
Charles Andrew Williams

Sorting Out the Contradictions

PETER LANGMAN, PH.D.

Langman Psychological Associates, LLC

At age fifteen, I brought a gun to school and intentionally shot fifteen people, killing two, and causing great bodily injury to thirteen others. I did so, willfully, deliberately and with premeditation. — CHARLES “ANDY” WILLIAMS¹

I did not intend to kill anyone. — CHARLES “ANDY” WILLIAMS²

I’ve avoided writing about Charles “Andy” Williams for years. There was simply too much contradictory information. Interestingly, though the attack occurred over thirteen years ago, new information has come to light in the last few years. Reconciling this information with earlier reports, however, remains difficult, particularly since one of the new disclosures is Williams’s comment “I was an awesome liar.”³

In addition, on 10 July 2015, several months after this article was first posted, I received an e-mail from Mr. Jeff Williams, Andy’s father. Though he wrote that the “article is in the most part well researched and reasoned,” he commented on several points in order to set the record straight. These will be noted as they occur in the article.

The narrative that took shape in the wake of the attack portrayed Williams as a well-adjusted boy from small-town Maryland who moved to California, where he was picked on mercilessly until driven to violence. Another piece of the narrative made him a victim not only of his peers who harassed him, but of his friends who pressured him to carry out the attack. A closer look at the case, however, reveals numerous problems with these narratives.

BACKGROUND

Andy Williams grew up in the town of Brunswick, Maryland — population, 5,700.⁴ According to his father, Williams was “about four years old” when his parents divorced

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CHARLES “ANDY” WILLIAMS

Perpetrator Dossier

Attack date	5 March 2001
Attack site	Santana High School
Location	Santee, California, United States
Age at incident	15
Killed	2
Wounded	13
Outcome	Prison
Shooter population	Secondary school
Psychological type	Psychopathic
Attack type	Random

in 1990.⁵ After the divorce, Williams lived with his father; his older brother, Michael, went with his mother. At the time of the attack, his mother was living in South Carolina, and his brother in Georgia.⁶

Though his brother said that Williams was picked on in Maryland,⁷ most testimonies described him as happy and popular. Friends in Maryland “recalled him as a clean-cut boy who built forts in the woods and played hide-and-seek with others in the neighborhood.”⁸ One reporter noted, “In his younger years, he was the class clown, a boy given to humorous parody and burlesque ... He played sports, made the honor roll and impressed those who knew him as a boy with ‘magnetism, personal charm.’”⁹ He also “appeared in class plays ... and ran for class president.”¹⁰ Williams “was considered one of the smartest and best-liked kids in his close-knit circle of friends.”¹¹

Not only was he liked by his peers, but “school officials who knew Williams in Maryland characterized him as a charmer ... ‘He was a good, happy-go-lucky kid ... He was a pleasure to have in class.’”¹² His former guidance counselor said, “Andy was a typical adolescent boy ... He was well-liked and well-adjusted.”¹³ According to a woman he was close to, he didn’t just fit in, but was loved.¹⁴

Williams and his father moved from Maryland to Twentynine Palms, California, in December 1999¹⁵ and he apparently made a good transition to his new home:

Williams seemingly thrived during his short stay in Twentynine Palms ... He did well in school and seemed to crave attention, once coming to school with his underwear over his pants and declaring himself, ‘underwear man.’ School officials, classmates and teammates embraced the quirky newcomer. They said he was funny, goofy and sarcastic.¹⁶

After living in Twentynine Palms for just a few months, Williams and his father moved to Santee in the summer of 2001.¹⁷ Sorting out what happened during his time in Santee is a challenge.

Not only did Williams describe himself as “an awesome liar,” but he has made numerous statements that are contradicted by other statements of his, or contradicted by his peers, or seem questionable and cannot be corroborated.

Reports to School Personnel

After his attack, Williams said that he had complained to his school counselor multiple times about having been bullied, and that he told a school security guard that “he planned on bringing a gun to school.”¹⁸ There is no evidence to support either of these claims. It is particularly hard to accept that, not long after the attack at Columbine High School, a school security guard would ignore a student’s report that he was going to bring a gun to school. Any inkling that Williams had complained about bullying to a school counselor and warned a guard about his intention to bring a gun to school would presumably have been seized on by the public and the media and probably resulted in lawsuits against the school. This has happened in other cases in which people believed the school failed to act on information that might have prevented an attack.

