

School Shooters: Tormented Teens or Cold Blooded Killers?

**Phillip J. Resnick, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry
Cleveland, Ohio**



**CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY**
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Disclosures: “In compliance with the ACCME Standards for Commercial Support of CME, I do not have any relevant financial relationships to disclose in relation to this presentation.

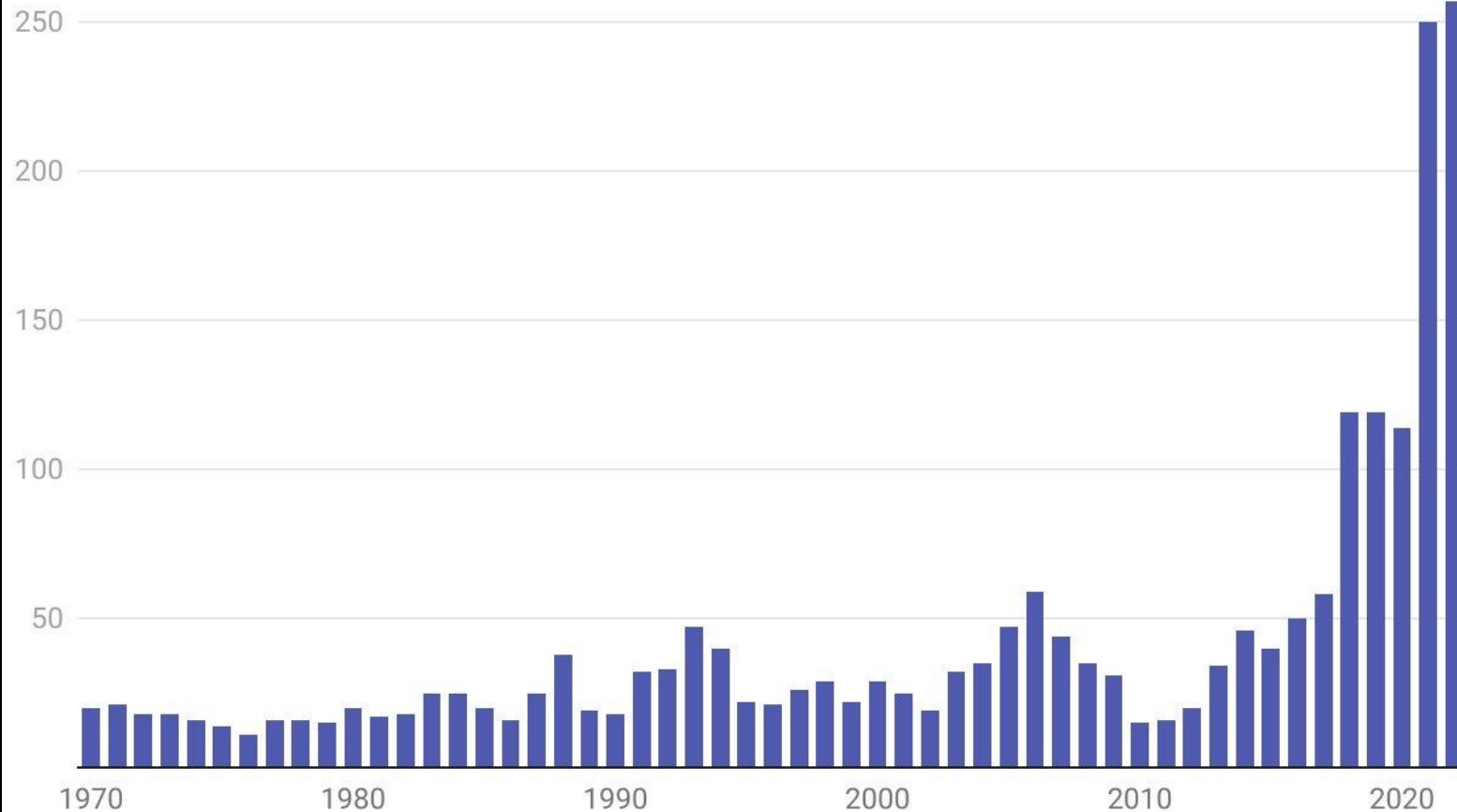
Educational Objectives

As a result of participating in this activity, you should be able to:

