

Addressing Emergency Preparation in Schools

The Mental Health Effects of Lockdown Drills in Schools

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Table of Contents

Abstract..... 3

How a “Lockdown Drill” is Defined..... 4

 Lockdown Drill Planning and Instruction..... 4

School Shootings and their Effects on Public Anxiety and Mental Health..... 5

Negative Social-Emotional Effects of Lockdown Drills..... 6

 Long-term Implications of Lockdown Drills..... 8

The Effectiveness of Lockdown Drills..... 8

Offensive Strategies as an Alternative to Lockdown Drills..... 9

Zero-Tolerance, Profiling, and Threat Assessment as Preventive Measures..... 10

 Psychological Profiling as a Preventive Measure..... 10

 Threat Assessment as a Preventive Measure..... 11

Using Environmental Design to Prevent Violence..... 11

The Importance of Mental Health Support in Preventing Violence.....13

 Lack of Debrief as a Shortcoming of Lockdown Drills..... 14

 Mental Health Support in Assisting Students Affected by Trauma..... 14

Conclusion..... 16

Abstract

In this review article, I present several academic perspectives on school lockdown drills. These perspectives address current lockdown drill processes, the mental health effects of school lockdown drills, as well as suggestions from education and psychology experts based on empirical evidence. Lockdown drills are only deemed necessary due to the threat of deadly violence in schools. In this article, I discuss several preventive measures which are used in addition to lockdown drills to reduce the threat of violence in schools. These preventive measures include zero-tolerance policies, psychological profiling, threat assessment, and environmental design. Finally, I discuss the essential role of mental health support at school to maintain social-emotional well-being, improve academic achievement, improve behavior, and prevent acts of violence in school from occurring. I conclude by examining my personal experiences with lockdown drills, considering the benefits and shortcomings of lockdown drills, and suggest that there are potentially more holistic methods for emergency preparedness without harming mental health.

Keywords: Lockdown drills, active shooter drills, school safety, school shootings, students affected by trauma, emergency preparedness, violence prevention

How a “Lockdown Drill” is Defined

Elementary and Secondary schools in Ontario are required to facilitate two lockdown drills per school year (Toronto District School Board, 2009). This is true of several provinces and states across Canada and the United States. The purpose of these drills is “to establish a procedure for emergency situations when a school cannot be safely evacuated” (TDSB, 2009). The aforementioned emergency situations are broad and can refer to a variety of possible threats inside or outside of the school building. Teachers are charged with facilitating lockdown drills with the entire school and ensuring that the students complete the drills in an effective and respectful manner. In most cases, when the drill is announced to begin over the loudspeaker, the teacher must silence the class and move them to a position in which they are hidden from the doors and windows (Poland and Ferguson, 2021). They must also lock the door and turn off the lights, admitting no one into the room until the announcements indicate that the drill has ended.

A lockdown drill is designed to prepare students for a variety of emergency situations, for example, an intruder in the building, or a report of violence occurring just outside the school grounds. However, the term “lockdown drill” is often used interchangeably with “active shooter drill”. Lockdown drills are designed for many situations, including those involving an active shooter, but active shooter drills are specific to this kind of deadly threat (Poland and Ferguson, 2021). Active shooter drills can contain the same measures as a lockdown drill, with the added immersion of people attempting to enter locked classrooms and yelling in the hallways. An active shooter drill can also include self-defense tactics, training staff and students to attack and overwhelm an intruder or barricade a door (Treisman, 2021).

Lockdown Drill Planning and Instruction

Specific lockdown emergency protocols are determined by individual school boards and are created in accordance with state and provincial legislature. School boards often designate a specific group of people to determine safe and effective lockdown protocol, sometimes referred to as a crisis management team. A crisis management team is recommended for the planning, implementation, and revising as needed of emergency preparedness protocols (Doss, 2015). However, the qualifications of the people on the crisis management team are not always specified. Mental health professionals are not required to be on such planning teams and protocols are sometimes implemented without any professional mental health consultation.

During a lockdown drill, students are directed to follow their teacher's specific instructions regarding where to hide and how to conduct themselves appropriately. Behavioral Skills Training (BST) is a common form of training used to teach lockdown protocols to students in elementary school (Dickson and Vargo, 2017). BST provides students with auditory, visual, and physical instruction and modelling of a skill, with opportunities to rehearse and receive feedback. In a study by researchers at Sam Houston State University, Texas, thirty-two kindergarteners were taught to complete lockdown drills using BST, and were able to achieve mastery of the procedures within three assessments (Dickson and Vargo, 2017). This shows us that the procedure itself of a lockdown drill is simple, direct, and easy-to-follow. However, this study did not investigate the emotional experience of the children as they participated in the lockdown drills. And as many students and educators claim, the experience of being in a lockdown drill, particularly one that is unannounced, can be deeply emotional (Goodman and Eckhoff, 2020).

