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# Mass Murder at School and Cumulative Strain

## A Sequential Model

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To explain the genesis of mass murder committed by students at their schools, the authors propose a five-stage sequential model in which several criminological theories (strain theory, control theory, and routine activities theory) are brought to bear collectively to demonstrate their cumulative effect. These stages are as follows: chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, the planning stage, and the massacre. Long-term frustrations (chronic strains) experienced early in life or in adolescence lead to social isolation, and the resultant lack of prosocial support systems (uncontrolled strain) in turn allows a short-term negative event (acute strain), be it real or imagined, to be particularly devastating. As such, the acute strain initiates a planning stage, wherein a mass killing is fantasized about as a masculine solution to regain lost feelings of control, and actions are taken to ensure the fantasy can become reality. The planning process concludes in a massacre facilitated by weapons that enable mass destruction in schoolrooms and campuses, where students are closely packed together. Based on this analysis, prevention strategies are suggested.

**Keywords:** *school shootings; violence; mass murder; strain; homicide*

As it has come to be known in the contemporary literature on criminal homicide (such as Duwe, 2007; Fox & Levin, 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2001), a *mass murder* refers to the antisocial and non-state-sponsored killing of multiple victims during a single episode at one or more closely related locations. Prior to the mid-1990s, social scientists who sought to understand mass murder tended to focus on episodes in workplaces, families, and public places, such as shopping malls and restaurants (see, for example, Dietz, 1986; Levin & Fox, 1985). In the mid- and late 1990s, a string of shootings occurred, often resulting in multiple injuries and homicides, at middle and high schools located in obscure, out-of-the-way suburban and rural communities, such as Pearl, Mississippi; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; and most famously, Littleton, Colorado. As a result of such shootings in schools throughout the United States, a growing number of specialists (Fox & Levin, 2005; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy,

Borum, & Modzeleski, 2004) turned their attention to the school massacre in search of an explanation for these perplexing events. Roughly a decade after the substantial spike in the middle and high school massacres of the '90s, we have seen this disturbing phenomenon anew on American college campuses, such as Virginia Tech, Louisiana Technical College, and Northern Illinois University (Fox & Savage, 2009).

Although the recent college campus massacres will surely result in myriad descriptive case studies and other empirical research (see Agger & Luke, 2008, for example), as was the case post-Columbine (see Larkin, 2007; Newman et al., 2004), the study of the school massacre as a phenomenon has far too frequently been disconnected from two terribly relevant ongoing conversations in the literature. First, few scholars researching school shootings have borrowed sufficiently from the existing literature on the larger phenomenon of mass murder. Second, research on school shootings has often lacked theoretical analysis and has been particularly disconnected from the ongoing debates in criminological theory.

In this article, we seek to remedy these two deficits by a careful comparison between school mass murders and those mass murders perpetrated at other locations (such as at work, in the home, or in public places) and by the introduction of a sequential and cumulative theoretical model suggesting the etiology of school massacres committed by students against their classmates and teachers. By explaining the sequence of events preceding the multiple school shootings, our analysis focuses on the accumulation of factors that ultimately lead to a slaughter as well as on the accumulation of factors that might have prevented the shooting from occurring in the first place.

Our approach is meant to move beyond (or, at least, to the side of) the framework of a monolithic explanation and toward an amalgam of mesolevel theories. Although the numerous empirical studies (see, for example, Sherman & Burke, 1984) that engage in theory testing and that pit theories against one another are certainly of merit in the body of knowledge we have regarding human behavior, not all theories of crime are mutually exclusive and in direct opposition. In fact, both integrated theories of crime (such as Elliott, Ageton, & Cantor, 1979; Tittle, 1995) and theoretical formulations that stress the additive impact of a sequence of events (notable examples include Athens, 1992; Linsky & Straus, 1986; Smelser, 1962) have a respectable if not lengthy history. In this vein, we intend to stress the etiological significance of multiple problematic situations, stressors, and criminal opportunities that ultimately produce an important cumulative effect in people's lives. Newman et al. (2004, p. 229) are notable for suggesting a "combination of factors" pertaining to school shootings, yet this work is not based in theory, nor is it explicitly sequential and cumulative.

For the purpose of providing a broad and comprehensive view of the factors frequently implicated in rampages committed by students, we used and combined various existing criminological theories. This analysis excludes the episodes in which outsiders, often much older adults who lack any direct connection with the

school, invade a school building with the intention of amassing a large body count. For the purpose of maintaining relative uniformity of motivation, our analysis includes only those perpetrators who themselves, at the time of the attack, were enrolled in or were recently withdrawn from the middle school, high school, or college that they targeted. Similarly, we seek to generalize not to all incidents of school shootings but, following Newman (2004), only to school massacres, cases in which multiple human targets were killed or injured on school property by a student or recent former student of the targeted school, where three or more victims were killed or injured. Our criteria for selection would then exclude the large number of school shooting cases with single victims (Hagan, Hirschfield, & Shedd, 2002) as well as double murders in which particular individuals, and no other students or teachers, were targeted, for example, in the case of domestic violence.

