

# School Shooters: The Warning Signs

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School shootings can be prevented by identifying warning signs in the form of leakage and attack-related behavior. Rampage school shooters typically reveal their violent intentions through their talk with peers, their school assignments, their online behavior, and/or their interactions with their parents. This article presents examples of warning signs that occurred prior to rampage attacks in the United States, Canada, and Finland.

In the last dozen years, multiple works have been published about the prevention of school violence. Some have focused specifically on the prevention of school shootings, including reports by the FBI as well as the Secret Service in conjunction with the Department of Education (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Others have focused more broadly on preventing school violence in general (Cornell & Sheras, 2006; Fox & Burstein, 2010).

A significant part of preventing school violence involves establishing and implementing a threat assessment system. Such a system prepares professionals in various disciplines, including law enforcement, education, and mental health, to investigate and evaluate potential threats that come to their attention. In order for people to identify potential threats, however, they need to know what behaviors might indicate that a student is contemplating carrying out a school shooting. This article presents warning signs from actual rampage school shootings in an effort to assist professionals in identifying potential school shooters.

The warning signs of school shootings do not relate to students' clothing, the video games they play, their musical preferences, or other aspects of their lifestyles. Warning signs are specific actions that students engage in that constitute attack-

related behaviors. These include any behavior related to the preparation for an attack: stockpiling weapons, diagramming the school as part of planning the attack, writing down plans, and so on. A key aspect of attack-related behavior is leakage – the leaking of plans to other people. Leakage occurs in several ways, including attempts to recruit someone to join the attack, warning a friend to stay away from school on a certain day, bragging about the upcoming attack, or otherwise indicating violent intentions.

## DIRECT THREATS

The most obvious warning signs often are ignored because people simply do not take them seriously. In 1997 in West Paducah, Kentucky, Michael Carneal told students that “he was gonna come to school and start shooting people . . . He kept on saying that Monday was the day of reckoning” (Adams and Malone, 1999). In 1998 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Andrew Golden stood on a table in the cafeteria and announced, “You’re all going to die” (Newman, 2004). Mitchell Johnson, Golden’s partner in the shooting, made multiple statements about shooting girls who rejected him, saying “I’ve got a lot of killing to do” (Kifner, 1998). According to a peer, Johnson also said, “Tomorrow you will find out if you live or die” (Labi, 1998). In 2007 in Cleveland, Ohio, Asa Coon made multiple comments to peers stating that he would shoot people at school. Similarly, Andy Williams told friends he was going to shoot people at school, T.J. Solomon threatened publicly to blow up his classroom, and many other shooters have declared their plans to their peers.

Unfortunately, despite the shooters clearly announcing their

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intentions, there was no intervention. There could be several reasons for this. First, the students may have been seen as too young to commit murder: Carneal and Coon were 14 years old, Johnson was 13, and Golden was only 11. Second, in some cases the students were seen as weird and were known for saying strange things; thus, no one took anything they said seriously. Third, sometimes shooters made direct threats but when questioned by their friends, said they would never actually carry out their threats. As a result, no report was made to adults. Finally, people may assume that anyone who seriously intends to carry out mass murder is not going to announce it publicly. This is where school shooters often differ from adult killers. Youths who commit school shootings typically leave a long trail of signals about what they intend to do. These warning signs of impending violence need to be responded to immediately. The best strategy for identifying these warning signs as early as possible is to train students to recognize threats of violence and provide them with multiple avenues of reporting what they hear to school authorities.

Another type of leakage occurs when students attempt to recruit a peer to join them in the attack. Andrew Golden convinced Mitchell Johnson to be his partner in the attack in Jonesboro. That same year, Andrew Wurst in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, tried to recruit a friend to join him but the friend turned him down. Unfortunately, the friend did not notify any adults about what Andrew was planning. A better outcome occurred in 2008 when Dillon Cossey approached a friend about helping him with an attack and the friend reported this to the police, who investigated the situation and arrested Cossey, thus foiling a potential rampage.

