentially utilizing his creative outlet in a more constructive manner for planning his attacks. While Klebold did not have as much of an interest in creating such video games, he enjoyed playing games alongside Harris. When the two boys broke into a van one night to steal video and computer equipment, they were subsequently taken to the county jail. It is unclear if the boys were looking to get into mischief or actively seeking to steal this computer equipment for their own use, but either way it is clear that technology, computers, and video games were all of significant importance to Harris and Klebold.

While Seung Hui Cho was not said to have been interested in violent video games or technology to an abnormal extent, he utilized the media to his advantage in the midst of his shootings. Cho submitted videos and written letters to NBC News in the middle of his shooting. After shooting two people in the dormitory, Cho went to the post office to drop off his pre-made

videos and writing, which was his attempt at a manifesto, before returning to campus and continuing his spree. By submitting his manifesto to NBC, Cho was essentially trying to use the media to his advantage through sending his work to such a public platform, who would hopefully in turn broadcast his proclamation. Cho's decision to send his manifesto to NBC just shows how much power he knew the media had, in the sense that Cho wanted everyone to be subject to his final words. Given the number of people that watch the news every single day, Cho's decision was not surprising in any way; however, the FBI did not allow NBC to release Cho's videos in entirety. Rather than posting his videos on a website like Facebook, Cho wanted a more public avenue, and in contemporary society the route with the most social power is likely to be a news outlet.

When Adam Lanza was enrolled in high school for a brief period of time, he tried to use technology as a way to make friends by joining the technology club. While the club was a way for Lanza to meet other peers with similar interests, Lanza never formed any legitimate friendships from the club, and he eventually left the club and changed the way in which he utilized technology. While technology could have been a way for Lanza to connect with others and make friends, it eventually became an excuse for him to avoid face to face interaction with others. Lanza spent months holed up in his room playing World of Warcraft on the computer, avoiding the public, as well as his mother. While he established loose friendships with people online who frequented the same websites as him, Lanza used technology as a way to avoid people. He also researched school shootings and firearms, often posting and editing websites about well-known shootings such as Columbine and Virginia Tech. Lanza used technology to enter into fake realities, places which made him feel safe, while avoiding the troubling reality that was his life.

All four perpetrators utilized media and technology in drastically different ways, yet it is clear that media and technology served as crucial aspects to not only their daily lives, but also to their shootings. Whether technology was used as a way to enter into fake realities, reach a greater audience, or connect with others around the world, its many uses prove to be influential to the perpetrators.

Chapter 4: Memorializing School Shootings

4.1 Introduction

The relationship between mental health and school shootings is becoming more apparent throughout the case studies that were reviewed. The majority of the perpetrators from the most significant mass shootings in the last several decades had extensive mental health concerns, such as schizophrenia, paranoia, suicidal ideation, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Whether or not these concerns were diagnosed prior to the shootings proved to be of little importance, given that those who had diagnoses often ignored their medications, therapy appointments, and signs of distress. Those perpetrators who did not yet have diagnoses were later diagnosed in prison, or more likely posthumously after their suicides, based on examining journals, computer hard drives, and behaviors that went unnoticed during their lives.

While the news often focuses on school shootings for the hours and days after the events, there is often little that is addressed regarding the aftermath of such tragedies. It is typical to commemorate anniversaries of shootings by holding vigils, religious ceremonies, and dedications of public places to the victims, however, with the prevalence of the media in recent years, many of the anniversaries have become publicized for the entire world to view. Following the three case studies previously mentioned, there have been countless attempts, both publicly and privately, to memorialize the victims and the communities that have been broken as a result of such acts of violence. Addressing the ways in which the communities attempt to heal post-tragedy is crucial in understanding how our nation moves forward following such atrocious events.

4.2 Rebuilding Columbine

As one of the deadliest and most televised school shootings in history, Columbine may arguably be the most famous of all shootings. Given the notoriety of Columbine, it is perhaps the shooting that has been most commemorated through memorial foundations and public ceremonies that occur on the anniversary; however, there was little policy change in the decade after Columbine, making many question the progress that our society makes following tragedies.