To assist in this theoretical exploration, various cases of school massacres committed by enrolled students were directly compared and contrasted to various other forms of mass murder (such as family annihilations, workplace massacres, etc.). This connection is important because, as previously mentioned, the existing literature on school shootings has often neglected to situate these horrendous occurrences as one particular subset of the mass murder phenomenon.

Our model consists of five distinct stages, each of which is hypothesized as a necessary condition for the school massacre to take place. The term *cumulative strain* has been used to emphasize the crucial point that these factors intersect and build on one another in a cumulative fashion. None of these variables at any given stage is viewed, by itself, as causing a school massacre to occur.

## Stage 1: Chronic Strain

Sociologists and criminologists alike have long asserted that strains, various life pressures and difficulties, may result in criminal behavior. In 1938, Robert K. Merton adapted Durkheim's anomie theory to argue that those who are structurally barricaded from achieving the cultural goal of material success experience strain and may ultimately adapt to this disappointing situation with various forms of deviant and criminal behavior. Likewise, social psychologists have long argued that chronic frustration, a string of failures to achieve an individual's objectives, increases the likelihood of anger and aggressive behavior (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). In an early study, Palmer (1960) found that convicted murderers had suffered a number of important frustrations throughout childhood—physical defects, poor academic performance, few friends, and chronic illnesses—in comparison to their brothers who had never been convicted of committing a homicide.

Moving the concept of strain beyond Merton's (1938, 1968) social structural and class concerns and beyond Dollard et al.'s (1939) notion of failed objectives,

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory broadened the concept of strain to include a range of negative experiences or disappointing events in social relationships at home, school, or work or in the neighborhood. In Agnew's theory, strain is regarded as a range of difficulties that lead to anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, fear, and ultimately, crime.

When strain intensifies and persists across a lengthy period of time, it becomes chronic. Adults who go on a rampage at work or in the family are typically victimized by one or more sources of chronic strain. Workplace avengers, those who open fire on their boss and coworkers simultaneously, have typically gone from job to job or have never achieved the promotions and raises to which they feel entitled. They are typically middle-aged men who feel like failures at the very stage of life when they believe they should be achieving occupational success. Chronically depressed and hopeless, those who go on a rampage at the office believe that their hard work has gone unappreciated and that their contributions to the company are being ignored (Fox & Levin, 1994a).

Similarly, family annihilators, those who take the lives of their spouse and children, suffer from long-standing strains, usually in the form of severe family conflicts as well as financial difficulties during a period of time (see Fox & Levin, 2005). These killers, most frequently the male head of the household (Duwe, 2004; Gosselin, 2000), commit "familicide" to restore control of the fate of their family, although this is done with one of two distinct motives in mind. Some, on one hand, seek "sweet revenge" against a spouse, whom they blame for all of their personal miseries, as well as the children the spouse loves. Others, however, view their act of family annihilation as altruistic, because they perceive some impending difficulty (be it personal or financial) as catastrophic and ultimately a fate worse than death for their loved ones (Holmes & Holmes, 2001; Palermo & Ross, 1999).

Not unlike the situation of those who commit family annihilations and workplace massacres, chronic strain seems to be a persistent theme in the life experiences of students who kill their schoolmates and teachers en masse (see, for example, Fox & Levin, 2005; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2004). For school shooters, stressful and frustrating conditions often characterize their home life, their school relationships, or both. Research has confirmed the role-played by strain and frustration in the family and at school in the development of delinquent behavior more generally (Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullin, 2002; Agnew & White, 1992). Furthermore, Leary, Kowalski, Smith, and Phillips (2003) found that chronic rejection of the shooters was present in at least 13 of the 15 school shooting cases they examined.

Many school shooters had experienced chronic strain for years at home and were quite hostile toward their parents and other members of their family. For example, school shooter Kip Kinkel murdered both of his parents on the day before perpetrating his school massacre (Mendoza, 2002). Likewise, Luke Woodham of Pearl, Mississippi, beat and stabbed his mother to death on the day of his rampage (Mendoza, 2002). Although Kimmel and Mahler (2003, p. 1442) found that "almost

all the shooters came from intact and relatively stable families, with no history of child abuse," such parricide is more than likely indicative of a less than ideal family dynamic—one in which such family problems are not directly visible via traditional measures. As Newman et al. (2004, p. 245) argued, family structure and living arrangements are no measure of the quality of family life, and in fact, this study found that almost half of its school shooter sample came from homes wrought with conflict.

