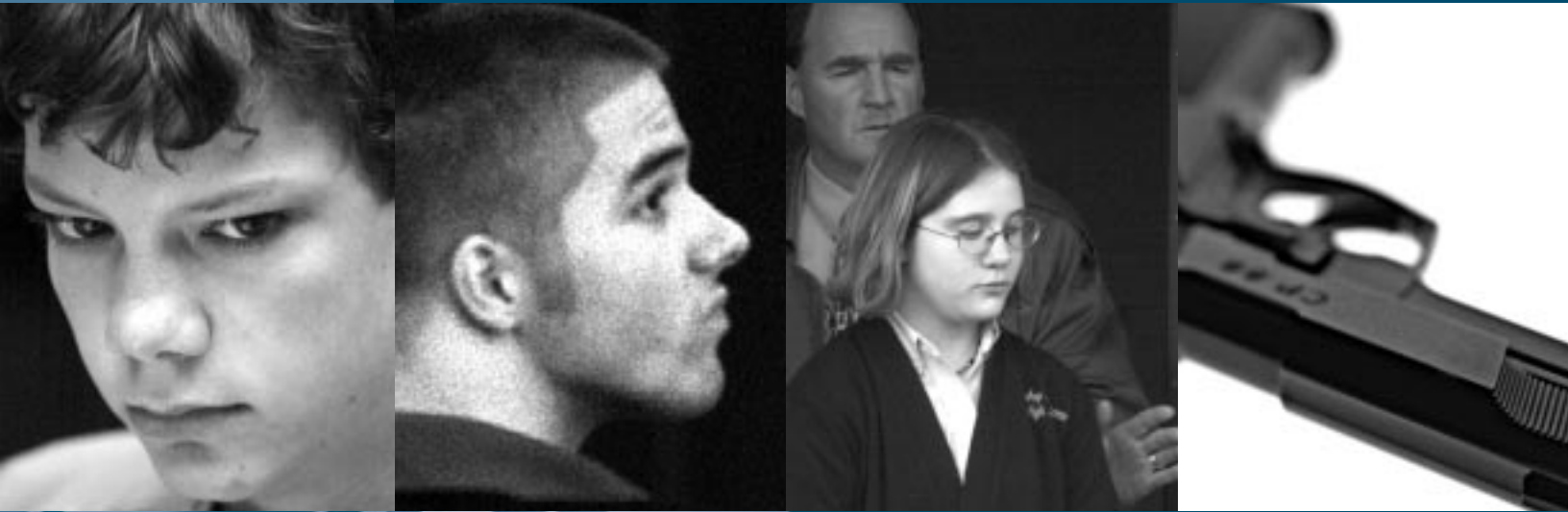


# Preventing School Shootings

*A Summary of a U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative Report*



**T**he 18-year-old honor student brought guns and a homemade bomb to school. He set off the fire alarm and shot at the janitors and fire-fighters who responded. The boy hung himself while awaiting trial. This story sounds as current as today's media headlines, but it happened in 1974. School shootings are not a new phenomenon.

There is no one reason why school shootings occur, and no one type of student who becomes a shooter.

This article dispels the myths and stereotypes about school shooters. Children who attack can be any age and from any ethnic group, race, or family situation. Contrary to assumptions that some of our youth “just snap”—they don't. They plan.

Most official statistics show a steady decline in the rates of school violence. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education show school to be one of the safest places for our children.<sup>1</sup> However, several high-profile shootings in schools over the past decade have resulted

## editor's note

This article summarizes *USSS Safe School Initiative: An Interim Report on the Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2000). The summary is published with permission from NTAC.

The full report, with expanded findings, is anticipated in early 2002. The research was funded in part through NIJ grant number 00-MU-MU-A003.

For more information, visit the National Threat Assessment Center online at <http://www.treas.gov/usss/ntac>.

in increased fear among students, parents, and educators.

The National Institute of Justice has joined forces with the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education to assess ways to prevent school shootings. The Secret Service has a long tradition of protecting our Nation's leaders by identifying, assessing, and managing persons who might pose a threat of targeted violence.

Targeted violence is a term developed by the Secret Service to refer to any incident of violence where a known (or knowable) attacker selects a particular target prior to the act of violence. Because of the Secret Service's expertise in the study and prevention of targeted violence, the Secretary of Education

asked the agency to conduct a similar operational study of school shootings. (See “Editor's Note,” above, and “The Study Specifics,” page 13.)

