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A Comparison of Fatal School Shootings in Rural Communities

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Similarities of School Shootings in Rural and Small Town Communities

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ABSTRACT

Disturbing new patterns have marked the occurrence of recent lethal school violence where young offenders have targeted large groups of fellow students as their victims. The current study is an effort to understand this growing trend of youth violence. Based on analysis of several cases that occurred between 1996 and 1999, a profile of the offenders is suggested built on similarities and differences between cases that were researched. Data was collected from online databases and internet websites for various news organizations. Sources of data included reports from national, regional and local newspapers, newsmagazines, wire services, interview transcripts, and reports posted on various news organization websites. Cases include incidents that occurred in Moses Lake, Washington; Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon, and Littleton, Colorado.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Media portrayals of youth violence often depict African-American males as the offenders. As a result, the expectation that juvenile violence was only a problem for minority youths created a false sense of security among many majority status communities. In contrast to common portrayals of juvenile homicide offenders, recent school shootings have involved a different scenario where Caucasian youths from small rural communities have killed large numbers of people on school premises. As a result of the location, number of victims, and demographics of the offenders, recent incidents have created an unprecedented interest among school officials, law enforcement officials, and mental health and other youth-serving professionals in understanding youth violence.

Unfortunately, there is little information in the professional literature that specifically addresses the problem of lethal school-related violence. The lack of research on multiple-victim offenses is primarily due to the relative infrequency of these occurrences. Kachur, Stennies, Powell, Modzeleski, Stephens, Murphy, Kresnow, Sleet, and Lowry (1996) reported there were 85 homicides in United States schools between 1992 and 1994. However, only two cases involved multiple fatalities. In a later study, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("Facts about violence", 1999) noted a steady decrease in school-related deaths since the 1992-1993 school year. However, it was also noted that multiple-victim incidents in schools have increased in recent years, with an average of five incidents per year over the last three school years (August 1995-June 1998) as compared to an average of only one incident per school year in the previous three school years (August 1992-July 1995). Another unique aspect of recent school shootings is

the occurrence of incidents in rural areas. Kachur et al. (1996) found the rate of violent school-related deaths was nine times greater in urban schools than in rural schools.

Previous studies attempted to identify characteristics common among juvenile homicide offenders. For instance, many studies found that offenders have a history of academic difficulties (Busch, Zagar, Hughes, Arbit, & Bussell, 1990; Zagar, Arbit, Sylvies, & Busch, 1990), are often witnesses or victims of family violence (Lewis, Pincus, Lovely, Spitzer, & Moy 1987; Myers, Scott, Burgess, & Burgess, 1995), have histories of substance abuse, and have histories of violence or arrests (Cornell, Benedek, & Benedek, 1987; Myers et al., 1995). However, it is not known whether findings from these studies can be generalized to offenders in the recent rural school shootings. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to identify common characteristics among young offenders from rural and small town communities who were involved in multiple-fatality school shootings.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects included in the current study were those who committed offenses between January 1996 and April 1999 in a rural or small town community. Cases were limited to those which involved multiple student fatalities on school campuses during normal operating hours. For the purpose of this study, "rural community" was operationally defined as a nonmetropolitan area with a population of 50,000 or less (Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995). Six cases involving eight offenders were identified based on these criteria. The cases occurred in Moses Lake, Washington; Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado.

Moses Lake, Washington. On February 2, 1996, Barry Loukaitis, a 14 year-old Caucasian male, walked into his algebra class at Frontier Junior High School with a rifle and shot and killed two male students, one of whom had repeatedly teased Loukaitis in the past. He then randomly fired another shot into the center of the classroom, seriously injuring a female student. Loukaitis then shot and killed his math teacher as she headed to the aid of the wounded students. Hearing the commotion, a physical education teacher entered the classroom. Loukaitis planned to take a hostage as protection so he could safely exit the school. The physical education teacher volunteered to be the hostage. As Loukaitis placed a plastic bag over the muzzle of the rifle to be placed in the mouth of the teacher, the teacher wrestled the weapon away from him.