Among the sources of strain identified by Agnew (1992) are the failure to achieve positively valued goals and the disjunction of expectations and achievements. Both of these sources are similar to, though broader in scope than, Merton's (1938, 1968) analysis of the disparity between cultural goals and structural means. Middle and high school students often judge their success and value in life neither by grade point averages (as Merton's singular material goal model would suggest) nor by family relationships but rather in terms of their popularity with peers. Youths who have gone on a rampage have been both academic successes and failures (Hermann & Finn, 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2004), but quite possibly all of them had been physically bullied, teased, humiliated, or ignored by their fellow schoolmates on a regular basis (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Larkin 2007; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2004). For example, Charles "Andy" Williams, who killed 2 students and injured another 13 at his high school in 2001, was beaten up and harassed constantly by his peers (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

Kimmel and Maher (2003) stressed the fact that many of the bullied students who went on a rampage were boys (all of the shooters from their 1982-to-2001 sample were male).<sup>2</sup> These sociologists argued that the tormenters attacked their victims' masculinity or manhood in profoundly important ways. The vast majority of the shooters were not in fact homosexual,<sup>3</sup> yet many of them feared being misperceived as gay or as having gay tendencies and thus as having failed in their manhood. They were "different from the other boys—shy, bookish, honor students, artistic, musical, theatrical, nonathletic, 'geekish,' or weird" (Kimmel & Maher, 2003, p. 1445). Dylan Klebold, one of Columbine's killer duo, was constantly pushed into lockers, grabbed in the corridors and cafeteria, and harassed with homophobic slurs (Larkin, 2007). School shooter Luke Woodham of Pearl, Mississippi, was similarly taunted as being "gay" or "a fag," and 14-year-old Michael Carneal, who shot to death three classmates in his West Paducah, Kentucky, high school, was devastated when fellow students referred to him as a "faggot" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In many cases, gay-baiting, bullying, and other forms of harassment by peers were persistent themes. These troubling peer relationships at school, or their familial equivalent at home, constituted serious and chronic strains for many of the school shooters.

Although a necessary contributing factor, persistent strain by itself is hardly enough to push any individual into a multiple-victim spree of violence. Workplace strains (because of diminished job security, downward mobility, and a growing level of income

inequality since the 1970s) have become more widespread (Blau, 1999; Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Rifkin, 1995). Accordingly, millions of employees never achieve the economic success to which they feel entitled, yet they never kill anyone. Instead, they continue to conform to conventional standards and remain loyal employees, hoping that they will be rewarded for working hard and contributing to the success of the company. Or they become ritualistic, in the Mertonian sense, by giving up on ever achieving economic success but continuing to go through the motions.

Countless couples endure long-standing conflicts with their partners. They argue, confront one another, and even become physically abusive. Although frustrated, depressed, and angry, relatively few partners actually kill anyone, let alone multiple members of their own families. Instead, they adjust to a continuing family climate of tension and conflict, or they separate and then move on to another relationship.

In the same way, numerous teenagers and young adults in schools and colleges across the country maintain less-than-ideal relationships with their peers and family members. They may hate school and feel like outsiders in their classrooms or on the playground, but they endure the negative experiences until graduation (or until they drop out) and then move on with their lives. Many young people experience family discord or even outright abuse and neglect yet never turn to the most extreme forms of violence. Thus, there is more to the story than just chronic strain.

## **Stage 2: Uncontrolled Strain**

In most cases, the strains of everyday life are contained by the presence of conventional and prosocial relationships. From the point of view of middle-class society (from which a majority of school shooters have come), most youngsters are embedded in a protective network with mainstream support systems in place. If they cannot find acceptance at school, they locate it in the family. Or, perhaps, they move to another set of peers outside the realm of their school.

Some students, however, either never develop any meaningful social relationships at all (such as Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho) or turn to marginalized students who are willing, even eager, to support and encourage their violent antisocial feelings and beliefs (such as the killer duos responsible for the massacres at Columbine, Colorado, and Jonesboro, Arkansas). In a recent study, Agnew et al. (2000) determined that juveniles lacking in social constraint, as measured by little attachment to parents or school and/or the presence of troublesome friends, are more likely to react to strain by engaging in delinquent behavior generally.

In his social control theory, Hirschi (1969) argued that commitment to conventional institutions and bonding relationships with conventional people immunize individuals from perpetrating criminal acts, including violence. Such well-connected individuals have a stake in conformity to mainstream norms and are reluctant to

jeopardize that stake by engaging in criminal behavior. Those who lack such conventional bonds, by contrast, may feel isolated and/or marginalized and are accordingly less restricted to conformist behavior. Elliott et al. (1979) modified Hirschi's control theory by arguing that delinquency is most likely when both weak bonds to conventional groups and strong bonds to deviant groups are present.

Adults who go on a rampage at work or in the family are almost always socially isolated and lacking in both conventional and deviant social bonds (Fox & Levin, 2005). By contrast, teenagers who shoot their schoolmates may similarly be without a vast mainstream social network, but they are also more likely to locate sources of support and companionship among their peers who experience many of the same grievances they have. While Vossekuil and his colleagues (2004, p. 20) determined that 34% of the school shooters they examined were characterized by others or themselves as "loners," another 27% of their sample of shooters socialized with students who were disliked by their peers or were viewed as being part of a "fringe" group, such as Columbine's infamous "Trenchcoat Mafia."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, they found that 44% of shooters were influenced by their peers to engage in the attacks by being dared or encouraged (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 26).

