

Just School Safety Tip Lines

Introduction [00:00:05] Now this is recording RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents just science.

Voiceover [00:00:19] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode two of our firearms research season, just sat down with Dr. Josh Hendrix, a researcher at RTI International Center for Community Safety and Crime Prevention and an expert in school safety and violence prevention to discuss school safety in the age of mass shootings. Dr. Hendrix has performed in-depth analysis on the efficacy of school tip lines and anonymous means for students and teachers to report suspicious activity. Listen along as he discusses the data surrounding school shootings, as well as strategies to prevent them from occurring in this episode of Just Science. This episode of Just Science is funded in part by the National Institute of Justice's Improving That Understanding a Mass Shooting Plots and RTI International's Applied Justice Research Division. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host Payton Attaway.

Peyton Attaway [00:01:19] Hello and welcome to just science. I'm your host, Payton Attaway, with the Applied Justice Research division at RTI International. Our topic today is school and community safety. Today, we are talking with Dr. Josh Hendrix. Welcome to the podcast, Josh.

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:01:33] Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Peyton Attaway [00:01:35] Dr. Hendrix, could you provide our listeners with a little bit of background on yourself and how you started doing research in the area of school safety and community safety?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:01:46] Sure. So I think I've had an interest in schools and violence prevention there for a long time. I was in high school when the Columbine tragedy happened. Like many, many others, that impacted me very much beforehand. I think many of us just didn't know that kind of thing could happen, and I was sort of a part of that first generation in which schools really started to think, How do we prevent this from happening? So doing lockdown drills and thinking differently about certain types of students with certain qualities, and as I sort of went through my education and began working in social science research, I started looking for opportunities to add to that knowledge base and help produce information that could be used to to make schools safer. After the Sandy Hook tragedy in the few years after that, the Department of Justice started making millions of dollars for research available to researchers to study ways to make schools safer through the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative under the National Institute of Justice. And in one of those first rounds of that funding, I applied for funding to look at bullying and assaults and other types of problematic behaviors that happen on school busses. Because this was always an area. A part of the school day I thought was sort of open ended and unstructured and maybe gave kids a little bit too much opportunity to interact with each others in ways that were not always positive. And I thought, there's a lot that could be learned about this area. We've not done a lot of research here. From there, it really sort of fell in love with the school safety research area and started looking for any opportunity I could to continue work. And the school bus project sort of led to another project looking at emergency operations plans at the district and school level. And

how do school districts and schools, how do they develop their protocols and what sort of protocols do they develop to keep students and staff safe? To what extent do they do lockdown drills? Do they do active shooter training? What are their evacuation drills look like? How do they document all of this? How do they train all of this? And then that work led to more work in this school safety plan arena. So I've had the opportunity now to look at school safety from many, many directions. And this new tip line work has really helped to round all of that out because I've done a lot of work on the response side. But now having the opportunity to look more on the prevention side has really helped to give an overall well-rounded picture of what the school safety mechanism has to look like.

Peyton Attaway [00:04:40] Perhaps we could have you start by framing the problem of firearm violence on K through 12 campuses.

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:04:45] Sure. So firearm violence in schools has definitely become a hot topic, largely because of multiple high profile school shootings that have attracted a ton of media attention and really have ignited this national interest in making schools safer and preventing these tragedies from occurring. But despite all of this relatively new attention, and even with current events that remind us that tragedies can and certainly do happen overall, schools are pretty safe institutions and in many ways they've come safer over time. The school violent victimization rate was about three times higher in the mid 1990s than it is today. We've seen the average number of homicides that occur at schools drop pretty significantly in the past few decades. National mortality data has consistently shown us that the risk of a child being killed during a school shooting is extremely small. Only a tiny percentage of all child homicides occur at school, less than one percent when it comes to children and the 10 to 18 age group. And in this data also shows us that things like swimming pools, accidental falls, even bicycles, these represent much more of a realistic danger to children than do school shootings. Nonetheless, it's undeniable that firearm violence is a problem in American schools. Data from the National Center of Education Statistics shows us that nearly 900 firearm incidents occurred on K through 12 campuses in the past 20 years. Those resulted in about 400 deaths and injuries to another eight hundred survivors. But most of those events involved a single victim that was deliberately targeted as a result of some type of interpersonal conflict. And the fact of the matter is the majority of gun violence in schools is not characteristic of the quote unquote rampage school shootings that are often highlighted by the media. For example, when a student opens fire in a school with the goal of killing as many people as possible, those types of rampage school shootings continue to be extremely rare. Using the broadest definitions, researchers have identified a few hundred of them in the last three decades or so. But when a narrower definition is used, for example, if we define school shootings as planned, events that resulted in the death or injury of at least four people, only about three dozen events can be identified over the past 70 to 80 years. But regardless of how they're defined, we know school shootings are a problem in this country, especially relative to other developed nations. American schools have an unparalleled problem with gun violence, and the truth is any gun violence in schools is too much. No child, no staff member should ever have to experience this, and no amount of it should be acceptable to us because even if they're rare, they have a vast impact on schools and communities. Every single one of these events has had devastating, long lasting effects on school climate, on student learning, on feelings of safety, on overall faculty and staff wellbeing. So we owe it to the victims, as well as the hardworking staff and the students in this country to continue to devote resources to researching school violence and understanding its precursors and building a knowledge base that's actionable and ultimately can help us eliminate this quality from our education system.

