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## Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a sharp incline in the number of annual school shootings in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). With this rise, greater attempts have been made to identify precipitating factors that ultimately lead to mass violence. One of the foremost methods has been creating a profile of the typical school shooter so that potential perpetrators can be identified prior to attacks. However, the FBI has cautioned against this method. Attempting to create a profile of a school shooter is complicated by a multitude of variables, including the relatively small sample size and the need to differentiate between varying forms of violence, such as mass gun violence versus gang-related violence. While the majority of all school gun violence occurs in urban settings, mass school shootings are primarily committed by white, middle-class males in suburban and rural settings. However, utilizing a profile such as this runs the risk of incorrectly implicating a large number of students, and would still likely fail to identify future school shooters (Baird, 2017; Ritchie, 2023).

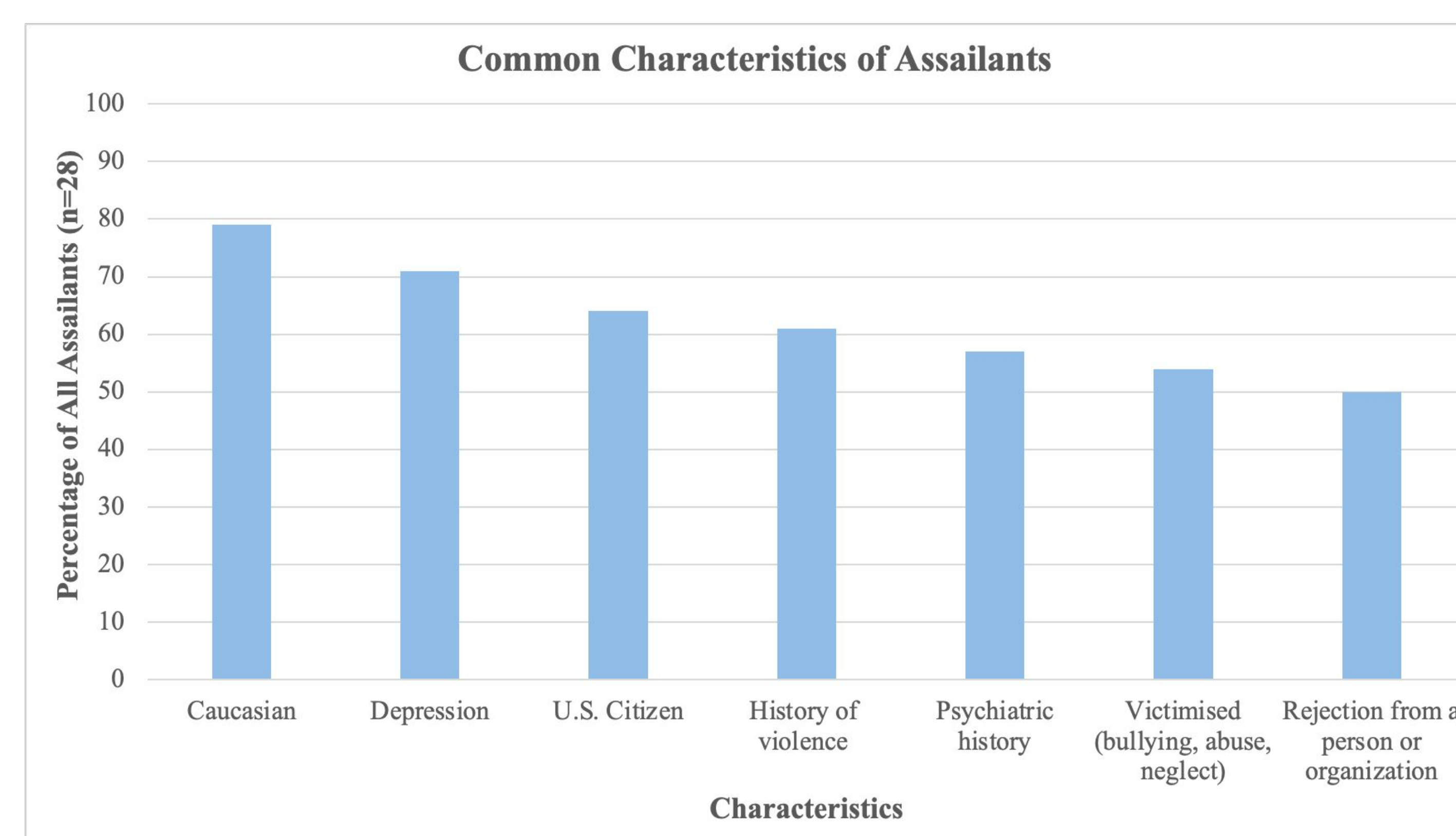
Attempts to profile school shooters often implicates mental illness as the primary motivation. While 64% of U.S. adults in the general population report experiencing at least one adverse childhood event before the age of eighteen, this number is as high as 73% amongst school shooters (Dowdell et al., 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). However, it is important to note that violence related to mental illness does not occur in isolation, and these events are oftentimes also related to socioeconomic stressors such as insecure housing or a history of trauma (Krebs & Mackavey, 2023). This begs the question, if profiling is ineffective, what techniques can be used to prevent future mass school shootings?

