

# Discussion of Change Needed Following the Shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, A Brief Response



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**Submission:** February 19, 2018; **Published:** February 26, 2018

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## Abstract

The recent school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida Raises serious questions about the failure of the mental health system and the response by the FBI. Despite a warning of concern from a concerned citizen, the FBI failed to appropriately investigate the concern. The warning signs of impending violence was clear and went ignored except for one citizen who reported the concern to the FBI. There was also a sheriff's deputy serving as the school resource officer on site who left the building rather than engage the suspect. Three are reports of as many as three additional Broward County Sheriff deputies who took positions outside the school building rather than enter the building to address the shooter, as reported by the Coral Springs Police officers who responded to the scene. What follows are the warning signs of impending school shootings and recommended changes for mental health and legal intervention.

## Background of the Shooter

17 students and staff lost their lives and 14 others were wounded. The 19-year-old suspect (Nikolas Cruz) was a former student and had been expelled for disciplinary reasons. He was later not allowed on campus with a backpack because he was found to have bullets in his backpack. He was labeled a "troubled kid", was known to have multiple guns, had made threats of violence in the past, and students joked that if someone would shoot-up the school, it would be him. He was apparently bullied while in school. He also liked to kill small animals and his social media showed him with weapons and talking about being a "professional school shooter". (Cut way [1]) He and his brother were adopted. He was 6 years-old when his father died and his mother died within the past year. He and his brother were then raised by family friends. The family friends were aware that he purchased an AR-15 and that he frequently shot a pellet gun. They were also aware that he possessed numerous other firearms and were aware of his troubled past There was a history of police calls to the shooter's home (Wilson [2]).

## The Shooting Situation

Numerous reports indicated that several Broward County Sheriff deputies were outside of the school taking cover when they should have entered the building to confront the gunman. This was reported by Coral Springs Police officers who has responded to the shooting. And then the school resource officer, also a Broward County Sheriff's deputy, left the school building the gunman was in rather than confront the gunman-

he as since retired. The investigation into this shooting and the Sheriff's office response is under investigation. If the Sheriff of Broward County provided adequate training to the officers, then the focus should be on why the officers failed to follow their training. If adequate training was not provided, then the Sheriff is responsible for the lack of training provided the officers. However, one cannot imagine why, training or not, the deputies failed to enter the building to confront the shooter. I train law enforcement and U.S. Probation nationwide in 26 states and I have yet to meet an officer who would not have put their life on the line to protect anyone, especially children and adolescents. One can only imagine how many lives may have been saved had the school resource officer and the other deputies responded appropriately. Again, the investigation will shed light into this matter.

Staff and students heroically jumped into action to save the students and staff from the gunman. Several gave their lives as they helped others to escape. All acted without regard for their own safety to help save others and many paid with their lives. They are the true hero's. Officers responding from surrounding jurisdictions jumped into action to do the job they were trained to do without regard for their lives as well. But again, why the Broward County deputies failed to act is baffling. Broward County Sheriff Deputies were aware of the shooter's background and propensity for violence. Numerous police responses to the shooter's home occurred over the recent years. Yet for some reason Cruz did not appear to have been referred for mental

health intervention nor were his weapons, specifically numerous guns, taken away.

### The Broward County Sheriff's Office Failed Response

There were apparently 20 to 30 calls to the Sheriff's Office in reference to the behavior of Cruz. The calls apparently involved concerns about his behavior and fascination with guns. It does not appear that the Sheriff's Office referred Cruz for mental health intervention nor did they confiscate Cruz's weapons. This is another failure that may have prevented the school shooting.

### The FBI's Failed Response

A man named Ben Bennight notified the FBI of the disturbing video posts of Cruz apparently in September, 2017. Mr. Bennight indicated that he was contacted by the FBI apparently the following day (Lam, 2018). However, the agents failed to refer the case to the FBI's Miami field office for follow-up. Therefore, no thorough investigation apparently happened. The FBI acknowledged this mistake on national news on February 16, 2018. This is of grave concern because had the investigation occurred, the shooting likely would have been prevented.

### The Mental Health Fields Failed Response

It has been reported that Florida Child Welfare staff had apparently assessed the shooter to not be at risk of harming himself or others (Gearty [3]). I guess they were wrong. How are these staff trained and do they have specific up-to-date training on assessing the risk of violence? This also will be investigated because the failed assessment and intervention cannot happen again. Mental health professionals should be aware of the risk factors that have been clearly identified as markers for violence behaviour. We have known these factors for over 30 years and continue to refine them. And yet here we are with a failure to intervene. When a person presents with any of the risk factors discussed below, a thorough mental health assessment is warranted, including a focused threat and violence assessment. Use of civil commitment should be used to ensure the individuals and communities safety during the assessment. This did not appear to have happened. Though mental health agencies were involved at some time, there did not appear to be a risk assessment for violence.

### The Family Friends Failed Response

The family that took Cruz in following the death of his adoptive parents were in fact aware that he possessed numerous weapons and guns. They also had to be aware of Cruz's troubled past, including awareness of violent tendencies and that he was expelled from school. They portrayed themselves on the news as being surprised by the violent behaviour of Cruz when in fact they had to be aware of concerns for his behaviour and attitude. In addition, that they allowed Cruz to possess and access the number of weapons he did, including the assault rifle, is unbelievably naïve. They failed to report concerns about Cruz and allowed him access to firearms.