- 1. Identify the characteristics of school shooters**
- 2. List appropriate areas of inquiry in evaluating potential school shooters**
- 3. Identify potential interventions to reduce the risk of a school shooting**

Shooting events at schools increase in recent years

Since 2010, the number of incidents with guns being displayed or fired, or bullets hitting school property, has increased steadily, with significant increases in 2018 and again in 2021.



This data includes all events when a gun is brandished or is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims, time or day of the week.

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND. Source: David Riedman, K-12 School Shootings Database

Frequency

Mass killings involving firearms occur approximately every two weeks in the U.S., while school shootings occur monthly.

Towers, S. et al: "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings," PLOS One DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0117259 July 2, 2015

School Attacks

- **All by boys**
- **Most enrolled in that school**
- **Revenge motive**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Planned Attacks

- **Students don't just snap**
- **Majority target faculty**
- **Plan for 2 days to 1 year**
- **Opportunity to intervene**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Planned Attacks

- **Students don't just snap**
- **Majority target faculty**
- **Plan for 2 days to 1 year**
- **Opportunity to intervene**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Others Know

- Most often peers
- Occasionally an adult
- Students may encourage
- Parents do not

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

Warning Behaviors

- Pathway
- Fixation
- Leakage
- Last Resort

Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., & Guldemann, A. (2014). Some warning behaviors discriminate between school shooters and other students of concern. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000020>

Leakage Warning Behavior

- Telling a classmate
- Online statements
- Innuendos
- Doodling

Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., & Guldemann, A. (2014). Some warning behaviors discriminate between school shooters and other students of concern. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000020>

Lesson

The greatest resource in preventing school shootings is the cooperation of other students.

No Useful Profile

- **Focus on behavior, not profile**
- **Two thirds from 2 parent families**
- **Two thirds no prior trouble**
- **Usually absence of criminal record**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Attackers Rarely Threaten

- Don't wait for a threat
- Investigate conduct
- Posing a threat is not the same as making a threat

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

Coping with Losses

- **Feelings of desperation**
- **Many attempted suicide**
- **Some had personal failures**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Felt Bullied

- **About 75%**
- **Not every case**
- **Some persecuted or injured**
- **Efforts at prevention**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Bullying

- Focus on individual's response
- Perceptions regarding bystanders
- Retaliatory fantasies
- Injustice collectors

Weisbrot, D.M.: "Prelude to a School Shooting? Assessing Threatening Behavior in Childhood and Adolescence," J. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 47:8, August 2008.

TJ Lane

- **17 years old**
- **Killed 3, wounded 2**
- **History of theft and assault**

At Sentencing

- **T-shirt – KILLER**
- **"This hand that killed your sons masturbates to the memory."**

Undo Humiliation

A school shooting can undo the humiliation and shame of being bullied by wiping the “tormentors’ mocking smiles from their faces” through violence.

Gilligan, J. and Richards, D.A. (2021): *Holding a Mirror Up to Nature*, Cambridge University Press.

Lesson

Bullied students may kill for revenge against the bullies and random students because bystanders did not come to their aid.

Weapons

- **Handgun or rifle**
- **Most are from home**
- **Gun-Free Schools Act**
- **Automatic expulsion**

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., et al. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, July 2004.

Goal of Threat Assessment

Intervene with students in distress before their behavior escalates to criminal actions.

National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

Psychiatric Assessment

- Suicide – primarily by interview of person
- Threat assessment – primarily through collateral information

Ash, P.: School Shootings and Mental Illness, in Gun Violence and Mental Illness, Gold, L.H. and Simon, R.I. (Eds), American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2016.

Joe's Letters

“Something big is going to happen tomorrow. Don't feel that it is your fault. I will always love you.”

