

Beyond the Trigger: Unveiling the Criminological and Psychological Intersections Behind School Shootings to Expose Systemic Failures and Transform Prevention Strategies

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Abstract

This dissertation critically examines psychological and criminological determinants and their intersections regarding the emergence of school shootings, aiming to advance a more nuanced understanding of the underlying causes. Integrating comparative case study methodology, it analyses the cumulation of personality traits, behavioural pathologies, adverse family environments, school-based experiences, and broader social dynamics that can produce the trajectory towards extreme violence. This research operationalises an expanded CSAM, which analyses and recognises school shootings as the outcome of prolonged and compounding psychological and systematic stressors, not as isolated incidents of deviance. This study draws on an interdisciplinary framework that shifts theory and socio-political analysis and applies it to the multifactorial complexity of school shooter profiles. The fundamental findings reveal consistent patterns of complicated psychological hardship, institutional neglect, and social alienation, which are all exacerbated through structural shortcomings within early intervention and the lack of multi-agency communication. The following discussion critiques and analyses the ethical, practical and theoretical implications of prediction-based models while challenging and reducing reductionist narratives that obscure the socio-political context of violence. The proposal of a multi-level prevention strategy whose primary focus is to uphold and push for early detection, collaborative safeguarding and systemic reform, this dissertation contributes insights into both practical policy development and academic discourse.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent decades, school shootings have transformed from individual tragedies to a continual societal crisis. These acts of violence have captured media attention and reshaped the everyday reality of safety for students within educational environments. These acts are not only extreme acts of violence but are indicators of deeper psychological, societal, and systematic failures. By the end of 2023, America witnessed 205 incidents where firearms were found on school grounds, becoming the most active year since 2013 (Everytown, 2023). Additionally, their presence has garnered significant attention within the media and public concern. Therefore, painting educational environments as unsafe targets highlights deep-rooted societal crises involving mental health, security, and systemic neglect.

The intense media frenzy has been crucial for debates surrounding gun laws, school safety protocols, law enforcement response, the effectiveness of existing policies, and the need for comprehensive reform. Agencies have taken a punitive response framework when this issue requires a multidisciplinary approach that evaluates root causes while proposing strategies to prevent future catastrophes.

1.1: Knowledge Gap and Response:

Much research into school shootings focuses on individual pathology, such as mental illness and personality disorders. A common pattern in the literature is the emphasis on psychological or personality disorders as key drivers of such violence (Langman, 2009). While these models offer insight, they often oversimplify complex, multidimensional tragedies and overlook the cumulative, long-term strain stemming

from environmental, social, and institutional pressures. This narrow focus creates gaps in understanding and limits the development of practical solutions. In response, this dissertation proposes a Cumulative Strain-to-Action Model (CSAM) that integrates psychological, criminological, and systemic factors to deepen theoretical understanding and inform real-world prevention strategies.

The CSAM draws on psychological elements such as depression and personality disorders, criminological theories like social control, and systemic issues such as institutional neglect and firearm access. Rather than treating these factors in isolation, the model emphasises their intersections and the multidimensional profiles that push individuals toward violence. It is designed to guide multi-agency teams in identifying at-risk individuals early, enabling intervention before signs of violence emerge.

Although existing research has explored psychological and criminological determinants, it rarely examines how these domains intersect. Framing criminological factors as external pressures and psychological ones as internal struggles limits understanding of the escalation to mass violence. The CSAM addresses this by integrating both, revealing how instability and chronic strain interact to shape violent trajectories.

1.2: Research Aims and Questions:

The overall aim of this research is to deepen understanding of the complex factors that cumulate to result in a school shooting. This dissertation emphasises the criminological and psychological factors that intersect with perpetrators' lived experiences. The development framework highlights the emergence of violent behaviours while proposing the creation of more effective prevention strategies.

To guide this inquiry, the following research question is posed:

"How do criminological and psychological determinants intersect in shaping profiles of school shooters, and can an expanded model of these differential characteristics reveal systemic issues related to political systems, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of intervention strategies?"

This question allows this study to analyse theoretical innovation and practical application by requiring critical analysis of individual-level traits and broader systemic conditions while applying this to evaluate periods and escalation risks. Additionally, it offers an opening to reflect on current policy, institutional response, and political structures and how these factors can cause exacerbation of violence.

1.3: Structure of the Dissertation:

This dissertation is designed into Six chapters, each accumulated to paint an understanding of school shootings and demonstrate how the proposed framework and model advance current thinking:

Chapter One—Introduction: Setting the scene by identifying research gaps and introducing the CSAM model and research questions.

Chapter Two—Literature Review: This chapter critically overviews the existing literature on psychological and criminological factors associated with school shootings.

Chapter Three—Methodology: This chapter justifies qualitative case study analysis, explains the rationale for case selections, and details how this research will be conducted.

Chapter Four—Study: This chapter analyses the five selected case studies, using thematic analysis to create heatmaps to indicate prominent and obscure factors of strain, escalation, and access.

Chapter Five—Discussion and Application: This chapter applies the CSAM model to findings and discusses implications of early detection, prevention policy, and cross-agency intervention.

Chapter Six - Conclusion: A summary of the key findings, with reflection on the contribution of CSAM, whilst considering limitations and analysis on direction for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

2.1: What ‘Makes’ a School Shooter?

The aftermath of school shootings often prompts questions of why, what, and who. Understanding this phenomenon is highly complex, with no single explanation. Media representations have generated myths and stereotypes about all parties involved, including students, schools, and perpetrators. Unlike traditional media, social media and online platforms have increasingly glorified school shootings and past offenders, creating spaces where perpetrators can curate their image and reinforce ideologies of hate and entitlement (Muschert & Sumiala, 2012). Researchers have attempted to develop offender profiles to identify at-risk students, yet institutions like the FBI warn that such profiling risks mislabelling and wrongful accusations. Rather than constructing static profiles, it is more effective to examine causal and catalyst factors to enable early intervention.

Drawing from academic literature and FBI practices, a four-pronged assessment model has been developed to evaluate the likelihood of a threat being acted upon. This model examines the “totality of circumstances” across four key domains (Langman, 2017; Langman, 2023; Farr, 2018):

- personality traits and behaviour
- family dynamics
- school dynamics
- social dynamics

Since the 1990s, the rise in school shootings has intensified the demand for prevention strategies and early warning indicators. Profiles of American school shooters often reflect a complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental factors, commonly featuring patterns of grievance and social isolation. Though each case is unique, recurring traits have emerged, including mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation. While more severe mental illnesses can occur, conditions like schizophrenia and psychosis are present in only a minority of cases and have been exaggerated by media portrayals, distorting the broader offender profile (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020).

Grievance-fuelled thinking, driven by perceived injustices from bullying, rejection, or academic failure, frequently catalyses violent ideation (Vechi et al., 2022). Exploring the cognitive and emotional influences behind these acts is vital, as is recognising how family and school dynamics may reveal early warning signs or “leakage” of violent intentions. However, it remains necessary to question how much of what the public believes about these perpetrators is accurate.

2.2: What does the media portray?

The media's portrayal of American school shooters is often characterised by glorification, oversimplification, and shaping public perceptions in ways that can perpetuate stigma and fear. Media narratives frequently focus on the shooter's mental health, framing them as 'troubled' or 'mentally ill' (Böckler et al., 2012), often emphasising conditions like schizophrenia or depression without nuanced discussion of these diagnoses or their actual link to violence. These stereotypes and painted pictures create unrealistic realities and do not follow the narrative of scientific and legal profiles of dangerous individuals. The oversimplification of these cases creates the perception that mental illness is the primary cause of school shootings, which leads to the overshadowing of other contributing factors such as access to firearms, societal influences, or systematic failures in intervention.