### Warning Signs of Youth Violence

The American Psychological Association (APA) [4] published an important article on youth violence that warrants reading (see <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/warning-signs.aspx>). In summary, some of the important warning signs identified by the APA & others include:

- a) History of engaging in aggressive or violent behavior
- b) Having been a victim of bullying
- c) Antisocial conduct
- d) Having a family that was abusive, neglectful, witnessing parental violence
- e) History of cruelty to animals
- f) Being callous or lacking empathy
- g) Drug and/or alcohol use
- h) Fascination with weapons
- i) Withdrawn from others, lacking friends
- j) Difficulty with emotions such as anger
- k) Declining academic performance
- l) Planning, discussing or engaging in acts of violence
- m) Possessing weapons, especially guns
- n) Drawing, writing, or school assignments depicting death, violence, bombs, guns, or themes involving future or potential acts of school violence
- o) Predicting future acts of violence (e.g., APA [4]; Langman [5])

The above echo similar findings for what I refer to as violent personality. Violent personality includes those predisposed to engage in violent behavior who possess specific factors correlated with violent behavior. Sexual predators (rapists and child molesters) and batterers and child abusers also share in many of the above mentioned factors. Sexual offenders in general show many of the same backgrounds as the school shooter (see Johnson [6]). We have an understanding of the background of violent people, including the school shooter. Permissive or abusive parenting appears to play a significant role as well for the basis of the offender's behavior. A fascination with weapons, especially guns, collecting and often firing the guns, and possessing multiple weapons are correlated with school shooters and mass murders. So the question remains how mental health professionals missed the blatant signs and why they failed to take appropriate action. Some of this rests with adequate funding issues to appropriately train mental health professionals, including child protection workers, with the most up-to-date training and have the resources available for civil commitment as needed [7].

### How to Intervene to Prevent a School Shooting

It is imperative that anyone who has a concern about someone's potential for current or potential violent behavior to report the information to law enforcement (local police, sheriff, or the FBI). Reporting concerns are imperative. Remember, reporting concerns is not the same as finding the person guilty of anything. It is simply reporting behavior that is suspicious and concerning. Law enforcement needs to thoroughly investigate the situation. Mental health professionals need to be trained specifically how to conduct a violence assessment to determine the individual's risk for self or other harm. This often requires a voluntary or involuntary commitment to safely assess the risk of harm and violence. Most mental health professionals have such training and are required by law to report to law enforcement concerns involving the safety of oneself or others. However, the limitation is that often people do not report suspicious or concerning behavior until after an incident of violence. Everyone who has information should report it and be educated about how to do that. This is even more important on social media, where hundreds if not thousands of people may see concerning posts but do not report it to law enforcement.

Social media platforms need to develop programs to detect concerning posts. Identifiable factors may include threatening language or behavior, displaying weapons, especially bombs or guns, and making specific or vague threats against anyone or any institution. This seems so easy to do. It is also becoming clear that we hold others accountable for failing to report serious concerns. Only one person reported the current school shooter despite hundreds viewing his social media posts. Also, hold those accountable who fail to respond appropriately and swiftly to the concerns. In the current shooting, the FBI failed to act- and this is troubling because this specific school shooting likely could have been prevented. There is also other information to suggest that the FBI and the military (in reference to the Ft. Hood Shooting) had reason to be concerned about the potential of violence yet failed to take necessary action. For law enforcement, it is imperative to remove weapons from the potentially violent individual's possession, home, and any place they have access. This should always include the parents of the individual because even if the parents keep the weapons locked and promise they will not allow the individual to access the weapons, the individual usually will find a way to have access. I understand that most law enforcement agencies do a great job already, but there are a few agencies that do not.

### Improved Mental Health Response and Resources

Children and teens in abusive or neglectful homes need more intervention and protection. Removing children and teens from unsafe homes is the first step. More resources for voluntary and involuntary mental health services is warranted. When needed, civil commitment is the last intervention to protect the individual from harming themselves or others. Gun control issues are less relevant here. School shooters have used bombs

and handguns in the past. When hell bound on killing, killers will find weapons. Allow school districts to decide if some staff will be trained to carry guns on school grounds. That is a decision best left up to a school district. Mental health professionals must report any concern immediately to law enforcement and follow-up with law enforcement frequently to ensure that the concerns are being addressed. I do not believe that any law enforcement professional would be offended that the concerned mental health professional was keeping in touch to make sure that appropriate action is being taken. Also, to utilize the civil commitment process as necessary to allow for more in-depth risk assessment.

### Conclusion

It is everyone's responsibility to report any person to law enforcement when aware of concerns for potential violence. Psychology and law enforcement professionals understand the risk factors and should always take any concerning behavior or threat seriously. Law makers need to make sure that appropriate laws are followed in reference to the reporting and intervention of potentially violent individuals. This also needs to include funding to allow for mental health hospitals resources to admit and thoroughly assess and treat those deemed dangerous to self or others. We have resources but not enough. We need more education for the public and especially those in any type of educational setting to be aware of what to report and to whom to report, understanding that they can remain anonymous. Lastly, internet companies that offer social media platforms must have programs that can detect potential threats earlier and to report concerns to law enforcement. We all want privacy, but the rights of one individual's privacy and right to free speech should never place others safety in jeopardy.

For law enforcement, I want to highlight my appreciation of the tireless and selfless job you do to keep out communities safe. There is always room for improvement. For those agencies not doing what they should be, then it is time to say enough is enough and time for your agency to obtain the appropriate training. Law enforcement agencies should talk with other agencies that appear to not be keeping up with appropriate training. Set the example by holding all departments accountable for receiving appropriate training.

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DOI: [10.19080/JFSCI.2018.07.555725](https://doi.org/10.19080/JFSCI.2018.07.555725)

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