Peyton Attaway [00:08:10] Thank you so much, Dr. Hendrix. What do we know about the precursors to school shootings and school firearm violence? Is there a typical profile for a school shooter, or are there certain warning signs that a student might be planning this type of violence?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:08:23] That's a great question, and unfortunately, the answer is not entirely clear cut. What the research over the course of the last 20 or so years has uncovered is a surprising amount of variation in the social and individual background characteristics of school shooters. So much so that developing a school shooter profile is actually a pretty unwise practice because it could lead school administrators to miss some students who don't fit the profile and possibly cause unfair targeting of others who do. The reality is that for most of the warning signs we can conceive of, some students who have committed a school shooting exhibited those warning signs and others did not. For example, some, but certainly not all, were bullied or felt rejected by their peers or showed signs of depression. Others were sort of unapologetically fascinated with guns and violence. But we see differences on these warning behaviors when we look back and we end up understanding each event as a sort of perfect storm of individual and environmental conditions that came together in very distinct ways. And the fact is that because school shootings are so rare and no two of them are ever completely the same. They're extremely difficult to predict. But all of that being said, we know that when an individual makes up his or her mind to show up at a school with guns and an intention to kill people, the students and staff on campus are in a very difficult position. Most shootings begin and end and only in a few minutes. So that's often before law enforcement can even arrive on the scene. And that means that students and staff are really the true first responders, and they face that extremely challenging, if not impossible, task of mitigating an attack. From someone who's usually heavily armed and many teachers and staff, they're just not prepared to handle that kind of event. They're educators, they're usually not coming from a law enforcement background. But even so, we've seen that even if a school executes their emergency protocols effectively, if not exactly as they trained, there still have been casualties. And it seems that very little could have been done to stop the attack once it started, even for a well-trained school. So what that means is that we have to get better at prevention, at proactively stopping these shootings before they're carried out. One really important thing we have learned from two decades of school shooting research is that most students, about 80 percent of them who carry out school shootings, informed at least one other person about their intentions to shoot up the school before they did so. This is a phenomenon known as leaking, and it's a critical, actionable warning sign for school shootings. Now, at the same time, historically students have been reluctant to report safety concerns because they worry about retribution or even betraying the person who made the threat. The growing recognition of these two qualities has inspired new safety strategies aimed at taking advantage of the fact that people know about these plans and encouraging them to report it so that an intervention can be staged. For example, school safety tip lines. School safety tip lines represent one relatively new but promising approach to preventing school shootings by creating a designated place where students, staff and others can report safety concerns anonymously using a web portal or even via text message or phone call or email. The beauty of tip line systems are that students who have become aware of a threat can report it to authorities without ever having to give their name or even having to speak directly to an adult. So in just a few years, we've seen tremendous growth in these systems. More than half of public, middle and high schools now use a safety tip line in some form, and at least 10 states operate a safety tip line.