Pearl, Mississippi. On the morning of October 1, 1997, Luke Woodham, then 16 years of age, stabbed his mother to death in their home. He then went to Pearl High School and shot and killed two students and wounded seven others with a .30/30-caliber rifle in a commons area of the school. Before Woodham could drive away, a school administrator reached in the car and grabbed the steering wheel, preventing him from escaping. Woodham later claimed to have seen demons the night before his offense and that the leader of a satanic group the boys had formed directed his actions.

West Paducah, Kentucky. On December 1, 1997, 14 year-old Michael Carneal took several firearms, which he stole from a neighbor's garage just days before, to Heath High School. In a hallway at school, he unveiled the weapons to a group of students in hopes of gaining much desired attention. Once the attention shifted away from Carneal, he became angered and brandished a .22-caliber Ruger pistol towards members of a prayer group. After his threats were disregarded, Carneal opened fire on the group of students, killing three and wounding five others.

Jonesboro, Arkansas. On March 24, 1998, 11 year-old Andrew Golden and 13 year-old Mitchell Johnson stole a van owned by Johnson's mother. They broke into the house of Golden's grandfather and stole a cache of firearms and ammunition. Dressed in full camouflage, the pair went to Westside Middle School and hid their armament in a wooded area less than 100 yards away. Golden pulled a fire alarm and ran out of the school to meet Johnson who laid waiting in the woods. As students filed out of the school, the two boys ambushed the students with over 20 rounds of ammunition, killing four classmates and a teacher. Police, who acted on a tip from nearby construction workers, caught the boys as they attempted to flee to the parked van.

Springfield, Oregon. Fifteen year-old Kipland Kinkel had been arrested and suspended from school for possession of a stolen firearm. His father picked him up at the police station and shortly after an argument about the incident, Kinkel shot his father to death with a handgun his father had bought him as a gift. Kinkel also shot and killed his mother that evening after she returned home from work. On May 21, 1998, one day after the suspension and murder of his parents, Kinkel opened fire with a .22-caliber semiautomatic rifle on students at Thurston High School as they ate lunch in the school cafeteria.

Littleton, Colorado. On April 20, 1999, 18 year-old Eric Harris and 17 year-old Dylan Klebold carried out possibly the most deadly mass murder committed by students at a United States school in history. They entered the school cafeteria at Columbine High School, threw several pipe bombs, and opened fire on their fellow students. The offenders then entered the library and killed several students execution-style, taunting some before shooting them at point-blank range. In addition, police found more than 30 undetonated homemade bombs hidden in the school. The two juveniles ended up killing twelve students and one teacher and wounded 23 other students before taking their own lives.

Procedure

In the wake of recent school shootings, popular media has increased its coverage of youth homicide exponentially. Subsequently, internet search engines and other online databases may offer a surprisingly rich source of archival data. Due to the novelty of the technology, very few studies have utilized such technology for data collection in case studies (Heide, Solomon, Hopkins-Eyles, & Spencer, 1999).

Data for the current study was collected from online databases, newsmagazine television programs, and internet websites for various news organizations. Sources of data included reports from national, regional and local newspapers, newsmagazines, wire services, interview transcripts from television news or newsmagazine programs, and reports posted on various news

organization websites. Sources were identified by conducting searches on internet search engines, archival searches within news organization websites, and searches on databases such as Periodical Abstracts and NEXIS. Data was collected on 34 characteristics, including offender demographics, characteristics of the offense (e.g. victimology), mental health history, family characteristics (e.g. marital status, criminal history), and behavioral history.

Since information from popular media sources is sometimes inaccurate, several measures were taken to improve the reliability of data. First, information obtained from interviews with offenders, family members, victims, witnesses, or others closely involved in the case were given preference in data collection. Second, only reports from the more reputable national, regional, or local news sources were accessed and reviewed. Finally, data from multiple sources were collected for each characteristic. In the event that multiple sources were unavailable, the journalist was contacted to verify the source of information or the information was not included in the final analysis.