## Study Implications

The findings clearly emphasize the importance of paying attention and listening to America's young people. More than a handful of adults—parents, teachers, school administrators and counselors, coaches, and law enforcement—can make an important contribution to and play a key role in preventing violence on school grounds.

Young people who need help often do not keep it a secret. They may exhibit obvious warning signs either through behavior or remarks, such as voicing problems or grievances, complaining about persecution or bullying, or showing signs of depression or desperation.

The Secret Service found that when young people plan targeted violence they often tell at least one person about their plans, give out specifics before the event takes place, and obtain weapons they need—usually from their own home or a relative's home.

An important effort in prevention may be to ensure that young people have opportunities to talk and connect with caring adults.

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## What We Know

### Attackers Talk About Their Plans

*Prior to most incidents, the attacker told someone about his idea or plan.* In more than three-fourths of the cases examined in the Safe School Initiative, the attacker told a friend, schoolmate, or sibling about his idea for a possible attack before taking action. In one case, an attacker made comments to at least 24 friends and classmates about his interest in killing other students, building bombs, or carrying out an attack at the school. Some of the conversations were long enough that peers conveyed detailed information about the plans, including the date it would happen.

However, the study identified a major barrier to the prevention of targeted school violence. In nearly all of the cases, the person who was told about the impending incident was a peer, and rarely did anyone bring the information to an adult's attention. It is important, therefore, that threat assessment inquiries involve efforts to gather information from anyone who may have contact with the student in question. It also is important to decrease barriers that may prevent students who have information from coming forward. In addition, both schools and investigators need a thoughtful, effective system for handling and analyzing any information that is provided.

Although some attackers did make threats, most did not threaten their target directly. The researchers indicate it is helpful to distinguish between *making* a threat (telling people they intend to harm someone) and *posing* a threat (engaging in behaviors that indicate intent, planning, or preparation for an attack). The study notes that plans to prevent school violence should

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involve adults attending to concerns when someone poses a threat rather than waiting for a direct threat.

### Attackers Make Plans

*Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive.* In almost all incidents, the attacker developed the idea to harm the target before the attack. In many cases, the attacker formulated the idea for the attack at least 2 weeks in advance and planned out the incident. Targeted violence is typically the end result of an understandable, often discernible, process of thinking and behavior. For more than half of the attackers, the motive was revenge. In several cases, students made efforts to acquire firearms—often from their own home—or bomb-making equipment, and solicited the assistance of friends to do so.

Because information about intent and planning was potentially knowable before the incident, the findings suggest some violent events may be preventable. Quick efforts to inquire and intervene are extremely important because the time span may be short between the attacker's decision to attack and the actual incident. An inquiry should include investigation of, and attention to, grievances and bad feelings a student may be experiencing about school or potential targets.

### There Is No Stereotype or Profile

*There is no accurate or useful profile of "the school shooter."* The personality and social characteristics of the shooters varied substantially. They came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and varied in age from 11 to 21 years. Family



situations ranged from intact families to foster homes. Academic performance ranged from excellent to failing. Few had been diagnosed with any mental disorder prior to the incident, and less than one-third had histories of drug or alcohol abuse.

Thus profiling is not effective for identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted violence at school. Knowing that an individual shares characteristics, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not advance the appraisal of risk. The use of profiles carries a risk of over-

identification, and the vast majority of students who fit any given profile will not actually pose a risk. The use of these stereotypes will fail to identify some students who do, in fact, pose a risk of violence, but who share few characteristics with prior attackers.

A fact-based approach may be more productive in preventing school shootings than a trait-based approach. This study indicates that an inquiry based on a student's behaviors and communications will be more productive than attempts to determine risk by attending to students' characteristics or traits. The aim should be to determine if the student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. If so, how far along are the plans, and when or where would intervention be possible?

### **Attackers Had Easy Access to Guns**

*Most attackers had used guns previously and had access to guns.* In nearly two-thirds of the incidents, the attackers obtained the gun(s) used in the attack from their own home or that of a relative. In some cases, the guns were gifts from the students' parents.

## **The Study Specifics**

Since September 1999, the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) has studied 37 school shootings involving 41 attackers. The attackers were current or recent students at the school and chose to attack the school for a particular purpose, not simply as a site of opportunity. The study excluded school shootings that were clearly related to gang or drug activity or to an interpersonal or relationship dispute. All of the incidents were committed by boys or young men.