Alongside this, high-profile cases often fixate on the violent imagery, the manifesto of the shooter or any other interest-grabbing information that will tend to get viewings of the case and report increased. Glorifying these factors inadvertently fuels the "copycat phenomenon" by providing a blueprint for future perpetrators seeking notoriety. However, as we discuss the book cover of what the media deems as a school shooter, it is crucial that we dig deeper into what the legal profiles are and understand what psychological, criminological, and sociological factors are present which contributes to the making of a school shooter.

2.3: Personality Traits and Behaviour

2.3(a): Mental Illness:

Mental disorders are frequently linked to aggressive behaviour in youth and have been cited as contributing factors in school shootings. While conditions like schizophrenia and psychosis are often associated with these events, this is largely a media-driven stereotype. More common disorders, particularly depression, are more frequently observed. Media outlets often exaggerate symptoms to provoke fear, perpetuating scaremongering stereotypes. However, typical depressive symptoms such as irritability, anger, and suicidal ideation are more relevant to understanding perpetrator profiles. McGee and DeBernardo identified hypersensitivity to criticism, rejection sensitivity, and suspicion of others as key traits in depressed individuals prone to violence. Supporting this, studies by Gerard et al. (2015) and Ioannou et al. (2015) found that 71% of 28 examined shooters experienced depression, and 57% had a psychiatric history. The FBI underscores the need to counter simplistic perceptions and deepen understanding of mental health as a complex but critical factor in school shootings (De Barros et al., 2008).

Suicidal ideation is also commonly linked to shooters, with many having previously expressed or attempted suicide (Lee, 2013). Marano (1998) suggests such individuals often resort to desperate actions due to feelings of hopelessness. This may explain why many perpetrators die by suicide during or after their attacks—one case showed 19 out of 22 school shooters took their own lives (Sanders et al., 2024).

Mental health concerns appear consistently across most documented cases of school shootings, though in varying severity. These issues fall under personality and

behavioural traits that schools should monitor closely. Common characteristics include low frustration tolerance, poor coping skills, and a lack of resiliency (Langman, 2009; O'Toole, 2000). Many shooters adopt an “injustice collector” mindset, harbouring long-standing grievances. Depression presents in multiple ways—ranging from lethargy and withdrawal to hostility and rage—as seen in the Columbine shooters (Cullen, 2009; Langman, 2009).

Adolescents, particularly those aged 15 to 18, are the most common age group involved in school shootings, with 16 being the average age (Petrosino & Petrosino, 2005). This aligns with key developmental vulnerabilities, as the prefrontal cortex—responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation—is still maturing (Steinberg, 2007). This neurological immaturity makes adolescents more impulsive and emotionally reactive, with limited foresight. When combined with depression, anxiety, trauma, and poor coping mechanisms, these factors significantly increase the risk of violent behaviour (Vossekuil et al., 2002; Ferguson et al., 2011).

2.3 (b): Personality Disorders:

Understanding personality disorders is crucial when profiling school shooters, as these conditions shape enduring patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour that may contribute to violent tendencies (Langman, 2009). Disorders such as antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder influence how individuals manage grievances, regulate emotions, and interact with others, offering insight into motivations and threat potential (Meloy, 2004). For years, aggression was assumed to stem from insecurity and low self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), yet evidence for this is limited. Instead, researchers have increasingly turned to the role of narcissism and inflated self-perception in violence.

Narcissism, particularly when threatened, can manifest as aggression. Baumeister et al. found that violent individuals often hold "highly favourable self-views," and aggression occurs when these self-views are challenged. The metapsychology of narcissism reflects a pervasive sense of grandiosity and self-importance, a dynamic historically observed in violent authoritarian figures such as Hitler and Saddam Hussein. This mindset, similarly, appears in school shooters, suggesting that wounded egotism, not low self-esteem, may be the catalyst for violence.

While shooters are often labelled as "loners" or "outcasts," these traits can coexist with narcissism, particularly in its covert form. Overt narcissism is marked by obvious entitlement and superiority, while covert narcissism combines grandiosity with insecurity and hypersensitivity (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). This duality fosters grievance, blame, and violent retaliation, often to assert dominance or gain recognition (Langman, 2015).

Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) is defined by chronic disregard for others' rights, impulsivity, and manipulative or criminal behaviour (APA, 2013). While ASPD varies in severity, it is particularly concerning when overlapping with narcissistic traits (Meloy et al., 2004; Langman, 2009). ASPD-related traits, lack of empathy, externalised blame, and contempt for social norms, are often observed in school shooters and contribute to their violent mindsets. Though not all shooters are diagnosed with ASPD, their behavioural profiles often align with its characteristics.

Neurobiological research suggests that ASPD-related traits may stem from atypical brain function. Abnormalities in the amygdala and impaired prefrontal cortex activity are linked to poor impulse control, reduced empathy, and difficulty processing consequences (Blair, 2013). Although still emerging, this research supports the idea

that some school shooters exhibit neurobiological vulnerabilities that mirror ASPD, further facilitating the progression from threat to violent action.

2.4: Environmental Factors:

2.4(a): Familial Dynamics:

Family dynamics are crucial in understanding school shooters' psychology and behaviour. Research suggests that adverse family environments contribute to violent tendencies, although they are not the sole cause. Studies, including one by Peter Langman (2010), show that perpetrators have varied experiences with their families. Some faced sexual abuse, foster care, or had a family history of mental illness, while others came from functioning families. Literature emphasizes that traumatized shooters often have backgrounds marked by abuse, neglect, or parental substance abuse, contributing to violent behaviours, and exacerbating mental health issues. However, not all shooters come from broken homes, indicating that external factors can lead to violence. By analysing these dynamics, professionals categorize offenders into profiles: psychopathic, psychotic, traumatized, and non-typical cases. Langman's profiles aim to identify patterns among shooters, clarify the impact of life experiences on violence, and help distinguish between general misbehaviour and high-risk individuals (2010).

2.4(b): School Dynamics:

Understanding school dynamics is crucial, as they play a significant role in phenomena like school shootings. Numerous studies highlight social conflicts, including bullying and troubled relationships with peers and teachers, often seen in attackers prior to their incidents. Sommer, Leuchner, and Scheithauer argue that the perception of these negative experiences leads perpetrators to view themselves as marginalized victims,

which complicates findings. Their systematic review identifies five main factors contributing to a toxic school culture: social conflict, peer rejection, physical bullying, romantic rejection, and teacher conflict. They found that these elements create an environment that fosters resentment and alienation, contributing to violent behaviour, which was observed in 88.1% of school shooters.

Conversely, Jessie Klein critiques their review in "Understanding Social Dynamics and School Shootings Requires Larger Context." She emphasizes that while interpersonal issues are important, a broader perspective is essential, examining institutional culture and hierarchies rather than solely individual interactions. Her analysis indicates that schools can foster a violent culture, and a focus on these dynamics may obscure fundamental systemic issues within the institution.

Social isolation and marginalization are significant risk factors for shootings, contributing to resentment and violent ideation. Many perpetrators report experiences of bullying or exclusion, leading to a sense of alienation from peers and their school (Lankford, 2016; Madfis, 2017). Even without overt victimization, some individuals may misinterpret neutral social interactions as hostility (Newman et al., 2004). This isolation can foster a desire for recognition, where violence is viewed to assert dominance, especially among those influenced by past shooters or radical online communities (O'Toole, 2000; Klein, 2012). To prevent these incidents, schools and communities must create inclusive environments, promote peer support, and enhance access to mental health services (Borum et al., 2010). Combating social marginalization should be part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce the likelihood of school shootings and address the long-term effects of exclusion.