He Didn’t Mean to Hurt Anyone

Williams told his psychiatrist after the attack that he had had no intention of hurting anyone. Despite bragging to his friends that he would shoot people, he reportedly claimed that he just wanted to take a gun to school so that people would respect him.¹⁹ Twelve years later, he said, “I didn’t think two boys were gonna die. I didn’t think 13 people were going to get shot. I just thought I was gonna make a lot of noise and that the cops were gonna show up.”²⁰ Make a lot of noise? By shooting people? He claimed that he didn’t think .22 bullets could kill someone.²¹

This is hard to believe. Williams was not a young child who didn’t know any better, but fifteen years old. He was experienced with firearms, having gone skeet-shooting²² and hunting with his father, as well as attending a gun safety class.²³ In fact, after the attack, an affidavit said Williams “considered that he would be hurting people and that he might be punished for this behavior but had decided to do it anyway.”²⁴ Additionally, “Williams had told as many as a dozen people that he was going to ‘pull a Columbine.’”²⁵ Pulling a Columbine meant more than making “a lot of noise.”

Also, his behavior during the attack contradicts his claims of not intending to hurt anyone and thinking that small bullets weren’t deadly. He shot his first victim in the back of the head at close range, killing him.²⁶ Even if Williams truly believed a .22 bullet was not dangerous, seeing what happened to his first victim would have convinced him otherwise. As noted in a court report, “Having shot three persons in the restroom, rather than recoiling at the enormity of his act, he repeatedly reloaded his gun and continued to shoot students and school staff.”²⁷ Elsewhere it was reported that “witnesses described a terrifying scenario in which Williams methodically confronted victim after victim.”²⁸ If Williams had no intention of killing anyone, he would have stopped shooting after his first victim fell. He did not stop, but kept shooting, then reloaded and kept

shooting, then reloaded and kept shooting, and reloaded yet again, firing more than thirty shots, leaving a trail of bleeding, wounded, and lifeless bodies.

Intended Outcome

Williams has given three different versions of the anticipated outcome of his attack. In one version, he assumed he would survive. He said he remembered visiting the condo that he and his father were going to move into and thinking, “I’ll never see this room — I’ll be in juvenile hall.”²⁹ Elsewhere, however, he said that he planned to shoot himself but the police arrived before he could do so. He claimed that he had planned to save one bullet for himself.³⁰ Twelve years later, however, he contradicted himself and said, “My grand plan was like suicide by cop.”³¹

Despite his alleged plans to kill himself or be killed by police, neither of these outcomes occurred. He made no effort to shoot himself, and when confronted by police, he did not shoot at them to force them to shoot back, but surrendered. His changing versions are another example of his inconsistent reporting, making it impossible to know what his actual intention was at the time of the attack.

When He First Conceived of the Attack

On Friday 2 March (three days before his attack), Williams was reprimanded by his drama teacher for not being prepared for class. According to Williams, this event caused him to think about bringing a gun to school for the first time.³² This, however, is contradicted by multiple reports. For example:

Williams told friends three times over the past week that he was planning a mass shooting.³³

For the last month, Andy Williams . . . repeatedly told friends he was going to take one of his father’s guns to school and shoot people.³⁴

Friends say he began threatening a month ago that he was going to shoot kids at school.³⁵

Authorities said Charles Andrew Williams was fulfilling months of threats.³⁶

Williams’s claim that he first got the idea to commit a shooting three days before his attack doesn’t hold up. He apparently sought to minimize the long build-up to his rampage and the many comments he made to multiple peers about committing a shooting.

Egged On by Peers

Williams has at times alleged that his friends either egged him on to commit the attack or were going to join him in the attack. Multiple people, however, presented the situation very differently.

According to Josh Stevens, one of Williams’s best friends:

The whole weekend he was talking about it ... And me and my friends were like, "You're not serious, are you?" And he says, "I'm just joking." And then he asked us if we want to do it with him. And we were all, "You're joking." He was like, "I am, I'm just messing around."³⁷

Stevens also reported, "He invited us to come out and take [part in the shooting]."³⁸ Another peer, Alex Ribble, noted that Williams said three times in the previous week that he was planning a shooting, but added, "He jokes around a lot ... We didn't believe him."³⁹ Jessika Pierce, a friend of Williams, said, "He kept telling everyone: 'Just watch. I'll do it. It'll happen.'"⁴⁰

Rather than egging him on, it appears that his friends often dismissed his claim that one day he would "pull a Columbine."⁴¹ When Williams said, "You guys just watch, I'll do it":

Everybody would just laugh and tell him to shut up ... Then Andy said, "OK, I'll show you one day. It'll happen." I didn't take it seriously at all. None of us did. I never thought he was like that.⁴²