Although strain may persist for decades and family strains often start early in life, conventional social bonds begin to break down much later. According to Agnew et al. (2002), adolescents are lower in social control than either adults or children. That is, teenagers tend to be less attached to their parents, less committed to being academically successful, and more likely to have friends who get into trouble. This developmental phase of life known as adolescence is often marked by a profound desire for independence and rebellion. The peer group becomes almost everything. Supportive parents may no longer be appreciated by a teenager who is rejected by his conventional peers and has no friends in the popular crowd. Young adults may similarly have trouble making the transition into adulthood. Unlike teenagers, they are now required to fend for themselves. Not every young adult is capable of moving easily from stage to stage. This is especially true for young people who have experienced long-standing difficulties throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Because workplace avengers are often socially isolated, they lack the external controls on their behavior (i.e., social support networks, such as friends and family) that might prevent them from going over the edge psychologically. Some workplace mass killers relocate for the sake of a job, leaving behind their family and friends (perhaps thousands of miles behind). In 1984, 41-year-old James Huberty lost his job as a welder in his hometown of Canton, Ohio, where he long resided with his wife, other relatives, and friends. While living in Canton, Huberty experienced numerous life stressors, even the loss of his cherished job, yet he never killed anyone. He soon decided that relocating to San Ysidro, a suburb of San Diego, California, would provide him with better job opportunities. In San Ysidro, Huberty promptly found employment as a security guard, but he also was very quickly fired.

Now thousands of miles from his family and friends, Huberty lacked affiliations with the people who might have supported and encouraged him in his time of need. One week after losing his job, he walked into a local McDonald's holding a semiautomatic rifle and shot to death 21 customers, most of whom were Latino children (Chester, 1993). Similarly, Harry De La Roche Jr. experienced serious failures, both socially and academically, during his college experience at the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. After several lonely and friendless months, he left his military school for good and came home to slaughter both of his parents and his two younger brothers. Estranged from both his family and peers, De La Roche apparently blamed his parents for pressuring him to remain in what he regarded as a horrific situation at the Citadel (Fox & Levin, 2005). If he had received supportive counseling from close friends or a professional therapist, he might have been able to adjust better to his school situation or negotiated effectively with his parents. Chances are, De La Roche would not have resolved his problems through violence.

Some school shooters were similarly isolated. According to his family members, Seung-Hui Cho—the Virginia Tech shooter—was “quiet,” “reserved,” and struggling “to fit in.” Cho’s middle and high school classmates described him as “difficult to know,” “in a world of his own,” and “dramatically uncommunicative.” In his senior year of high school, neither his name nor his photograph appeared anywhere in the graduating class yearbook (Cho & Gardner, 2007, p. 1).

Most adult mass killers operate alone when they commit multiple homicide (Fox & Levin, 2005). Few kill in a team or belong to a subgroup of disgruntled employees who seek to get even with the boss. By contrast, school shooters sometimes operate with a partner or belong to a marginal peer group whose members feel alienated from conventional student culture (Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2004). In contrast to their adult counterparts who commit mass murder, students who kill often experience social isolation as a result of a strong sense of community rather than a weak one. Many school shooters reside in small, tight-knit towns where residents are in close contact with one another (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Newman et al., 2004).

For the individuals who can conform to dominant cultural norms (perhaps about masculinity in particular) and are accordingly accepted by other residents, it is very comfortable to live in such a locale. However, for students who are rejected or ignored, there are few alternative options for peer acceptance. A strong sense of community may leave them feeling trapped in the only game in town (Levin, 2008; Newman, 2004). As their resentment grows to an intolerable extent, they may have only two choices—either to retreat into a world of isolation or to join together with other students who are similarly rejected or ignored.

Edmunds and Kendrick (1980) suggested that repeated strain may lead to hostility, particularly, a broad dislike and suspicion of others. Adult mass killers frequently externalize responsibility for their personal miseries and regard the behavior of others as highly suspicious (Fox & Levin, 1998). In their way of thinking, the boss refuses

to give them the raise they deserve; the coworker at the next desk has an unfair advantage with the supervisor; the company wants to terminate them despite all of their good work. In an effort to reduce the impact of chronic strain and loneliness on his self-esteem, the bullied or unpopular youngster similarly may begin to deflect responsibility for failures and exhibit mild paranoia. This is particularly problematic, as isolation from conventional relationships enhances a youth's tendency to externalize blame, and his externalization of blame (which others would negatively perceive as irritability, pride, and/or even delusional paranoia) further enhances isolation. In the most extreme cases, uncontrolled strain can become a vicious cycle of despair, isolation, and the deflection of responsibility.

Numerous young individuals who suffer strain for a long period of time come to be isolated from conventional sources of encouragement and support and still live long, law-abiding lives. Many move beyond the isolation and rebellion of adolescence and eventually increase their social bonds (attachments, commitments, involvements, and beliefs) to conventional social institutions. In the third sequential stage, however, disaster strikes (or at least is perceived to strike), and the chronically strained and uncontrolled individual falls one step deeper into the pit of multiple murder.

### **Stage 3: Acute Strain**

In the vast majority of cases of all forms of mass murder, there is evidence of acute strain, some loss perceived to be catastrophic in the mind of the killer, which serves as a catalyst or precipitant. The chronic–acute distinction is akin to that found in medical nomenclature between chronic and acute illness. Whereas chronic illness refers to a persistent and long-standing medical condition, acute symptoms develop rapidly and have a substantially shorter life span. Likewise, whereas chronic strains are persistent and long-term, acute strains are short-term but particularly troubling situations or events that seem catastrophic to an already beleaguered, frustrated, and isolated individual who has lost the ability to cope with adversity.