2.4(c): Social Factors and additional elements:

Various social and environmental factors contribute to the development of school shooters, including media influence, substance use and the copycat effect. Sensationalised media coverage can incentivise notoriety-seeking behaviour. Subsequently, perpetrators view shootings as a means of achieving fame and recognition (Lankford, 2018). This then can lead to the development of the copycat effect, which further perpetuates shootings, as perpetrators often study and emulate past attackers, replicating their methods and motivations to maximise impact (Peterson, 2021). Violent entertainment and online spaces further serve as platforms for radicalisation to take place, where shooters engage with extremist ideologies, plan attacks, and ultimately receive validation for their grievances, something they may not receive in their social lives (Gill et al., 2017). These sites typically consist of people who exhibit obsessive interests in firearms, military tactics or extremist beliefs, thus reinforcing violent ideation over time (Lankford & Hakim, 2011). Alongside this, substance abuse can reinforce and exacerbate psychological distress and contribute to decision-making, which increases the likelihood of violence (Hollis et al., 2019). Given these interrelated aspects, prevention techniques must address peer interventions, substance use, and the role of digital communities in facilitating violent ideologies to disrupt the rotation of mass shootings.

2.5: Case Study: Columbine:

Examining the psychological factors behind school shooters offers insights into their motivations, behaviours, and warning signs. Acts of violence result not from a single cause but from a complex interplay of mental health struggles, personality disorders, and environmental influences. The Columbine High School massacre, carried out by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold on April 20, 1999, illustrates these dynamics. While

bullying is often cited as a primary motivation, evidence suggests that the shooters exhibited aggressive behaviours rather than being mere victims.

Harris displayed traits of psychopathy and narcissistic personality disorder—grandiosity, lack of empathy, and a fixation on power (Langman, 2009). His writings reflected a desire for legacy through violence. Conversely, Klebold faced severe depression, social anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, with his journals revealing a search for meaning amidst emotional turmoil (Lankford, 2018). Their contrasting psychological profiles created a dangerous dynamic, with Klebold vulnerable to Harris's influence, reinforcing the notion of a leader-follower relationship among some shooters.

Family dynamics also influenced their development. Harris's strict military upbringing may have fostered his sense of superiority, while Klebold's emotionally expressive background lacked sufficient emotional regulation (Cullen, 2009). Although neither experienced overt abuse, deficiencies in emotional support and oversight likely exacerbated their vulnerabilities.

School dynamics further shaped their experiences. They perceived themselves as outsiders, fostering alienation and grievances. The failure of schools to identify warning signs highlights the need for comprehensive threat assessment models. Social factors, including media influence and online subcultures, contributed to their radicalisation, with Harris's fascination for violence echoed in later school shooters (Peterson & Densley, 2021).

Understanding these factors emphasizes the importance of early intervention strategies, including mental health screenings and behavioural threat detection. While mental health does not directly cause shootings, the interaction of psychological vulnerabilities, family dynamics, peer influence, and social forces creates an environment where violence is seen as a solution.

Chapter 3: Methodology:

3.1: Opening:

School shootings have become one of the most critical criminal justice concerns within America, especially in the 21st century. These incidents have increased in frequency, averaging 46 per year (Everytown, 2021). Columbine (1999) set a precedent for future shooters, revealing behavioural and systemic issues. Subsequent cases like Sandy Hook, Parkland, Oxford, and Uvalde reflect continued failures. Each of these cases has demonstrated persistent failures in intervention and response from law enforcement, which is another pressing issue regarding this topic. This dissertation will critically analyse the intersections of psychological and criminological determinants encircling school shootings to understand systematic political failures that contribute to the continuous nature of these events.

3.2: Research Aims and Objectives:

Within this dissertation, I will be examining the intersection of criminological and psychological determinants encircling how the behaviours of school shooters are shaped. By analysing expanded models of these characteristics, we can reveal systematic failures and improve prevention and intervention strategies, specifically by exploring the common psychological traits, evaluating factors, investigating systematic institutional failures, and assessing how political systems and legislation are used and

their effectiveness. Following this, an assessment can be carried out to assess the role of political and institutional response in mitigating or exacerbating the crisis.

3.3: Methodology Overview - How the research will be conducted:

To address the research question, the research will enforce a qualitative comparative case study approach, in which the study shall systematically analyse five major school shooting events. The data will be drawn from official investigative reports, law enforcement assessments, academic literature, and psychological evaluations. Using these sources will ensure reliability, as they are produced and published by experts and official bodies. The study will then use a comparative coding matrix (CCM). Key themes (including mental health indicators, warning signs, access to weapons, law enforcement response, and systematic failures) will be examined across the cases. This approach ensures a structured analysis that augments criminological theory and policy recommendations.

3.4: Case Study Selection:

The five key school shooting cases that will be examined in this study are as follows: Columbine (1999), Sandy Hook (2012), Parkland (2018), Oxford High School (2021), and Uvalde (2022). Each of these cases has been chosen due to the availability of comprehensive data, diversity in shooter profiles and their significance in shaping public discourse and policy. Each one of these cases provides insight into how mental health, criminological determinants and systematic failures influence the likelihood of the severity of school shootings. Selecting cases with diverse profiles and varying systematic failures ensures a multi-layered analysis relevant to prevention strategies (Braselmann, 2016).

3.5: Ensuring Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Standards:

To enhance the trustworthiness of this research, steps were taken to ensure reliability, validity, and adherence to ethical standards throughout the case study analysis.

Reliability was achieved using triangulated, publicly available data from authoritative sources. These included police reports, court documents, government inquiries (e.g., Texas House of Representatives, 2022), and peer-reviewed psychological assessments (Langman, 2017; Lankford, 2015). The selection of high-quality sources ensured internal consistency and allowed for credible comparisons across cases (Yin, 2018).

Validity was addressed through several dimensions:

- Internal validity was strengthened through data triangulation, comparing accounts across multiple independent sources to confirm behavioural patterns and institutional responses (Bryman, 2016).
- Theoretical validity was supported by the consistent application of the CSAM to each case, enabling identification of recurring strain patterns (Agnew, 2006; Erikson, 1968).
- External validity was considered through the purposeful selection of five varied school shooting cases. Although not representative of all incidents, this variation allows for broader analytical generalisability of CSAM's explanatory power (Stake, 1995).

Ethical considerations were significant to the research design. As the study used only secondary data, it did not require formal ethics board approval. Nevertheless, care was taken to treat all subjects with sensitivity and avoid sensationalism. The portrayal

of perpetrators was limited to analytical relevance, and traumatic content was handled with academic neutrality (British Society of Criminology, 2015).

3.8: Discussion of potential reliability and validity limitations:

Despite rigorous methodological approaches, challenges remain in this study. A primary concern is the redaction or incompleteness of data, notably from official reports like the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Columbine Report, which often withhold sensitive information about the perpetrator's psychological history and law enforcement actions. To mitigate this, data triangulation and cross-referencing were used to supplement missing information.

Additionally, the potential subjectivity in thematic analysis poses risks in interpreting qualitative data, such as warning signs and systemic failures. To minimize researcher bias, a comparative coding matrix (CCM) was consistently applied across all cases, and periodic external reviews by an academic advisor ensured replicability and methodological rigor.

Lastly, the study's generalizability is limited since it focuses on select high-profile school shooting cases. While the findings offer insights into psychological, criminological, and systemic patterns, each case's unique socio-political context must be acknowledged. To enhance external validity, common themes were identified, situating the findings within broader criminological and psychological theories to inform discussions on school violence prevention and intervention strategies.