Initially after the shooting, there was an outpour of support from the community of Littleton, Colorado. Although the initial display of public support in Clement Park, a park near Columbine High School, was overwhelming, it was important for the community of Littleton to create a more permanent memorial to remember the victims of the shooting. The Columbine Memorial Foundation was opened publicly in Clement Park on September 1, 2001 as a place for community members, as well as the public, to come and reflect on the tragedy that occurred at the high school (Columbine Memorial Foundation 2001). The memorial space was intended to be a peaceful place where people could honor the dead, injured, and survivors of the attack. The memorial also provided a space where the community could grieve and remember the tragedy of April 20th, 1999 (Columbine Memorial Foundation 2001). The memorial is comprised of native plants and flowers, sloping hills, and stone walls etched with quotations from the deceased and their family members. Visitors are supposed to feel tied to the community through the native plants, protected and comforted by the sloping hills, and connected to the deceased after reading the quotations on the walls (Columbine Memorial Foundation 2001). As the most public of all memorial locations for the Columbine shooting, this site proves to be one of the most significant places for people to heal, given that it was created by, and for, the community.

With bullet holes in every surface throughout the school, blood stains in the carpets, and haunted memories floating through the hallways, it was unfathomable for the students of

Columbine High School to return to their school after the shooting to complete the academic year. Following a $1.2 million renovation, students continued their studies in the fall of 1999 back on the grounds of Columbine High School, which had been largely renovated (CBS New York 2012). The library, where ten people were killed, was torn down completely and turned into a glass atrium after a group of parents raised enough money to build a new library. HOPE (Healing of People Everywhere) is one of the dozens of foundations created in light of Columbine by community members and parents alike, and they raised over $3.1 million dollars to fund the rebuilding of the new library within the high school (CBS New York 2012). While it was important for the community to rebuild on the site of where the massacre occurred, it was just as crucial to create a new environment conducive to learning in which students were not constantly in fear remembering the tragedy that transpired in the same hallways.

4.3 Policy Post-Columbine

In relation to policy changes that were enacted after Columbine, there were shockingly only a few laws that were passed by the government following the Columbine massacre. While there were 800 gun bills introduced in 2000, fewer than ten percent of the bills were passed by government (Fuller 2014). Because gun control policy plays a significant role in politics, it is often a disputed topic during elections, and in attempt to gain more votes and funding from supporters of the National Rifle Association (NRA) many politicians, particularly more conservative politicians, are in support of looser gun laws (Fuller 2014). Some of the 800 bills that were proposed to the government following Columbine included restricting the power of unlicensed gun dealers to sell without background checks. Passing this law would have been an immense success for policy makers because background checks vital in attempting to understand

the mental health of the buyer. While this law was not accepted by the government, the Clinton

Administration did pass laws that required safety locks on guns and banned "the importation of

high-capacity ammunition magazines" (CBS 2000). The passing of these laws did not address

the ability for almost anyone to purchase a gun, nor did it focus on the necessity of backgrounds

checks for buyers, which still remains an urgent topic to tackle given the importance that these

aspects play in current shootings. Despite detailed conversations by parents, lobbyists, and

reporters, there was ultimately little change after Columbine in regards to gun control or mental

health resources. If a tragedy does not alter the way that we as a society handle important

problems that plague us, then what will drive us to enact such change?

4.4 Rebuilding Virginia Tech

Immediately following the shooting that occurred on April 16th, 2007 at Virginia Tech,

the student body rallied together to memorialize their fallen community members. The student

volunteer group, Hokies United, brought 32 Hokie Stones, stones made from limestone found on

the property of the university, onto an open field to serve as a temporary space for mourning

(Virginia Tech Alumni Association 2017). As a symbol that represents foundation to the Virginia

Tech community, this limestone also serves as a material in which many buildings on campus are

made (Virginia Tech Alumni Association 2017). By utilizing such a prominent piece of the

campus as a way to memorialize their fallen community members, Virginia Tech is showing the

connection between the entire campus to this tragedy. The semi-circle of limestone became a

place for the campus community to gather and mourn the loss of their loved ones, and the

famous Virginia Tech candlelight vigil, with over 30,000 people in attendance, occurred in this

exact space. Since the initial stone display was constructed, there has been a more permanent set

of 32 stones assembled on campus, engraved with the names of those killed during the spree (Virginia Tech Alumni Association 2017). This permanent memorial on the Virginia Tech campus serves as a reminder to the community of the tragedy that occurred on April 16, 2007.

