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Learning from Crisis: School Stabbings in Sweden and the Case for De-Escalation Training

On August 21, 2026, a 17-year-old girl was killed and three others seriously injured when an 18-year-old student attacked Brinell High School in Fagersta, Sweden - another sword crisis. Recent research offers insights that could help schools move beyond traditional “lockdown and escape” protocols.

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De-Escalation Under Duress: A Civilian Encounter Duri...

On 13 April 2024, Joel Cauchi perpetrated a mass stabbing attack at Westfield Bondi Junction, Sydney, Australia, resulting in six fatalities and twelve injuries...



A Pattern of Violence

Sweden's experience with targeted school violence, while less frequent than in some nations, has been devastating. The Fagersta attack follows a series of incidents that have shaken the country's sense of security. In 2015, the Trollhättan school attack claimed three lives when 21-year-old Anton Lundin Pettersson entered Kronan school armed with a sword, posing for photographs with students before methodically targeting dark-skinned victims in what authorities classified as a racist hate crime [3]. Forensic analysis using the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) revealed that Pettersson had autism spectrum disorder, depression, and suicidal ideation, with his attack triggered by job loss and fuelled by chronic anger toward immigrants [3].

In 2022, two female teachers were killed in Malmö when an 18-year-old man attacked them with a knife and axe. In 2025, Sweden suffered its worst mass shooting when 11 people died at an education centre in Örebro. These incidents

represent what researchers describe as “lone actor” attacks - planned acts of violence by individuals acting without direct organisational support [4], [20].

Nordic research on school violence preparedness has documented significant gaps in crisis response capabilities [1]. A qualitative study examining school shootings and life-threatening violence in Nordic contexts found that while schools have developed protocols for evacuation and lockdown, few have invested in training staff to manage direct encounters with attackers when escape is impossible [1].



Beyond “Escape, Hide, Tell”

Traditional crisis guidance focuses on three responses: escape the danger zone, hide if escape is impossible, and alert authorities. While this framework has merit, it offers limited options for those who cannot flee - teachers protecting students, staff members in enclosed spaces, or individuals directly confronted by an attacker. Recent autoethnographic research by Lynch (2026) challenges this limitation, proposing what he terms a “fourth stress response”: a deliberate, trained turn toward danger using de-escalation principles [17].

Lynch’s framework emerged from his direct experience during the April 2024 Westfield Bondi Junction mass stabbing attack in Australia, where Joel Cauchi killed six people and injured twelve others. Drawing on his professional training in Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) Safety Intervention principles, Lynch employed five core de-escalation strategies: verbal de-escalation using calm, empathetic communication; non-threatening body language with visible, open

hands; the supportive stance, positioning oneself at an angle to reduce perceived threat; rational detachment, maintaining emotional composure; and continuous environmental awareness of safety risks and escape routes [17].

Critically, Lynch's approach does not advocate confrontation or physical intervention by untrained civilians. Rather, it provides evidence-based strategies for reducing escalation when direct encounter is unavoidable. The coronial inquest into the Bondi Junction attack recognised multiple civilians who used improvised tools and calm positioning to protect others, demonstrating that trained responses can function as harm-reduction strategies even in extreme circumstances [17].



Evidence for De-Escalation in Educational Settings

The relevance of de-escalation training extends beyond clinical and social service environments where it originated. Research on school threat assessment and crisis preparedness increasingly recognises that educators need skills beyond evacuation protocols [7], [8], [9]. The German NETWASS (Networks Against School Shootings) programme, for example, has demonstrated that training school staff to recognise and respond to students in psychosocial crisis can prevent targeted violence before it occurs [9], [15]. This approach focuses on early intervention rather than emergency response, but the underlying principle remains consistent: trained individuals can reduce harm through deliberate, evidence-based actions.

Swedish research on school violence has documented the psychological toll on educators who feel unprepared for crisis situations [10], [18]. A 2011 survey of Swedish teachers found widespread concern about threats and violence, with

many reporting inadequate training in crisis management [10], [18].

International studies support these findings, showing that teachers who receive crisis intervention training report greater self-efficacy and confidence in managing escalated situations [6].