3.9: Conclusion

By implementing this framework and multiple strategies, this study ensures that the findings assembled are consistent, accurate, and academically rigorous; therefore, it contributes to understanding the criminological and psychological factors behind school shootings. Although there are some potential issues, this framework has been produced in a way that implements mitigation strategies to address these.

Chapter 4: Study:

4.1: Thematic Analysis Across Cases:

This study adopts a methodological framework that involves examining both data and the perpetrator through thematic analysis. This approach aims to elucidate patterns of emotional, social, and structural breakdowns that may signify preventable pathways leading to school shootings and related acts of violence. Moreover, thematic analysis facilitates an exploration of the interplay between internal, interpersonal, and external factors.

The research is informed by Braun and Clarke's (2016) six-phase model, which serves as a structured method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. This method enhances analytical rigour and aids in identifying pertinent factors that contribute to addressing the study's research question and developing a hybrid explanatory model. While it is essential to recognise the limitations inherent to qualitative methodologies, it is equally important to consider potential impediments, including issues related to retrospective data, variances in the availability of information, and the influence of media distortion. For qualitative-based methods, it is also important to acknowledge that there can be impediments, including retrospective data, different levels of available information, and media distortion.

Figure 1: Example of the thematic analysis that will be used to conduct this research (found in appendix)

4.2: Psychological Disturbance and Identity Crisis:

Introduction:

When addressing the psychological state and identity of a shooter, it is known that each shooter's psychological background differs. However, subsequently, all cases reveal a pattern of internal emotional conflict, identity instability and unaddressed psychological distress. Crucially, within these cases, these were not isolated mental illnesses that led to this but part of a process of identity fragmentation, in which violence becomes a means of asserting control, externalising internal pain, or achieving notoriety. This theme explores a spectrum of internal states, from diagnosed disorders to suicidal ideation, alongside how these psychological issues shape the shooter's perception of self, others and meaning.

4.3: Case-By-Case Exploration

4.3(a) Columbine

The Columbine case revealed distinct psychological profiles between the two perpetrators. Eric Harris displayed traits consistent with psychopathy and narcissistic personality disorder, marked by manipulative behaviour and a lack of empathy (Langman, 2010). His violence was a tool for asserting dominance and a distorted “God-like” identity. In contrast, Dylan Klebold suffered from major depressive disorder, with evident self-loathing and suicidal ideation. While both were emotionally detached and shared a fractured sense of identity, their motivations differed—Harris was driven

by control, Klebold by despair. Their insular relationship further magnified their psychological disturbances.

4.3(b) Parkland

Nikolas Cruz exhibited severe psychological disturbances rooted in early trauma, emotional neglect, and mental health disorders, including ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and depression (Stoneman, 2019). His escalating emotional dysregulation manifested in violent behaviour, animal cruelty, and disciplinary issues. The death of his adoptive parents deepened his abandonment issues. Cruz developed a fixation on firearms and glorified past shooters (Brown, 2024). Despite multiple warnings, institutional inaction prevailed. His attack appeared to be both an act of vengeance and self-destruction, demonstrating how untreated psychological strain and social alienation, compounded by firearm access, can lead to mass violence.

4.3(c) Sandy Hook

Adam Lanza experienced long-term psychological and developmental difficulties, including social withdrawal, sensory sensitivities, and rigid behaviours (Connecticut's Official State Website, 2016a). He was likely on the autism spectrum and suffered from anxiety, obsessive-compulsive traits, and disordered eating (Hook, 2015). His close but isolating relationship with his mother and his intense focus on mass shootings evolved from study to emulation. Lanza's emotional detachment and eroding identity culminated in an act of extreme violence, reflecting both psychological decline and a final assertion of agency (Connecticut's Official State Website, 2016b).

4.3(d) Oxford

Ethan Crumbley demonstrated acute psychological distress, institutional neglect, and preoccupation with violence. In the days leading to the attack, he expressed intrusive thoughts and sought help through journal entries—e.g., “the thoughts will not stop – help me” (Oxford Community Schools, 2021). Despite alarming signs, including a violent drawing shown on the day of the attack, no psychological intervention followed (Murray, Yates, & Murray, 2023). The violence can be seen as a catastrophic externalisation of internal turmoil, showing how untreated distress, ignored by both schools and parents, can lead to tragedy.

4.3(e) Uvalde

Salvador Ramos exhibited psychological vulnerabilities rooted in social isolation, family dysfunction, and behavioural instability. He was bullied for his speech impediment, leading to absenteeism, and lived in a turbulent home marked by conflict and instability (Texas House of Representatives, 2022). He engaged in self-harm and shared disturbing content online, yet received no mental health support. Ramos' identity appeared shaped by alienation, nihilism, and a desire for notoriety. His fixation on violence, coupled with access to firearms, culminated in the attack. This case illustrates how unaddressed psychological strain and a chaotic familial environment can fuel targeted violence.

4.4: Theoretical Integration:

Across all five cases, Erikson's theory of identity (1959) vs the role of confusion offers a clear lens: a sense of fragmentation of oneself, particularly during adolescence, is something that each perpetrator struggles with, thus failing to form stable identities

within peer or institutional structures. The psychodynamic theory reveals deeper intrapsychic conflicts, particularly in Harris, Cruz and Crumbley, where compressed emotions and unmet attachment need to be manifested through violent projections. Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) alongside Erikson's theory offer complementary insights that reveal more robust understanding of perpetrator development. The integration between external social strain and internal identity disruption is a constitutive of the trajectory to violence. Alongside this, the concept of threatened egotism, as portrayed in Leary et al. (2003) theory, aligns with Harris and Ramos, whose fragile self-worth collapses when social rejection undermines their inflated self-perception. Another model that equally illuminates these cases comes from Joiner's (2005) model, in which feelings of burdensomeness, alienation and habituation to violence coalesced into suicidal-homicidal action in several cases.

4.5: Deviant Socialisation and Criminogenic Influences:

While psychological disturbances laid the footing for violence, it is important to understand that deviant scripts are backed by criminogenic social environments, thus modelling violent ideation, and ultimately enacting it. Therefore, we must analyse this topic through a psychological view and a critical sociological lens, where deviant socialisation and criminogenic influences can be interpreted. In cases such as these, it is apparent that these individuals did not develop in a vacuum; instead, they were shaped by dysfunctional familial environments, exclusionary institutions, peer rejection and exposure to violent subcultures, all of which contribute to the individual's deviant drift from functioning society. Drawing on theories such as Sutherland's Differential association, Agnew's GST and Ferrell's Cultural Criminology, this section examines how social learning, structural strain and identity formation through deviance coalesced to produce violence.

4.5(a): Family Systems and Early Socialisation:

The familial environment during the early stages of an individual's life plays a crucial role in shaping behavioural norms and emotional regulation during adolescence. Regarding school shootings, some patterns emerge: chaotic home lives, parental neglect, and weak emotional bonds, which function as criminogenic influences that undermine prosocial development.

The GST (Agnew, 2006) offers a valuable framework that suggests that individuals who are exposed to persistent negative stimuli, such as abuse, conflict, or neglect, can experience psychological strain, which can lead to deviant coping mechanisms when legitimate outlets are unavailable to them. Adam Lanza's fragmented and overly enmeshed relationship with his mother, alongside an absent father following a divorce, led to the escalation of his mental health issues. Although his mother was not overtly abusive, her denial of her son's mental issues, alongside socially isolating him from school and peers, arguably exacerbated his detachment and misanthropy. The breakdown in parental boundaries contributed to a developmental context in which violence was neither adequately anticipated nor prevented.