The university also established the Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund, a collection of $7.5 million of private donations to be split among the families of the deceased, as well as those who were injured in the attack (Siegel, Block, Feinberg 2007). The fund was established to provide financial aid and compensation for those who were affected most directly. As a way of carrying on the legacy of the lives of the people killed, the Hokie Spirit Scholarship Fund was created with 32 separate scholarships available each year starting in the fall of 2007 (Hincker 2007). The Vice President for Development and University Relations, Elizabeth Flanagan, commented that she felt as if establishing scholarships in honor of those killed "was an appropriate way to ensure that the memory of each of these fallen hokies would live on forever" (Hincker 2007). Because the attack occurred on the grounds of an educational institution, it seems only fitting to remember the lives lost through the use of improving the educational experiences of dozens of students each year. Rather than dwelling on the negative impact that the shooting left behind, the Virginia Tech community worked together to memorialize the fallen in the most appropriate of manners, through unifying the school in times of struggle and then creating a brighter future with scholarships as a means of moving forward.

4.5 Policy Post-Virginia Tech

An extremely noteworthy part of the Virginia Tech shooting relates to the gaps between mental health records and gun sales. Although Seung Hui Cho was recommended for outpatient treatment for his mental health concerns, he ultimately denied treatment. At the time when Cho

purchased his firearms, there were no laws stating that people looking to buy guns had to be

checked for mental health history or the potential to be dangerous. Had an executive order been

established prior to the Virginia Tech shooting, it is likely that Cho never would have been able

to legally purchase a firearm, given his extensive mental health records, lack of treatment at the

judge's recommendation, and ability to be seen as dangerous to others. The Virginia Governor,

Timothy Kaine, issued Executive Order Number 50, on April 30th, 2007. The order states that:

> All executive branch agencies to immediately begin including the names of individuals
> found dangerous and ordered to undergo involuntary mental health treatment in the
> database accessed before the sale of firearms by licensed gun dealers to ineligible
> individuals. The order clarifies that there will be no distinction in reporting based on
> whether an individual is ordered to undergo inpatient or outpatient treatment.
> (Clementson 2007)

This executive order was crucial to the policies of the state of Virginia because it has the ability

to minimize the gap between mental health facilities and hospitals from licensed gun dealers.

The published list of names of those who should not have the capability to purchase a gun has

the potential to prevent dealers from selling to individuals who are considered to be a harm to

others. Failure to comply with the list results in dealers losing their licenses, therefore, dealers

have an incentive to sell only to those who are legally allowed to purchase firearms. While this

executive order should have been issued years earlier, the establishment of the order proves

promising in reducing the gap between mental health records and gun sales.

In the following year, in response to the Virginia Tech shooting, Congress passed a bill

on January 8, 2008, that aimed to "expand the federal database used to screen gun buyers to

include the estimated 2 million-plus people, including felons and mentally ill individuals, who

are ineligible to buy firearms" (Simon 2008). While the executive order focused solely on

Virginia, this new bill applies to the entire United States, ensuring stricter gun laws with the hope

of minimizing tragedy. Prior to this bill, 17 states did not need to submit the mental health

records of their citizens to the background check system, essentially making the system worthless (Simon 2008). When mentioning the Virginia Tech spree, the president of the of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence noted that "The Virginia Tech killer was able to arm himself because the court order that should have blocked his gun purchases was not entered in the Brady background check system. This new law will help ensure that records like that don't fall through the cracks" (Bansal 2008). Shockingly, this piece of legislation was the first bill relating to gun control that Congress had passed in 12 years (Simon 2008). Even after Columbine, which occurred in 1999, Congress did not agree to pass any bills relating to gun control until 2008. It took 12 years, dozens of school shootings, and hundreds of deaths by firearms before Congress passed any bill relating to harsher gun laws or the gap between mental health records and background checks.

