



# School Safety Newsletter

Volume 6, Issue 7

February 2019

## School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence?

NPR, February 10, 2019

<http://www.nprillinois.org/post/school-shooters-whats-their-path-violence#stream/0>

It's hard to empathize with someone who carries out a school shooting. The brutality of their crimes is unspeakable. Whether the shootings were at Columbine, at Sandy Hook, or in Parkland, they have traumatized students and communities across the U.S.

Psychologist John Van Dreal understands that. He is the director of safety and risk management at Salem-Keizer Public Schools in Oregon, a state that has had its share of school shootings. In 2014, about 60 miles from Salem, where Van Dreal is based, a 15-year-old boy shot one student and a teacher at his high school before killing himself.

"Someone went out of their way to target and kill children who look like our children, teachers who look like our teachers — and did it for no other reason than to hurt them," says Van Dreal. "And that's very personal."

Still, Van Dreal and other psychologists and law enforcement agents do spend a lot of time thinking about what it's like to be one of these school shooters, because, they say, that is key to prevention.

### **How many school shootings?**

Tallying up all shootings and instances of school violence is difficult, researchers say; there's no official count, and various organizations differ in their definitions of school shootings.

For example, an open source database put together by Mother Jones suggests there have been 11 mass shootings (where four or more people died) in schools since the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado in 1999, and 134 children and adults died in those attacks.

Psychologists and law enforcement agencies have been analyzing how these sorts of multivictim attacks came to be, because of what they tell us about many other people who are at risk of becoming violent in schools and the ways we might intervene early, before anger becomes violence.

In the two decades since the Columbine High School shooting, researchers have learned a lot about school shooters. For one thing, many are themselves students, or former students, at the schools they attack. A significant majority tend to be teenagers or young adults.

"There's no one thing, [but] maybe a couple of dozen different things that come together to put someone on the path to committing an act of mass violence," says Peter Langman, a clinical psychologist in Allentown, Pa., and the author of two books and several studies about school shootings.

### **Multiple factors contribute in each case**

Most shooters in these cases had led difficult lives, the studies find. "Adolescent school shooters, there's no question that they're struggling and there have been multiple failures in their lives," says Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist who has consulted with the FBI.

*Protecting our  
future through  
information  
sharing*

### **In This Issue**

- School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence?
- Next Monthly Webinar - March 6, 2019
- School Systems Should Confront Domestic Violence in Formative Educational Courses
- How Teachers Can Help Students Experiencing Dating Abuse

## **School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence? (Continued)**

Many struggle with psychological problems, Meloy says.

"We know that mental health issues are very much in the mix," he says. "The child might be just, you know, very depressed. We also found in one of our early studies that you've got this curious combination of both depression and paranoia."

Studies by the FBI and the U.S. Secret Service have also found that many of the shooters were feeling desperate before the event.

"Whether or not they've been diagnosed, or whether or not they're severely mentally ill, something is going on that could [have been] addressed through some kind of treatment," says Langman. But most never got that treatment.

### **The role of mental health problems**

Mental health issues don't cause school shootings, Van Dreal emphasizes. After all, only a tiny, tiny percentage of kids with psychological issues go on to become school shooters.

But mental health problems are a risk factor, he says, because they can decrease one's ability to cope with other stresses. And studies have shown that most school shooters have led particularly stressful lives.

Many, though not all, of the perpetrators have experienced childhood traumas such as physical or emotional abuse, and unstable families, with violent, absent or alcoholic parents or siblings, for example. And most have experienced significant losses.

For example, the defendant in the case of the Parkland, Fla., shooting last year had lost his adopted mother to complications from the flu just a couple of months before the school attack. His adopted father had died when he was a little boy.

### **Feeling like an outcast at school may also play a role.**

"A lot of these people have felt excluded, socially left out or rejected," says Van Dreal. Studies show that social rejection at school is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, aggression and antisocial behavior in children.

A 2004 study by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education found that nearly three-quarters of school shooters had been bullied or harassed at school. Marginalized kids don't have anchors at school, says Van Dreal. "They don't have any adult connection — no one watching out for them. Or no one knows who they are anymore." And the absence of social support at the school, Meloy says, is a big risk factor.

"People who do these kinds of targeted attacks don't feel very good about themselves, or where they're headed in their lives," says Van Dreal. "They may wish someone would kill them. Or they may wish they could kill themselves." For example, Dylan Klebold, one of the perpetrators of the Columbine shooting, had been depressed and suicidal two years prior.

"About half of the school shooters I've studied have died by suicide in their attack," says Langman. "It's often a mix of severe depression and anguish and desperation driving them to end their own lives."