Leakage also occurs in the form of warnings. Michael Carneal warned some of his friends to stay away from school on the Monday after Thanksgiving – the day of his attack. He told other peers to avoid the lobby, which is where his attack was to occur. Students need to be taught not only to report direct threats, but invitations to join the attack as well as warnings to stay away because of the attack.

## ADMIRATION AND IMITATION

A less direct threat occurs when a student condones or comments favorably on a school shooting, perhaps referring to it as “cool” or stating that “somebody should do that here.” For example, Andrew Wurst made such comments about the Jonesboro shooting by Golden and Johnson. A month later, Wurst carried out his own attack. Kip Kinkel was also fascinated by the Jonesboro shooting and said that somebody should do something like that at his school. Two months after Jonesboro, Kip went on his rampage. Similarly, numerous shooters have been fascinated by previous attacks such as those at Columbine or Virginia Tech. Fascination with school shootings, especially if accompanied by comments like “somebody should do that at this school,” should be taken as warning signs of a possible attack.

In 2006, Kimveer Gill posted an ominous comment on a true-crime website several months before he shot twenty people at Dawson College in Montreal. Gill wrote:

Cool page. Like what you do here. But I find you only look at the story one way. Not once have I read a comment you’ve made about even one of these school shootings being acceptable, or needed. Did you use to be a police officer or something? (Woods, 2006, p. 42)

The idea that school shootings can be “acceptable” or “needed” was a frightening indication of Gill’s perspective and a warning of what was to come.

Gill not only condoned school shootings, but he talked to peers about his interest in the Columbine attack. He also expressed his admiration online for Harris and Klebold. Among his “likes” he listed “Reb and V (Modern Day Saints)” (Kimveer Gill Online, p. 11). Reb was Harris’s nickname and V was short for Vodka, which was Klebold’s nickname. Gill not only “liked” Harris and Klebold, but viewed them as saints. Gill also imitated Harris, writing “Ich bin Gott,” which is German for “I am God” and a phrase that Harris wrote in his school planner and the yearbooks of several of his peers.

Similarly, Pekka-Eric Auvinen wrote what he called “Natural Selector’s Manifesto,” which is full of echoes, quotes, and references to Eric Harris. Harris wrote about natural selection as a way to eliminate unfit people from the earth, and Auvinen wrote a long rant on this same theme. Harris wrote, “HATE! I’m full of hate and I love it” (Eric Harris’s Journal, p. 8). Auvinen wrote, “Hate, I’m so full of it and I love it” (Pekka-Eric Auvinen Online, p. 4). He also wrote, “Like some other wise people have said in the past, human race is not worth fighting for or saving . . . only worth killing” (Pekka-Eric Auvinen Online, p. 5). The wise person he was referring to was Eric Harris, who wrote, “The human race isn’t worth fighting for anymore . . . people just aren’t worth saving” (Eric Harris’s Journal, p. 3). These passages not only reveal how immersed Auvinen was in Harris’s writings, but also highlight the importance of professionals knowing these writings so they can spot unattributed quotes and references.

In Finland in 2008, Matti Saari was heard by peers to repeatedly say “Humanity is overrated.” This was the phrase on the shirt that Pekka-Eric Auvinen wore less than a year before on the day that he committed a school shooting. This imitation of a previous school shooter was a warning sign. In fact, a few days after Saari was heard to say “humanity is overrated,” he committed a rampage attack at his school.

Not only did Saari copy Auvinen’s shirt, but after Auvinen’s attack in Jokela, Saari was so fascinated by the event that he traveled to Jokela and took photographs of the school where Auvinen committed his rampage. He also ordered guns from the same shop where Auvinen had gotten his weapons. Nor was Saari the only shooter to make a pilgrimage to the site of a previous rampage.