Similarly, Ramos grew up in an unstable and conflict-ridden household environment due to financial hardship, maternal neglect, and alleged drug use within the home. It was reported that he frequently fought with his mother, leading to him eventually moving in with his grandmother. Due to the lack of consistent guidance and emotional support, the shooter turned to online forums, weapon fetishisation and violent video games to fill the void of belonging and control. This concept of "Chronic strain" (Agnew,

2017) explains where sustained interpersonal stress leads to cumulative emotional collapse.

However, in contrast, Ethan Crumbley's parents demonstrated a permissive and disengaged parenting style, which overlooked clear warning signs of psychological distress, including violent drawings and disturbing journal entries. Despite this, they failed to intervene and instead purchased him a Sig Sauer 9mm handgun, the gun used in the attack. The mix of direct material enablement, emotional neglect and failure in parental responsibility reflects a dangerous void of parental regulation and social learning (Akers, 1998; Burke, 2018).

These cases have illustrated how deviant trajectories can stem not primarily from trauma but from environments that fail to socialise youth into conventional settings and functioning environments. With the absence of strong parental modelling, attachment or intervention, psychological vulnerabilities are left to fester in isolation, thus combining to create the conditions for lethal violence to develop unnoticed.

4.5(b): Peer Influence and Social Isolation:

Peer relationships, or their absence, are crucial in adolescent identity formation and behavioural reinforcement. Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947) posits that deviance is learned through interactions with those who promote pro-deviant values, especially when such interactions are intense and long-lasting. In cases of social exclusion, isolation can create a vacuum where individuals seek belonging and identity within digital communities or violent subcultures. This phenomenon, termed "Digital Drift" (Matza, 2018), is increasingly relevant in the context of online

radicalization and contemporary school violence (Gill et al., 2017; Larkin, 2009; O'Toole, 2000).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine perpetrators, exemplify the impact of deviant peer reinforcement. Their contrasting personalities, combined with their friendship, formed a self-contained dyad of shared alienation, destructive ideas, and anger. Although not fully socially isolated, their bond became an incubator for mutual radicalization, with Harris's dominant personality heavily influencing the more passive and depressed Klebold, thereby reinforcing a hierarchy that nurtured their violent fantasies (Langman, 2009). Sutherland's theory is reflected in these dynamics through the "priority" and "intensity" of associations that shape deviant behaviours (Sutherland, 1947).

In contrast, both Salvador Ramos and Nikolas Cruz faced long-term peer rejection and bullying. Cruz dealt with frequent disciplinary issues, including aggressive outbursts that further alienated him from peers (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2019). Similarly, Ramos was bullied for his speech impediment and poor hygiene, leading to increased withdrawal and truancy (Robb Elementary Independent Review, 2023). Their experiences with social exclusion contributed to the development of violent identities, and both turned to online platforms that reinforced their feelings of grievance and isolation.

Reports on Ethan Crumbley reveal similar patterns; he experienced peer isolation at school and was largely ignored by classmates. In response, he immersed himself in digital content that glorified violence and school shootings (Oxford Community Schools

Independent Report, 2023). The lack of authoritative parenting and minimal corrective feedback from peers or mentors influenced his internal world, leading to a fixation on weapons and nihilistic thinking.

Overall, these cases illustrate how peer dynamics, whether through toxic reinforcement or exclusion, can foster environments where deviant ideation flourishes when left unchecked. In the absence of healthy social bonds, violent subcultures and the internet provide alternative avenues for identity construction and belonging (Larkin, 2009; Klein, 2012).

4.5(c): Media, Internet Subcultures, and Copycat Dynamics:

The online and media environment, both traditional and digital, significantly shapes identity and motives for school shooters. Many perpetrators fixate on Columbine, viewing violence as a performative act. This section, informed by Cultural Criminology (Ferrell et al., 2008), examines how digital subcultures, media representations, and online echo chambers contribute to school shootings as a form of deviant status achievement.

Cases like Cruz, Ramos, and Crumbley illustrate how shooters engage with online content glorifying earlier shootings, particularly Columbine. Harris frequently posted videos of himself with weapons, mimicking Columbine's imagery and declaring his ambition to be a "Professional school shooter" (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2019). Similarly, Ramos extensively researched and expressed admiration for past shooters (Robb Elementary Independent Review, 2023), highlighting the "Copycat Effect" (Surette, 2016), where media saturation of shootings influences new offenders seeking notoriety.

Perpetrators like Harris and Klebold exemplify "performative violence," imagining their attacks as cinematic events and seeking to leave a legacy, evident in their video diaries and manifestos (Langman, 2009; Larkin, 2009). They frame violence as expressive and attention-seeking, modelling future attackers who view violent acts as both revenge and symbolic protest a perceived failure of society (Ferrell et al., 2008).

Furthermore, platforms like YouTube and Reddit reinforce these narratives through echo chambers, validating grievances by sharing ideology (Klein, 2012). This illustrates how the mediation and commodification of violence can create a cultural script for school shootings. Shooters, influenced by marginalization and grievance, reinterpret these scripts as pathways to power, recognition, and symbolic revenge against a society they believe has let them down.

4.5(d): School environment and institutional Failures:

The failure of institutions like schools, law enforcement, and mental health services is a recurring issue, highlighting systematic negligence. Under-resourcing, miscommunication, and risk-averse bureaucracies significantly contribute to the decline in law enforcement's response to shooting cases. This section will utilize institutional anomie theory (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994), which posits that deviant behaviour often arises when social institutions fail to provide necessary regulation or support.

In the case of Crumbley, clear warning signs were evident just hours before the shooting; however, he was allowed to return to class without a psychological evaluation (Oxford Community Schools, 2023). Similarly, Nikolas Cruz received

multiple referrals to various disciplinary and mental health programs, but oversight and information sharing were inconsistent (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2019).

Adam Lanza's known mental instability and isolation went unaddressed as his mother chose home-schooling, effectively removing him from institutional support (Sedensky, 2013). Despite being truant and online threats, Salvador Ramos avoided intervention due to poor coordination among school, law enforcement, and child protective services (Robb Elementary Independent Review, 2023). These institutional breakdowns represent Garland's (2001) "criminology of the other," treating specific individuals as irredeemable, leading to disengagement rather than prevention. This structural neglect actively creates an environment where violence can flourish.

4.5(e): Peer Dynamics, Bullying, and Violent Identity Formation:

Across the five case studies, peer dynamics and bullying are key factors in alienation and identity formation. For shooters like Harris, Ramos, and Crumbley, social exclusion and humiliation within schools fuelled their grievance narratives. This aligns with strain theory (Agnew, 2006), which suggests that when one cannot achieve social status through legitimate means, they may resort to deviant behaviour to assert power. Dylan Klebold's journal reflects a struggle for connection amid a sense of rejection. Ramos faced bullying over his speech impediment and appearance, driving him to find solace in online spaces where he expressed his rage and crafted a dominant persona (Robb Elementary Review, 2023). In these cases, violence serves to counteract feelings of powerlessness, creating what Katz (1988) calls "righteous slaughter," framing violence as justified retaliation. This aligns with toxic masculinity, where emotional repression and aggression become symbols of male identity (Connell,

1995). Many school shooters portray hypermasculinity online and offline, brandishing weapons as tools of empowerment. Eric Harris positioned his attack as an assertion of superiority, expressing contempt for the weak (Langman, 2009), while Nikolas Cruz idolized weapons and sought validation within violent fantasy communities.

The intersection of bullying, masculinity crises, and social exclusion feeds into Kimmel's (2013) concept of "aggrieved entitlement," where individuals feel society has denied them their rightful status. In this light, school shootings represent both symbolic and literal attempts to reclaim lost dignity. These instances demonstrate that violence is not merely a psychological issue, but rather a culturally scripted response shaped by peer hierarchies and gender norms.