Researchers reviewed primary source materials for each incident, including investigative, school, court, and mental health records. Information gathered about each case included facts about how

the attacker developed the idea to harm, selected the target(s), planned the attack, and chose to communicate an intent to cause harm.

Each case file also identified the motivation behind the attack, the method used to acquire weapons, and demographic and background information about each attacker. In addition, NTAC personnel conducted interviews with 10 of the attackers. The interviews provided an opportunity to hear the attacker's perspective on his decision to engage in a school-based attack.

The results of the study overturn stereotypes and suggest ways to prevent shootings and other school violence.

While access to weapons among students may be common, when the idea of an attack exists, any effort to acquire, prepare, or use a weapon may signal an attacker's progression from idea to action. A threat assessment inquiry should include investigation of weapon access and use and attention to communication about weapons. The large number of attackers who acquired their guns from home highlights the need to consider issues of safe gun storage.

### **School Staff Are Often First Responders**

*Most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement intervention.* More than half of the attacks ended before law enforcement responded to the scene—despite law enforcement's often prompt response. In these cases, faculty or fellow students stopped the attacker, or the attacker either stopped shooting on his own or committed suicide. Many of the incidents lasted 20 minutes or less.

Schools can make the best use of their resources by working with law enforcement on prevention efforts as well as critical incident response plans.

### **Attackers Are Encouraged by Others**

*In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.* The attackers acted alone in at least two-thirds of the cases. However, in almost half of the cases, friends or fellow students influenced or encouraged the attacker to act.

In one case, the student planned to bring a gun to school in an attempt to appear tough to other students who had been harassing him. The attacker shared his plan with two friends who convinced him to actually shoot students at the school to

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persuade others to leave him alone. Several days later, he did just that. The attacker schemed to shoot fellow students in the lobby of his school at a specific time in the morning. On the morning of the attack, he asked three others to meet him in the mezzanine overlooking the lobby, where only a few students could be found every morning. The students told so many others that by the time the attacker opened fire in the lobby—killing 2 and injuring 2—a total of 24 students were in the mezzanine watching the attack. One student brought a camera to record the event.

Advance knowledge among students about the planned incidents contradicts the assumption that shooters are “loners” and that they “just snap.” The research suggests that an inquiry should not only include efforts to gather information from a student's friends and schoolmates, but also give attention to the influ-

ence that a student's friends or peers may have on intent, planning, and preparations.

### **Bullying Can Be a Factor**

*In a number of cases, bullying played a key role in the decision to attack.* A number of attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that were longstanding and severe. In those cases, the experience of bullying appeared to play a major role in motivating the attack at school. Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk. However, in a number of cases, attackers described experiences of being bullied in terms that approached torment.

Attackers told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, would meet the legal definition of harassment. That bullying played a major role in a number of school

shootings should strongly support ongoing efforts to combat bullying in American schools.

Two recent cases not included in the Secret Service's interim report brought the issue of bullying to the Nation's attention. One boy experienced the torment of kids burning their cigarette lighters and then pressing the hot metal against his neck. He was constantly picked on, even by his friends. To stop the daily taunting, he opened fire on his classmates, killing two.<sup>2</sup>

In the second case, a girl had been the victim of such severe harassment that she frequently skipped school; administrators threatened legal action if she did not begin to attend school regularly. Students called her names and threw stones at her as she walked home. Increasingly concerned, her parents transferred her to a small parochial school. The teasing continued. In an effort to stop the pain, the student planned to commit suicide in front of a classmate to whom she had revealed personal information. Instead of killing herself, she pointed the gun at her classmate and wounded her in the shoulder.<sup>3</sup>

### Warning Signs Are Common

*Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated a need for help.* In more than half of the cases, the attacker's behavior caught the attention of more than one person. Behaviors that led others (e.g., school officials, police, fellow students) to be concerned included those related to the attack, such as efforts to obtain a gun. But they also included behaviors not clearly related to the attack. More than three-fourths of the attackers threatened to kill themselves, made suicidal gestures, or tried to kill themselves before their attacks. In

## For More Information

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one case, a student wrote several poems for English class that involved themes of homicide and suicide as possible solutions to feelings of hopelessness. School authorities ultimately determined that his was a family problem and did not intervene. He later went to school and killed two people. Many attackers had a history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.

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## Notes

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