Alvaro Castillo was obsessed with Columbine. He was also suicidal and had planned to kill himself on 20 April 2006,

the seventh anniversary of Columbine. His father, however, came home unexpectedly and stopped Castillo's suicide attempt. Castillo was so obsessed with Columbine, however, that he convinced his mother to take him from their home in North Carolina to visit the school. Castillo not only made the trip to Columbine High School, but while in Colorado he purchased a black trench coat like the one Eric Harris wore on the day of the attack. Castillo made the trip in June 2006; on 30 August 2006, he committed a rampage attack at his school.

When someone is so obsessed with a school shooting that he makes a pilgrimage to the school, this should be viewed as a warning sign of potential violence.

## SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS

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School shooters have often foreshadowed their attacks in the content of their school assignments. Sometimes their projects have raised concern among teachers or other school personnel, but not enough to trigger an investigation that might have stopped the attack. In the absence of direct threats, it is difficult to use schoolwork to identify risk. In hindsight, however, it is often clear that students were sending signals of their violent intentions.

For example, Kip Kinkel was interested in bombs. His peers heard him talk about wanting to be the next Unabomber. He even gave an oral report in class on how to make bombs. He had gotten instructions online and had built bombs at home. Though his attack at the school did not involve bombs, he left numerous bombs in his home (where he had murdered his parents) before going on his rampage at the school. Many houses in the neighborhood had to be evacuated while a bomb squad removed the explosives from the Kinkel home. When Kip gave his report, a school counselor heard about it and contacted the parents to express concern. The parents, however, took no action and the matter was dropped. The result was that Kip killed his parents and shot twenty-seven people at school.

The bomb-making presentation was not the only school assignment that was a warning sign of potential violence. When the class was asked to write on the topic of love at first sight, Kip wrote an ominous essay. The essay includes the sentences, "That is why you go to a pawn shop and buy an AK-15 because you are going to execute every last mother fucking one of you" and "My firearms will be the only things to fight my isolation" (Lieberman, 2008, pp. 94-95). The entire essay is strange and disturbing, especially considering it is supposed to be about love.

Kinkel also wrote an essay on *Romeo and Juliet* from the perspective of the character Tybalt. The piece includes the following passages:

But you know me, I loathe all of them ... I am no longer blind in my hatred, I can see with my hate ... Blood will flow until they are all dead ... This was the first moment

in my life where I had taken the life of another. I loved it, it dispelled all the anger and animosity I was feeling. (Lieberman, 2008, p. 94)

In the context of the assignment, this might not be alarming considering that Tybalt fought a duel with Mercutio and killed him. In the context of Kinkel's bomb-making speech and essay on love where he wrote about firearms and murder, it is another warning sign.

Luke Woodham also handed in disturbing writing assignments. One of these was to be about what the students would do if they could spend the day as their teacher. As part of this assignment, Woodham wrote, "I would go crazy and kill all of the other teachers. Then I would slowly and very painfully torture all of the principals to death." Another sentence includes the passage, "Then I would get a gun and blow my brains out" (Clarkson, 2004, pp. 35-36). The second assignment was supposed to be about an incident that upset his parents, but Woodham invented a story that ended with the sentence, "I robbed a bank and set it on fire. I love to set things on fire, and killed all the tellers. When the police came I killed them all and when the National Guard came, I killed most of them but they finally caught me" (Clarkson, 2004, p. 36).

Barry Loukaitis wrote a poem about murder and reportedly read it aloud in class. The poem included the following lines: "It's my first murder, I'm at the point of no return ... I look at his body on the floor, Killing a bastard that deserves to die, Ain't nothing like it in the world" (Fast, 2008, p. 33). Another poem of his referred to murder, and "the heat of hate and the love of death." Besides these written warning signs, Loukaitis made comments about wanting to kill people and asked a girl if she deserved to live. Thus, there was a pattern of thoughts about murder that manifested in multiple written and spoken statements.

Gary Scott Pennington gave warning signs of being both suicidal and homicidal. He wrote an essay stating, "The worst day of my life was the day I was born." He also wrote a short poem: "Lying in bed / Wish I was dead. / Thought of suicide / Might be homicide" (Mueller, 1995). In another assignment he wondered where he would be in a year: "Home and college can be ruled out. Why? Because they don't pat you on the back and send you home for what I'm planning." Pennington was planning a rampage and he provided multiple warning signs of what was coming.

