

Brendan O'Rourke: A Profile

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Brendan O'Rourke's early life. This article will review the details of his attack, present the available information about his background, highlight his severe psychosis, and compare him to other aberrant adult shooters.

THE ATTACK

O'Rourke had no connection to Kelly Elementary School. He had considered other schools for his attack before deciding on Kelly; his decision to attack Kelly Elementary apparently was based on issues of access to the school and ease of escape due to traffic patterns.¹ He had legally bought the gun he used more than a year before shooting.²

O'Rourke planned his attack as both a shooting and a bombing. He had a gas can and a propane tank that he had intended to use as explosives. He opened fire on children during recess, but told them, "This is just a drill. These are not real bullets."³ O'Rourke was confronted by construction workers at the school; when he fled the workers chased him. When O'Rourke pointed his gun at one of the workers in a vehicle, the worker drove into him. Other workers then kicked and hit O'Rourke, took his gun, and held him until the police arrived.⁴ During the attack, O'Rourke reportedly looked "crazed," "distant, far-off," and "disconnected," and was yelling about Christians, Barack Obama, and AIG.⁵

O'ROURKE'S LIFE

Piecing together O'Rourke's life is difficult due to the lack of information, with his early life remaining a mystery. All that

is known about his family is that he had a half-brother named Larry. At some point, O'Rourke had taken college classes, but when and where is not known.⁶

In 2002, he was living with a roommate in Illinois while working at an insurance company. He reportedly became depressed when he was fired from his job as an electronics technician.⁷ This job may have been with AIG; he reportedly had worked for AIG at some point.⁸ As discussed below, his delusions focused significantly on AIG.

O'Rourke's roommate encouraged him to seek treatment for his depression, but O'Rourke refused. The roommate then asked him to move out. Following this, the roommate and his mother received harassing telephone calls; at one point, there were 228 calls within five days. O'Rourke was arrested on a misdemeanor charge of telephone harassment. He was given

BRENDAN O'ROURKE

Date: **8 October 2010**
School: **Kelly Elementary School**
Location: **Carlsbad, CA**
Age: **41**
Killed: **0**
Wounded: **2**
Outcome: **Subdued; apprehended; prison**
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**
Psychological type: **Psychotic**
Attack type: **Targeted group (children)**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

one year of probation and fined \$300.⁹

O'Rourke stated that he moved from Illinois to California in 2008.¹⁰ In March of 2009, he reportedly told a neighbor he was unemployed, but he found a job a few months later.¹¹ At the time of the attack, he was employed at an entertainment company that installed video equipment and games in commercial establishments. In the year before the attack, police were called to his apartment three times due to complaints about the noise he was making. The noise included yelling racial slurs, profanity, and statements that he was going to kill somebody.¹² Due to the complaints, O'Rourke was given a 60-day eviction notice in August 2010.¹³

PSYCHOSIS

As summarized in a court report, O'Rourke had

long-standing delusions that members of a conspiracy were persecuting him, including by torturing him, holding him captive in a basement, threatening his life, preventing him from dating younger women, making false claims that he had committed rape, and telling women that he was homosexual.¹⁴

O'Rourke believed that AIG was involved in political corruption and was somehow behind the conspiracy against him. He wrote an email to his half-brother, Larry, on 30 August 2010, that he was going to work for AIG, commenting:

You were the one who said if you could not beat them, then join them. Therefore, that is exactly what I am going to do. I want to destroy some lives, in fact many lives, and laugh in their faces while being paid by AIG insurance and Illinois political Weathermen, because life is all about [greed] money, cocaine, torture, and corruption.¹⁵

A month before this, O'Rourke had written to his half-brother:

I'm going to join AIG insurance and destroy people's lives, and I will get paid for it. By me destroying American citizens' lives, I will be exposing AIG insurance and Illinois politicians in the news for what they are all about, and that is cocaine and corruption for the money.¹⁶

After receiving his eviction notice, O'Rourke wrote in his diary that he believed the conspirators were behind the eviction. He also wrote that he believed a woman must have filed a false rape report with the apartment manager that caused him to be evicted.¹⁷

The connection between his delusions about AIG and politicians in Illinois and his attack on an elementary school in California is difficult to follow. At one point, he wrote that by committing a terrorist attack he would receive a "lavish retirement" because "everybody who does crimes on behalf of the Illinois' corrupt politicians gets taken care of."¹⁸ On 27 September 2010, he wrote to his half-brother a message indicating his belief that

AIG and the Illinois Political Weathermen had tortured him in order to get him to commit the attack, and that once he does so, he will be paid "handsomely."¹⁹

After the attack, O'Rourke explained to the police that his plan was to "kill white Christian children."²⁰ He subsequently claimed that he committed the attack in order to stop the harassment and torture by the conspirators. Prior to this, however, he had framed the attack as an assault "against rich people," noting that he wanted to "go around and slaughter rich people's families."²¹ He also had conceptualized the attack as a way to get the conspirators to stop filing false claims of rape and sexual harassment. He thought that "taking someone else's happiness away from them . . . could give him happiness and success."²²

The source of his hostility toward white people (he was white) and Christianity is unknown.

COMMENTARY

Woven through O'Rourke's paranoid delusions were various sexual themes. These included that his beliefs that the conspirators

- prevented him from dating younger women,
- made false allegations of rape against him, and
- told women he was homosexual.

When he received his eviction notice, he thought that this was a result of a false rape allegation. The prominence of these themes raises the possibility that O'Rourke may have had rape fantasies and perhaps struggled with homosexual urges, but there is no information to confirm or disconfirm these possibilities.