In the event of a mass killing at work or in the home, the precipitant is usually the loss of a job; the loss of large amounts of money, as in the stock market; or the loss of a relationship, as in a nasty separation or divorce or a custody battle (Levin & Fox, 1985; Madfis & Arford, 2008). In 1987, R. Gene Simmons murdered 14 members of his family at his home in Dover, Arkansas, after hearing about their plans to desert him (Fox & Levin, 2005). In 1999, day trader Mark Barton killed his wife and two children before shooting to death nine people in two day-trading companies after losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single day (Fox & Levin, 2005).

With school shooters, the catalyst is most often a humiliating loss of face, a rejection by a girlfriend, a loss of academic standing, an eviction from a community of peers, or even a major illness (Madfis & Arford, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2004). High

and middle school students who go on a rampage often suffer some episode by their peers or romantic interests that leaves them unable to any longer cope with the day-to-day harassments they have endured. Shooter Kip Kinkel, for example, had recently been expelled from school and was about to be sent to a program for troubled youths before he engaged in his massacre (Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2008). Before his school rampage, Luke Woodham had his heart broken by a girlfriend, an event he described in his journal as destroying him (Mendoza, 2002).

By contrast, college students who open fire on campus are more likely to have suffered academically rather than socially (Fox & Savage, 2009). When a massacre occurs on a college campus, the motivation is frequently more like that involved in workplace killings. The shooter acts when he fails to graduate or fails to receive academic acclaim for his achievements. One such case was that of Gang Lu, a physics PhD recipient at the University of Iowa. In 1991, Gang Lu was in stiff competition with a fellow graduate student for the prestigious Spriesterbach Dissertation Prize, which would have ensured him an excellent academic future. After losing the award, Gang Lu went on a rampage with two firearms, shooting to death five people on the Iowa City campus, including the three faculty members on his dissertation committee and the rival physics graduate student who had won the prize he felt he had deserved. He then took his own life (Chen, 1995).

In adults, an eviction can constitute a catastrophic loss, especially when it threatens to remove the individual from a protected environment. Forty-two-year-old James Ruppert, for example, shot to death the 11 members of his family after learning that his mother would no longer allow him to live in her home (Levin & Fox, 1985). On the campus of Virginia Tech, eviction may similarly have served as a precipitant to a school shooting. Cho was a senior who was due to graduate in a few weeks. Even for many well-adapted college students, graduation represents a difficult event; it means being forced to leave campus and fend for one's self as a full-fledged adult. For a student like Cho, who was already on the edge psychologically as the socially isolated victim of long-term bullying and rejection, leaving the Virginia Tech campus would have been tantamount to being evicted. This singular foreboding event, certainly not sufficient on its own, was substantial when evaluated alongside the other explanatory factors found in Cho's experience. The anticipation of being forced to leave the campus was, in fact, the final straw.

Recent studies conducted by Meloy and his colleagues (2001; 2004) have indicated that precipitating factors or acute strains may be found more frequently in the life histories of adult mass murderers than in those of adolescent mass murderers. These researchers recognized precipitating events in 90% of their 30 cases of adult mass killers (Meloy et al. 2004: 298) but in only 59% of their 34 adolescent counterparts (Meloy et al. 2001: 722).

A second reason many researchers may miss acute triggers is because they have been conceptualized incorrectly in the first place. Recent case study research (Madfis

& Arford, 2008) suggests that the various acute strains involved in school shootings precipitate a planning stage but not necessarily the massacre itself. Therefore, such precipitants may exist but not necessarily immediately before a massacre takes place.

### **Stage 4: The Planning Stage**

Acute losses prove catastrophic in part because of the lack of a positive and supportive environment and have a cumulative effect because of long-term frustration and chronic strain. No longer feeling able to cope and feeling as if there is nothing in life left to lose, the potential shooter is inspired to get even and show the world, even if in only a few minutes of horrifying bloodshed, that he cannot always be ignored and diminished. After this point in time, the killer's mind has been made up to commit a massacre, and he must spend some time first planning the event to go out, literally and figuratively, with a "bang." Subsequent events, and even subsequent strains, may change the timing (likely speeding it up) and logistics of the plan, but there does seem to be one singular acute episode that serves as a last straw for the killer, who finally decides on mass murder as a power-asserting, albeit fatalistic, way out of a terrible situation.

