

The Effect of Campus Shootings on the Quality of Graduate Students' College Experiences

Recent campus shootings have changed the common belief that college and university campuses provide a safe environment for students. In an attempt to understand how students' perception of campus safety from possible shooting incidents affects their college experience, a qualitative study has been conducted. Three main themes emerged from the study. First, respondents assessed their safety perceptions by acknowledging that campus shootings are difficult to prevent, but that distance makes a difference. Second, college experience was affected as a result of more careful social life after the shootings. Third, mentally-ill students should be allowed to attend classes if they receive proper treatment; however, all reports of abnormal behavior must be taken seriously by school administrators.

Leann G. Rutherford, Purdue University¹
Sharon A. DeVaney, Purdue University²

Introduction

The traditional belief that college and university campuses are a safe haven for young adults is losing its credibility due to the reported violence and fatalities in the last year. Recent deadly shootings such as the ones at Delaware State University and Virginia Tech, have shaken students around the country by the idea that such shootings could have happened on any university campus (Lipka, 2007). In the wake of these tragedies, research has examined the factors that went wrong at Virginia Tech (Shute & Comarow, 2007), and proposed ideas of what universities have to do to prevent shootings from occurring and how to deal with the situation if the event does occur (Rawe, 2007). However, the issue of how the students feel about their safety as a result of the recent school shootings and how it affects their college experience has not been examined.

The purpose of this research is to explore how campus shooting incidents have affected the graduate students' perception of safety and college experience. Results from this study will aid university administrators in understanding the detrimental effects of college incidents on students' college experience. Specifically, findings from this study will provide the foundation to (1) determine if the recent campus shooting events had an impact on students' college experience, (2) determine what aspects of the college experience they have impacted, and (3) assess methods for reducing the impact.

Review of Literature

Safety is an important part of every person's life. Maslow (1954) ranked safety as the second tier of needs above basic physiological needs in his hierarchy of needs pyramid. Based on his research, Montante (2006, p.38) stated that people "are never fully free or fully safe because safety is relative, and chance and risk are our constant companions." DeJoy et al. (2004) reported that there are three main factors that affect people's perception of safety: environmental conditions, safety-related policies and programs, and the general organizational culture. Of these factors, safety policies and programs have the highest correlation (.395) with the perception of safety. Another perspective on safety is previous exposure to a threat. Goldberg et al. (1991) shows that witnessing a devastating incident has a bigger impact on one's perception of safety than learning about the threat of such an incident occurring in training.

In his book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds*, Harvard professor Richard Light (2001) encourages students to focus on both the academic and social aspects of college life to make the most of their time in school. However, the enjoyment of college life can be affected when violence on campus lowers the students' perception of safety. Research shows that both academic achievements and social life are negatively affected by exposure to violence (Barnes, 2002; Ratner et al., 2006).

Method and Sample

The study was conducted using a qualitative method with a phenomenological research design. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research is a procedure of studying a small group of subjects to develop patterns and relationships about their common experiences and interpretations of those experiences. The sample

was comprised of ten graduate students at Purdue University. The respondents were selected using a single criterion of being a current graduate student at Purdue University. Ten interviews were conducted before reaching the point of saturation.

Of the ten respondents, five were males and five were females. There were five American students and five International students. The respondents came from nine different departments. Of the total sample, five students were pursuing a Masters Degree and five students were pursuing a Ph.D. degree. Eight respondents lived in the U.S. when the Virginia Tech shooting took place on April 16, 2007, while two respondents lived outside of U.S. during that time. Three respondents had previous exposure to violence, and seven respondents did not have exposure to violence aside from movies, video games, and news coverage.

The data was collected using one-on-one interviews with each respondent in a location of their choice. The interviews were conducted between December 3 and December 5, 2007. The original set of questions consisted of ten items, which can be grouped into three categories: filter, perception of safety, and college experience. Based on the original set of questions, the first two respondents offered their thoughts on mentally ill students on campus. As a result, the researcher added the following question, "How do you feel about mentally ill students on campus?" to the set of questions for the remaining respondents. See Appendix.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Students in this study were all familiar with the tragedy of the Virginia Tech shooting in April 2007. Since all of the respondents were students, they were able to relate to the victims of the Virginia Tech shooting. The analysis of responses showed that three broad themes emerged: campus safety, effects of shootings at other campuses on college experience, and treatment of mentally disturbed students by universities.