School Shootings and their Effects on Public Anxiety and Mental Health

Lockdown drills were implemented primarily as a response to the public's growing anxiety concerning school shootings (Poland and Ferguson, 2021). They became a popular method of emergency preparedness after the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School (Schildkraut et al., 2019). Although gun violence at schools has been recorded since the 1970's, it was not until the Columbine shooting that such violently tragic events were extensively covered by the media (Poland and Ferguson, 2021). Statistically, it is incredibly unlikely that any given school in North America will be involved in a school shooting. Borum et al. (2010) states that by dividing the average yearly number of school homicides by the 12,500 K-12 schools in the United States, "any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years" (p.27). Despite this statistic, roughly two thirds of Americans report feeling concerned that such a deadly incident may likely occur in their community (Borum et al., 2010). Increased media coverage is one contributing factor to this fear of school shootings, as parents and students are made more aware of such tragedies through internet and television outlets within hours of their occurrence, compared to the technology available in the 20th century.

Negative Social-Emotional Effects of Lockdown Drills

Lockdown drills themselves are another contributing factor to public concern over school shootings. The mere language, "lockdown", is inherently negative, and suggests being kept against one's will due to uncontrollable outside forces (Kislin, 2020). Being forced to hide can be somewhat stressful for some, but for students affected by trauma, the experience of not being allowed to leave a space can be particularly distressing (Goodman and Eckhoff, 2020). Aside from being allowed to opt-out of lockdown drills, there is very little accommodation in place for students affected by anxiety or trauma (Goodman and Eckhoff, 2020). Opting out of a lockdown

drill may not even be an option for students if the administration decides to have a lockdown drill with no notice given to staff or students. Schools in Ontario are required to conduct these drills, but they are not required to provide advance notice (TDSB, 2009). Such instances in which staff and students are left to wonder whether or not the threat is real can be distressing and traumatic, as students have reportedly texted goodbye messages to their parents and suffered panic attacks as a result (Simonetti, 2020).

A qualitative study was conducted by Bonnano et al. to better understand student perspectives on lockdown drills from an emotional perspective. This study was conducted using students aged eight to eleven from various public schools across New York State. Students were interviewed privately about what feelings lockdown drills evoked in them (Bonnano et al., 2021). There were multiple emotions described, but fear was the most common. Even when they were aware that the lockdown drills were only practice, many expressed that self-reminders were necessary to quell anxious feelings. They expressed overall feeling much safer when the drills were made known in advance rather than having to wonder if the threat was real or not.

Lockdown drills, announced or otherwise, can be stressful not only to students, but to teachers as well. Teachers are obliged to protect their students, and during a crisis at school, students will look to a teacher first for guidance (Thornton, 2021, p.57). In a lockdown drill, teachers must put aside their own anxiety or trauma and maintain the emotional well-being of their entire class in the face of a perceived deadly threat. If the teacher looks worried or displays signs of stress, the mental fortitude of the entire classroom can be impacted. Teachers report a lack of professional training for facilitating lockdown drills and ensuring their students' emotional well-being (Goodman and Eckhoff, 2020).

Long-term Implications of Lockdown Drills

Much is as yet unknown about the long-term mental health effects of lockdown drills. How recently they have been routinely implemented is one reason for the lack of empirical knowledge on the subject. However, one study conducted by Schildkraut, et al. with students in New York City public schools shed light on student perceptions of safety and preparedness. In this study, students and staff received regular SRP-X Emergency Response training and lockdown training over the course of a school year. They were surveyed throughout the process on their feelings of preparedness and feelings of safety on a 5-point Likert scale. The results concluded that there was a positive trend for feelings of preparedness in an emergency, raising as much as .5 on the Likert scale in some areas compared to the initial surveys. However, the results also concluded that there was a negative trend for feelings of safety at school, reducing by approximately .1 on the Likert scale in all areas (Schildkraut et al., 2019). This shows us that even if lockdown drills are effective in emergency preparedness, students' perceptions of safety at school can suffer.