Two days before the attack, Williams repeated his talk about a shooting; when confronted by his friends, he said he was joking. At one point Williams had said that he would use his father's guns.⁴³ When his friends questioned him, however, he assured them, "The guns are locked up."⁴⁴ According to his friend Dustin Hopkins, when the topic was pursued, Williams said that he didn't have a key to open the locked case.⁴⁵

Josh Stevens told his mother's boyfriend, Chris Reynolds, about Williams's violent talk. Mr. Reynolds confronted Williams, who again insisted he was joking: "He was sitting there laughing about it and denying it."⁴⁶ Reynolds reportedly tried to call Williams's father to inform him of what Williams was saying, but was unable to get through.⁴⁷ (According to Mr. Williams's e-mail to me, however, Chris Reynolds did call the home; when Mr. Williams answered the telephone, Reynolds asked to speak with Andy, which he did for at least several minutes.)

The day before the attack, Williams told Katie Hutter, a twelve-year-old friend, "Tomorrow I'm going to bring a bunch of guns and I'm going to shoot a bunch of people. I'm going to shoot people down and you're going to watch."⁴⁸ Because his peers didn't take him seriously, they mocked him for his talk of a school shooting. That night, Williams made similar comments to his friend Neil O'Grady, who later said, "I thought he was just messing around. He told me he was going to take a gun to school and shoot people. He told me to stay home."⁴⁹

Despite thinking that he was joking, several friends were concerned enough that they patted him down before school on 5 March 2001, to see if he had a gun. Unfortunately, Williams wasn't carrying the gun on his person, but in his backpack, and his friends didn't think to check there.⁵⁰

The picture provided by multiple people is that Williams bragged about committing a school shooting repeatedly. Some dismissed this as a joke; others were concerned enough to ask him if he were serious. Whenever this occurred, however, he denied any violent intent and played it off as a joke. Despite this, his friends checked to see if

he had a gun on him before they entered the school. The composite picture indicates that rather than egging him on to do the attack, his friends tried to prevent the attack.

After the attack, however, Williams shifted the blame to Josh Stevens, claiming Stevens told him they would “shoot up the school on Monday.”⁵¹ Williams also said that when he realized that Stevens and another friend (A.J. Gilbert) would not join him in the attack, that he decided to do it himself to prove he wasn’t scared.⁵² He also said that he thought somebody would stop him, yet every time people took him seriously enough to ask if he meant what he said, he hid his intentions with a laugh and assured them that he was kidding. If he had wanted to be stopped, he could have simply told people that he was seriously having thoughts about committing a shooting. Or when they frisked him the morning of the attack, he could have said, “You better check my backpack.” His behavior at the time was contrary to his later claim that he wanted someone to stop him.

Twelve years after the attack, Williams made even more detailed claims about his peers’ involvement. He said Josh Stevens “got a piece of paper and diagrammed the school. He said what hallway he was going to. He told A.J. [Gilbert] where he was going to go. He told me where I was going to go.”⁵³ This is hard to accept for a couple of reasons. First, why would Williams wait twelve years to disclose this information, particularly considering that he was facing life in prison? Any evidence that his peers were involved in the planning presumably would have come to light. Second, it is contradicted by the many peers and one adult — Mr. Reynolds — who heard about Williams’s rampage talk and/or confronted him about his frequent claims that he was going to commit a school shooting.

Williams also claimed that it was Stevens who bragged about going on a rampage.⁵⁴ There is no evidence for this, and it is contradicted by multiple witnesses. In addition, why would Williams not have disclosed this at the time of his trial?

One other claim is particularly hard to believe. Twelve years after the attack, Williams claimed that Mr. Reynolds told him, “If you don’t go through with it, I’ll kill you.”⁵⁵ Why would Mr. Reynolds have said such a thing? And if he did, why didn’t Williams report it in the immediate aftermath of his rampage?

In summary, it appears that Williams has repeatedly tried to shift the blame for the shooting to his peers and to Mr. Reynolds.

WHOLESOME OR DELINQUENT?

The dominant narrative in the media in the wake of the attack seemed to be that of the wholesome boy who moved to Santee where he was picked on to the point of going on a rampage. Two days after the attack, however, there was the beginning of another narrative that has not received much attention: Williams as a kid with long-standing behavior problems.