RESULTS

Results described below include those characteristics that were common among at least six of the eight offenders researched in the current study. A few case examples are also provided for each characteristic.

Verbal Threats

Seven of the eight offenders researched in this study made threats prior to committing their offenses (See Table 1 for a list of common characteristics). Some threats were explicit warnings for friends to stay away from a certain group of students, revelations to a friend that the offender intended to kill another student, or remarks such as "tomorrow you find out whether you live or die." Other threats were vague warnings that "something big is going to happen."

Table 1

Common Characteristics of Offenders

Offender	Verbal threats	Peer rejection	Interest in violent media	Previous violent behavior	Suicidal ideation	Violent writings
Loukaitis	x	x	x			x
Woodham	x	x	x	x	x	x

Carneal	x	x	x	x	x	x
Johnson	x	x	x	x	x	
Golden				x		
Kinkel	x		x	x	Suspected by his mother	x
Harris	x	x	x	x	x	x
Klebold	x	x	x	x	x	x

Interest in Violent Media

Seven of the eight offenders showed an intense interest in violent media, including violent movies, music, video games, or books. For instance, Barry Loukaitis spoke of how "cool" it would be to go on a cross-country killing spree as depicted in his favorite movie, "Natural Born Killers". He also may have enacted a scene from the Stephen King short story, "Rage", in committing his offense. Harris and Klebold frequently played violent internet role-play games. Other offenders played violent video games, listened to music with violent themes, favored movies depicting classroom violence.

History of Violent Behavior

Likewise, seven of the eight offenders displayed violent or aggressive behavior in the past, including fighting in school, bringing weapons to school, harming animals, or previous involvement with law enforcement. For example, Woodham was involved in several fights in school and tortured and killed his pet dog. Golden was reportedly asked to leave a day care center for fighting and using foul language when he was younger. Carneal threatened two boys with a handgun after the boys threatened to beat him up. Most of the violent acts towards people occurred in school, possibly because the offenders were defending themselves against ridicule or expressing anger towards rejecting peers.

Writing about Violence or Death

Along with acting violently, six of the eight offenders wrote about killing or death in class assignments or personal writings. These writings typically depicted scenes of mass killings. For instance, Carneal wrote a personal story about a young boy who was ridiculed by peers. In the story, the boy's older brother owned a gun and killed all the kids who teased the boy. Woodham

wrote in a personal journal about the satisfaction he took from killing his own dog, which he described as his "first kill". Harris wrote about killing war enemies in a creative writing assignment and kept a personal journal where he planned the offense.

Peer Rejection

A feeling of peer rejection was a characteristic shared among six of the eight offenders reviewed in this study. A few offenders targeted particular victims who had teased them, or they reported seeking revenge for the lack of respect and maltreatment they received from peers. As Luke Woodham stated, "I killed because people like me are mistreated every day." Woodham's comment suggests that the motive of his attack was to seek revenge against an entire student body or the local community. This was likely a major motivation behind attacks by other offenders, who were also rejected by peers and may have similarly felt a lacked of connection with their community. Feelings of rejection also occurred after several offenders were apparently spurned by a love interest. Woodham and Johnson had both recently broken up with girlfriends, one of whom became a victim in the boy's offense.

Suicidal Thoughts or Gestures

Another characteristic among six of the eight offenders was expressed suicidal ideation. For example, Carneal reported holding a gun to his head on one occasion and laid down on railroad tracks on another occasion as he contemplated suicide. Johnson threatened to kill himself and showed a friend a rope and gun he could use to complete the suicide. Harris noted on his website that the day of his offense would be his "last day on earth." The two Colorado offenders ended their rampage by committing suicide. Finally, while Kinkel never verbalized suicidal ideation, his mother told a friend she was concerned about her son killing himself.

DISCUSSION

A Profile

Results suggest the typical multiple-victim school shooting offender is a Caucasian adolescent male who recently made verbal threats of homicide. He is an above average student, but he often writes about death or killing in school assignments or personal journals. He feels rejected by others and has an intense interest in violent movies, books, or music. He has acted violently in the past and has fantasized about or threatened suicide. However, he does not necessarily use alcohol or illegal drugs. In addition, the offender will likely commit his offense with a gun owned by a family member.

