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Lethal hints

'Red flags' suggest which troubled students will become school shooters, experts say

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

"On Wednesday, May 14th, I will lock the exits and entrances of my high school and begin firing at students. Hopefully I will be able to hold off the police for long enough to kill what I estimate to be in the upper 60's. There will be no backing down and in the ultimate standoff with the law I will have to kill myself. In my possession I have 3 92 series Beretta 9mm pistols, and boxes of ammo, roughly 360 shells. I'm working on acquiring a live grenade."

-- Internet posting in May by an Upper Arlington 15-year-old

Was this a prank -- or a deadly plot? How can police or mental-health experts tell? What can be done to identify troubled students before they kill?

In the local case, a citizen alerted the FBI in Tampa, Fla., to the posting. An agent there checked it out, found it came from Upper Arlington and alerted FBI Special Agent Harry Trombitas in Columbus. Trombitas had taken two weeks of FBI and Secret Service training in January in Quantico, Va., on how to assess school-violence threats. He now teaches the skill to local agencies and has made about 20 presentations around Ohio, with more scheduled next school year.

In the Upper Arlington case, Trombitas informed the suburb's police, who told school officials. The superintendent called off activities at the high school for May 13 and closed the school May 14.

"There was evidence of planning," the FBI agent said, "and you cannot afford to not follow up on any kind of threat."

The more specific a threat is, Trombitas said, the more seriously it needs to be addressed. The Upper Arlington threat included a date, he said, which attached a red flag.

Another was the reference to locking a door, as Virginia Tech shooter Cho Seung-Hui did, said Dr. Kris Mohandie, a police and forensic psychologist in Pasadena, Calif.

"Fortunately, the (Upper Arlington boy) was a false positive," said Mohandie, who wrote *School Violence Threat Management: A Practical Guide for Educators, Law Enforcement, and Mental*



Eric Harris, left, and Dylan Klebold during the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999

MBC NEWS



Virginia Tech gunman Cho Seung-Hui, from a video mailed just before the April 2007 massacre



"What's wonderful in the (Upper Arlington) case is the kid is getting help through their diversion program," said Dr. Marisa Randazzo, formerly the Secret Service's chief research psychologist and one of the first to work on the Columbine case.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students at Columbine High School in suburban Denver, killed 12 students, one teacher and themselves. Twenty-one more were injured.

Harris and Klebold had completed a juvenile diversion program for breaking into a car a couple of months before the attack, according to the Jefferson County sheriff's department report. Both were described as intelligent boys with typical childhoods who concealed darker sides that included depression, suicidal thoughts, lack of self-esteem and feelings of superiority, traits common to school shooters, experts say.

Dr. Mary Ellen O'Toole, an FBI behavioral analyst and supervisory special agent, wrote "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective" following the Columbine attack.

Like other experts, O'Toole warned against trying to profile school shooters. She quoted H.L. Mencken: "For every problem, there is a solution which is simple, neat, and wrong."

No single policy applies, O'Toole wrote. But certain actions beforehand merit attention.

"It's not profiling," Mohandie said. "We're not dragging a net across people with certain characteristics."

Randazzo, now president of Threat Assessment Resources International in Reno, Nev., said: "There's no checklist. But if there's a red flag, it's time to ask questions. There are behaviors that should make us sit up and take notice."

Mohandie agreed.

"What caused people to notice that young man (in Upper Arlington) was his behavior," he said. "Then, you have to scratch beneath surfaces for risk factors that cause people to move forward."

"But for (the Upper Arlington boy) expressing (himself) in cyberspace, there was no reason to look at him," Mohandie said.

Troubled students tend to be "injustice collectors, people who hold onto every little slight, whether real or perceived," Trombitas said. "It just builds until they think they have to act out violently."

Other risk factors include poor impulse control that suggests "a willingness to go there," feelings of hopelessness, peers who encourage the person to do bad things, a mentality that embraces violence, identifying with people who've done these things and a violent fantasy life, Mohandie said.

Other findings, however, tell authorities violence is unlikely, Mohandie said. In the Upper Arlington case, there was no evidence that weapons were accessible, he said.

A final consideration is a precipitating event that could destabilize a person, Mohandie said.

These could include any change in relationships, particularly a romantic one, or a family change. A legal or school matter could also be the breaking point.

Many injustice collectors harbor animosity and resentment, Mohandie said.

"The ones we're most concerned about have that exact psychology whether it's based in reality or not," he said. "I don't think Cho Seung-Hui's was based in current reality. I think he was mentally unstable. They all have anger management problems."

"A lot of them do it for notoriety," he said. "They have pitiful self-esteem and are willing to sacrifice themselves and others to be remembered. ... They are seeking fame without achievement."

There are numerous myths about school shooters, experts say.

These include:

- They "just snapped."

"People don't just snap," Trombitas said. More than 50 percent of attackers planned their attacks for at least two weeks, he said.

Randazzo said, "Over 85 percent thought about or planned or attempted suicide before they carried out their plan. They are desperate. Nothing in life is going their way.

"So they come up with a plan, share that plan with friends and classmates, then get weapons and carry out the attack," she said. "It's a process that's detectable. It follows a logical progression of behavior."

- They are loners.

Statistics show that in 81 percent of the cases, at least one other person knew of the attacker's plans, Trombitas said. In 60 percent, two or more others knew.

- People are either dangerous or they're not dangerous.

"We're all on a continuum," Trombitas said.

Added Randazzo: "Some people have more coping skills. They handle one problem after another. Others are overwhelmed.

"The reality is all of us are capable of violence under the right circumstances."

Regardless of the attention violence at schools receives, Trombitas said, "Schools are certainly one of the safest places to be. The chances of being killed there are one in a million. It's safer than being at home or in the street."

"There's a phenomenon out there that people think school violence is running rampant," but the reality is global communication now makes people aware of each incident, he said.

"School violence is not a new phenomenon," Trombitas said, noting the homicide rate at schools has declined.

The most significant incident remains a 1927 attack in Bath, Mich., he said. An irate school treasurer used dynamite to blow up a school and killed 45 people and injured many more.

"Most of these events are preventable, all the time, so there's hope," Mohandie said. "One of the most positive things that came out of Columbine, aside from how law enforcement responds, is the shattering of national denial, perhaps even international."

These events can happen anywhere, he said.

"One of the good things after Columbine and Virginia Tech is that other students learned their role in actively reporting threats and rumors," Randazzo said.

It's because of these students that some of these attacks have been prevented, she said.

School administrators or law-enforcement officials who would like more information or who wish to set up training can contact Trombitas at 614-744-2168.

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