A mass murder is not a simple criminal act to perpetrate. For the killers, a massacre constitutes the final power-asserting moment of a disastrous and failed existence, so it is clearly in their interest to have the event well planned and achievable. This planning is an involved and often lengthy process. According to Vossekuil et al. (2004), most school shooters create a plan at least 2 days before initiating their attack on students and teachers. Yet many of them plan not for days but for weeks or months prior to carrying out their shooting spree. For example, the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, spent more than a year preparing their attack (Larkin, 2007). Everything was planned well beforehand. The assault, which if executed as intended, would have included numerous additional fatalities from bombs and explosives; it was timed to coincide with the anniversary of Hitler's birthday in April. Under their black trench coats, Klebold and Harris carried two sawed-off 12-gauge shotguns and a 9 mm semiautomatic rifle, all of which were obtained by Klebold's girlfriend, who had just turned 18 years of age. In addition, the Columbine duo carried a 9 mm semiautomatic pistol, which they had purchased from a fellow employee in a local pizza shop. Such elaborate and lengthy planning necessitated rational premeditation; this was not simply an impulsive or spontaneous act.

Recently, Robert Hawkins, the 2007 Omaha mall shooter, wrote in a suicide note that he "just snapped." The notion of "snapping," wildly pervasive in the popular image of mass murderers, suggests that the violent onslaughts are spur-of-the-moment, impulsive reactions to final life stressors. The common misconception portrays the killer as a madman who suddenly "goes berserk" or "runs amok" and kills a large number of people with hardly any particular rationale, trigger, or objective.

These slang expressions do not accurately describe the vast majority of mass murders (adolescent or adult) in the contemporary United States. Spontaneity and randomness may be appropriate descriptors for homicidal maniacs who genuinely suffer from psychotic delusions and hallucinations. However, such overly simplistic explanations are fundamentally inappropriate in any understanding of the deeper psychological and sociological motivations of most modern-day mass killers. It is clear that the majority of massacres have involved deliberate planning and rational thought (Fox & Levin, 1994b; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2004), and only a small minority of mass killers have been psychotic (Holmes & Holmes, 2001) or diagnosed with mental health or behavior disorders (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

This logic leads to a troubling but inevitable conclusion. If mass murderers are rational actors and not hallucinating maniacs, then a violent massacre must in some way provide a rational, if terribly immoral, solution. In fact, for school shooters (and likely other mass killers as well), the massacre serves to solve their most pressing problems of damaged personal identity and tarnished self-worth.

Merton's (1938, 1968) theory of anomie conceptualized innovation as a response to American society's overemphasis on the cultural goal of success and underemphasis on the legitimate opportunities for achieving that success. It is well documented that impoverished youth may turn from the legitimate system to criminal activities in an effort to achieve monetary reward. Innovation also may apply to middle-class delinquents who are desperate to be recognized as popular and powerful among their peers. Many of the shooters apparently hold reasonably high expectations for their lives, being mostly successful in an academic sense and from parents with middle-class backgrounds. In a deadly version of innovation, however, they go on a rampage, when they see no other way to become accepted among their schoolmates as powerful and important individuals who cannot be ignored.

One of the Columbine killers, Eric Harris, had written in his diary about his plans to "leave a lasting impression on the world," (Healey, 2006). He wrote that he and Klebold intended to hijack a plane filled with bombs and crash it into the New York City skyline.

Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho was desperate to make his fellow students take notice of him. On the afternoon of April 16, 2007, in the midst of his killing spree, Cho took a break long enough to get to the post office and mail photos of himself to NBC News. These photos depicted Cho as a dangerous and powerful person holding guns and knives in a threatening posture. By the end of the day, he had shot to death 32 students and instructors on the Virginia Tech campus.

As Kimmel and Maher (2003) and Newman et al. (2004) have previously noted, the utility of a school massacre as a masculine gender performance is paramount. When we consider the manner in which much of Western culture equates violence with masculinity, we can begin to comprehend such a despicable act as a deliberate plan designed to control the image others have of the killer (as a powerful and masculine individual) in the socially approved manner for men, with violence. By one last catastrophic show of

force, continually humiliated, ignored, and emasculated boys feel homicidal violence on a massive scale will regain lost feelings of masculinity, pride, and power and possibly result in the added bonus of achieving international fame.

After the final cumulative loss, the killer has set his mind on the terrifying vision of massive human destruction as a way to gain a personal sense of pride, accomplishment, and masculine force. A period of planning must take place, during which the prospective killer locates an appropriate weapon, prepares the logistics of the attack, selects appropriate targets, and so on. For this event to successfully take place, not only must it be meticulously planned; various facilitating factors need to be in place to transform a deadly dream into a terrifying reality.

### **Stage 5: Massacre at School**

As previously suggested, most bullied and rejected youngsters never commit a massacre, even if they suffer from chronic and acute strain and distance themselves from mainstream sources of social control. It is similarly true that many severely troubled young people who have seriously considered committing a mass murder and even planned for their deadly attack have not gone through with it. Additionally, some people desiring to be mass killers make attempts yet fail because of a critical lack of facilitating factors, such as the training in or access to firearms or deadly explosives.

First and foremost, a certain level of competence, and firearm proficiency in particular, is necessary to actually carry out a homicidal rampage. Fired from his job and rejected by his girlfriend, Dion Terres was sick and tired of being pushed around and desired to get even by perpetrating a mass murder. In August 1993, the mentally ill 26-year-old man parked his car in the lot of a Kenosha, Wisconsin, McDonald's restaurant and grabbed his weapons from the front seat. Unfortunately for him, he also locked his keys in his car along with the 30-round gun clip for his semiautomatic and totally forgot about the spare clip that he carried in the pocket of his jacket. Forging ahead, he still killed two people in the restaurant with his .44-caliber revolver. Terres's psychotic state of mind had made him so confused that he failed in his mission to amass a much larger body count (Fox & Levin, 2005).