Peyton Attaway [00:12:34] That's great. It sounds like these tip lines are really promising practices to preventing these events. So what can you tell us about the kinds of research you and your colleagues have conducted on school safety tip lines?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:12:45] Yeah. So with funding from the National Institute of Justice, we've had a pretty unique opportunity to take an in-depth look at school safety tip lines. This is a project led by Dr. Michael Planty at RTI, who's the director of the Center for Community Safety and Crime Prevention, and that included a survey of more than 1200 school principals to document the prevalence of tip lines, the types of schools that are most likely to use them, how they're being used and the challenges and benefits of those systems. Now we've we've also had the opportunity to study thousands of tips submitted over the course of a couple of years and to understand the types of safety concerns that are being reported and what types of details are provided in these tips. One area that relates directly to the topic of firearm violence is an analysis we conducted of tips submitted to the Safe Oregon Tip Line, which is a state operated school safety tip line for Oregon students, parents and staff members. There is a essentially a web page they want to provide mostly students because we know they're the tough ones to get to report that they want to make it as easy as possible to report something anonymously. So the most commonly, they use the web portal, so they essentially go to the safe Oregon website. There's going to be a button that says report a tip or report a safety concern. They click that it takes them to a web page where it's got a handful of fields that some are required, some or not that the student or whoever will fill out to make that report. So what kind of safety concern are they reporting? When did they hear it? All of that kind of thing, or if they go to that web page and hopefully in the trainings that they get. They also know that they can simply text a tip to the tip line or there's a phone number they can call or they can do it by email. But most commonly, users are using the web form where they fill out the different fields. And we analyzed tips submitted over a forty three month period in which a student was being reported because they had threatened to enact a school shooting or other type of violent attack on their school. We reviewed more than 6000 tips submitted between February of 2017 and August of 2020 and extracted 228 tips having to do with a serious, violent threat against a school. We coded each one of those and we tried to capture information about the threat, including where and when it occurred. Details about the person who made the threats, such as whether they have access to a firearm or have a history of violent behavior. We also wanted information about the tip itself. Who reported it? How and when did they report it? And then any information about how the threat was handled by the school. So, for example, was the student who made the threats suspended and where the police called to respond. The goal here was to present some basic descriptive statistics about school shooting threats reported and tip lines. But also we wanted to know what types of threats were more likely to lead to the police being called. In other words, are there certain qualities or details that perhaps increase the extent to which threats are perceived to be serious and urgent and lead to police intervention? And along those same lines, because it's impossible to know whether a threat is actually sincere, time is really of the essence when when threats are made, and it's essential that the reported immediately so that law enforcement and schools have time to intervene. So in addition to these other areas, we wanted to understand if certain types of threats are more likely to lead to what we call same day reporting or when someone reports a threat on the same day they observed it.

Peyton Attaway [00:16:38] And are you able to share with us some of the findings that came out of this study?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:16:42] So what we learn from this data is that most tips in our sample described overt threats to shoot up the school by a known male student, and that threat was usually made out loud at school, usually in the classroom or in the hallways, or often using social media, most commonly Snapchat or Instagram. The majority of those threats were reported by a student using the Safe Oregon web portal, usually between Monday and Thursday. On the same day they were observed, typically between about 4:00 p.m. and midnight. But a sizable number were also reported on the weekends or in early morning hours or during the school day. So tips are really coming in at all times, and administrators have to be prepared to receive and respond to them pretty much on a 24 hour cycle. We also found that these threats tend to ebb and flow throughout the calendar year. So, for example, the fewest came in June through August, when many students are on summer break. But we saw pretty massive increases in the fall and winter. We also saw a substantial spike during the six week period, immediately following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February of 2018. So it's possible that that shooting, although it occurred across the country from the schools using the Safe Oregon Tip Line, really impacted how students and staff perceived red flags in their interactions with particular students and really worked to drive up the number of threats people felt that they needed to report. And then interestingly, we found that about one third of the threats mentioned a specific date for when the shooting or the attack would occur, and about one in 10 described a hit list, or specific targets of violence, or other very particular details about how the violence would be carried out. And when a date was mentioned and the threat, especially if that date was that day or the next day, the reporter was significantly more likely, about four times more likely to report the threat on the same day they observed it, and the police were significantly more likely to be called to intervene. So that might suggest that threats with a specific date attached to them are perceived to be more serious. And the need for an intervention is more urgent because the student has seemingly begun to actually plan the shooting.

Peyton Attaway [00:19:09] Well, that's all very, very interesting, especially kind of the findings that you guys had around the Parkland shooting and how these major events play into our perceptions of people even across the country. So whenever someone reports hit the tip line, does that tip go to school administrators and law enforcement or kind of what's the logistics of that?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:19:30] Yeah, it really depends on who's running the tip line. So with the state operated tip lines, they have, you know, fully trained technicians that review tips in real time as they come in. And what we know is that they route them to the appropriate personnel. So obviously, the school top administrators have to be informed. And from what I understand, it's often the school's decision of whether to contact law enforcement or not. But if it is the tip line operated by state police, for example, you may have more direct involvement by law enforcement depending on the seriousness of tips, but Mike Planty would probably be able to answer that a little bit better than I could.

Peyton Attaway [00:20:13] Yeah, it seems really interesting because like in my mind, or at least what I hear in the media a lot of, the administrators just don't know which threats to take seriously or not, and they don't want to like over police kids, but you kind of have to in a way.