4.6 Rebuilding Sandy Hook

The approach taken after the Sandy Hook shooting felt different in comparison to the other shootings mentioned, likely because the perpetrator targeted an elementary school, making the tragedy even more unbearable to comprehend. The community made a significant effort to memorialize the 20 young lives and 6 adult lives that were lost on December 14th, 2012. Given the delicateness of the young students within the school, the surviving children did not return to school for a month following the shooting. Upon the decision to send the children back to school, the kids attended the Chalk Hill School in the neighboring town of Monroe. In addition to recently going through a traumatic school shooting, the students now had to adjust to a new school environment. The Chalk Hill School sat unused prior to the shooting but was renovated in the month leading up to the children's return to school in order to make it a child-friendly space for learning in the wake of disaster (BBC 2013).

The fifth anniversary of Sandy Hook recently occurred on December 14th, 2017. Within these last five years there have been substantial plans made to memorialize all of the lives lost from this tragedy. Connecticut's largest firefighter union is taking this opportunity to spread happiness in light of such a tragedy, building 26 playgrounds, one for every victim, in towns throughout Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey that were ravaged by Superstorm Sandy (The Associated Press 2013). The two tragedies will now forever be linked given the shared name between the school and the storm, yet they will be commemorated through the positivity that the playgrounds bring to these devastated communities. Memorializing the lives of the victims, the majority of who were elementary school students, through building playgrounds is the ideal way to remember the young lives lost.

The community in Newtown, Connecticut also formed the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission after the tragedy on December 14th, 2012. The committee is tasked with the job of picking one of hundreds of designs submitted by community members to create something to commemorate the victims from the Sandy Hook shooting (Silber 2018). The committee recently met on January 10th, 2018 to begin looking through designs for the memorial, hoping to find a way to appropriately remember the victims from the shooting. Although the committee has not done anything permanent yet, Newtown will hopefully have a public memorial by 2019 (Fulcher 2018). While looking for designs, the community wanted something where:

> The main focus is to memorialize the victims and the beautiful essence of their individuality instead of the actual event. The memorial should communicate the tragic and sudden loss of the innocent lives and the silence that this event left behind, but at the same time celebrate the strength and courage of the educators who died protecting the children. (Fulcher 2017)

Memorializing those who were killed in such tragedies is more important than memorializing the event itself. By remembering the victims, the perpetrator is not present in the commemoration.

4.7 Policy Post-Sandy Hook

After the Sandy Hook shooting, President Obama signed 23 executive actions, which do not need to be approved by Congress, in attempt to enact stricter gun control laws to minimize tragedies that stem from guns violence. Some of the executive actions signed by Obama include instating background checks on all who purchase guns, publicly or privately, and banning the sales of military-grade weapons and high-capacity magazines (Bash, Yellin, and Cohen 2013). Obama also requested that Congress reinstate the ban on assault weapons and the sale of magazines with more than ten rounds. Republicans attacked Obama, claiming that stricter gun laws could not have stopped Lanza, or any other perpetrators for that matter. The NRA claimed that "Attacking firearms and ignoring children is not a solution to the crisis we face as a nation. Only honest, law-abiding gun owners will be affected and our children will remain vulnerable to the inevitability of more tragedy" (Bash et al., 2013). While children are perhaps the most vulnerable of populations, the high circulation of guns present in the United States is only putting children at a greater risk for facing tragedies. Obama stated at a press conference that the background checks already in place "over the last 14 years [have] kept 1.5 million of the wrong people from getting their hands on a gun. But it's hard to enforce that law, when as many as 40 percent of all gun purchases are conducted without a background check" (The Washington Post 2013). The gun control policies that were already in place prior to 2012 have done some good, in terms of the 1.5 million people prevented from purchasing guns because of failed background checks, but it is clear through the substantial number of gun tragedies that still occur in contemporary society that the laws still need to be stricter.