According to Cohen and Felson (1979) and Felson (1994), in their routine-activities theory, predatory crimes occur only when suitable targets are available, effective guardians are absent, and motivated (or "likely") offenders are present. Multiple-victim shootings at schools contain all three of Cohen and Felson's foreground-level factors: multiple students collectively despised by the shooter(s), who are congregated closely together in classrooms or public places; an absence of armed resource officers in the immediate area (few school shootings are ended because of the intervention of law enforcement); and a student who is dedicated to killing his schoolmates.

To explain, also in Felson's foreground-level manner, why school massacres feasibly occur and take multiple lives, one must look to the presence of a weapon of mass

destruction, most frequently, a firearm. Consistent with the routine-activities perspective, most of the school shooters conveniently acquired the gun(s) used in their rampage from their own home or the home of a close relative or friend (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Fifteen-year-old school shooter Kip Kinkel of Springfield, Oregon, used the pistols and semiautomatic rifle that his father gave him as a present to carry out his massacre, and Michael Carneal of West Paducah, Kentucky, stole the .22-caliber Ruger pistol he used to commit mass murder from a neighbor's father (Fox et al., 2008). The absence of a semiautomatic firearm, conversely, reduces the likelihood that a school shooting might be turned into a mass murder. In November 2004, for example, a 15-year-old student at a high school in Valparaiso, Indiana, stabbed seven of his classmates with two large knives. However, none of these injuries were life threatening.

In addition, routine-activities theory helps to make clear the selection of victims in school shootings. Few episodes of school violence result in any death at all, let alone a large body count, and the vast majority of homicides have a single victim (Hagan et al., 2002). For a massacre to occur, a number of suitable targets must be available for slaughter. As previously mentioned, youths who target multiple victims may be motivated to kill en masse to set a new record or achieve infamy. The massacre is, in some cases, meant to be an act of revenge, but it may also be designed to send a message: "I am much more powerful and important than you thought. I cannot be ignored." This morbid statement is only as potent as the action is deadly, and so a massacre sends the strongest message. Routine-activities theory helps explain why the school classroom or campus serves as the ideal site for a massacre, as the crowded classrooms and bustling campuses pack unsuspecting victims (not to mention bitter rivals and despised authority figures) closely together.

Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho came to the United States at the age of 8. Throughout his middle and high school years, Cho was humiliated, on a daily basis, by his classmates, who made fun of his flat affect, his extreme shyness, and his lack of fluency in English (Cho & Gardner, 2007). It seems entirely plausible that Cho's real enemies were not at Virginia Tech but in the public schools where he had been bullied. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, however, for Cho to have targeted his classmates from an earlier period in his life. They were now scattered across the country and inaccessible as a group. On his campus, however, Cho was able to commit *multiple murder by proxy*. Virginia Tech students were in proximity and available in large numbers. They stood in for the many classmates who had victimized Cho during his formative school years. In the absence of a firearm and students packed into classrooms, he might have injured or killed 1, but not 32.

## Preventing Multiple-Victim School Shootings

In the panicked aftermath of the attack at Columbine High School in 1999, numerous shortsighted policies were designed to satiate the public; reduce the

anxieties of teachers, students, and parents; and make politicians appear to be protecting us. “Inventive” solutions included the excessive use of resource officers and metal detectors in suburban schools and increasingly rigid zero-tolerance policies. One Georgia legislator proposed allowing faculty members to carry concealed handguns to class. Over time and as the hysteria regarding the Columbine massacre subsided, these shortsighted, politically expedient, and punitive policies lost much of their traction. In the wake of the 2007 attacks at Virginia Tech, however, many of these same proposals again came to the forefront of the debate.

It is important to emphasize that many school shootings take place during a period of less than 15 min (Vossekuil et al., 2004), so reactive measures (such as resource officers, emergency plans, and even armed faculty members) can ultimately accomplish little. Resource officers were on guard at Northern Illinois University and Columbine High School, but they were not able to reach the mass killers in time to avert disaster. From a routine-activities perspective, increasing the number and effectiveness of capable guardians and engaging in target-hardening tactics to diminish their suitability and easy access does nothing to diminish the third and most vital of Felson’s (1994) factors, the motivation of offenders. To this end, the focus must also be on long-term prevention techniques to ensure that students do not develop the desire to engage in a school massacre in the first place.

Our analysis suggests that incidents of multiple-victim shootings aimed at students and teachers might be deterred early on by reducing the chronic strains experienced by students who are likely to turn violent. Frequently, there are important warning signs—bullying, serious acts of animal abuse, lack of friendships—to identify students who have suffered prolonged frustration in school and/or at home and are in urgent need of assistance from supportive adults. The problem is that teachers, school psychologists, and counselors do not always react to *troubled* students until they become *troublesome* and are seen as a threat to others.

