

Abstract of the talk at 16th annual congress of the German Association of psychotraumatology on “individual – trauma – institution: scientific and cultural aspects as well as aspects concerning the health care system” published in German in Abstractband DeGPT-Tagung 2014, page 43

Epidemiology and predictors of psychological stress of affected students after a school shooting

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Background: Institutions like schools can be affected by traumatic events like school shootings, research concerning psychological consequences still scarce, despite several such incidents. This study examines posttraumatic and general psychological stress of affected students after the school shooting in Erfurt in 2002.

Methods: In cooperation with “Unfallkasse Thüringen”, medical records and psychological screening of affected students (N=638) were analyzed by means of multiple regression. Posttraumatic (measured with CAPS-CA or PDS) and general psychological stress (measured with CBCL/4-18 or SCL-90-R) was evaluated in two sub-samples: students in grades 5-7 (N=239) and students in grades 8-12 (N=399).

Results: 44.7% of the students met diagnostic criteria of posttraumatic stress disorder according to DSM-IV. Female gender was found to be a significant risk factor ($\beta_{5-7}=.22$, $p<.01$; $\beta_{8-12}=.08$, $p<.001$). Peritraumatic physiological hyperarousal had a significant effect on students in grades 5-7 ($\beta_{5-7} = .17$, $p < .01$). With regard to general psychological stress, female gender was again a significant risk factor ($\beta_{8-12}=.27$, $p<.001$) whereas physical proximity was the only significant predictor for students in grades 5-7 ($\beta_{5-7}=.18$, $p<.05$).

Conclusion: Institutions like schools need profound information on the epidemiology of psychological stress in regards to school shootings to be able to manage these situations adequately.

This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 312395.