While law-abiding gun owners may need to partake in more background checks, there is still no need for people to own military assault weapons or high-round magazines. Law-abiding

citizens should have no qualms about the changes in law enacted by the government because neither hunters nor people who claim to need guns for protection should be in possession of such destructive weapons. Addressing gun control is essential in helping to reduce the number of school shootings, as well as mass shootings, that have increased recently in society simply because of the number of guns in circulation in the country.

Strengthening gun control is crucial in reducing the number of guns that are sold annually, but one problem that remains unaddressed is the idea that many school shooters live in houses where firearms are present because they were purchased by parents, who passed such background checks. While Harris and Klebold acquired their guns from an 18-year-old friend, who purchased them from an unlicensed dealer, Cho purchased his guns from a shop, and Lanza stole guns that belonged to his mother. While reducing the number of guns circulating in the United States may be beneficial to the safety of the country, "mass shootings in the schools are the most difficult to prevent using gun control. Due to the fact that most guns are acquired by family members, guns need to be stored in a place not accessible to troubled youngsters who are struggling with depression, anger, or resentment" (Paolini 2015). Gun restrictions are important in reducing the number of guns sold, which would mean fewer family members would own guns. If fewer family members had guns, there would be less of a chance for a struggling teenager to bring the gun to school and turn the gun on his classmates. Background checks have the chance to prevent people with severe mental illnesses or criminal records from purchasing guns, but they do not hinder their ability to find guns to purchase illegally or take guns that belong to friends and family. This is where improved mental health resources will likely be valuable in reducing the number of school shootings annually.

Realistically, society may not be able to prevent everyone from obtaining guns, yet institutions may be able to help people cope with mental illnesses through counseling and medication, in turn reducing the urges the perpetrators feel to engage in damaging behavior. Throughout the last several decades, mental illnesses have become more discussed, and school shootings have become more prevalent, which may be why there have been more laws passed recently relating to gun control and mental health. There have been far more laws authorized relating to gun safety and background checks after Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook than there were following Columbine. Such shifts in policy reflect societal changes.

4.8 Moving Forward

It seems nearly impossible to move on from such tragedies like those of Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook, and while memorializing the victims of such events is important, it is also crucial to move forward, and in doing so ensure that these events do not happen again. Our society has the ability to prevent mass shootings, specifically school shootings, by restricting access to guns and changing the way media addresses violence and masculinity, but perhaps more importantly we have the capacity to decrease the number of school shootings by addressing mental illnesses in a constructive manner. The connection between school shootings and mental illnesses can be seen throughout Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook, as well as dozens of other school shootings, yet had these perpetrators had better ways to handle their internal struggles, hundreds of lives could have been saved.

Schools have the greatest potential in helping kids who are struggling with mental illness because from preschool until 12th grade, most kids spend the majority of their time in formal education settings; "Because education is an entitlement for all children, schools represent the single location through which virtually every child and the large majority of adolescents can be

reached. Schools have the potential to contribute to the solution of this problem" (Weist, Evans, and Lever 2003). Although providing mental health services in an educational setting seems to be rather logical, mental health services have not always been provided in schools. Historically, schools have provided resources for students with physical disabilities, as well as learning disabilities. While mental health services were not viewed as necessary in a school setting, with the recent rise in mental health awareness it seems more vital than ever to have such services available at a place where kids and adolescents spend eight hours a day. The need for these services is steadily growing.

In 1991, a report found that "between 12% and 15% of adolescents exhibited psychosocial problems severe enough to warrant intervention, yet less than one-third of those actually received mental health services" and a 1999 study found that "one in five children and adolescents experiences the signs and symptoms of a DSM-IV disorder during the course of a year" (Brener, Martindale, and Weist 2001). According to Mental Health America (2018), youth mental health is worsening and "Rates of youth with severe depression increased from 5.9% in 2012 to 8.2% in 2015. Even with severe depression, 76% of youth are left with no or insufficient treatment" (Mental Health America 2018). The rate of youth depression is on the rise, as is the rate of youth considering suicide, attempting to harm others, or checking into hospitals for mental illness related problems (Novotney 2014). The definite rise of mental health concerns in students must be addressed, not only to ensure the safety of the students struggling, but also to ensure the safety of thousands of other students attending the same schools. This is not to say that every student struggling with mental health will end up being the perpetrator of a school shooting but given the connections from past shootings and mental health, it is important to note. It is also crucial to mention that the increase of mental health services in all schools would