In our view, it often takes years of being teased, bullied, and/or neglected by peers before a student develops a plan to kill his classmates and teachers. By the time a youngster has murderous intentions, it is usually too late to intervene. But years earlier, a sensitive teacher, a perceptive guidance counselor, or even a concerned parent might have made all the difference. If strains are counteracted early on, then the cumulative impact of isolation, catastrophic losses, and planning lose their efficacy in regard to producing a massacre.

There are changes at the individual level that can be encouraged by competent adult advisors and counselors. Students who are able to modify their personal standards or change their objectives may also be able to reduce the strain in their lives. Important modifications in goals may require effective guidance, counseling, or even medication. Millions of young people across the country, regardless of their potential risks for violence, would be better served by the intervention of parents, teachers, administrators, and school psychologists in bullying and harassment among students. Fortunately, many

principals across the country, thanks to the fear that their students and staff will be targeted next, have recently enacted antibullying programs and policies. They aim at changing the student culture rather than focusing on changing bullied students. One effective and preventative solution is a curricular intervention that promotes peace and social justice. Such programs teach students to put aside their differences and cooperate together for the purpose of achieving mutually satisfying objectives. This intervention emphasizes that students can benefit by their rejection of bullying and by their interdependence in the classroom and on the playground. In American culture, the masculine role is frequently defined by elements of dominance, violence, and militarism. Because almost all of the school shooters have been males, an effective conflict resolution policy should promote more constructive images of masculinity.

Second Step is a widely employed conflict resolution curriculum that aims at helping children learn to solve their problems, develop empathy, manage their anger, and control their impulses. The program focuses on reducing aggressive behavior by proactively teaching the emotional and social skills necessary for children to get along well with others. Research suggests that Second Step is effective in achieving its objectives (Grossman et al., 1997).

Oliver and Ryan's (2003) *Lesson One* is another educational program that helps elementary school children to develop their life skills and internal discipline. Through experiential activities and games, students are taught self-control, self-confidence, problem solving, and cooperation. In the classroom, students are given an opportunity to test the skills they have acquired and to share how they use these skills with other children. Several systematic studies suggest that *Lesson One* has a positive impact on student culture (Oliver & Ryan, 2003).

In Stage 2, we saw that some angry students externalize the blame for their miseries. Students who go on a rampage are unlikely to take responsibility for their own actions, accept their marginal status among conventional peers, or adjust to the role of outsider. Some youngsters who never seriously consider violent vengeance may find sources of self-esteem beyond popularity. In response to gay-baiting and peer humiliation, targeted students may resist and gain much needed self-esteem by developing competence in other valued areas of life, such as in scholarship, extracurricular activities, athletics, or music and art or with family members.

Moreover, many students who suffer from strain for a lengthy period of time never experience a catastrophic loss and instead mature from middle to high school status, high school to college status, or into adulthood, where peer influence declines in significance. It is important to intervene in the lives of desperate students emotionally on the fringe long before they potentially suffer acute strain in the form of a catastrophic event. When such a calamitous occurrence does arise in their lives, they will then have the self-esteem and social support system in place to soften the blow.

Additionally, as our fourth stage clearly indicates, school massacres are by and large carefully planned for days, weeks, or months before they take place. Fortunately, many attackers also reveal some element of this plan to their friends or

family members. Vossekuil et al. (2004) found that 81% of their sample revealed their homicidal plot to at least one person, and 59% informed two or more people. These facts speak to the dire need for students to break their culture of silence, take threats seriously, and come forward with such pivotal information. Because of the widespread publicity of certain school massacres, this change has already begun to take place. Many shootings since the momentous Columbine attacks in 1999 have been narrowly averted because trusted young confidants have revealed the dangerous intentions of their peers to the authorities (Butterfield, 2001).

Finally, students who lack access to and training in the use of particularly lethal weapons may injure but not kill many. Though it is much more common for a young student to attack a classmate in school with a knife, guns are the most common weapons used to commit multiple homicide. If parents, grandparents, or other adult relatives keep a firearm in the home, they must be absolutely certain that it is inaccessible to troubled children and teenagers.

## Notes

1. The authors' names have been listed alphabetically to reflect their equal contributions to the article.
2. There have in fact been several female school shooters but almost always of the single- or double-victim variety, with Latina Williams's fatal shooting of two of her fellow classmates at Louisiana Technical College in 2008 being the most recent. Masculine pronouns have therefore been used throughout this article.
3. Larkin (2007) suggests that Columbine killer Dylan Klebold may have been unsure of his sexuality.
4. By no means do the authors intend to suggest that being different, befriending people who are out of the mainstream, or participating in youth subcultures (which are, more frequently than not, prosocial cultural endeavors) usually facilitate a move to violence. In addition, the fact that the name Trenchcoat Mafia was initially created not by its members but rather by other students at Columbine High as a derogatory term for the friendship clique (Larkin, 2007) indicates just how potentially dangerous it can be for school administrators and teachers to use outsider status as a warning sign for murderous behavior. Rather than reduce a potential threat, this approach can doubly victimize already marginalized kids through negative attention from school authorities.

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