Of course, most people who feel suicidal don't kill others. So what makes a small minority of kids who have mental health issues and thoughts of suicide turn to violence and homicide? Meloy and Van Dreal think it's because these individuals had been struggling alone — either because they were unable to ask for help or their cries went unheard when the adults in their lives didn't realize the child needed support.

### **When despair turns to anger and a desire for revenge**

When someone has been struggling alone for a while and failing, their despair can turn into anger, the researchers say. "There's loss. There's humiliation. There's anger. There's blame," says Meloy. That sort of anger can lead to homicidal thoughts, Van Dreal says. They start out fantasizing about revenge, says Meloy.

## **Monthly Webinars!**

First Wednesday  
of Every Month

at 10 am

(Except January,  
July, and  
August).

## **Next Webinars**

**Wednesday,  
March 6, 2019**

Each webinar has a  
round table  
discussion at the  
end. Questions are  
always welcome!

To participate, you  
must be a vetted  
member. For more  
information please  
email  
[schoolsafety@isp.state.il.us](mailto:schoolsafety@isp.state.il.us)

## **School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence? (Continued)**

"So the fantasy is one where the teenager starts to identify with other individuals who have become school shooters and have used violence as a way to solve their problem," he says.

These days, Meloy adds, it's easy for a troubled kid to go online and research how previous shooters planned and executed their attacks.

Easy access to guns — one of the biggest risk factors — then turns these fantasies into reality.

Psychologists say these attacks can be prevented — they are often weeks or months in the planning.

The keys to prevention are to spot the earliest behavioral signs that a student is struggling, Langman says, and also to watch for signs that someone may be veering toward violence.

Some signs can seem obvious in hindsight. "So, I've stopped being the kid who went to Boy Scouts, and church and loved his grandmother," Van Dreal says, "and now I want to be that kid with camouflage who's isolated and attacks people and hurts them."

But sometimes, even professionals who see the signs miss their significance.

About a year and a half before he attacked students at Columbine High School, Dylan Klebold, who was a gifted student, started to get into trouble. He and some friends hacked into his school's computer system. Then, a couple of months later, he and his friend Eric Harris broke into a van and stole some equipment. They were arrested at that point and sent to a diversion program — an alternative to jail for first-time juvenile offenders — that offered counseling and required community service.

Sue Klebold, Dylan's mother and subsequent author of the book *A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*, tells NPR she was upset and concerned to see the sudden change in her son's behavior. She says she asked the diversion counselor if his behavior meant something and whether he needed a therapist. The counselor asked Dylan, and Dylan said no.

Sue Klebold says she never realized how deep the problem was. "The piece that I think I failed [in] is, we tend to underestimate the level of pain that someone may be in," Klebold tells NPR. "We all have a responsibility to stop and think — someone we love may be suffering, may be in a crisis."

### **Beware pitfalls in the search for a solution**

The solution, according to psychologists who study kids who become violent, isn't to expel or suspend a student like Dylan — though that is what happened to him in the fall of 1997, after he hacked into his school's computer system. A student like that who's expelled "can now be bored, can be isolated at home, can be living in a dysfunctional family, and can be ruminating and thinking all the time about how he's going to avenge what has happened to him," says Meloy.

Eric Harris, who was Dylan Klebold's friend and fellow killer that day at Columbine, didn't seem depressed; he was self-absorbed, lacked empathy and was prone to angry outbursts, according to those who analyzed his journals and earlier behavior.

While Klebold's journals were "full of loneliness and depression," Langman says, the writings of Harris were "full of narcissism and rage and rants against people — a lot of contempt."

Harris' contempt extended to himself. Significant surgeries during his early teen years to correct a birth condition contributed to self-loathing, Langman's study of Harris' journal suggests.

"I have always hated how I looked," Harris wrote in his journal. "That's where a lot of my hate grows from." In his last journal entry, Harris refers to himself as "the weird looking Eric KID."

"Anyone contemplating getting a gun and killing people needs to be seen as a person in crisis," says Langman. "And that's why it's so important to reach out and connect with that individual." Time and time again, psychologists and educators have found that surrounding a young person with the right kind of support and supervision early on can turn most away from violence. Connecting with these students, listening to them and supporting them, getting them the help they need, these researchers say, can help prevent future attacks and make schools a safer place for all children.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST: There were 25 school shootings last year. Thirty-three children and adults died in those incidents. More than 60 people were injured. Experts say to prevent these attacks, we need to understand what's behind the rage of school shooters. NPR's Rhitu Chatterjee explains what puts these kids on the path to violence.

## **School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence? (Continued)**

RHITU CHATTERJEE, BYLINE: April 20, 1999 - it felt like the beginning of a new and terrible era in America where parents feared that their kids could go to school in the morning and never come home. Two students walked into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and shot dead 13 people and then killed themselves. When Sue Klebold heard about the shooting, she panicked and hoped her son was safe. Then she learned that he was one of the shooters.