## PROJECTS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS: NONFICTION AND FICTION

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Several school shooters have completed projects and writings about school shootings. Perhaps ironically, the fictional pieces may be better guides to their intentions than the nonfictional ones. For example, at least four shooters wrote essays about rampage school attacks, how they can be prevented, gun control,

and related issues. These shooters were Eric Harris, Seung Hui Cho, Steven Kazmierczak, and Timothy Kretschmer. Of these, only Harris's paper has been made public. Cho's paper caused enough concern that he was referred for an evaluation. Based on the lack of alarm generated by the other papers, however, it seems likely that they gave no indication that the writers were at risk for rampages of their own.

In fact, Harris, Cho, Kazmierczak, and Kretschmer may not have conceived the ideas for their attacks when they wrote their papers. Even if they had, they apparently were able to hide their intentions. Of course, it is possible that students write about school shootings out of genuine interest in the topic without being at risk for violence. If a student who writes on this topic, however, shows other warning signs, then his interest in the topic may not be innocent and should be investigated.

Apart from nonfiction essays on school shootings, other school assignments more clearly foreshadowed future violence. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold made a film for their video production class that was called "The Trench Coat Mafia: Hitmen for Hire." The film portrays Harris and Klebold as hitmen who are hired by a student who is picked on. They come to school and gun down the bullies. It was reported that the class did not find the video amusing. Other videos were said to have been dark and violent to the point that the class was alarmed and the teacher angry.

It was also reported that Harris had talked about making a video of Klebold and him gunning down students in the cafeteria, as well as talking about a senior prank of riding dirt-bikes through the school as they shot people. In addition, it was reported that Klebold had made a computer simulation of the school being blown up. Klebold also wrote a term paper on Charles Manson where he stated that it is possible to logically explain the actions of the Manson gang.

In February 1999, Klebold wrote a short story about a man who kills students. The story was so disturbing that his teacher refused to grade it. She talked to Klebold about it, met with Klebold's parents, and also talked to a guidance counselor. Klebold said it was just a piece of fiction, and no further action was taken. Approximately six to ten weeks later, the attack at Columbine occurred.

Finally, Michael Carneal handed in a bizarre story about a boy who goes on a rampage against "preps." The story is notable for strange content, disorganization, and reveling in sadism and gore.

Many students write stories that include violent content, however, so it is important not to overreact to student writings. What makes the stories by Klebold and Carneal different from ordinary stories about war or criminals? First, both stories are about young people killing students. In today's climate, any story in which students are murdered by other students should raise concern.

Also, in both stories there is an identification of the author with the killer. In Klebold's story, the killer is described as wearing a black trench coat, being 6'4", and left-handed. Klebold

was approximately 6'4", wore a black trench coat, and was left-handed. In Carneal's story, the killer is named Michael, just like Carneal himself. In addition, the names of students being killed in the story were the names of actual students in his school. Thus, both stories contain evidence that the writers identified with the killers who murdered students, and Carneal actually named real students as victims, giving the story a threatening sense of imminent danger.

Beyond the physical parallel between the killer in his story and himself, Klebold wrote about the killer with admiration – almost worship: "If I could face an emotion of god, it would have looked like the man. I not only saw in his face, but also felt emanating from him power, complacency, closure, and godliness. The man smiled, and in that instant, thru no endeavor of my own, I understood his actions" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, p. 10,468).

In addition, both stories revel in brutal violence. Carneal's is particularly graphic and sadistic. In a passage about the killing of five students, Carneal wrote: "The first one he crucified on a metal cross that had been heated up to a glowing red temperature . . . The third one he heated up a drill bit and drilled it into one of his eyes" (Newman, 2004, p. 94). The sadistic nature of the violence is disturbing and may help to distinguish this paper from more typical stories that include violent content.