Theme 1: Campus Safety

Safety is a relative term, as there is no absolute protection. However, people perceive being safe by assessing their control over risks and determining if the probabilities of threat are acceptable (Manuele, 2003). The respondents in the current study assessed their perception of safety by acknowledging that the possibility of being a victim of college campus shooting is difficult to prevent, and by estimating that the probability of such event occurring is low:

"it's situational... universities are not isolated bubbles, but are part of the real world; there is a slim chance of campus shooting at PU."

"it's very infrequent, so it's very positive; it's always possible, but I am not afraid because it has a lower possibility of happening at school than in the general population."

As supported in the literature by Goldberg et al. (1991), the findings in the current study show that it makes a difference whether or not a person lived through a close encounter with devastating event. Since the respondents did not experience campus shootings in the past, they felt that they were not in significant danger. In fact, many respondents stressed that even the distance between themselves and the event made a difference on their perception of safety:

"it would have had a bigger impact if it were to happen to me, or at Purdue... even say at IU... the closer the event the more impact it has."

Safety-related policies and programs have a significant effect on people's perception of safety (DeJoy et al., 2004). To assess this effect, the respondents were asked what they thought about safety programs that the University has in place. Most students pointed out that the safety measures focused on curbing the magnitude of a possible shooting disaster, but not on preventing it.

"police, emergency phones... but these measures don't prevent shootings."

"PU tried to send text messages and email to make students aware of the situation."

"I would feel safer if PU had specific preventive measures."

Theme 2: Effects of Shootings at Other Campuses on College Experience

Light (2001) interviewed students over a course of fifteen years to determine what students need to do to make the most of their time in college. Although his list consists of numerous activities, they can be categorized

into two main groups: academic performance and social life. Ratner et al. (2006) found that exposure to violence leads to poor academic performance and Barnes (2002) concluded that exposure to violence leads to decreased social involvement. After hearing about recent campus shooting incidents, the students in the current study reported no effect on their education experience.

“it did not affect my education because I am able to achieve the goals that I had before the shootings.”

“due to my background with violence at home, my education has not changed... I am used to events out of my control.”

One possible explanation for this discrepancy between the previous literature and the current study findings is the effect of distance, as proposed by Goldberg et al. (1991). As stated by respondents, the effect of the recent campus shootings would have had a bigger impact if the shootings happened at Purdue University or somewhere nearby.

Barnes' (2002) conclusions that exposure to violence leads to decreased social involvement were held partially true in the current study. The respondents did not report that they changed their behavior, but they stated that they are more careful in their social life and are more aware of their surroundings as a result of the recent campus shooting incidents.

“no new overhaul, but it reinforces the general belief to be careful.”

“less trusting towards other people.”

“it used to be that if we heard a fight, we would rush to check it out... now I am more cautious and ‘hide’ behind a closed door instead.”

Theme 3: Treatment of Mentally-Disturbed Students by Universities

The issue of how much of a threat mentally-disturbed students are to the overall perception of safety on campus was not included in the original list of questions. However, after the first few respondents offered their opinions, an additional question was added to determine how the universities should handle students with mental illnesses. The subject about mentally ill students was brought up because Seung Hui Cho, the student behind the Virginia Tech massacre suffered from mental illnesses (Report of Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). Although people with mental disabilities are often a threat to themselves and others, their condition is protected under the Americans and Disabilities Act (ADA). Due to the confidentiality protection offered by the ADA, school officials are often unaware of the pre-existing mental conditions of these students, and are thus unable to provide protection to the other students. However, according to the Report of Virginia Tech Review Panel, the university officials had many warning signs that Seung Hui Cho was a threat, but they did not take any substantive measures to reduce the risk of the threat.

The respondents in the current study were asked how they felt about mentally ill students on campus. The participants reported that although students with possible mental illnesses made them uneasy, these students should still be allowed to attend school as long as they receive professional help and their condition not worsen to pose any threats. Also, the participants suggested that the university take all reports about abnormal behavior seriously.