When he lived in Maryland and in California, Williams had a reputation as a mischievous prankster. For example, he reportedly filled a water pistol with urine and shot it inside his apartment complex,⁵⁶ as well as at school.⁵⁷ He was said to be a joker,⁵⁸ a class clown,⁵⁹ and “fond of pranks.”⁶⁰ He was also a daredevil, reportedly jumping off roofs.⁶¹ His father noted that Williams got “in trouble every now and then for not paying attention in class or goofing off.”⁶² Though not violent, these behaviors suggest

cockiness, a disregard for rules, a desire for attention, and a willingness to take pleasure in violating social norms or in making people uncomfortable by playing jokes on them.

Even when he lived in Maryland, he was not only a prankster, but engaged in more serious conduct problems, including fire-setting. In fact, when he was approximately eleven or twelve years old, he and a buddy set a fire in the woods that was “pretty big by the time the fire department got there.”⁶³ The mother of a peer said, “He was always a troublemaker, getting into mischief”⁶⁴ — this was severe enough that she prohibited her son from playing with him. (Mr. Williams wrote to me that he has no recollection of the fire-setting incident nor knowledge of the parent who kept her son from playing with Andy.)

Williams reported a long history of substance abuse that began well before he moved from Maryland to California: “My friends and I started taking pills and going to harder stuff like cocaine. The first time I experienced those, I was 12 years old.”⁶⁵ Even in a small-town community where such drug use was not the norm, Williams found drugs and delinquent peers.

Thus, while still in Maryland, Williams engaged in hard drug use and fire-setting, and perhaps other behavior that led a parent to prohibit her son from playing with him. Despite this, school personnel viewed him as a wholesome, well-adjusted boy. This suggests that Williams was good at “impression management,” knowing how to behave to make a good impression while secretly committing antisocial acts. He later showed his ability to deceive people by talking about committing murder for weeks in such a joking manner that he fooled everyone into thinking he didn’t mean it. Even on the day of the attack, when his friends finally suspected that maybe he was serious and they patted him down, he played it calm and cool and passed the whole thing off as a joke.

After arriving in Santee, his misbehavior continued as he immediately fell in with a group of delinquent kids. This was not because he was ostracized and was only accepted by “losers” or “troublemakers.” He formed his friendships before he had even attended school or been bullied by anyone in California. To get a sense of who these kids were, a reporter followed up on Williams’s three closest friends several years after the attack. This is what he found: “A.J. Gilbert, 23, died in 2008 while on parole. Shaun Turk, 27, is serving time for murder, in the same prison as Williams. Josh Stevens, 27, is in prison in Florida on a probation violation.”⁶⁶ Thus, one delinquent youth found other delinquent youths.

According to Williams, he and his buddies not only smoked marijuana and drank alcohol, but “a friend’s mom had Lyme disease and she, like, she had all kinds of pain pills, and so we were just stealing them and eating opiates all the time.”⁶⁷ They also reportedly stole tequila from a local store.⁶⁸ Not long before his attack, “police patrolling the park found Williams in possession of several 40-ounce bottles of beer.”⁶⁹

Williams was also frequently truant and did his best to hide this from his father. Though the school left voicemail messages regarding his truancy, Williams erased them before his father got home.⁷⁰ Williams also neglected his homework, resulting in a significant decline in his grades. To keep his father from finding out, “I would try to get my report cards before he would get them.”⁷¹ Apparently proud of his ability to deceive his father, Williams commented, “I was an awesome liar.”⁷²

Another possible antisocial act involved Williams and his girlfriend (he was fifteen; she was twelve). A group of kids paid the girl to steal a bottle of tequila, which she did.

They all got drunk, and she and Williams went off on their own. The girl was later found unconscious, with her belt somewhat undone. The girl's mother and a friend found Stevens and the girl and noticed her belt. Rumors spread that Williams molested her, or at least tried to, and a male peer beat him up for this.⁷³ The truth of the matter remains unknown. Taken together, the substance abuse, theft, truancy, fire-setting, lying, and deception suggest that Williams had psychopathic traits. His behavior related to his attack provides further evidence of this.

PSYCHOPATHIC CALMNESS AND CALLOUSNESS

Williams's behaviors prior to, during, and immediately after his rampage suggest the cold-heartedness of a psychopath. Perhaps fifteen minutes before he started shooting, he appeared calm. A female peer commented, "He seemed carefree."⁷⁴ Apparently Williams showed no signs of depression, anger, anxiety, or agitation. This lack of distress was consistent with his laughing and carefree manner whenever questioned about his talk of "pulling a Columbine."

