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# BYSTANDER REPORTING HELPS PREVENT MASS VIOLENCE

Bystander reporting's role in mitigating mass violence deserves much more attention – because peers, bystanders, and “bystanders of bystanders” often know a lot about a person’s concerning behavior, and because they often choose not to report because they perceive authority figures are not receptive or are unlikely to be helpful.

Professionals in the field of threat assessment and management, which seeks to prevent mass attacks, have long agreed that bystanders are often key to preventing these acts of violence. Threat assessment and management professionals work quietly every day to prevent mass violence. This process involves the identification, assessment, and mitigation of threats. The identification piece is key – clearly, assessment and mitigation cannot occur before a threat is identified. Without – often heroic – bystanders who notice concerning behaviors and report them, becoming “upstanders,” identifying threats would be a much more burdensome process for security practitioners and other authorities.

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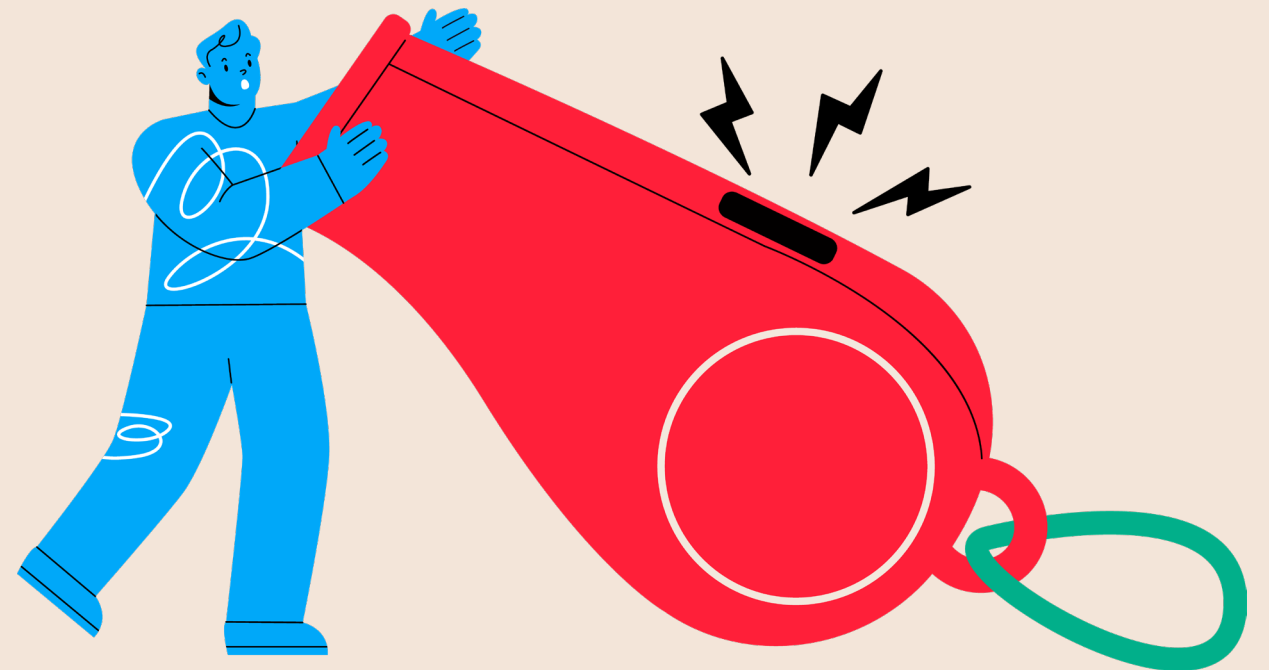
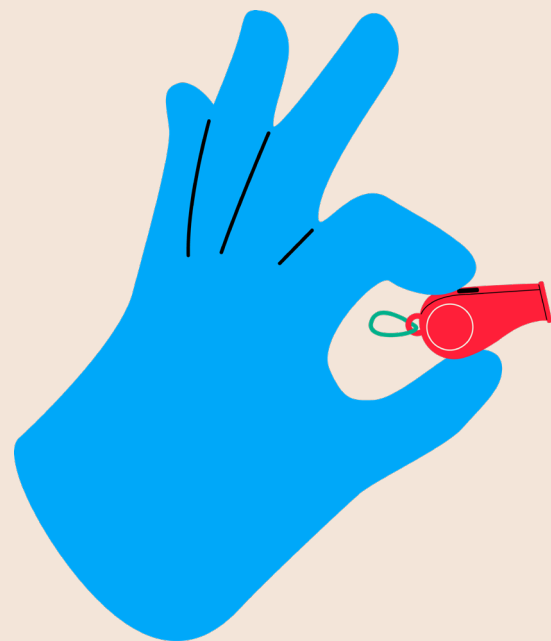
However, security professionals cannot continue to call for bystanders to become upstanders without upholding our end of the bargain. While bystanders and security professionals have worked together to identify and mitigate significant threats throughout the years, cases like Lewiston, ME or Parkland, FL are reminders that more work is to be done.