“I am nervous when I see an Asian student acting weird... you know if he is walking around looking down, mumbling.”

“there should be a caring system for people from other countries who are lonely... maybe some counseling; if somebody has been reported several times, the university should pay more attention to that person and get him/her some help.”

Summary and Implications

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how campus shooting incidents have affected the graduate students' perception of safety and college experience. It was determined that the recent campus shooting events have impacted the students' college experience, although not drastically. The students acknowledged the risk of a possible shooting threat on their campus. However, due to the distance between the locations of the recent shootings and the Purdue University campus, the impact on the students' perception of safety, and as a result on their college experience, was reduced. Based on the results of the current study, the recent campus shootings have predominately affected the students' social life. Students reported that school shooting incidents, such as the one at

Virginia Tech, made them more aware of their surroundings. They are also more careful about who they interact with and how their interaction is interpreted by others.

Participants of this study had two main suggestions to the university about how the threat of school shooting, and thus the impact, can be reduced. First, they stressed the importance of adding preventive safety measures to the existing impact-reducing measures in the event of a campus shooting. Second, they suggested that the university monitor students with known and/or suspected mental disorders and refers these students to professional counseling to ensure that they are not a significant threat to themselves and others.

To achieve the primary objectives of the study, other results were found. It was found that distance mediated the effect of traumatic event on one's perception of safety. Possibly due to the distance effect, there was no significant impact on the students' education experience. In addition, respondents' previous experiences with violence did not have long-lasting effects on their lives and did not affect their perception of safety after the recent shooting incidents.

Appendix

Interview Questions

- How have previous experiences with violence affected your perception of safety?
- How do you feel about the recent university campus shooting incidents?
- How do you think the recent university campus shooting incidents apply to other universities?
- What safety measures do you think the University has in place to prevent possible campus shooting incidents?
- Knowing that the University has those safety measures in place, how does it make you feel on campus?
- How do you think the recent university campus shooting incidents affect your quality of education?
- What events outside of studying do you participate in?
- How do you think the recent university campus shooting incidents affect your social life?
- How do you think the recent university campus shooting incidents affect your college experience?
- How do you feel about mentally ill students on campus?
- Where did you reside in April 2007 when Virginia Tech shooting took place?

References

- Barnes, P. (2002). Approaches to community safety: Risk perception and social meaning. Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 15-23.
- DeJoy, D. M., Schaffer, B. S., Wilson, M. G., Vandenberg, R. J., and Butts, M. M. (2004). Creating safer workplaces: Assessing the determinants and role of safety climate. Journal of Safety Research, 35, 81-90.
- Goldberg, A. I., Dar-El, E. M., and Rubin, A. E. (1991). Threat perception and the readiness to participate in safety programs. Journal of Organizational Behavior 12(2), 109-122.
- Light, R. J. (2001). Making the most of college: Students speak their minds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lipka, S. (2007, April 27). Lessons from a tragedy. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 53(34), 12.
- Manuele, F. A. (2003). On the practice of safety. (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley Interscience.
- Maslow, A. (1954). Motivation and personality. New York: Harper.
- Montante, W. M. (2006). The essence of safety. Professional Safety, 51, 36-39.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological Research Design. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Ratner, H. H., Chiodo, L., Covington, C., Sokol, R. J., Ager, J., Delaney-Black, V. (2006). Violence exposure, IQ, academic performance, and children's perception of safety: Evidence of protective effects. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 52(2), 264-287.
- Rawe, J. (2007, April 30). How much can schools do? Time, 169(18), 59.
- Report of Virginia Tech Review Panel. (2007). Retrieved November 1, 2007, from www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport.cfm
- Shute, N., & Comarow, A. (2007, April 30). What went wrong? (Seung Hui Cho). U.S. News & World Report, 142(15), 42-46.

Endnotes

1. Leann G. Rutherford, Ph.D. student, Department of Consumer Sciences, E-mail: lpashnya@purdue.edu
2. Sharon A. DeVaney, Professor, Department of Consumer Sciences, E-mail: sdevaney@purdue.edu