A New Type of Killer

There may be several factors that contribute to an atmosphere that spawns this new type of killer. First, most of the offenders apparently lacked emotional support from their parents. In several cases, parents were either unresponsive or unsupportive of their child's emotional needs, and some offenders were left to care for themselves at young ages. The lack of parental monitoring

was found to be significantly correlated with violent behavior by youths (Singer, Miller, Guo, Flannery, Frierson, & Slovak, 1999).

Second, with the lack of parental support, offenders found solace and company in their favorite television program or barbaric video game. The changing face of society has cultivated an environment where graphic scenes of violence can be viewed by children of any age through a number of sources. There is evidence that supports the belief that violent media contributes to subsequent violent behavior (Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Lowry, Sleet, Duncan, Powell, & Kolbe, 1995). For instance, researchers have noted that viewing violent television programs is associated with an increase in violent behavior (Donnerstein et al., 1994). It is believed that children exposed to violent media are often desensitized to the realities of violence, and often overestimate the effectiveness of violence at solving problems (Lowry et al., 1995).

Third, researchers have found that watching violent television programs resulted in a style of daydreaming characterized by dreams about heroes or about taking action against a disliked person (Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1995). Most of the offenders in this study were regularly exposed to violent media and wrote about violence in personal journals or school assignments. Writing about killing and exposure to violent media may provide youths who are already emotionally vulnerable with an avenue to enact their homicidal ideation in the safety of fantasy.

Several of the offenders also wore costume-like clothing, including camouflage and cowboy attire (See Table 2 for a summary of attire and other characteristics).

Table 2

Other Individual Case Characteristics

Offender	Age	Academic performance	Attire	Owner of weapon used	Recent loss
Loukaitis	14	Honor role	Cowboy hat and boots, trench coat	Father	Divorce of parents
Woodham	16	Declined from above average to poor	Not known	Brother	Break-up with girlfriend
Carneal	14	Average	Not known	Neighbor	
Johnson	13	Average	Camouflage	See Golden	Break-up with girlfriend
Golden	11	Average	Camouflage	Grandfather	

Kinkel	15	Poor	Trench coat	Offender	School suspension
Harris	18	Average	Sunglasses, trench coat	Offender	Rejected by military
Klebold	17	Average	Sunglasses, trench coat	Offender	

Both clothing styles seem significant because they convey an image of masculinity and power as frequently portrayed by characters in violent television programs and movies. The donning of such attire may have completed the image of invulnerability in the offender's fantasy. The apparel may also have created a sense of deindividuation, where the offenders had a feeling of anonymity behind the outfits they wore. Zimbardo (1969) suggested that a sense of anonymity may occur as a result of feeling alienated from others, which was apparently the perception of nearly all of the offenders. Zimbardo (1969) further suggested that a sense of anonymity may result in impulsive behavior and a temporary loss of self-awareness, where victims may be disregarded.

Fourth, many children have easy access to firearms. In fact, most offenders in this study used firearms owned by a family member to commit their crime (See Table 2). Wilkinson and Fagan (1996) suggested that the availability of guns may contribute to feelings of toughness and high status. It is apparent that many of the offenders were, in fact, seeking status among their peers. For instance, in describing the lack of respect he felt, Michael Carneal stated, "…I had guns, I brought them to school, I showed them to them, and they were still ignoring me." With guns readily available, the offenders first used threats of violence to gain respect, and eventually followed through with their threats after they failed to get the peer recognition they desired.

Fifth, almost all of the offenders in this study felt rejected by peers. Even in cases in which the offender had a small group of friends, the modeling of responsible behavior did not occur. For instance, Luke Woodham had a small group of friends, one of whom influenced the others to read satanic books. This boy also told him that the only way Woodham could rid himself of thoughts about an ex-girlfriend was to kill her and others who teased the boys. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris also had a small group of friends who supported the boys in their violent rants and role-playing.