The Effectiveness of Lockdown Drills

Though lockdown drills seem to positively affect student preparedness, there is no actual data which proves that lockdown drills protect students from school violence. This is because school violence can occur in a multitude of ways, and different schools define school shootings differently (Borum et al. 2009). For instance, some may only define an incident as a school shooting if someone was injured or killed, and others may define a school shooting as any incident involving a gun on school grounds. The intent of the student in question can also affect the subjective nature of the categorization. A student may be found with a gun at school, but the

incident may not be considered an act of violence if the student claims they never intended to use it against anyone. Due to the differences in reporting, it is difficult to draw any conclusion that lockdown drills have an effect on protecting from or even curbing school violence. Stevens, et al. conducted a study to investigate lockdown drills and their possible relationship with reported student aggression towards teachers. The results showed no changes on student behavior, positive or negative (Stevens, et al. 2019).

Offensive Strategies as an Alternative to Lockdown Drills

Some believe that training students to do more than hide in a lockdown drill will improve their confidence during lockdown and improve their chances of survival in a real active shooter situation. ALICE is a program which provides active shooter response training to schools, businesses, and organizations in the US. In addition to lockdown, ALICE trains people in evacuations and physical countering strategies, such as throwing several items at an armed intruder (ALICE, 2021). Though this is a last resort, critics are concerned that this type of training can increase anxious feelings in students, further distress traumatized students, and result in injury (Treisman, 2021).

There are also those that suggest arming teachers as a solution to reduce gun violence in schools. This is an extreme and poorly considered option for school safety. Teachers have several responsibilities as educators already, and are tasked with caring for the social, emotional, and physical health of every student in their care. Merely having a gun in the room would put the students at increased risk every day. To use the guns safely and effectively, extensive training and certifications would be required for teachers in addition to those required for the profession already. And in a situation in which an active shooter enters the classroom, the

teacher will most likely miss. In a study of the shooting accuracy of New York City police officers, police officers miss their target 82% of the time when firing in real-world situations (Poland and Ferguson, 2021, p. 35). It is therefore likely that an armed teacher will miss their target, or worse, shoot a student. Arming teachers is as dangerous a strategy as it is unrealistic.

Zero-Tolerance, Profiling, and Threat Assessment as Preventive Measures

One measure which has been adopted by many schools is a zero-tolerance policy for school violence. Approximately 75% of schools have some form of zero-tolerance policy (Borum et al., 2009). These policies punish less severe incidents of school violence, such as fist fights, with heavy punishments in the hope of deterring more destructive behavior. These punishments typically include suspension by default. Unfortunately, no studies have been able to prove that zero-tolerance policies actually reduce violent behavior in schools (Bondu et al., 2013). They do not consider the specific needs and challenges facing the child in question, and disproportionately affect students of color (Borum et al. 2009).

Psychological Profiling as a Preventive Measure

Another measure, more specific to preventing school shootings, is using psychological profiling to identify potential attackers. Psychological profiling is recognizing troubling psychological signals in a student's behavior and intervening before they take violent action. This could potentially be effective since approximately 70% of school shooters were current or former students at the school they attacked (Dumitriu, 2013, p. 444). The issue with this method, however, is that no specific psychological profile for school shooters exists. This is due to the incredible rarity of school shooting incidents and to the unequal methods of identifying specific incidents as school shootings (Borum et al., 2009). Psychological profiling would also require a

great deal of attention being paid to each specific student's mental health, while many schools struggle to provide counselling services.

Threat Assessment as a Preventive Measure

Threat assessment is similar to psychological profiling, but not nearly so speculative. And unlike zero-tolerance policies, which have little room for extra considerations, threat assessment is about understanding the specific student's challenges, needs, and how they came to be involved in an incident of school violence. In a study by University of Virginia, threat assessment teams visited schools across the state and used specific evaluation and questioning guidelines to determine the offending student's level of threat, and recommend appropriate action. Nearly 70% of the incidents were resolved through a student's explanation or apology, 30% required specific counselling or follow-up action plans, and only the small remainder required long-term suspension (Borum et al., 2009). This shows that by considering the complexity of a student's profile and their specific incident, the vast majority of students pose no significant threat to the safety of the school. Compared to other preventive measures, threat assessment offers the most consideration towards helping a student and supporting the school community. Psychological profiling and zero-tolerance policies rely too heavily on speculation towards severely violent action that the student will most likely never take.