Lessons

- **Don't do a school threat assessment**
 - **Unless you feel qualified**
 - **Without school records and collateral data**
- **Assess the student's Internet history**
- **Don't accept denials at face value**

Pathway Warning Behavior

- Research
- Planning
- Preparation
- Implementation

Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., & Guldemann, A. (2014). Some warning behaviors discriminate between school shooters and other students of concern. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000020>

Internet Support

- **Deviant ideas validated**
- **Added justifications**
- **Reinforce hatred**
- **Disinhibits aggression**

Mohandie, K.: Threat Assessment in Schools, in International Handbook of Threat Assessment (Meloy, J.R. and Hoffmann, J. Eds), Oxford University Press, 2014.

Before Interview

- Obtain complete records
- Get cyberspace content
- Consider seizing phones and computers
- Search warrants

VanDercar, A.H. and Resnick, P.J.: "School Shooters: Troubled Teens or Cold Blooded Killers?" Psychiatric Times, 42(1):14-15, Jan 2025.

Ash, P.: School Shootings and Mental Illness, in Gun Violence and Mental Illness, Gold, L.H. and Simon, R.I. (Eds), American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2016.

Assess

- **Weapon websites**
- **Practicing shooting**
- **Stockpiling ammunition**
- **Ebay - gun sales**

Ash, P.: School Shootings and Mental Illness, in Gun Violence and Mental Illness, Gold, L.H. and Simon, R.I. (Eds), American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2016.

Look For

- **Current grievances and grudges**
- **Perceptions of being treated unfairly**
- **A wish to solve an "unbearable" problem**
- **Recent interest in school attacks**

National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

Interview

- **Suicidal impulses**
- **Self control**
- **Desperation**
- **Fantasies**

Goodrum, S., Thompson, A.J., Ward, K.C., & Woodward, W. A Case Study on Threat Assessment: Learning Critical Lessons to Prevent School Violence. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 5(3), 121-136, 2018. (doi.org/10.1037/tam0000104)

Threat Assessment Teams

- **Educational administrator**
- **Law enforcement**
- **Mental health professional**
- **Legal counsel**

Goodrum, S., Thompson, A.J., Ward, K.C., & Woodward, W. A Case Study on Threat Assessment: Learning Critical Lessons to Prevent School Violence. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 5(3), 121-136, 2018. (doi.org/10.1037/tam0000104)

Assessment of Threats

- **Level of intent**
- **Preoccupation**
- **Focus of the threat**
- **Any preparatory steps**

Weisbrot, D.M.: "Prelude to a School Shooting? Assessing Threatening Behavior in Childhood and Adolescence," J. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 47:8, August 2008.

Assessment

- Inner rage
- Social isolation
- Immersion in fantasy
- Paranoid ideas

Weisbrot, D.M.: "Prelude to a School Shooting? Assessing Threatening Behavior in Childhood and Adolescence," J. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 47:8, August 2008.

Paranoid Personality

- Feeling persecuted ≠ being persecuted
- Overly sensitive to disrespect
- Closed thinking precludes corrective information
- Externalization of blame
- Disproportionate rage

VanDercar, A.H. and Resnick, P.J.: "School Shooters: Troubled Teens or Cold Blooded Killers?" Psychiatric Times, 42(1):14-15, Jan 2025.

Dutton, D.G. et al: "Paranoid Thinking in Mass Shooters," Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18:548-553, 2013.

Paranoid Personality

- Feeling persecuted ≠ being persecuted
- Overly sensitive to disrespect
- Closed thinking precludes corrective information
- Externalization of blame
- Disproportionate rage

VanDercar, A.H. and Resnick, P.J.: "School Shooters: Troubled Teens or Cold Blooded Killers?" Psychiatric Times, 42(1):14-15, Jan 2025.

Dutton, D.G. et al: "Paranoid Thinking in Mass Shooters," Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18:548-553, 2013.