Similarly, he reportedly showed no sign of distress during the attack. In fact, it was just the opposite. A student named John Schardt said, "He was looking around, smiling, with his weapon ... He had an evil kind of sadistic demeanor to him."⁷⁵ Raymond Serrato, a student whom Williams wounded, stated, "There's a face smiling. Grinning. Just staring right at me."⁷⁶ One student said, "It was malicious. I couldn't believe he was smiling," and another student referred to Williams's "Grinch-type of smile."⁷⁷ Peter Ruiz, a school security guard, was hit by three bullets; Ruiz said that after being shot, "We made eye contact, and he gave me a smirk."⁷⁸ A friend reportedly saw Williams "grinning wildly."⁷⁹ Williams himself reported his own callous behavior: "I swung around and I shot Trevor. I think it hit him in the neck. He fell, and after about 10 or 15 seconds he asked me why I did it. I told him to shut up."⁸⁰

Even as he surrendered and was taken into custody, Williams's behavior was noteworthy. Deputy Jack Smith apprehended Williams in the school and handcuffed him. According to Smith, Williams "appeared very calm and very cold."⁸¹ Immediately after the attack, deputy sheriff J.T. Faulkner was shocked by Williams's demeanor. He said, "He has never chaperoned a boy so expressionless — 'almost to the point of nonchalant.'"⁸² Faulkner commented that Williams "was very sure of himself,"⁸³ which is remarkable considering he was a fifteen-year-old kid who was just arrested for murder. Other officers had similar impressions: "He acted like nothing had happened ... I couldn't believe how calm he was."⁸⁴ Williams reportedly was "completely relaxed and calm," according to one officer. Later in the day, Faulkner noted that Williams was "upbeat and calm. I believe he knew the gravity of the situation, but he was pretty nonchalant."⁸⁵

This behavior is all the more remarkable when we keep in mind that fifteen people had just been shot, with multiple bloody bodies on the floor. "The bloody tableau facing San Diego Sheriff's Deputy Howard Kluge was the stuff of nightmares. The bodies of children lay strewn like discarded toys. Their moans filled the air — cries of pain, pleas for help."⁸⁶ Yet Williams smiled through the rampage and was calm, nonchalant, and even upbeat afterwards.

Two days after the attack, Lieutenant Jerry Lewis commented that through all the

interrogations Williams showed no sign of remorse.⁸⁷ According to a reporter who saw a videotape of the interrogation, “Williams at first appears cold, casual, and matter of fact.” Williams told the interrogating officer, “I didn’t want anybody to die, but if they did, then oh well.”⁸⁸ While being interviewed by Detective James Walker, Williams was asked about the victims: “Why shoot them?” He replied, “They were just there.” Walker said, “Wrong place at the wrong time, huh?” and Williams said, “Yeah.”⁸⁹ Williams even knew and liked some of the people he shot, commenting, “By that time, you know, my finger’s on the trigger and I didn’t recognize them until it was too late.”⁹⁰ He exhibited a remarkably callous attitude about having shot his own friends. At one point during the interrogation Williams became emotional, but it is not known if his tears were for his victims or for himself.

The reference by Ruiz to Williams’ smirk during the attack is interesting; Nick Molina, a friend from Williams’ hometown in Maryland, saw him in handcuffs on the news and said he instantly recognized Williams’ smirk: “He was always smiling like that.”⁹¹ The fact that Williams was smirking while being escorted in handcuffs after committing murder is disturbing.

Calmness and nonchalance in the wake of a school shooting is striking, but not unheard of. Other shooters, such as Brenda Spencer, Wayne Lo, and Barry Loukaitis, shocked the police who interacted with them because they seemed so utterly without distress. All of these shooters were psychopathic.

HOW BADLY BULLIED?

It is often difficult to determine how badly school shooters were picked on. To cite a trivial example: Williams liked to hang out at a local park, but reportedly had his skateboard stolen there. One source says that this happened once,⁹² another that it happened twice,⁹³ and a third source said he had three skateboards stolen.⁹⁴ Just to further confuse things, one of his best friends said that though Williams hung out at the skate park, he did not skate.⁹⁵ Maybe this is of minimal importance, but it is representative of the contradictory reports about Williams.

Though it is expected that prosecuting and defending attorneys will present a case differently, often they argue over the significance or interpretation of facts. In Williams’s case, however, their presentation of the “facts” were diametrically opposed. The public defender composed a list of incidents in which Williams was bullied, including: being “burned with [a] cigarette lighter on his neck every couple of weeks,” “sprayed with hair spray and then lit with a lighter,” “beat with a towel that caused welts by bullies at the pool,” and “slammed against a tree twice because of rumors.”⁹⁶

In contrast, the district attorney “said that after talking to hundreds of the teenager’s fellow students and friends, investigators have found ‘just no evidence to support the theory that he was bullied.’”⁹⁷ Where is the truth?