## Purpose

Given the growing discussion linking mental health issues to school shooters, this study aims to investigate observed patterns of traits and behaviors exhibited by offenders and evaluate current recommendations to prevent future school violence.

## Methods

- **Search Engines:** EBSCOhost, Pubmed, Google Scholar
- **Search Terms:** “School shooter”, “mental health”, “psychology”, “traits”
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Violence attempted or committed by offenders of all ages using a firearm on school premises at college campuses or elementary, middle, or high schools across the globe from 2000 onwards
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Gang-related shooting events



**Figure 1.** Adapted from "Offender and Offence Characteristics of School Shooting Incidents," by F. J. Gerard, K. C. Whitfield, L.E. Porter, K.D. Browne, 2016, *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* 13: 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jip.1439>

## Warning Behaviors Identified in School Shooters

Fixation	Last Resort	Pathway	Identification
Increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or cause	Increasing desperation or distress forcing the individual into a position of last resort	Research, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack	Closely associating with weapons, identifying with previous attackers, or identifying as an agent to advance a cause
Directly Communicated Threat	Novel Aggression	Energy Burst	Leakage
Communication of a direct threat to the target or law enforcement	Unrelated act of violence committed for the first time	Increase in frequency or variety of activities related to target	Communication to a third party of an intent to harm a target through an attack

**Table 1.** Adapted from “Some Warning Behaviors Discriminate Between School Shooters and Other Students of Concern,” by J.R. Meloy, J. Hoffmann, K. Roshdi, & A. Guldemann, 2014, *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000020>



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## Results

Based on one study of twenty eight cases of school shootings, the majority of offenders are white males who attend the schools that they attack, are subjects of bullying, and report feelings of isolation and rejection by their peers. Offenders tend to come from families with low emotional intimacy and lack of supervision, and have histories of violent interests, anger management issues, and mood disorders. Of offenders who were diagnosed with mood disorders, 61% were noted to have depression, and 78% were noted to have a history of suicidal ideation. Despite having histories of violent interests, most of the assailants did not have a prior history of committing violent acts (Gerard et al., 2015). Another study that examined positive psychosocial characteristics in twenty mass school shooters found the offenders broadly lacked social involvement in school organizations, community, and religious groups (Vitz & Faria, 2020).

In addition to offender characteristics, certain behavior patterns were identified among offenders (Meloy et al., 2014). These included fixation, identification, last resort, pathway, novel aggression, directly communicated threat, leakage, and energy burst, as defined in **Table 1**. In a study of nine active shooter cases, all nine offenders demonstrated pathway, fixation, identification, and leakage (Meloy et al., 2014). According to the *Safe School Initiative* published by the Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, in 81% of incidents of targeted school violence “at least one person has information that the attacker was thinking about or planning the school attack” (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

## Discussion

- Although risk profiles pose challenges, identifying general offender characteristics and behavior patterns provides an opportunity for early intervention
- Addressing underlying causes such as insufficient mental health services, easy access to firearms, and low teacher-to-student ratios can prevent school violence
- Forming threat assessment teams may be an effective and economical way to identify and resolve threats



QR Code to Abstract and References