Finally, Carneal's paper contains bizarre elements that suggest he was experiencing disorganized thoughts. For example, he wrote, "Michael's Mom's birthday was the next day so he decided to get a present from the 'Your Mom Has a Birthday Only When There's a Riot' store" (Newman, 2004, p. 94). This makes no sense. Other elements of the story also do not make sense or indicate disorganized thinking. Cognitive disorganization is a type of psychosis and a symptom of schizophrenia, and school shooters sometimes have undiagnosed psychosis (Langman, 2009a; Langman, 2009b). When evidence of psychosis occurs along with warning signs of a potential school shooting, it is imperative that the student receives not only a risk assessment but a mental health evaluation as well.

Seung Hui Cho also wrote a story about a school shooting, but in this story, the shooter (named Bud) eventually decides not to go through with the attack. What is notable about Cho's story is the profound sense of isolation and envy that Bud experienced. Bud saw other students as "smiling and laughing as if they're in heaven-on-earth," and he felt like there was "something magical and enchanting about all the people's intrinsic nature that Bud will never experience" (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007, p. 50).

Though Cho's entire story has not been made public, the available excerpts do not appear to be as alarming as the stories by Klebold and Carneal. Other writings of Cho's, as well as his classroom behavior, however, raised alarm among students and faculty. His poetry and plays were disturbing and violent, and his behavior in class was markedly odd. By itself, his story about a would-be school shooter may not have seemed like a warning sign of violence. When the fact that Cho wrote a story

about a young man contemplating a school shooting is added to the disturbing content of his other writings and his own strange behavior, the overall picture becomes more alarming.

## INDIRECT WARNING SIGNS

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Picking up on indirect warning signs is more difficult because any one behavior by itself may not appear to mean much and might easily be explained. Nonetheless, in today's climate it is important to attend to indirect warning signs, especially if there is an accumulation of minor behaviors. Because of the wealth of information available on Columbine, it is possible to identify numerous behaviors of Eric Harris that indicated his interest in homicide.

For example, in a class involving dream interpretation, Harris talked about his dreams of shooting people. In another class, Harris said that people who are "unfit" do not deserve to live. When given the assignment to imagine being an inanimate object, Harris wrote about being a shotgun shell and penetrating someone's body; he read this aloud in class. Harris wrote in a school assignment that stupid people should be shot. In a peer's yearbook, Harris wrote "natural selection needs a boost – like me with a shotgun."

Harris also tried to get friends at school to buy him guns. He told a peer he needed multiple propane tanks by 20 April; when asked why, he said it was Hitler's birthday. The peer apparently did not ask about the connection between Hitler and propane tanks. Friends knew that he bought guns illegally, sawed off the barrels, and practiced with the guns. While examining the impact of a bullet in a piece of wood, Harris commented about imagining what the bullet would do to someone's brain. Harris's friends knew he was fascinated by Hitler and even gave Nazi salutes in public. They also knew he made and detonated bombs. He was said to have talked obsessively about guns, and joked about killing people and blowing up the school.

Some of these behaviors by themselves might not seem alarming, but taken together, along with other behaviors discussed above, a pattern emerges. Unfortunately, what often happens is that different individuals observe different behaviors but do not communicate their knowledge with each other. Thus, the pattern goes unnoticed. This is why communication among school personnel and other professionals is essential.

## WARNING SIGNS AT HOME

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In several cases, parents of school shooters were aware of behaviors in their children that in hindsight can be seen as significant warning signs. To cite one example, Kip Kinkel was obsessed with guns. He begged and pleaded for his parents to buy him guns. When his father bought him one gun, Kip just wanted more. By itself, this may not seem alarming. Kip, however, was also an explosively angry young man. He was also severely de-

pressed. These symptoms were significant enough that his parents took him to both a psychiatrist and a psychologist. He also had an extensive knife collection. The Kinkel's housekeeper was so disturbed by Kip's weapons that she quit her job with them.