4.6: Systemic Neglect and Institutional Failures:

Across all five cases, there is an apparent pattern of systemic neglect, one marked not by a single institutional failure but by the cumulative effect of fragmented responses, poor inter-agency communication and the prioritisation of institutional image over individual welfare. Institutional Anomie Theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994) argues that when achievement is prioritised, social regulation deteriorates, and, therefore, the neglect of those who do not fit within normative frameworks. In these cases, mental health providers, law enforcement agencies and schools have repeatedly identified warning signs and failed to intervene, therefore allowing high-risk trajectories to continue unchecked.

4.6(a): Schools As Sights of Missed Intervention:

The repeated failure of institutions, particularly schools, to respond effectively to escalating warning signs is a defining issue in many school shooting cases. Instead of

serving as protective environments, schools often act as passive bystanders, hindered by under-resourcing, poor communication, and risk-averse bureaucracies. These failures reflect Messner and Rosenfeld's (1994) Institutional Anomie Theory, which points to the erosion of institutional efficacy when cultural pressures prioritize performance over welfare. In the absence of proper support and regulation, deviant behaviour may emerge as a response to unmet needs.

In Ethan Crumbley's case, several psychological red flags, including violent drawings and pleas for help, were reported to school officials just hours before the Oxford High School shooting. Nevertheless, he was allowed to return to class without a search or parental intervention (Oxford Community Schools, 2023). Similarly, Nikolas Cruz had a history of disciplinary incidents and referrals to mental health services, yet there was a lack of sustained coordination and comprehensive risk assessments (MSD Public Safety Commission, 2019).

Adam Lanza's social withdrawal and psychological distress were recognized by school personnel, but his mother's decision to home-school him effectively cut off institutional oversight (Sedensky, 2013). In Uvalde, Salvador Ramos was truant and disengaged, often expressing violent threats online, but poor coordination among the school, law enforcement, and child protective services meant these concerns were never consolidated into a clear risk profile (Robb Elementary Independent Review, 2023).

These institutional blind spots illustrate Garland's (2001) notion of the "criminology of the other," where certain students are perceived as too deviant or volatile for intervention. Instead of acting as early warning systems, schools may disengage from

complex behavioural issues, leading to a structural neglect that creates conditions for psychological crises and violent ideation to escalate unchallenged.

4.6(b): Mental Health Failures and Gaps in Access:

Mental health systems and their failure to intervene have repeatedly emerged through these case studies, particularly under-resourced, siloed and reactive rather than preventative. Although the disability of psychological distress is not visible in many shooters, consistent therapeutic engagement was rarely achieved. In the case of Cruz, there were numerous times when mental health professionals identified serious concerns, including depression, aggression, and suicidal ideation; however, no long-term treatment was sustained, and alongside this, none of this important information was forwarded to the school or law enforcement (MSD Public Safety Commission, 2019). In the case of Crumbley, alarming signs of psychological decline were apparent. However, mental health evaluations were never pursued despite clear indicators of delusional thinking (Oxford Community Schools, 2023).

Despite being diagnosed with multiple developmental and psychiatric conditions, Lanza never received assistance from mental health services, thus being socially isolated and disengaged throughout his adolescence, partially due to parental resistance (Sedensky, 2013). It is apparent through these cases that mental health services were either fragmented, episodic, or abandoned altogether, thus reflecting what Scull (1977) describes as "Deinstitutionalisation without community support". This refers to a system withdrawing institutional care without creating sustainable alternatives for the individual. As a result of this, the individuals have navigated psychological crises with little oversight, allowing violent ideation to solidify in isolation.

4.6(c): Law Enforcement Failures and Reactive Policing:

Whilst normally aware of warning signs, it is evident that law enforcement agencies operate in a reactive rather than preventative capacity across all five cases. During the lead-up to the Parkland shooting, Cruz became the subject of numerous 911 calls and FBI tips regarding possession of firearms and threatening violence, and despite these alerts, no interventions occurred (MSD Public Safety Commission, 2019). Ramos posted online threatening violence, which was known to the police. Alongside this, he was known to the police for truancy and instability, and even with this knowledge, law agencies failed to act pre-emptively. On the day of the shooting, Police delayed entry for over an hour, reflecting institutional paralysis during crisis (Robb Elementary Independent Review, 2023).

Evidently, the lapses within these cases reflect broader issues within the reactive policing framework, in which threats are only taken seriously and acted on post-incident. Ericson and Haggerty (1997) argue that modern policing often prioritises risk management over early intervention, particularly when individuals are not covered precisely by conventional criminal profiles. Due to this, violence is underscored and underestimated on how quickly violence can escalate, not due to a lack of information but from failures to coordinate, assess and act upon information meaningfully and purposefully.

4.6(d): The intersection of neglect and Opportunity for violence:

Across all five of the cases, institutional systems are repeatedly failing to respond adequately to prolonged psychological distress, escalated reported behavioural red flags and clear signs of social breakdown. The result of Institutional miscoordination deepens isolation, whether through missed assessments, deferred responsibility, or

risk-averse decision-making, each one of these institutions contributes to creating a climate in which early intervention is missed and is structurally unlikely. This reflects Messner and Rosenfeld's (1994) argument that their social-regulatory functions deteriorate when institutions are subordinated to cultural goals of individualism and institutional survival.

4.7: Key Findings:

This examination of the intersections between psychological, criminological, and systematic factors in the development of school shooters is guided by the overarching question of whether a multidimensional model could better account for the complexity of school violence. The use of thematic analysis of the chosen five major U.S school shooting cases, Columbine, Parkland, Sandy Hook, Oxford, and Uvalde, have introduced the three dominant patterns that emerge throughout all the cases: (1) cumulative psychological strain (2) deviant socialisation and criminogenic environments, and (3) systemic neglect and missed institutional interventions.

These findings are visually consolidated in two key models presented within this chapter: the Thematic Strain-to-Action Model of School Shooting (Figure 2, see appendix) and a cross-case Heatmap (Figures 3 and 4 and 5, see appendix) comparing the presence and intensity of risk factors across all five cases. Ultimately, these tools serve not only as a visual, analytical aid but also as a framework for future intervention designs.

4.8: Conclusion:

Leading from these findings, the following chapter will take the findings and theoretical framework presented in the preceding sections and transition them into a practical

exploration of their real-world implications. By building on the Thematic strain-traction model of school shootings, the next chapters will illuminate how the intersection of psychological, criminological, and systematic factors can enhance current risk detection, intervention, and prevention practices. Paramount to this discussion will be the practical applications of the expanded model, which provides an understanding of the complex dynamics that lead to school shootings.

Chapter 5: Discussion:

5.1: Revisiting the expanded model: bridging theory and practice:

Multiple theories reviewed in this research, such as Agnew's strain theory, emphasise that these attacks result from one particular type of strain or environment. CSAM allows one to build on these pre-existing models and theories while examining and expanding on the emerging intersection between psychological strain, criminological predisposition, and systematic failure. As most models treat psychological and criminological determinants as separate ideologies, due to the external and internal dimensions, therefore, this model interweaves both by saying identity problems make strain more unbearable, and unresolved strain deepens identity problems, thus producing a innovative model through this reciprocal relationship. Subsequently, building from this by examining how institutional responses (or lack thereof) exacerbate strain over time and ultimately push vulnerable individuals further towards crisis. Thus, in analysing these cases, the findings revealed that psychological distress alone was insufficient in producing violent action, and this is the same with the other domains. The institutional mishandling of distress, through punitive school measures and social exclusion, pushed individuals towards catastrophic responses. These findings reinforce the model's focus on interaction effects, not isolated traits.

