

Research highlights link between school shootings and violence against women

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A new study of school shooters over the past 50 years found that 70% had perpetrated violence against women (VAW), either before or during their attacks.

The research adds a layer of understanding about the attitudes and behaviors of those who perpetrate [school violence](#) and could help shape strategies to prevent future shootings, said Nicole Johnson, associate professor of counseling psychology in Lehigh University's College of Education and lead author of the study.

"These findings have many implications, including the importance of targeting policies and procedures that normalize violence and of taking victims of harassment and abuse seriously, prior to escalation," Johnson said. "It demands that we attend to, and take seriously, these 'smaller' acts of violence that exist on the same spectrum as [school shootings](#)."

The study, [published](#) in the journal *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, analyzed the profiles of 59 boys and men who perpetrated school shootings between 1966 and 2018 to determine the prevalence of violence against women in their histories.

The profiles were drawn from the school shooter database compiled by Peter Langman Ph.D., a researcher, author and expert on the psychology of school shooting perpetrators, who is also a co-author of the paper.

Approximately 89% to 97% of perpetrators of mass violence are male, and many studies have established links between mass violence and hegemonic masculinity—the idea that men are dominant and that their oppression of women is justified.

However, little research has focused on the impact of these masculinities on girls and women. Centering gender concerns, and women in particular, opens up new ways to think about preventing future shootings.

"We made this relationship between VAW and school shootings visible in hopes that school administrators, teachers, parents and communities

will do the same," Johnson said. "All of these behaviors exist within a social-ecological reality that condones violence, hostility toward women, and enactment of hegemonic masculinity in harmful ways."

The social-ecological model of violence prevention simply acknowledges that people's experiences are influenced by multiple levels, including our immediate relationships and communities such as schools and neighborhoods, in addition to society at large.

In American society, hegemonic masculinity is internalized through each of these levels, from widespread cultural norms and expectations of masculinity to behaviors and attitudes experienced at the school and family levels, Johnson said.

"At each of these levels exists various ways to prevent violence—we can challenge hegemonic masculinity at all levels," she said. "We can challenge our friends and family when they make statements that support the subordination of women and girls, we can work within communities to change norms and policies, and we can advocate for policies that protect girls, women, and other oppressed groups from violence."

The researchers stressed that there is no specific formula for identifying and preventing school shootings. However, they said, there are underlying factors, such as the normalization of violence and hegemonic masculinity, that create environments in which school shootings might take place more easily.

The study includes recommendations for responding to these factors both within and outside of schools:

- Schools should make a multitiered commitment to a [school environment](#) absent of violence normalization.
- Schools should take seriously the "smaller scale" acts of violence

and harassment against women and girls as they occur.

- All people can commit to taking victims of harassment seriously.
- All people can notice and confront statements and behaviors that perpetuate hegemonic [masculinity](#).
- All people can strive to make the environments around us at all levels less welcoming to violence.

"Pay attention to violence against women—derogatory comments, expressed intent to harm girls and women, and direct verbal or physical harassment," Johnson said. "Listen to girls and women when they say they feel unsafe."

More information: Nicole L. Johnson et al, Not so random acts of violence: Shared social–ecological features of violence against women and school shootings, *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/men0000445](#)

Provided by Lehigh University

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