Using Environmental Design to Prevent Violence

Physical security measures, such as automatically locked doors, are a commonly used method to protect schools from intruders. Lockdown drills are designed as a way to fortify and protect the classroom in a situation in which the other security measures have been breached. When considering the physical design of an education space, making sure that the space is safe,

affordable, and useful is often the priority. However, the aesthetic design of the environment itself has an impact on students' perceptions of safety and belonging at school. Feeling safe and comfortable in the school environment improves executive functioning and will result in higher academic performance. Even something as simple as more natural lighting is shown to reduce stress and improve test scores in a variety of subjects. (Lamoreaux and Sulkowski, 2020) In an effort to improve school safety, some schools have implemented security cameras and metal detectors to monitor students more closely. But no research exists that proves such rigorous security implementations reduce crime and violence at school, and some suggest that it worsens problems concerning student behavior (Lamoreaux and Sulkowski, 2020). Security cameras imply to a person that they are not trustworthy, rather than making them feel like someone is caring for their safety. And metal detectors suggest to a person that the environment is routinely unsafe and requires constant vigilance (Poland and Ferguson, 2021).

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) provides a more holistic alternative which offers methods to improve school safety while supporting mental health. CPTED is the pedagogy of using physical layouts, aesthetics, and policies to improve academic performance and mental health by reducing stress (Lamoreaux and Sulkowski, 2020). Reducing crowding, providing ample daylight, reducing noise, and creating open, restorative spaces are all important considerations in CPTED. These considerations, however, can do more than just improve mood. Open spaces which allow for natural surveillance through multiple vantage points, as opposed to security surveillance, serve to monitor students without making them feel distrusted (Lamoreaux and Sulkowski, 2020). In the aftermath that followed the tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, Connecticut, CPTED design changes were implemented to primarily make the community feel safe at school again, and also reduce the threat of violence.

A footbridge over a water course in front of the school was added, which is aesthetically pleasing while making it difficult for an intruder to access the school without using the single, monitored bridge (Lamoreaux, 2020). Larger windows to common areas and the environment outside provide more sunlight as well as more vantage points to detect people approaching the building.

CPTED shows us that schools do not have to be heavily fortified in order to keep students safe. By fortifying a school, educators are preparing for violent incidents that are statistically highly unlikely to occur at the cost of student perceptions of safety, and in turn, at the cost of academic performance and social-emotional well-being. While architectural design changes can be costly, so can the architectural and technological implementation and maintenance of security technology like cameras and metal detectors. CPTED provides a realistic option which can make students feel safer, reduce violence at school, and reduce the necessity for facilitating regular lockdown drills.

The Importance of Mental Health Support in Preventing Violence

Perhaps the greatest method for reducing school violence incidents and improving the lives of our students is providing ample mental health support (Poland and Ferguson, 2021). Minor incidences of violence can occur at school as a result of several social issues, such as bullying. Having a school counselor who is available and qualified to support the mental health of a student and advocate on their behalf can be crucial to mitigating social issues at school before any violence occurs. If a student does commit an act of violence, mental health support can be useful in guiding students towards healthier methods, preventing such incidents from occurring again. School counselors can also recognize troubling behaviors in students and suggest further mental health support if necessary. If we are to continue facilitating lockdown

drills in schools, providing mental health support before, during, and after drills can ensure that the experience is educational and harmonious by reducing any negative social-emotional effects.

Lack of Debrief as a Shortcoming of Lockdown Drills

An issue with lockdown drills reported by teachers is a lack of debrief after the drill is concluded (Goodman and Eckhoff, 2020). After being asked to hide as if their lives depended on it, students are often expected to go about the rest of the school day as normal. But there is clear evidence that many students can find the experience of lockdown drills distressing and even traumatizing. Teachers can choose to spend time in class after the drill to discuss and debrief, but are not necessarily qualified to provide suitable mental health support to students who found the experience to be particularly frightening. Therefore, to reduce the negative social-emotional impacts of lockdown drills, it is imperative that schools have counselors available who are trained to guide students through what could be a traumatic experience.

Mental Health Support in Assisting Students Affected by Trauma

Students, like any of us, can be affected by trauma that has occurred in their lives. When their trauma affects their perceptions and their ability to learn, accommodations to instruction may be necessary for their continued academic success. But these accommodations which serve academic achievement and social-emotional well-being extend must extend beyond classroom instruction. Most students prefer being given advance notice before a lockdown drill so they have time to process and mentally prepare themselves (Bonnano et al., 2021). Without proper notice, a student affected by trauma may experience crying, panic attacks, and other post-traumatic stress symptoms. While students will never be given advance notice in a real emergency, the likelihood of an active shooter in the building is extremely unlikely. By

providing advance notice of lockdown drills, students can learn the proper protocols, they have time to mentally prepare or seek support, and they may be able to opt-out by being in a non-stressful environment during the drill. By being allowed to remain in a counselor's office during the drill, students can feel in control of themselves and engage in positive behaviors with someone who is qualified to assist them with their mental health needs.