The day after Williams’s attack, an article noted, “Some described the young man . . . as an outsider who was mocked as a nerd, but others said he was sunny and well liked.”⁹⁸ The reports of his peer interactions seem to fall into four categories. There are those who present a very positive picture with no harassment, those who say there was some harassment but that it was nothing out of the ordinary, reports of chronic harassment, and reports of harassment that was abusive or even criminal in its intensity.

At the positive end of the spectrum, a female peer said, “He was nice and funny. I never saw him get picked on.” Another girl, who dated him for a while and then remained friends, commented, “He’s very popular.”⁹⁹ A peer stated, “He wasn’t an outcast. He had a lot of friends.”¹⁰⁰ One article noted:

He was well-liked and friendly. He loved to tell jokes. He had a lot of friends. He seemed happy. “He always had a smile on his face,” said Vanessa Dill, a freshman.¹⁰¹

Another article quoted an adult who knew Williams who stated that he “was always happy and friendly . . . I’ve never seen him upset.”¹⁰² The same article quoted a peer who said, “He didn’t even get in fights . . . I never heard him talk much about his family or about feeling angry or about anybody at school.” This same girl commented, “He was always laughing.” She then added, “When he was shooting the kids he was smiling. That was typical of him.” Additional comments include:

Andy Williams was known around Santana High School as a joker.¹⁰³

Williams did not appear to have a chip on his shoulder.¹⁰⁴

He’s still my friend I’m not going to dislike him just because he killed people. He’s not sick in the head like those people from Columbine. He’s a nice guy. He wasn’t an outcast. He had a lot of friends.¹⁰⁵

What emerges from these reports is not a picture of a picked-on, outcast youth who struggled with anger and depression, but someone who was happy and well-liked, even popular.

On a different note, a peer acknowledged that Williams was picked on, but said that this was typical within their group of friends: “All of us joke around with each other, it’s a thing we do . . . It’s kind of all of us showing our love.”¹⁰⁶ Though some reports viewed this negatively, saying that even his own friends picked on him, this person simply saw it as a good-natured bantering among friends. Another peer said, “A lot of people picked on him, but he was good with words, and he could always make people laugh.”¹⁰⁷ In this view, it appears that Williams could take teasing in stride and laugh it off. Based on his interviews, a reporter concluded, Williams “got picked on, but not so much more than any other teenager.”¹⁰⁸

One student said, “Everybody was always picking on him because he was a freshman and because he was small.”¹⁰⁹ Whether or not this was anything out of the ordinary is unknown. A different student commented that Williams “was picked on because he was one of the scrawniest guys. People called him freak, dork, nerd, stuff like that.”¹¹⁰

In addition, he was reportedly called “anorexic” because he was so thin, as well as “albino”¹¹¹ because he was pale.

Williams allegedly told his friends back in Maryland that in California kids threw eggs at his house, called him gay, and threw his homework in the garbage.¹¹² The article that mentions this, however, doesn’t identify a source for this information, nor did any of his peers in California report these details.

Ten years after the attack, Dr. William Schneid, who met with Williams early in his incarceration, reported that “he had made repeated complaints regarding being bullied [in high school] — having his head stuck in a urinal in the boys’ room and having older kids urinating all over him — almost on a daily basis.”¹¹³ This report is hard to accept. As noted earlier, there is no evidence that Williams complained to the school of such victimization. In addition, if kids had urinated all over him, it seems likely that somebody — students, teachers, his father — would have noticed both the smell and the fact that he was wet. Yet, I have found no such reports.

The most serious claim of mistreatment is that older kids at the skate park routinely burned Williams on the neck with hot cigarette lighters. Though such a thing is possible, the lack of evidence makes this an unsubstantiated claim. I have found no reports that anyone — either Williams or a peer — reported this to anybody prior to the attack. Similarly, I have found no report that his father, a teacher, a friend, or anyone who interacted with him in prison after his attack, ever saw a scar on his neck.

The claim that this happened at the skate park raises two questions. First, if he was being burned at the park every couple of weeks, why did he keep going there? The district attorney “noted that the bullying was not done at school and that Williams could have escaped merely by not going to the skate park.”¹¹⁴ Second, if he were full of rage at the kids at the park who burned him, why didn’t he shoot them instead of innocent people (including his own friends) at school?