benefit the lives of the majority of the students. Whether a student is struggling with generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, or any other mental illness on the expansive scale, the increased support from counselors in a school setting would be nothing but advantageous. Improving mental health education and support within schools would not just have the potential to reduce school shootings but Cullen (2015) notes that "We should not be identifying teen depression just because of school shooters. We should do it to slash school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, car accidents, and general misery… Teen depression: the greatest unlearned lesson of Columbine" (Cullen 2015:387). Addressing mental health in schools is one of the changes in educational settings that has the immense potential to reap the substantial benefits.

According to a study by Brener, Martindale, and Weist (2001), "More than three-fourths (77.8%) of schools have a person who oversees or coordinates mental health and social services at the school. Similarly, 77.1% of schools have a part-time or full-time guidance counselor who provides mental health or social services to students at the school" (Brener et al. 2001:310). While school counselors and professionals are crucial in a school environment, having *one* person, who may not even be full time, is not enough to help an entire student body. If society is looking to change the way students handle their mental health, the government should provide funding for such resources. Mental health is a major concern in contemporary society, but school funding and budget cuts are not allowing schools to hire the staff they need to help their students. Another study by the Committee on School Health (2014) noted that "adolescents with access to SBCHs (school-based health centers) with mental services were 10 times more likely than students without such access to initiate a visit for mental health or substance abuse concerns" (Nastasi, Moore, and Varjas 2004:1841). Simply by providing such services in a place where

students spend 40 hours a week makes it extraordinarily easier for those students to obtain necessary services. Students who have access every single day to mental health counseling and resources are more likely to take advantage of them, so if the government provides funding for such centers, there is a likelihood that more students would seek help.

In the case of most perpetrators, they often display several warning signs, but these signs are not always evident to those around them. By providing designated people in a school to focus on such warning signs, there is a chance these people would target struggling students, in addition to the students who actively seek help. For example, Eric Harris saw a therapist, but lied to her and stopped taking his medicine. Because this therapist was not in a school setting, she could not check up on him daily. Giving students access to counselors in a place where they spend most of their time is invaluable. The Child Mind Institute Report of 2016 noted that "If educators, policymakers, parents, and mental health professionals came together to advocate for sensible integration of these approaches, mental health promotion in school may provide a stunning return on investment" (Child Mind Institute 2016). Students, particularly boys, are socialized to think that mental illness is something to keep a secret, but rather, by integrating mental health education and awareness in schools, struggling students will be able to receive the help that they need earlier once warning signs become present, and they will hopefully have the confidence to address, rather than suppress, these feelings.

Chile, for example, has a mental health intervention program, Skills for Life, in 20% of their schools and this program has screened over one million students in ten years (Child Mind Institute 2016). The program starts screening children as young as first grade and of these students screened, 16.4% of these first graders received mental health and behavioral support and services to some extent (Child Mind Institute 2016). Seung Hui Cho and Adam Lanza both

displayed warning signs before or around first grade and if intervention had occurred then, like it does in many Chilean schools, instead of later on in their lives there is a chance that their deadly shootings may never have happened. Chile's Skills for Life shows society that "a large-scale preventive intervention for mental health has a significant positive association with improved student behavioral and academic outcomes" (Karter 2015). Not only is the mental health of students improved with the implementation of such programs, but also the behavioral and academic aspects of the students are enhanced. Given the success seen within the last ten years of the program, the Chilean government has decided "to fund a major increase in the size of the program, adding more than 400 schools during the next school year" (Massachusetts General Hospital 2015). If the United States enacted programs like Skills for Life into some of their schools, and the government saw its value by funding them, there would be a significant change in culture regarding mental illness.