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:20:26] And I've thought about that issue a lot with this project because it was eye-opening in how many of these types of threats we saw in this few years of tip line data. You know, obviously, they represented a small proportion of all the tips, you know, roughly around four percent. But when you're talking over just a few years

and you have hundreds of these, these are just the ones are reported through a tipline. Obviously, obviously, there's a huge dark figure that are never reported and we don't know about them. So schools are getting a lot of these tips. They probably realize to some extent students already using these kinds of threats as a way to gain status or power over their peers. Because in an era in which mass shootings and school shootings are common, it comes with a great deal of power to declare that you have intentions to do that kind of harm at your school, and you can really have an effect on people very quickly. So to get that kind of response, I think, can be very, very powerful. And so school administrators don't know which ones are serious and which ones are not. But I think they have to treat all of them as serious because making that kind of threat just has to be unacceptable,.

Peyton Attaway [00:21:42] Right. So what are some of the practical implications of your findings?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:21:46] Well, a lot of the implications come down to the need for training for students and staff on how to use tip lines in about 13 percent of the tips we analyzed. It wasn't clear who had made a threat because the reporter did not provide enough information about that person's identity, which is pretty consistent with past research that finds insufficient detail to be a common problem with tip lines. It was also pretty uncommon for the tipster to mention other qualities the literature suggests are key warning signs for school shootings, such as access to a firearm, or a history of being bullied, or engaging in self harm. The challenge here is that it's up to the discretion of the reporter to include these details, or to mention if a date or a hit list was declared in the threat. They are not prompted to provide these details. They sort of do it on their own, their own well. So our estimates are almost certainly a significant undercount of the extent to which these warning signs and aggravating factors are present. And this is important because the amount of information provided can really impact how the tip is perceived and whether an intervention is needed. And if the reporter engaged anonymously with the tip line, well, you know, follow up can be impossible. And so those details may never be retrievable. So as tip lines become more and more popular as a mechanism of violence prevention, it's critical that students and staff are trained on how to use them effectively. Trainings have to emphasize the importance of describing the safety concern as clearly and as with much detail as possible, and providing some actionable information that can be used to sort of gauge the seriousness of the threat. Additionally, 30 percent of the threats we examined were not reported the same day they were heard or seen or otherwise observed, and about 10 of them were reported a week or more after the threat was made. So that kind of delays significantly cuts down on the time that an intervention could be staged. And students and staff have to be trained and empowered to understand the importance of reporting events as quickly as possible, because doing so could prevent serious violence. Another implication is that schools thinking about using a tip line have to be aware of the reality of doing that. They need a proper infrastructure, and they need the bandwidth to be able to receive review and respond to many, many tips at all hours of the day, all seven days a week. And they may need to be prepared to increase staffing during certain parts of the year or after a major school shooting that occurs elsewhere, but that received substantial media attention and may inadvertently increase the number of tips that are reported.

Peyton Attaway [00:24:39] Great. And is there anything else that you'd like to mention in regards to firearm violence in schools or about the use of tip lines in general?

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:24:46] Well, tip lines. While they offer a new, very promising approach to violence prevention, they are not going to solve the problem of school shootings by themselves. The unfortunate truth is that some students will not leak their plans to shoot up the school beforehand. Others will leak that information, but their peers, for whatever reason, will not report it. In other instances, maybe it is reported, but there's no intervention and someone is still able to carry out a shooting. But once that person has stepped onto campus armed and of the mindset to do harm, it is up to the school to mitigate that attack as much as possible. And their ability to do that is going to come down to building security and the quality of their safety protocols, the extent to which they've rigorously practiced their safety procedures. And of course, their relationships with local law enforcement and the ability of first responders to get to the scene quickly and to handle the situation efficiently and effectively. All of these factors are critical, so we really have to understand firearm violence prevention as involving multiple moving pieces, all of which have to be implemented and maintained with fidelity. And in addition to using a tip line to gain intel about possible plans for harm against a school, we want to see schools have well-developed protocols for threat assessment and comprehensive safety plans, and that they're incorporating all of their staff and students and the training of those plans, practicing their emergency responses often and with local first responder agencies and continuously learning from areas of vulnerability and areas in which they need improvement. It's a dynamic process that unfortunately schools really have to approach from numerous angles and consistently work to improve.

Peyton Attaway [00:26:42] Well, that's all we have time for today. I'd like to thank our guests, Dr. Josh Hendrix, for sitting down with just science to discuss school and community safety. Thank you so much, Josh.

Dr. Josh Hendrix [00:26:51] Thank you.

Peyton Attaway [00:26:52] I'd also like to thank you the listener for tuning in today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow just science on your podcast platform of choice. I'm Peyton Attaway, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:27:07] Next week, just science sits down with artist Mark Pope and Rand's John Hollywood to discuss mass shooting attacks. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.