If the burning did occur, then perhaps Williams could be viewed as a traumatized shooter. Though this designation generally refers to abuse at home, being repeatedly burned would constitute abuse, too. Unfortunately, there is no corroborating evidence to support the claim that he was burned. Not only is there no such evidence, but prior to making this claim, Williams made comments that cast serious doubt on his own later reports.

In the immediate aftermath of his attack, what did Williams tell police? When asked directly if he had been bullied, Williams “told deputies that he had not been bullied or even teased.”¹¹⁵ There he was, a fifteen-year-old boy who had just shot fifteen people, killing two of them, who had been arrested and was facing murder charges and possible life in prison. The police were seeking some insight into his action, perhaps looking for mitigating circumstances, and Williams told them that he was not a victim of bullying. The claims of horrific victimization came later. He either lied to the police during his interrogation or lied later about being victimized.

What did Williams originally offer as an explanation? He told the police that he was “angry because he had been disciplined for tardiness several times.”¹¹⁶ He reported, “I was just, like, screwing up in school and . . . I didn’t want to move again [his father planned to relocate nearby], and my dad kept yelling at me. He’s been bitching at me for a while.”¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, Williams reported that after being reprimanded by a teacher a few days before the attack, “I got out of class and I went and told my friends, ‘This chick yelled at me for a half-hour. I sure wish someone would shoot her.’”¹¹⁸

According to Williams’s father, he did more than show up late to school: “He didn’t do well in school. By October [2000] and the first teacher’s conference, I found out he was skipping school and getting lots of detention, and his grades started to fall.”¹¹⁹ Though Williams reportedly improved his behavior after the teacher’s conference, in early 2001 “he started cutting classes and the grades were really bad.”¹²⁰ Williams not

only had problematic behavior in school, but in the neighborhood, too. He reported, “People’s parents would come and complain to him [his father] about stuff we were doing.”¹²¹ (Mr. Williams noted in his e-mail to me that the only people who complained about Andy being a bad influence were Chris Reynolds and Josh Stevens’s mother.)

Thus, Williams had multiple triggers for his anger, many of them related to school. He was disciplined repeatedly for tardiness and truancy, reprimanded by a teacher, frustrated by his own “screwing up in school,” angered by his father’s yelling at him and planning to relocate, and perhaps bothered by the parents who complained about him. Though Williams disclosed these sources of his distress to police, the investigators made “no mention of any complaints the teenager had about harassment.”¹²²

Williams’s reaction to his father’s planned move is worth noting. The day before the attack, Williams visited his new home with his father and appeared to be delighted with the place.¹²³ In fact, Mr. Williams said, “He [Andy] sat there calm as all, smiling, picking out the room he wanted.”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, despite the opportunity to enter a new school, Mr. Williams said that Andy “wanted to take the bus and continue at Santana.”¹²⁵ Assuming Mr. Williams was right, this raises a question: how bad could things have been at Santana High School if Williams had the opportunity to make a fresh start at another school but preferred to remain where he was?

Nearly twelve years after his attack, Williams made another claim of victimization that cannot be substantiated. He said that Mr. Christopher Reynolds either molested him or tried to molest him: “There was some abuse at like, with like, the hands of my buddy’s stepdad.”¹²⁶ (Mr. Reynolds was actually the boyfriend of Josh Stevens’s mother.) A few months after this initial claim, Williams gave another interview and said that Mr. Reynolds “was abusing all of us.” He said that Reynolds would “grab on us and try to kiss us and stuff. If he wanted to grab someone’s butt, it was, like, whatever, dude.”¹²⁷ Williams also said, “He would try to masturbate us,” adding that Reynolds “did it to me one time.”

What are we to make of the molestation claim? On one hand, it is possible, especially knowing that in 2011 Reynolds was imprisoned for ordering two teenage boys to commit sexual acts at gunpoint.¹²⁸ On the other hand, why did Williams not mention this until twelve years after the attack? One possibility is that disclosing sexual abuse is difficult. Another possibility is that the allegation of abuse was a lie that he concocted after hearing that Reynolds had been imprisoned for such behavior. It is interesting that Reynolds commanded the boys he molested at gunpoint. During the interview in which Williams said Reynolds molested him, he also claimed that Reynolds told him to commit the attack or else he would kill him. Perhaps Williams got the idea for both allegations from the story that Reynolds molested kids at gunpoint.