The 2023 Initial Interim Report from The Independent Commission to Investigate the Facts of the Tragedy in Lewiston (the Commission) was a stark reminder of this. Initial findings appear to point out that the offender’s teenage son, coworkers, brother, leadership, and others, identified that he was acting out of the norm and something needed to be done. The offender’s concerning behaviors, which included paranoia, deteriorating mental wellness, and threats of violence, were noticed by those closest to him and those who worked beside him. On at least

two occasions, bystanders made the heroic choice to report their concerns to law enforcement, and the Commission found several attempts by bystanders to address their concerns with the offender directly. Despite these efforts, on October 25, 2023, the offender killed 18 people and injured 13 others, before killing himself.

The tragedy in Lewiston, ME begs the question – why didn’t authorities recognise the significance of the bystander reporting they received? This question may never be answered, but clearly the importance of the bystander reporting was not sufficiently recognised by authorities.

Research has found that bystanders are often hesitant to report their concerns for a wide variety of reasons. One very important reason is that they perceive the authorities who would receive their report to be unreceptive or unlikely to be helpful. Indirect bystanders, people who are bystanders-of-bystanders, may be hesitant for much the same, or entirely different reasons. These bystanders of bystanders are also vital to authority figures’ efforts to prevent mass violence, as they often assist bystanders in the decision to come forward – or, unfortunately, discourage such action.



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It is essential that security professionals understand the people who report potential violence and understand the access to information these bystanders may have. A close family member in contact with a potential offender every day may hold different information than a spouse, a colleague, or an online stranger. Assessing the relationship that a bystander, or bystander of a bystander, has to the reported party may improve security professionals’ ability to triage and respond to threats of violence.

Understanding the wide variety of barriers that bystanders face when considering reporting may also help security professionals triage and prioritise reports of concern. A tip from a concerned mother who thinks she has tried everything to prevent her son from violence and now feels she must go to law enforcement is different from a tip from a stranger about a post they saw online by someone they don’t know; the stranger faces much lower barriers to reporting than the concerned parent. It is usually much more difficult for a close friend or family member to come forward, but once they overcome their barriers, their information often proves to be the most useful to authorities.

Ongoing education and awareness for security professionals and authorities in bystander reporting and barriers they face is imperative – and will contribute to preventing mass violence.

## QUESTIONS FOR SECURITY PRACTITIONERS TO ASK THEMSELVES:

1. What relationship does this potential bystander have to the person about whom they are concerned?
  - a. Are they a stranger, a friend, a family member, a peer, a coworker, an authority figure?
2. What is the context? Are they part of an organisation or community? What has happened recently?
3. Is this person a bystander of a bystander (an indirect bystander)?
4. Does this potential or actual source of information describe specific concerning behaviors they are worried about?
5. Does this bystander report having taken steps to address their concern? Have they spoken with the person directly? Have they contacted other authority figure(s) or other bystanders?
6. Have multiple potential bystanders reported concerns regarding the same person? If so, how has the organisation or community reacted? What steps have been taken thus far?

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