Since the Sandy Hook shooting on December 14th, 2012, there have been approximately 138 people killed in school shootings in the United States, and tens of thousands more killed from acts of gun violence (Patel 2018). In Chile, it is nearly impossible to find any instances of school shootings throughout their history. In tandem with programs like Skills for Life, gun ownership is seen as a privilege and not a right in Chile. In order to purchase a firearm in Chile, the owner must be over 18 years of age, have a permit from the police, pass a written test about gun safety and knowledge, receive a written note from a psychiatrist proving no severe mental illnesses, and have a clean criminal record (GunPolicy.org 2018). There are over 300 million guns in circulation in the United States, compared to the 845,900 guns in circulation in Chile (GunPolicy.org). Throughout firm gun restrictions and mental health resources, Chile has essentially no record of school shootings throughout their history.

School shootings are particularly difficult to resolve, or even fully understand, because of the interconnectedness of the institutions and values relating to them. Perhaps the most underlying structural aspect of school shootings is linked to mental health, in the sense that severe mental illness symptoms and signs displayed by many of the perpetrators considerably influence their behaviors and attitudes. When mental illnesses are so serious, they have the ability to greatly hinder people. These hindrances can relate to people's abilities to make friends and establish social connections, resulting in a sense of anomie, or normlessness. When social relationships are not present in daily life, the result is damaging, often culminating in more emotional and behavioral distress. Another aspect that ties into mental illness is the stigma that surrounds it; more often than not, mental illnesses are seen as negative, particularly for men. When men suppress their struggles and avoid help, they are ultimately allowing their illnesses to progress, causing even more harm. Stereotypically, men are seen as strong and secure, and they are taught not to ask for help, but if society changed the entire negative stigma surrounding mental illness, specifically for men, it would be a significant social movement. Additionally, the media displays the perpetrators of school shootings more often than the victims of the shootings, essentially giving attention to the negative actions of harmful people. When struggling boys see the social power given to school shooters, they are driven to act similarly, perpetuating the copycat effect.

Gun control is also an important factor to address in school shootings. Comparatively, many countries who have enforced stricter gun laws have a significantly lower number of school shootings, as well as gun fatalities overall. With the use of intense background checks, gun safety courses, and governmental intervention, dozens of countries have made immeasurable progress in reducing gun violence; however, the United States has made less progress than most other

countries. In response to the Parkland, Florida shooting that occurred on February 14th, 2018 at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, there was a major shift in gun policy. The perpetrator, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz, legally purchased a gun at Dick's Sporting Goods, and although the police do not believe Cruz used this exact gun to carry out his massacre, in which he killed 17 people, Dick's made the decision to ban the sale of assault weapons in their stores. Dick's also decided not to sell high-capacity magazines within their stores or sell guns of any kind to customers under the age of 21, even if local laws permit underage sales (Creswell 2018). Following the Sandy Hook shooting, Dick's "removed assault-style rifles from its main stores. But a few months later, the company began carrying the firearms at its outdoor and hunting retail chain, Field and Stream" (Creswell 2018). Dick's has since received immense support from the community, and their stock prices have risen as well, proving that their customers are in favor of the decision to ban assault weapons. Following the model of Dick's, Walmart has announced that they will also be banning the sale of assault-style weapons, airsoft guns, and toy guns (Popken 2018). Dick's Sporting Goods has shown that it is not necessary for the government to intervene in order to enact change, and while it would be helpful to have the government working towards gun control, it is not entirely realistic given the connection between politics and gun control.

After the two dozen school shootings that have occurred within the first few months of 2018, several questions have come to the surface. Do we as a society care enough about the safety of our children and schools to ban guns? Do we as a society care enough about the mental health of our students? Do we as a society have a solution to cease school shootings? While we do not have concrete answers for any of those questions, we are perhaps the closest to confidently answering the third question. We do not have a solution for stopping school shootings entirely, but that is not a reason to prevent us from trying to reduce the number of

school shootings to any degree. Adjusting any of the aspects related to school shootings is a positive start to enacting change, but solely changing one part will not be enough to solve the convoluted phenomenon that has become school shootings. Starting with increased mental illness awareness, counseling, and intervention appears to be the most beneficial of all changes that should be made in response to school shootings, given the underlying influence of mental illness on past school shooters.

There have been 66 school shootings thus far this academic year. How many more will it take before we care enough to make a change?

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