Lesson

**School shooters may have
paranoid traits and blame
their exclusion on others.**

Child Protective Services

Suicidal Adolescents

**Only one third of parents
complied with recommendations
to remove guns from the home.**

Brent, D.A., Baugher, M., Birmaher, B. et al.: Compliance with Recommendations to Remove Firearms in Families Participating in a Clinical Trial for Adolescent Depression. J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry 39(10):1220-1226, 2000.

Lesson

Parents often have a hard time believing that their child could kill others or themselves.

Firearms Access

- **Inquiry of patient/family**
- **Agreement by family to remove guns**
- **Confirmation by family of removal of guns**
- **Documentation of removal**

Simon RI: Therapeutic Risk Management of the Suicidal Patient, in Textbook of Suicide Assessment and Management, 2nd edition, Simon RI and Hales RE (Eds) American Psychiatric Publishing Inc. 2012.

Integrated Approach

- **Reduce emotional pain**
- **Help the student see that he has a future**
- **Show him a non-violent way to resolve his problem**
- **Develop appropriate monitoring**

National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

Potential Interventions

- **Change in classroom assignment**
- **Evaluation for IEP**
- **Increased supervision**
- **Consider unruly petition to set limits and add structure**

Wills, C.D.: "Return to School Evaluations: The Challenges of the Psychiatrist, OPPA – Insight Matters, Fall 2018.

FLORIDA SCHOOL SHOOTING



Nikolas Cruz

- **Killed 17, wounded 14**
- **Used an AR-15 rifle**
- **Made prior threats**

Prior Diagnoses

- **ADHD**
- **Depression**
- **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome**

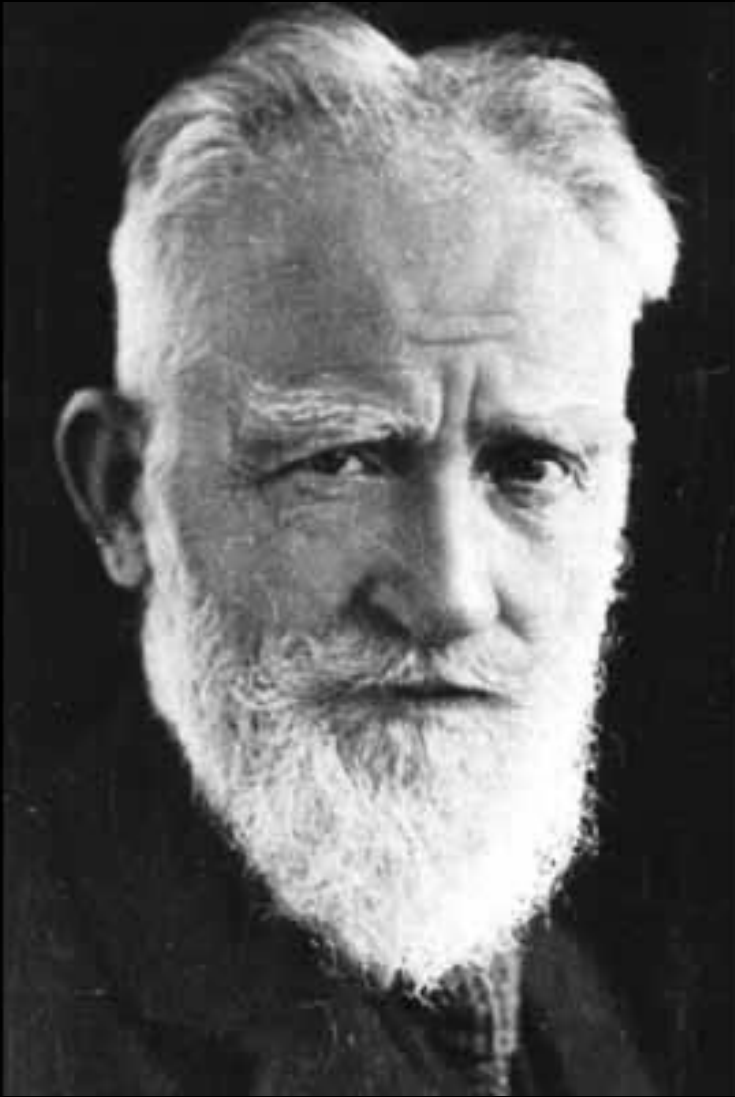
Cruz Phone Video

- **I will be the next school shooter.**
- **I am nothing.**
- **My life is meaningless.**
- **I hate everyone.**