SUE KLEBOLD: I was completely confused. I didn't know what had happened or why. I was trying to accept that my son was dead, that he was being held responsible for this terrible, terrible tragedy.

CHATTERJEE: Klebold says after the incident, her son Dylan was called many things.

KLEBOLD: My son was called a monster. He was called evil.

CHATTERJEE: But that wasn't the boy she knew.

KLEBOLD: He was kind and friendly and nice and gentle.

CHATTERJEE: Then months after his death, she discovered a side of her son that he'd hidden from nearly everyone. The police returned his journals to her.

KLEBOLD: There, I could clearly see here was a young man who was saying, I am in agony; I want to get a gun; I want to kill myself. He was saying that when he was 15 years old.

CHATTERJEE: His writings reveal that he'd been depressed and suicidal for almost two years before the shooting. Now, it's almost impossible to empathize with someone like that. The brutality of their crime is unspeakable. Psychologist John Van Dreal gets that.

JOHN VAN DREAL: Someone went out of their way to target and kill children who look like our children and teachers who look like our teachers and did it for no other reason than to hurt them. And that's very personal.

CHATTERJEE: Van Dreal directs the safety and risk management program at Salem-Keizer Public Schools in Oregon. But he and other psychologists do think about what it's like to be one of these kids because they want to figure out how to prevent these shootings and keep children safe.

There's no official count of school shootings. An extensive Washington Post database shows more than 230 incidents where a gun was fired at K-12 schools since Columbine. Six of those were mass shootings. And here's what experts have learned about school shooters. Most have had one struggle after another.

PETER LANGMAN: My assumption, based on years of research into dozens of perpetrators, is that there are significant psychological issues.

CHATTERJEE: Peter Langman is a psychologist in Allentown, Pa., and the author of the book "Why Kids Kill: Inside The Minds Of school Shooters."

LANGMAN: So whether or not they've ever been diagnosed, whether or not they're severely mentally ill, you know, something is going on that could be addressed through some kind of treatment.

CHATTERJEE: But most never got treatment even though they had childhood traumas, unstable homes. They felt like outcasts at school where they'd been bullied, and many had experienced severe losses. The defendant in the case of the shooting in Parkland, Fla., last year - his mother died the year before the shooting. His father died when he was a little boy. John Van Dreal says these struggles add up over time.

VAN DREAL: They don't feel very good about themselves or where they're headed in their life. They may wish someone would kill them, or they may wish that they could kill themselves.

CHATTERJEE: Most of these kids were in despair. Many did kill themselves in their attacks. But most people who are feeling suicidal don't attack others, and most people with mental illness are not violent. So what makes a tiny percentage of kids become violent and homicidal? Van Dreal and other experts think it's because these kids had been struggling alone and failing for a long time, and their despair had turned into anger. Reid Meloy is a forensic psychologist and has consulted with the FBI.

REID MELOY: There's loss. There's humiliation. There's anger, and then there's blame.

## **School Shooters: What's Their Path To Violence? (Continued)**

CHATTERJEE: Blame - a precursor to violence. These individuals had a history of collecting grievances and fantasizing about revenge.

MELOY: And the fantasy is one in which the teenager begins to identify with other individuals that have become school shooters, that have used violence as a way to solve their problems.

CHATTERJEE: And access to guns turns that fantasy into a reality. But psychologists say these attacks can be prevented. There are often weeks or months in the planning. And John Van Dreal says there are signs that someone's struggling and heading towards violence.

VAN DREAL: I've stopped being the kid that went to Boy Scouts and church and loved his grandmother, and now I want to be that kid with camouflage who's isolated and attacks people and hurts them.

CHATTERJEE: Fourteen months before Columbine, Dylan Klebold, who was a gifted student, started to get into trouble. He and his friend Eric Harris got arrested after they broke into a van and stole some equipment. His mother was concerned. She asked him, did he need therapy? He said no. And she never realized how deep the problem really was.

KLEBOLD: The piece that I think where I failed the most is that we tend to underestimate the level of pain that someone may be in. We all have a responsibility to stop and think someone we love may be in a crisis.

CHATTERJEE: The solution isn't to expel or suspend a student, which is what happened to her son. Time and again, psychologists and educators have found that what these kids need is support and help.

## **School Systems Should Confront Domestic Violence in Formative Educational Courses**

East Tennesseean, February 14, 2019

<http://easttennessean.com/2019/02/14/school-systems-should-confront-domestic-violence-in-formative-educational-courses/>

Sex education and wellness class: Two of the most practical, yet undervalued, classes students will ever have in compulsory education. Think of it like personal finance, but you'll actually want to use what you've learned. One specific area that public schools have yet to address is domestic violence: What it is, what the signs are, and how to help someone or receive help.