O'Rourke was described as a loner. He apparently wanted to have a woman in his life but was not successful. In 2009, he had written to Larry that he was considering joining the Peace Corps where he would not only help humanity but also "might meet a nice young woman."²³ He made advances on women in his apartment complex that led to conflict. At least one woman was afraid of him and another said "there was just a funny vibe. He was weird."²⁴ Sexual frustration and the failure to establish a relationship with a woman have been common themes among school shooters.

Another common theme is the aspiration to have a career in the military or law enforcement. O'Rourke may fit this pattern; he got licensed as a security guard in California.²⁵ He does not appear, however, to have ever been employed as a security guard. The desire among school shooters to be in the military or law enforcement may be their attempt to establish their masculinity. Failure in this pursuit may be devastating.²⁶

Why O'Rourke attacked an elementary school is known. Even with a knowledge of his delusions, it is not possible to draw a clear line between his thinking that a terrorist attack would be beneficial to him and his choice of an elementary school for the venue of the attack. There apparently was no need to commit violence at a school or against children. In an article about Adam

Lanza, the 20-year-old Sandy Hook Elementary School killer who gunned down 6-year-old children, I speculated, “perhaps he felt so weak and inadequate that he was afraid to attack teens or adults. Maybe he sought out the most vulnerable targets because that was all he felt capable of handling.”²⁷

ABERRANT ADULT SHOOTERS

Aberrant adult shooters are those with no current or recent connection to the schools they attack. Comparing O’Rourke to 16 other aberrant adult shooters I’ve profiled reveals that he fits several patterns. First, most aberrant adult shooters have been psychotic. At least 13, and possibly 14, of the 16 other aberrant adult perpetrators had psychotic symptoms. This is important to recognize because the search for a rationale for their attacks may run into what I have called “an irrational rationale,” i.e., a motivation based on delusions rather than reality.

O’Rourke’s status as a single adult, without a spouse or significant other, is in keeping with the other 16 aberrant adult shooters. Of these, none was married at the time of their attacks, and only one was involved in a relationship (Jillian Robbins had a boyfriend; she had a significant fight with him the day before her attack). Based on this sample, the failure to establish a stable significant intimate relationship is typical for this population.

If O’Rourke’s aspiration to be a security guard was akin to the aspirations of other shooters to be in the military or law enforcement, then this parallels a number of other aberrant adult perpetrators. Of the 16, at least 7 had military aspirations (and one of these also worked briefly as a security guard), another one may have served in the military in another country, another one aspired to be a terrorist, and one more was obsessed with the military though it is not known if he aspired to a career there.

Apart from their failures to have careers in the military, aberrant adult shooters generally struggled with maintaining employment and supporting themselves. O’Rourke had been fired from one position and had experienced unemployment, though he was employed at the time of his attack. In this regard, he did better than most aberrant adult perpetrators. He was, however, facing eviction. Whether the stress of this contributed to his violence is unknown. If he had, in fact, been fired by AIG, this could have been so distorted by his paranoia as to account for his obsession with the organization.

In addition to O’Rourke, three aberrant adult shooters attacked elementary schools. All three had traits of two types of shooters. Laurie Dann and Thomas Hamilton both had aspects of psychotic and psychopathic shooters, and James Wilson was both traumatized and psychotic. Based on the available information, O’Rourke was psychotic, with no evidence of psychopathic traits or the significant family dysfunction seen among traumatized shooters. This lack of evidence, however, could simply be due to the lack of information about his earlier life.

SUMMARY

At age 41, Brendan O’Rourke attacked an elementary school he had never attended. He shot two girls and had intended to use explosives to commit a much greater atrocity. Like most aberrant adult shooters, he was psychotic, with the rationale for the attack being driven by his delusions. Though he was employed, he had not succeeded in his aspiration to be a security guard, nor had he succeeded in establishing a relationship with a significant other. Aberrant adult shooters typically struggle with multiple life domains, and though O’Rourke was somewhat more successful than others in this population, he had suffered significant personal and professional disappointments. It appears that the combination of these failures and his psychotic symptoms resulted in his violent behavior.

NOTES

- 1 Eva Knott. “Brendan O’Rourke Tells His Tale,” *San Diego Reader*, 18 April 2012.
- 2 Knott, “Tells His Tale.”
- 3 “People v. O’Rourke,” 2013, p. 2. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 4 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 3.
- 5 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 3.
- 6 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 8.
- 7 Associated Press. “Report: Shooting Suspect Depressed About Lost Job,” Associated Press, 13 October 2010.
- 8 ABC News. “Carlsbad School Shooter Given 189-Year Prison Sentence,” *ABC News*, 20 April 2012.
- 9 Kristina Davis and Harry Jones. “Carlsbad Shooting Suspect had Troubled Past,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 12 October 2010.
- 10 Teri Figueroa. “Kelley Elementary Shooter Says He Scouted Second School,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 26 January 2012.
- 11 Harry Jones and Pauline Repard, “Accused School Shooter Described as Angry Loner,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 9 October 2010.
- 12 Davis and Jones, “Carlsbad Shooting.”
- 13 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 6.
- 14 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 4.
- 15 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 6.
- 16 “People v. O’Rourke,” pp. 5-6.
- 17 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 6.
- 18 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 6.
- 19 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 6.
- 20 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 7.
- 21 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 5.
- 22 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 5.
- 23 “People v. O’Rourke,” p. 5.
- 24 Jones and Repard, “Accused School Shooter.”
- 25 Jones and Repard, “Accused School Shooter.”
- 26 Peter Langman. “Patterns Among School Shooters: Body-Related

Issues and the Military.” Available at www.schoolshooters.info;
Peter Langman. “A Bio-Psycho-Social Model of School Shooters,”
Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention, 2017, Vol. 5, pp. 27–34;
Peter Langman. *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College,*

and Adult Perpetrators, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.
27 Peter Langman. *The Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention*,
2015, Vol. 3, pp. 1–11. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.