**“I want to be
famous.”**

Nikolas Cruz



**Martyrdom... is
the only way in
which a man
can become
famous without
ability.**

George Bernard Shaw

Lessons

- **Most school shooters suffer some loss before the shooting.**
- **Suicidal students have little to lose by killing others before taking their lives.**
- **Suicide prevention is homicide prevention.**

Red Flag Laws

Civil court orders that temporarily restrict firearm access for an individual who is behaving dangerously or presents a high risk of harm to self or others.

<https://erpo.org>

Red Flag Laws

- **Gun violence restraining orders (GVROs)**
- **Extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs)**
- **Do not require mental illness**

VanDercar, A.H. and Resnick, P.J.: "School Shooters: Troubled Teens or Cold Blooded Killers?" Psychiatric Times, 42(1):14-15, Jan 2025.

Red Flag States (2024)

California

Colorado

Connecticut

Delaware

Florida

Hawaii

Illinois

Indiana

Maryland

Massachusetts

Michigan

Minnesota

Nevada

New Jersey

New Mexico

New York

Oregon

Rhode Island

Vermont

Virginia

Washington

<https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/law/extreme-risk-law/>



THE VIRGINIA TECH SHOOTING

ICMAP PRESENTS



Seung Hui Cho

- **7th Grade**
 - **Selective mutism**
 - **Social anxiety disorder**
- **8th Grade**
 - **Major depression**
 - **"I want to repeat Columbine"**

At VirginiaTech

- **Marked isolation**
- **Harassed 3 coeds**
- **Committed as suicidal**
- **Failed to follow
mandated after care**

12/13/05 Evaluation

He emailed a friend yesterday that he felt like killing himself. States he was just kidding around. Very non-verbal and did not discuss his feelings.



“I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people. ...”



"You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off"

Social Exclusion



“Oh the happiness
I could have had
mingling among
you hedonists,
being counted as
one of you.”

Failure to Communicate

- **Faculty knew of violent writings**
- **Campus police knew of harassment**
- **Counseling Center knew of commitment for suicidality**
- **Parents knew of Columbine remark**

HIPAA Exception

**Necessary to lessen a
serious and imminent threat
to the health or safety of a
person or the public...**

Lessons

- **Human life always trumps confidentiality.**
- **Collateral sources are more credible than the potentially homicidal evaluatee.**
- **Coordination of information is needed to avoid missing potential school shooters.**

Frankenstein's Monster

Started with a sweet temperament

He felt abandoned and lonely

“Everywhere I see bliss, from which I am excluded.”

“I was beneficent and good; misery made me a fiend.”

Reference: Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, 1818

Lesson

**Isolated, rejected people
may seek revenge against
those who exclude them.**

**We want to be loved; failing that,
admired; failing that, feared;
failing that, hated and despised.**

Hjalmar Söderberg, Doktor Glas, 1905

Prevention

- **Set a tone so students are comfortable reporting any concern**
- **Anti-bullying programs**

Pulavarthi TS, Fabio A, Miller E, Culyba AJ. Examining Associations Between School Connectedness, Social Support, Violence, and Firearm Carrying. J Interpers Violence. 2024 Aug;39(15-16):3651-3668. doi: 10.1177/08862605241233267. Epub 2024 Feb 20. PMID: 38379210.

Summary

- **Assess the student's Internet history.**
- **Don't accept denial at face value.**
- **Suicidal students risk little by killing others.**
- **All sources of information must be brought together.**