Threat assessment research provides additional context for understanding prevention. Studies examining school attackers consistently find warning signs - often called “leakage” - where individuals communicate their intentions before acting [7], [8], [11], [13]. The U.S. Secret Service’s Safe School Initiative found that in most cases of targeted school violence, attackers told someone about their plans beforehand [11]. This suggests that comprehensive school safety requires both prevention through threat assessment and preparedness through crisis response training.

Preparing Schools: A Multi-Layered Approach

The Trollhättan attack exposed critical security failures. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate had fined Kronan school 600,000 kronor just months before the attack for “substantial shortcomings in the areas of security and the study environment” [5]. The school’s cafeteria and library were open to the public, allowing the attacker to enter unchallenged. Yet simply hardening schools with security measures addresses only one dimension of the problem.

Research on school preparedness for mass-casualty events emphasises the need for multi-layered approaches [2], [19]. Swedish emergency preparedness expert Annelie Holgersson’s work on public transportation attacks demonstrates that effective crisis response requires coordination between physical security, staff training, and inter-organisational collaboration [2]. Applied to schools, this suggests that preparedness must include:

Environmental design and access control: Balancing openness with security through controlled entry points and visitor management systems, while maintaining the welcoming atmosphere essential to education [21].

Threat assessment protocols: Systematic processes for identifying and responding to students exhibiting concerning behaviours, as demonstrated by

the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines and similar evidence-based programmes [8], [14], [16].

Crisis response training: Equipping educators with de-escalation skills, situational awareness, and options for protective action when escape is impossible [17]. This training should be trauma-informed and avoid creating excessive fear or anxiety among staff and students.

Mental health support: Addressing the underlying psychosocial crises that often precede targeted violence through accessible counselling, peer support networks, and early intervention programmes [9], [15].

Post-incident support: Preparing for the psychological aftermath of violence through crisis counselling, community support, and evidence-based trauma recovery programmes [5].

Moving Forward

The Fagersta attack, like Trollhättan before it, demonstrates that Sweden is not immune to the targeted school violence that has plagued other nations. While the frequency of such attacks remains lower than in countries like the United States, each incident carries profound trauma for victims, families, and communities. The forensic analysis of the Trollhättan attacker revealed a complex interplay of mental health challenges, social isolation, and ideological radicalisation [3] - factors that demand comprehensive prevention strategies rather than single-point solutions.

Lynch's framework for de-escalation under duress offers a valuable addition to school safety planning, not as a replacement for existing protocols but as an evidence-based option for situations where escape is impossible [17]. His key recommendation - that crisis management training should incorporate de-escalation principles alongside traditional guidance - deserves serious consideration by education authorities. As he notes, investing in crisis training for public-facing professionals, including educators, increases the presence of trained individuals who can reduce harm in active threat situations.

The Swedish context presents unique opportunities for implementing such approaches. The country's strong tradition of teacher professionalisation,

commitment to evidence-based policy, and relatively well-resourced education system provide a foundation for comprehensive crisis preparedness programmes. Nordic research networks studying school violence have already established collaborative frameworks for sharing best practices across borders [1], [12].

Ultimately, preventing and preparing for school violence requires acknowledging an uncomfortable reality: while we work to prevent such attacks through threat assessment, mental health support, and social intervention, we must also prepare for the possibility that prevention may fail. Providing educators with evidence-based tools for crisis response - including de-escalation strategies - represents not a capitulation to violence but a pragmatic recognition that preparedness saves lives.

As Sweden mourns the loss in Fagersta and reflects on the lessons of Trollhättan, Malmö, and Örebro, the path forward must combine prevention and preparedness. The research is clear: schools need multi-layered approaches that address both the root causes of violence and the immediate need to protect students and staff when crisis occurs. De-escalation training, grounded in evidence and adapted to educational contexts, offers one piece of this essential puzzle.



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- Adjunct Professor at the Universiti of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) in the Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE)
- Plymouth University - Subject Lead in the Institute of Education - Ofsted outstanding (UK) 2015-2017
- Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University - no. 1 in world QS rankings (Australia) (2011-2015).
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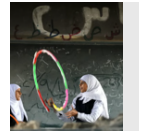
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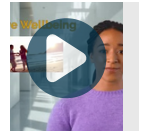
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