Not only did Williams say nothing of this in the aftermath of his attack, but neither did any of his friends who allegedly were also victimized; they didn’t report their own abuse, nor that of Williams. In addition, the Saturday before the attack, Williams slept at Stevens’s home.¹²⁹ If the abuse had occurred, it would be expected that Williams would avoid being in the home of his abuser, especially overnight.

Of course, Williams’s molestation claim could be valid, but the twelve-year delay in making it, along with the many other inconsistencies in his accounts, make this impossible to determine.

My book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators* identifies patterns that appear frequently among school shooters. Several of these are relevant to Andy Williams.

Many shooters faced biological challenges in the form of birth defects, minor physical anomalies, short statures, or other concerns. Williams reportedly was short (one report said “barely 5 feet tall”¹³⁰ and another said 5’4”¹³¹), scrawny, and unusually thin and pale (he was reportedly called “anorexic” and “albino”). These biological challenges may have resulted in his attempting to overcompensate and act tough.

Other patterns relate to the place of firearms and the military within the families of shooters. Like most psychopathic shooters, Williams came from a family where firearms had a prominent place but were used legally. Also, as is common among shooters’ families, there were relatives who served in the military. This included Williams’s mother,¹³² his grandfather,¹³³ and possibly his great-grandfather.¹³⁴ Williams’s father served in the Army from 1980 to 1982 (he reported this in his e-mail to me); he later worked for the Naval Medical Center in San Diego.¹³⁵

Besides having relatives in the military, many shooters had military aspirations of their own. Prior to the attack, Williams reportedly wanted to join the Naval Academy,¹³⁶ and on the day of his attack he wore a sweatshirt with the U.S. Navy insignia.¹³⁷ Even after the attack, he had hopes of becoming an army helicopter pilot, probation officer,¹³⁸ or cop.¹³⁹

In addition, many shooters had both romantic and academic failures. Williams reportedly was upset about a recent breakup.¹⁴⁰ As discussed above, Williams’s academic performance declined significantly in the months preceding his attack, and during his interrogation he identified school-related stress as a primary factor in his attack.

Two other stresses often seen among school shooters involve change and loss. Williams had moved twice in the preceding eighteen months and was about to relocate again. Also, a close friend with muscular dystrophy reportedly died a couple of months before the attack,¹⁴¹ and another friend was killed in a bus accident “just weeks before the shooting.”¹⁴² The impact of these relocations and losses is unknown.

CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

Based on the available evidence, it appears that Williams had psychopathic personality traits. He engaged in a range of antisocial acts and behaviors often seen among psychopathic school shooters:

- illegal drug and alcohol use, including hard drugs starting at age twelve
- fire-setting
- theft of drugs from the mother of a friend
- theft of alcohol from a store
- truancy and tardiness
- deception in the form of lying to his father, erasing telephone messages from the school, and intercepting report cards
- possible molestation or rape of a twelve-year-old girl

- unspecified behaviors that caused at least one mother of a peer in Maryland to prohibit her son from playing with Williams, and the parents of several peers in California to complain to his father
- impression management with adults and peers
- callousness and sadistic pleasure during the attack
- no sign of remorse in the immediate aftermath of shooting fifteen people
- apparent attempts at deception after the attack, revising his account of events, and displacing the blame for his actions, rather than accepting responsibility for what he did

It is also possible that he was the victim of traumatizing events, including being burned by heated metal cigarette lighters and/or being molested by an adult. In the absence of supporting evidence, however, these claims cannot be substantiated.

Apart from possible trauma, other events may have been factors in his attack. These include relocations, deaths of friends, biological issues and the teasing that resulted from them, a romantic breakup, and academic stress and the conflict it caused with his father.

Having attempted to identify his personality traits and environmental stresses, the question of his motive still remains unanswered. He reportedly bragged to his friends that he would “pull a Columbine,” and the impression that he was bragging about such a thing suggests that he viewed this as a way to boost his status. The need to do so may have been driven by the combination of his desire to be tough and masculine (he aspired to join the military) and his physical smallness and weakness.

In this regard, Williams is reminiscent of Wayne Lo. Lo’s father served in the military, and Lo was obsessed with the marines. Unfortunately, Lo was short and thin. After Lo’s attack, a friend commented, “We’d be like, ‘How tough are you Wayne?’” And he’d say, ‘I’m tough’ . . . It was just ridiculous.”¹⁴³ One of Lo’s friends said, “This is a terrible thing to say, but it was almost as if Wayne did those shootings to impress his friends.”¹⁴⁴ Perhaps Andy Williams wanted to show off and was willing to kill for the sake of boosting his image.

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