Should an active shooter incident actually occur in a school, providing additional mental health support to students after the incident is essential. In Norway, a qualitative study was conducted to determine if trauma from gun violence would impair academic performance, and if mental health services had any effect (Stene and Dyb, 2018). Participants were survivors of a mass shooting at Utøya Youth Camp, and were in secondary school or higher education programs. They returned to school in September, just four weeks after the attack, and were asked throughout the school year to rate their satisfaction with mental health support from the school and note any changes in their academic performance, positive or negative. Four to five months after the attack, 69% of participants reported an impairment in their academic achievement, and a year after the attack, 26% of participants did not finish the school year (Stene and Dyb, 2018, p. 322). Academically impaired participants reported posttraumatic stress, feelings of depression and anxiety, decreased satisfaction overall, and issues with sleep (Stene and Dyb, 2018). Those who reported an impairment in their academic achievement most often also reported dissatisfaction with mental health services at school, and those who reported that their academic achievement remained the same were likely to report high levels of satisfaction with their school's mental health support (Stene and Dyb, 2018). This shows that mental health support at school has a direct, positive impact on the academic success of students affected by trauma. Investing in mental health support not only decreases the likelihood of school violence,

but is essential to academic success, mental health, and overall quality of life for students should a particularly violent incident occur.

Conclusion

I was raised in the United States, and as a child, I was part of the first generation of students to undergo regular lockdown drills at school. I remember the anxiety I felt as the drills were explained to us in Grade 6, and the frightening scenarios I would imagine during the drills. I specifically recall when they told us that teachers were to close their doors immediately after the announcement signaled the drill. They said that teachers were supposed to close the door even if they saw a student in the hallway rushing towards them, because the perceived intruder could be right around the corner, and they had to consider the safety of everyone in the classroom. It scared me to think that I could be locked out of a classroom and have to hide by standing on a toilet seat in the bathroom, or be left exposed to an active shooter. I remember being forced to consider all of this, and then immediately return to classroom activities as if everything were normal.

School shootings are a particular issue in schools in the United States, where they occur more frequently than any other country in the world (Bondu et al., 2013). Even though it is still statistically highly unlikely that a school shooting will ever occur at my school, I, like two-thirds of Americans in my generation, felt that a school shooting was at least somewhat likely in my community (Borum et al., 2013, p. 27). I still take the threat of an active shooter at school seriously, as it was one of the minor reasons I had decided to become an educator in Canada, where school shootings are even less likely. As I consider my role as a teacher, and think of how

I will eventually have to guide my students through lockdown drills, I still wonder if regular lockdown drills are the best method for preparing students to act in an emergency.

While lockdown drills do provide a comprehensive plan of action, the practice seems to be marred by a lack of research and several negative social-emotional effects. Our students will most likely never be involved in gun violence at school, and yet twice a year they are asked to imagine this remote, hypothetical threat and hide for their safety. If we continue maintaining lockdown drills as mandatory, it should also be mandatory for schools to provide advance notice of the drills to prevent negative mental health effects, such as distress or trauma. Students who have been affected by trauma also benefit greatly from advance notice, as they can mentally prepare themselves and seek necessary accommodations. Being prepared to act in an emergency is important, but schools also have a responsibility to care for students' feelings of safety and support, which directly impact their academic success and mental health (Stene and Dyb, 2018). When planning lockdown drills, it is recommended that a mental health professional be on the designated planning team who will be able to consider the effects of particular strategies on mental health and well-being (Poland and Ferguson, 2021).

I recommend further research into the mental health effects of lockdown drills in school, as there is little that we know about this relatively new implementation in our students' academic lives. Through further research, we may be able to find new methods which are able to prepare our students to act in an emergency while benefitting their social-emotional well-being. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) seems to be one such potential alternative, although there may be more methods as yet undiscovered. There have been many school security and safety policies enacted to protect students. But as educators and researchers, we can

do much more to provide mental health support to our students, the benefits of which extend beyond the school into society as a whole.

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