5.2: Empirical Validation: Integrating Findings into the Model:

Throughout this research, the findings found that mental health was coherent through all five cases; however, mental conditions and severity differed. Alongside this, all cases showed a pattern of untreated mental health issues, delinquent behaviour, fascination with weapons or past shooters, and trouble within the systematic system, including school suspensions, lack of mental health referrals and passive threat responses. In multiple cases, we see that over time, the shift from internalised distress to externalised aggression aligns with the heat map's prediction of high-risk convergence in the months (or days in the case of Crumbley) leading up to the incident.

5.3: Advancing Beyond Traditional Models:

While traditional models such as the pathway to violence (King, 2012) and GST (Agnew et al., 2002) have contributed great and valuable insight into the progression of school shootings, they tend to fall short regarding accounting for the complex, dynamic interplay of psychological, behavioural, and systematic variables over time. For example, the Pathway to Violence provides a linear trajectory from ideation to action but does not fully address how institutional responses can accelerate or mitigate the progression. Similarly, the Agnew's Strain Theory effectively links strain to deviant coping mechanisms. However, it fails to fully integrate the institutional amplifiers of strain, such as exclusionary discipline or systemic neglect. To build on these, CSAM foregrounds accumulation and convergence as core mechanisms rather than static risk markers. It is apparent that many of the models still used now are checklist-style models that seek to identify "types" of shooters, whilst CSAM aims to emphasise developmental escalation and interaction effects to capture how unresolved psychological distress, criminogenic tendencies and institutional failures can

synergistically produce high-risk conditions and offer a more holistic, ethically responsive, and practically actionable model for real-world prevention and threat assessment. Ultimately, CSAM can provide ethically responsive and practical tools by identifying factors such as when and where intervention is most critical, intervening not when warning signs appear, but when identity disturbance and social strain start to reinforce one another.

5.4: Enhancing Early Detection: Informing Risk Identification Protocols:

5.4(a): Translating Theory into Observable Indicators:

Analysis of the case studies revealed it was evident that early low-severity behaviours, such as truancy or isolation, were visible years before the escalation, however, these signs were only either punished or ignored instead of receiving support to investigate underlying distresses. This research revealed that key early-stage indicators were not always singular dramatic events but rather the gradual convergence of psychological, criminological, and systemic stressors over time. Criminological signals are manifested through low-level delinquency, such as minor vandalism, which is usually paired with a growing fascination for violent media and revenge-oriented narratives. Following this, systemic indicators emerged where institutions escalated disciplinary actions, such as repeated suspension, without offering corresponding pastoral or therapeutic support. Moreover, critically analysing these findings emphasises that prevention must begin not at the point of visible crisis but as soon as rumblings across multiple domains start to synchronise. These findings argue that a fundamental shift in early detection strategies should be implemented to prevent these acts of violence.

This approach's concept aligns with the ecological models of violence prevention (Durklak et al., 2011), where the intersection between individual, relational, and

systemic variables form the true terrain of risk. By intervening at the intersection of these trends, institutions can disrupt the storm of cumulative progression toward violent action long before it becomes imminent.

5.4(b): Statutory Duty to Monitor Cumulative Strain Indicators:

This dissertation advocates for the establishment of a Statutory Duty to Monitor Cumulative Strain Indicators within all educational institutions, based on the overlapping psychological, criminological, and systemic variables observed in these cases. To maintain a safe educational environment, schools would be required to create Student Well-being Risk Profiles that track metrics such as mental health disclosures, safeguarding interventions, repeated low-level behavioural infractions, and chronic absenteeism. Early multi-domain tracking of preventative values is supported by findings from the U.S. Safe School Initiative (2004), which revealed that in 81% of school shooting cases, concerning behaviours were noted by at least one adult prior to the incidents but were not systematically addressed. Programs that track cumulative risk factors—rather than treating them as isolated disciplinary issues—have been shown to reduce the likelihood of violent outcomes by up to 52% (Cornell et al., 2018).

Creating a national anonymized tracking database to analyse regional patterns of cumulative strain would allow institutions to identify gaps and vulnerabilities, enabling them to allocate preventative resources more effectively. Embedding this requirement into legislation would ensure that early intervention is not left to individual staff discretion but integrated into the educational system's operational structure, transforming passive observation into proactive safeguarding.

5.4(c): The Heatmap Act: Legalising Preventative Screening Frameworks:

Building on the cumulative patterns identified in this study, this dissertation proposes the implementation of a Heatmap for Early Intervention Act, mandating all educational institutions to utilize CSAM-aligned risk assessment heat maps. These heat maps would track emotional, behavioural, and systemic indicators, enabling early detection of escalating risk trajectories. Schools employing this model would be required to respond according to the heatmap's thresholds:

- Yellow Zone: Triggers a pastoral support meeting within two weeks.
- Orange Zone: Requires a formal mental health assessment offer and a parental conference.
- Red Zone: Initiates a multi-agency threat assessment and the development of a bespoke care and intervention plan.

Annual reports generated from these assessments would aid governmental oversight and ensure equitable funding adjustments. Referring to the five case studies, Lanza displayed progressive social withdrawal, faced repeated low-level disciplinary sanctions, and developed an increasing fascination with violent ideologies. Under such a framework, individuals like Lanza could have been intercepted long before any violent actions occurred.

Empirical studies support intervention systems like this, including research by Reddy et al. (2001), which indicates that comprehensive threat assessments can reduce school shooting incidents by over 50%. Moreover, no single indicator reliably predicts violence in isolation; rather, it is the convergence of emotional distress, social friction,

and systemic failures that creates risks (Fein et al., 2002). By implementing these heat maps, educational systems could shift from reactive, punitive approaches to proactive safeguarding models.

5.4(d): Early Intervention Rights Charter for At-Risk Students:

The At-Risk Students Charter is a legislative framework that ensures students flagged under specific risk thresholds are given the right to comprehensive support services, thus transforming punitive measures into preventative ones. This framework would follow the precedent that any student identified as at risk would be entitled to access counselling within 10 school days, be assigned a dedicated adult mentor or advocate within the school and participate in restorative conferencing before facing suspension or exclusion. Therefore, when a student reaches the critical risk, the multi-agency case review will be triggered to assess and provide a tailored intervention plan. Each of these interventions would be trauma-informed and informed and understand that the complexity of each student's circumstances is different. Within the case study findings, it is evident that students were often sanctioned without access to support, thus increasing feelings of isolation and alienation. This framework reframes interventions as an opportunity to replace punishment with the chance to access guidance and assistance, offering at-risk students the resources to address underlying issues before they escalate into a crisis.

5.4(e): National Standard for Multi-Agency Cumulative Risk Teams:

The Cumulative Risk Teams (CRITs) would be the formation of a local, multidisciplinary team that would be available in every education authority region, containing trained individuals who represent schools, mental health services, youth justice, law enforcement and social services. With these trained individuals, these

teams would be responsible for pre-emptive intervention plans, resource allocation, and development of de-escalation strategies to prevent violent outcomes. Additionally, CRITs would work hand in hand with local police forces, creating a direct line of communication for active shooting threats. In these cases, law enforcement will then be equipped with comprehensive risk profiles, enabling them to implement appropriate tactical responses based on the student's history and risk levels rather than resulting in reactive, punitive measures. This type of information will guarantee that the lack of action that we see in the Uvalde (2022) case is not repeated and that adequate communication and intervention are taken whilst ensuring systematic accountability and addressing these critical gaps that are evident in the current framework by focusing on early, coordinated intervention.