Kip Kinkel also was interested in bombs. In fact, the parents found bomb-making materials in the house and put them in a garbage bag outside. Kip simply went out and brought them back. Kip, like other school shooters (including Eric Harris, Michael Carneal), had a copy of *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, a book that explains how to make explosives from commonly available materials. If his parents had searched his room more thoroughly and/or regularly, they might have found Kip's journal, which articulated his suicidal anguish and his rageful, homicidal thoughts. The combination of explosive anger, desperate depression, and an obsession with weapons and violence is a volatile mix that warrants investigation.

## WARNING SIGNS ONLINE

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A number of shooters have posted text, photographs, or videos online that were warning signs of their upcoming attacks. As noted above, people might think that someone who is planning to commit mass murder is not going to publicize this. This is an erroneous assumption. Eric Harris posted a log of his bomb-making experiments, and wrote about his desire to kill people, even naming a particular student he wanted to murder. His website included explicit homicidal rants. For example, Harris wrote, "God I can't wait till I can kill you people . . . I don't care if I live or die in the shootout, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, p. 10,415). These posts were brought to the attention of the police but for some reason the matter was dropped and there was no investigation.

Canadian shooter Kimveer Gill posted fifty-one photographs of himself posing in threatening positions with guns. He also posted a message titled "Vengeance is coming" that included the following: "Disemboweled bodies litter the streets. Some have been decapitated, others hung off bridges and over-passes. Yet, others still lie burning. Flames slowly eating away at their putrid flesh. Glorious. HA HA HA HA." Elsewhere Gill wrote, "Let the blood flow, let the streets run red with blood, blood of mine enemies." In another post, he wrote, "I love guns I really do. The great equalizer." There are multiple passages of both grandiose and paranoid content, as well as his admiration for the Nazis. Also, as noted above, Gill admired and echoed Eric Harris. Though there is no direct statement regarding his impending attack, the combination of threatening poses with guns, admiration and imitation of Eric Harris, and the writings on his site create a disturbing profile. Also, as noted earlier, he wrote a message on another website indicating that he saw school shootings as "acceptable" or "needed."

Finnish shooters Pekka-Eric Auvinen and Matti Saari each posted videos online. Auvinen's clearly forecast his upcom-

ing attack and included sequences of him shooting a gun, as well as videos and text in praise of Harris and Klebold, Timothy McVeigh, and the Unabomber. In addition to video clips, Auvinen's manifesto announced his intention of carrying out a rampage attack at his school. He listed the name of his school, the date the attack would occur, and identified it as a "massacre" that was not simply a school shooting but an act of "political terrorism." He even noted the type of firearm he would use. He quoted Eric Harris and echoed many passages of Harris's writings. The manifesto is a scathing attack on the masses of humanity who, in the mind of Auvinen, did not deserve to live.

Saari posted clips of him shooting a gun, along with messages such as "Whole life is war and whole life is pain. And you will fight alone in your personal war" (Mustikkamaa, 2008). He noted that his favorite videos were about Columbine. In one video, he said, "You will die next" and then fired a series of shots (Charter, 2008). The postings by Saari raised enough concern that he was interviewed by police. He denied any violent intent and they let him keep his gun. He went on his rampage the next day.

It should be emphasized that when Auvinen posted specific details about his impending attack, he did so the morning of his rampage. Such explicit messages are likely to be posted with little time to spare, making an immediate response imperative.

## SUMMARY

Predicting violence is difficult. Drawing on actual rampage school shootings, this article has highlighted examples of behaviors that in hindsight can be recognized as warning signs. The primary limitation of this review of school shooter behavior is that there is no way of knowing how often students may engage in similar behavior without presenting any risk of violence. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that a particular behavior that appears to be a warning sign does not guarantee that an attack is imminent. Even a direct threat can be made with no intention of actually carrying it out. The behaviors cited here do not necessarily predict impending violence. They are signals, however, that there may be a risk and that investigation and assessment are necessary. One behavior can raise concern about a student, but by itself may not indicate the presence of an actual threat. When there are clusters of warning signs, however, the likelihood of an actual attack increases.

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