



Rampage school shooters: A typology[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A number of researchers have sought to identify the features that school shooters have in common in terms of family life, personalities, histories, and behaviors. This article examines the cases of 10 rampage school-shooters in an effort to find out not only how they are alike, but also how they differ. Based on available information, these youths are categorized into three types: traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic. Out of the 10 shooters discussed, three were traumatized, five were psychotic, and two were psychopathic. The three traumatized shooters all came from broken homes with parental substance abuse and parental criminal behavior. They all were physically abused and two were sexually abused outside of the home. The five psychotic shooters had schizophrenia-spectrum disorders, including schizophrenia and schizotypal personality disorder. They all came from intact families with no history of abuse. The two psychopathic shooters were neither abused nor psychotic. They demonstrated narcissism, a lack of empathy, a lack of conscience, and sadistic behavior. Most people who are traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic do not commit murder. Beyond identifying the three types of rampage shooters, additional factors are explored that may have contributed to the attacks. These include family structure, role models, and peer influence.

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1. Rampage school shooters: a typology

Although rampage school shootings are statistically rare, the magnitude of the events, as well as the mystery of what causes them, has resulted in widespread speculation about the perpetrators. Media coverage often focuses on social factors such as peer harassment and the influence of media violence. These factors, however, cannot explain school shootings. It is probably safe to say that students are picked on everyday in virtually every school in the country. Thus, peer harassment is common, but school shootings are rare. Similarly, millions of adolescents play violent video games and watch violent movies without becoming murderers. Trying to explain aberrant events by commonplace behaviors is not a productive approach.

For a variety of reasons, however, this population is difficult to study. First, the sample size is extraordinarily small. Second, the perpetrators sometimes kill themselves, which limits researchers to a retrospective review of the perpetrators' lives, and/or interviews with people who knew the perpetrators. Third, in cases where the perpetrators are apprehended, they are not available to be part of a standardized assessment or research project. In addition, the prosecuting and defending legal teams often engage in a battle regarding the perpetrator's sanity. Thus, there tends to be contradictory evidence that is presented to serve the respective legal teams' agendas.

Finally, the definition of a *school shooting* or a *rampage school shooting* varies across researchers, resulting in somewhat different, but overlapping, populations being studied. Some researchers study student-perpetrated firearms deaths at school, whereas others focus on large-scale attacks. Newman (2004) defined rampage school shootings as involving students who attend (or formerly attended) the school where the attack takes place; occurring on a school-related "public stage" (i.e., in plain view of others); and involving multiple victims, at least some of whom were shot at random or as a symbol (e.g., a principal who represents the school). Other victims may have been targeted due to a grievance or perceived wrong. Rampage school shootings do not include shootings of specific individuals due to a conflict. For example, rival gang shootings, shootings resulting from conflicts over a drug deal, and so on, were not part of this study, even if they occurred on school grounds.

Despite the difficulties in studying school shooters, a number of studies have attempted to describe this population. McGee and DeBernardo (1999) studied 14 cases of adolescent mass murder and developed a profile for what they called "classroom avengers," whom they defined as adolescents who engage in school-related mass murder. The researchers concluded that such adolescents tend to be white males who are loners. These boys are interested in violence, but do not have histories of violent behavior. They tend to be depressed, with features of several personality disorders, including the paranoid, antisocial, and narcissistic.

In a study conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), O'Toole (2000) reviewed 14 cases of actual shootings and four cases of planned shootings that were stopped before they could be carried out. The study identified 47 descriptors that many shooters had in common, including 28 personality traits and behaviors, seven family dynamics, seven school dynamics, and five social dynamics. Not all the shooters had each of these features, but the identified dynamics were seen as constituting significant trends. A few of the common individual features included narcissism, bigotry, alienation, poor anger management, fascination with violence, low self-esteem, and a lack of empathy.

Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas (2000) published a review of risk factors among 10 perpetrators of what they called "multiple victim homicide" that occurred in American schools. As in the FBI study (O'Toole, 2000), the researchers examined several domains, including individual, family, school/peers, and societal/environmental factors. Prominent factors included a history of aggression, uncontrolled anger, depression and suicidal ideation, discipline problems, and feeling rejected and picked on.

Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva, and Gray (2001) reviewed 37 adolescent mass murderers, including eight who were classified as "classroom avengers," and listed traits and behaviors they shared. The researchers found that school shooters often were bullied, but did not bully others. They were preoccupied with weapons and fantasy. Many had histories of substance abuse. Most were not depressed and did not have histories of antisocial behaviors. Psychosis was rarely a factor among the adolescent mass murderers.

In a study conducted by the United States Secret Service and the Department of Education, Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski (2002) reviewed 37 incidents of school violence involving 41 students from 1974 to 2000. The researchers found a number of commonalities among the perpetrators. Most of the shooters were depressed, felt persecuted, had grievances against at least one of their targets, and had an interest in violent entertainment. Most of the shooters did not have a history of drug abuse, prior violence or criminal behavior, or cruelty to animals.

Leary, Kowalski, Smith, and Phillips (2003) reviewed 15 school shootings and identified features that many of the shooters had in common. These factors included acute or chronic peer rejection, an interest in weapons and death, depression, poor impulse control, and sadistic tendencies.

Although these studies have provided valuable information, the focus on what school shooters have in common misses important ways in which they differ. For example, Verlinden et al. (2000) found that though most of the perpetrators had no histories of abuse, three of them had been abused. In fact, the family backgrounds of school shooters vary dramatically. This suggests that there may be different types of school shooters, with some coming from intact, functioning families and others coming from dysfunctional and abusive families.

Similarly, O'Toole (2000) concluded that shooters are often narcissistic and entitled, as well as having poor self-esteem. Though it is possible that the shooters' narcissism is an attempt to compensate for their poor self-esteem, it is also possible that two different types of shooters are being described—those who are narcissistic and those who are not, with the latter having poor self-esteem.

Finally, Meloy et al.'s (2001) finding that most adolescent mass murderers were not psychotic means that some were psychotic. In fact, the case example of the classroom avenger that the article presented had paranoid delusions and auditory hallucinations. Again, this suggests that there are different types of shooters—those who are psychotic and those who are not.

The purpose of this article is to highlight important differences among school shooters. This article will present a typology consisting of three categories of rampage school shooters.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

The data-gathering process involved researching specific rampage school shooters in an effort to learn as much as possible about them. Particular emphasis was placed on what was known about the shooters prior to the shooting. As noted above, after the shootings there was often discrepant information presented by opposing legal teams, which raises doubts about its accuracy.

In some cases, however, psychiatric and psychological evaluations were conducted after the shootings that provided important information and appeared to be consistent enough to be considered reliable. In addition, in some of these cases, there was evidence that the symptoms in question had been noted prior to the shooting, and the post-shooting evaluations confirm and expand upon the earlier evidence.

The 10 shooters included in this analysis were chosen because of the amount of information available about them, as well as the consistency of the information. Other shooters, no matter how much publicity their

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