Possibly even more influential is the social incompetence that may result from rejection by peers. Rutter, Giller, and Hagell, (1998) suggested that social incompetence is the primary risk factor for antisocial behavior among adolescents. Therefore, as a result of being isolated from peers, many offenders may have lacked opportunities to develop social skills. Without adequate social skills, the offenders likely struggled in social situations, creating a downward spiral of increasing isolation and rejection.

Finally, many of the offenders had recently experienced some loss or failure (See Table 2). In one case the loss was a divorce. In another case the loss was a suspension from school. In other

cases the loss was a rejection by a love interest. The experience of a loss or perceived failure may have been a breaking point for adolescents who were already experiencing significant emotional distress caused by other rejections or failures, lack of social support and inadequate coping skills. As Kipland Kinkel wrote, "I can tell you one about love. It does more harm than good. I plan to live in a black hole. My firearms will be the only thing to fight my isolation. I would also like to point out, love is a horrible thing. It makes things kill and hate."

The combination of intense feelings of rejection and hopelessness, a lack of emotional support and detachment from parents or others in society, desensitization to violence from exposure to violent media, and the easy access to guns may have ignited the lethal spark that resulted in 31 dead and 69 wounded parents, teachers, and classmates of the eight offenders.

Conclusions

Despite the steps taken to ensure the integrity of information, the use of media reports for data collection is one limitation of the current study. Media sources report information that makes the best story for their purposes. Only the most shocking information may be reported in the source's effort to gain readership. Consequently, important information may be omitted as a result of selective reporting and editing. Information may also be misreported as a result of hasty efforts by the source to meet deadlines. However, since the offenders were inaccessible for interview, the current data collection method was considered a worthy alternative.

The profile proposed in this study is specific to juvenile offenders from rural or small town communities who were involved in multiple-victim school-related homicides and may not be generalizable to other types of violent individuals. A lack of generalizability is another limitation of this study. The small sample size contributes to the lack of generalizability, and is a common limitation of case studies. Thus, research on common characteristics of school shooting offenders needs to be conducted using a larger subject pool by employing broader selection criteria to confirm the current findings.

The high number of multiple-victim school shootings in rural communities indicates a need to explore the impact of certain cultural variables on youth violence, such as accessibility of violence prevention resources, the lack of geographic mobility, and an acceptance of violence in certain cultures. Youth violence has been a problem in urban communities for many years, which has likely resulted in greater funding for programming, the implementation of violence intervention programs and tighter security in many urban schools. In essence, there may be more resources for coping with violence in urban communities.

A perception of geographic immobility may also have impacted rural youths' decisions to kill. Many youths from rural communities take residence in or near their hometown after completing school. In fact, this lack of mobility seems to be expected of many rural youths. As a result, feelings of hopelessness may have intensified as the offenders failed to see any escape from the ridicule of their peers. Committing such an offense may have been viewed as the only way out of an intolerable situation.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) suggested that Caucasian southern culture fosters a "culture of honor" where violence is an acceptable means of protecting one's property, reputation, and masculinity. As compared to individuals from other regions, Southerners were no more accepting of violence in general, but were more accepting of violence as a response to personal affronts. The authors also suggested there is a greater socialization of violence in southern portions of the United States, where corporal punishment is more generally accepted and children are more often expected to physically defend themselves in the presence of an aggressor. The authors concluded that acceptance of violence in combination with greater availability of guns results in a higher likelihood that retribution may be deadly.

Finally, several offenders in the current study made suicidal gestures prior to their offenses and two offenders committed suicide immediately following their offense. Garbarino (1999) suggested that a youth's homicidal acts may ultimately be a plan for suicide. It is reasonable to conclude that the offenders may have decided that being killed by police was easier or more glamorous than committing suicide. Thus, further research is needed to explore the possible similarities between suicidal and homicidal adolescents, including the impact that depression, feelings of rejection, and being a victim of abuse may have on decisions to kill.

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