Domestic violence is an awful plague on any society. It is especially a concern for society when the abused partner rarely knows the appropriate response or resources available to victims. Far too often, victims remain in the relationship thinking they can fix it, but these relationships should only be escaped.

According to Love Is Respect, their website reports, "Nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year, and one in three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner, a figure that far exceeds rates of other types of youth violence."

Without the education to understand what domestic violence means or how to report it, many victims remain silent about their abuse, or cover up evidence with a lie or defense of the abuser. Love Is Respect reports "only 33 percent of teens who were in a violent relationship ever told anyone about the abuse."

The flaw in even our best sex ed classes is that they usually assume relationships will work or at least end amicably. This is not realistic. If the only way people can learn about domestic violence is firsthand, then the American education system has failed its students.

Domestic violence is not an issue we can leave to parents to address either. Never mind how uncomfortable that conversation can be, but there's never a situation where anyone can guarantee children will have parents who are informed, willing or able to have that talk. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, statistics show "a child witnessed violence in 22 percent (nearly 1 in 4) of intimate partner violence cases filed in state courts."

Typically children who witness/experience domestic violence at home will fall into an abusive relationship when they're older. The National Domestic Violence Hotline reports, "One study in North America found that children who were exposed to violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average."

## **School Systems Should Confront Domestic Violence in Formative Educational Courses (Continued)**

Though it's the season for Valentine's Day, America needs to understand the ramifications of domestic violence and the lack of comprehensive education. Everyone should understand what domestic violence is, and everyone should know what resources are available to them if domestic violence occurs.

If you know anyone who may be a victim of domestic violence, reach out to them. Victims need to know they have a support system willing to help them. This is a conversation that must be had between family, friends, classrooms and coworkers, no matter how uncomfortable. For more information or to report domestic violence, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.

### **How Teachers Can Help Students Experiencing Dating Abuse**

Break the Cycle, Excerpt from: <https://www.breakthecycle.org/blog/how-teachers-can-help-students-experiencing-dating-abuse>

One of the best methods for deterring abuse is for teachers to understand what dating violence looks like, how they can take action to prevent it and how to help their students who are experiencing abuse. Interested in what that may look like? Here's a short guide for teachers on best practices so they can best support their students:

- If a student comes to you about an unhealthy or abusive relationship, you need to make the school's confidentiality and reporting requirements extremely clear. This is for everyone's safety and protection, including you.
- Listen without interrupting. Thank them for trusting you with this information. They'll likely be confused about how they feel and what to do, and may even change their mind while talking to you.
- Do not judge. Dating abuse can happen to anyone, no matter their age, race, gender identity, cultural background, religion or socioeconomic status. Also, remember not to assume the gender-identity or sexuality of the person demonstrating abusive behaviors.
- Watch how the student interacts with you and respect their body language. Listen to what they say and how they say it and replicate their tone.
- Listen to them and talk about their choices without offering your personal opinion of the situation. Empower the student to make the best decision for their well-being and safety.
- Asking unnecessary questions could make them shut down or feel like they're being interrogated, even if your questions are well-meaning. For example, "Why didn't you..." or "why don't you..." can come off as confrontational.
- Don't go to the person committing the abuse, even if they're also a student of yours. This could increase the risk that they'll lash out or do more harm to the student who made the report to you. It may also put you in danger!
- If the student experiencing abuse feels it's best to stay with their partner, be supportive about their choice. This can often be hard for people to understand, but there are many reasons why someone might stay with a partner demonstrating abusive behaviors, whether it's fear, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, lack of financial independence, children, or something else.
- What the survivor is telling you should be treated as confidential. Do not gossip about it, even in places where you think other students cannot hear you. Word could get back to the student perpetuating the abuse, which could put the reporting student in a more dangerous place than before. If you need support or information, visit loveisrespect.org or go to the designated school administrator who handles these issues.
- Ultimately, let the student know you'll be there for them, no matter what. Offer resources available to them, such as school counseling, talking with their family or friends for support, safety planning and online resources like Break the Cycle, the National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline and loveisrespect.org. If you feel your student may be in immediate danger, find out what your school's policies are for reporting dating violence, whether it's occurring on campus or not. Student safety is the most important factor and you are a vital part of ensuring that safety.

#### **School Safety Newsletter**

Statewide Terrorism &  
Intelligence Center  
2200 S. Dirksen Parkway  
Springfield, IL 62703  
Phone: 217-558-2661  
E-Mail:  
[Schoolsafety@isp.state.il.us](mailto:Schoolsafety@isp.state.il.us)

**Mia Ray Langheim**  
School Intelligence  
Officer