5.4(f): Closing Access Loopholes: Safeguarding Against Weapon Acquisition:

Shifting focus to the criminological and social factors involved, the Firearm Access Risk Review (FARR) aims to close critical loopholes that allow at-risk minors to access firearms through mandatory assessments of firearm possession and security. Most school shooting cases indicate that perpetrators legally acquire firearms through family members, unsecured storage, or loopholes undermining background checks (Langman, 2009; Petrosino & Petrosino, 2020). In conjunction with the Heatmap Act, when flagged students enter orange or red zones, local safeguarding agencies will initiate a Firearm Access Risk Review. This assessment will determine if firearms are present in the home, evaluate security measures, and ensure legal compliance with gun storage practices. Studies reveal that 68% of school shooters obtained their firearms from their own homes (Everytown, 2021), highlighting the need for parents or guardians to demonstrate secure storage that meets state requirements — firearms

must be locked and separated from ammunition. If unsafe storage is found, interventions such as temporary firearm removal can be mandated.

Additionally, this proposal advocates for extended background checks when purchasing a firearm to include any cohabiting adult, addressing scenarios where firearms might be accessible to siblings or informal possessors. The Cooling Off Safeguarding provision will prevent flagged students from legally purchasing or inheriting firearms for a minimum of five years without psychological clearance, ensuring at-risk individuals do not gain access to weapons during critical developmental years. The importance of this policy is underscored by the cases of Lanza and Cruz, who had access to legally owned firearms that were improperly stored. By addressing firearm access, this proposal enhances the CSAM framework, emphasizing that while strain is a crucial precursor, preventing access to weapons is a necessary barrier to violent escalation.

5.5: Future Application and Empirical Validation of CSAM:

The CSAM is a robust and multi-dimensional theoretical model, but to enhance its academic and policy impact, real-world applications need to be tested, refined, and implemented. Moving beyond theoretical development toward empirical validation is essential for increasing its practical credibility and policy relevance.

One proposed approach to test the model is through a Pilot School-Based Intervention, which would implement the CSAM framework in schools with significant safeguarding and behavioural concerns. This would involve accumulating developed student risk profiles based on psychological strain, criminogenic exposure, and systemic strain. Multi-agency reviews would be conducted for students who reach

threshold scores, allowing for success to be measured by outcomes such as reduced incidents, early intervention, and improved mental health engagement.

It is crucial to be aware of the risks of over-policing and the potential criminalization of students, particularly those from marginalized groups. Students might feel targeted for normal developmental behaviours like withdrawal or frustration. To mitigate this risk, monitoring should prioritize support rather than discipline, embedding interventions within mental health and pastoral care systems rather than relying on law enforcement. Additionally, mandatory training for staff to minimize misidentification based on race, disability, or social background is essential to prevent discrimination.

Another important limitation to consider is the potential for misidentification, which could flag students as 'at-risk' despite not posing any real threat. This could lead to stigma, anxiety, withdrawal, or punishment. To address this, the CSAM matrix should be used as a guidance tool rather than a definitive diagnosis. Integrating collaboration among agencies to conduct a multi-stage assessment, such as combining psychological evaluations, teacher input, and behavioural history, before finalizing any intervention is also necessary.

5.6: Conclusion:

Throughout this discussion, the CSAM has been translated into a script of actionable strategies to use early intervention to prevent school shootings. By identifying psychological, criminological, and systematic factors and how they converge over time, the CSAM switches reactive responses into proactive, pattern-based prevention, such as how law enforcement reacts. Through analysing cases such as Cruz and Lanza, it is evident that violence is often a breaking point that follows a build-up of

unaddressed strain. Proposals such as the Cumulative Risk Monitoring Duty, Heatmap, and CRITs produce practical ways for academic environments and agencies to respond to escalating risks. Alongside this, the proposal for weapon access safeguarding is a way of responding directly to patterns in the most likely source of firearms: the home environment. The core centre of this model is a culture shift from punishment to support, pushing for a way to ensure intervention is both trauma-informed and rights-based and addressing alienation before it escalates to violence. Hence, this dissertation proposes the At-Risk Students' Students' Rights Charter.

In summary, the CSAM provides a flexible and holistic approach to early intervention by embedding risk monitoring into the bases of legislation, cross-sector collaboration, and school culture. Through this, institutions can rely on true preventative measures and systems rather than implement reactive safety measures, therefore averting tragedies before they even unfold.

Chapter 6: Conclusion:

Central Research Aims This dissertation explored the question: "How do criminological and psychological determinants intersect in shaping the profiles and behaviours of school shooters?" following this, "Can an expanded model reveal systematic issues and support better prevention?" In response, this study has developed a preventative framework, The CSAM, a multi-domain framework that integrates psychological, criminological, and institutional elements and understands how this turns into a unified trajectory of violent action. While traditional models follow the census of isolating singular predictors, CSAM takes a dynamic view of escalation

by conceptualising school shootings as the humiliation of intersecting and compounding strains over time, laying the groundwork for cross-sector preventive strategies applicable in real-world environments.

6.1: Summary of Key Findings and Their Significance:

As a result of an in-depth analysis of five notorious case studies, this dissertation identified evident, recurring patterns across psychological, criminological, and systematic dimensions. Elements such as unaddressed mental health issues and chronic withdrawal became apparent through the psychological aspect, while criminological indicators often involved early delinquent behaviour, violent ideation, and online radicalisation. This research found many systematic shortcomings regarding reactive disciplinary measures, a lack of multi-agency collaboration, and inconsistent support structures, which all amplify individual vulnerabilities. When reviewed, these stressors can form observable trajectories before violent escalation. These findings validate that the CSAM was a practical and preventative framework for assessing when and how interventions can disrupt the path toward violence.

6.2: Limitations and Contextual Boundaries:

While this dissertation offers contributions, several limitations must be addressed. Firstly, because this study is primarily qualitative and relies on retrospective analysis of cases, a limitation is the limited case studies that are not restricted to generalisability across broader populations. Aside from this, this research is UK-based. Therefore, much of the political analysis reflects British educational and safeguarding systems. Due to this, the American view on owning firearms and how owning firearms is a form of deep personal liberty must be acknowledged and applied. Both produce challenges when applying findings directly to countries like the U.S., where shooting cases are

more prevalent, and the framework around firearm access differs significantly from the U.K. However, CSAM cannot account for spontaneous, driven attacks outside the cumulative strain trajectory. These limitations highlight the need to refine the model's predictive and preventative potential.

6.3: Future Research Directions:

For future research, building on the groundwork of CSAM whilst pursuing a way of implementing this framework to other forms of targeted school violence, for example, knife attacks, bullying, or even self-harm, and through this, the versatility of CSAMs can be tested. Alongside this, future research can be dedicated to the fundamental legislation surrounding firearm access and why these loopholes have been left open for as long as they have and build an understanding of the variation of influence surrounding the ideation of firearms and violence. Additionally, further research into case study selection and considering the inclusion of non-US cases such as different countries or educational systems can provide a broader perspective.

6.4: Closing Reflections:

School shootings are not the tragic inevitabilities that we make them appear to be but rather the catastrophic, critical endpoints of combined warnings left unheeded. Through this dissertation, it has been shown that without compassion response and timely intervention, psychological distress, criminological behaviours, and systematic failures can lead young people to violence, leaving them out of reach of support. Therefore, a moral imperative must be implemented to enforce safeguards legally, multi-agency solidarity, and trauma-informed care at every stage of a student's journey. By viewing risks as a shared responsibility for multiple agencies and intervention as an ethical duty, CSAMs alter the frame of school safety as an

expression of collective impassion, guaranteeing warning signs go unassisted and a child's crisis goes unsupported.

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