

Why Terrible Things Happen in Perfect Places

The Pathways to Rampage Shootings

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Definitional dilemmas

- What is a rampage shooting?
- Refining the problem
 - Multiple victims
 - On school property
 - Committed by a member or former member of the institution
 - Random selection of targets or radiating circle

Figure 1: Number of School Shootings by School Year

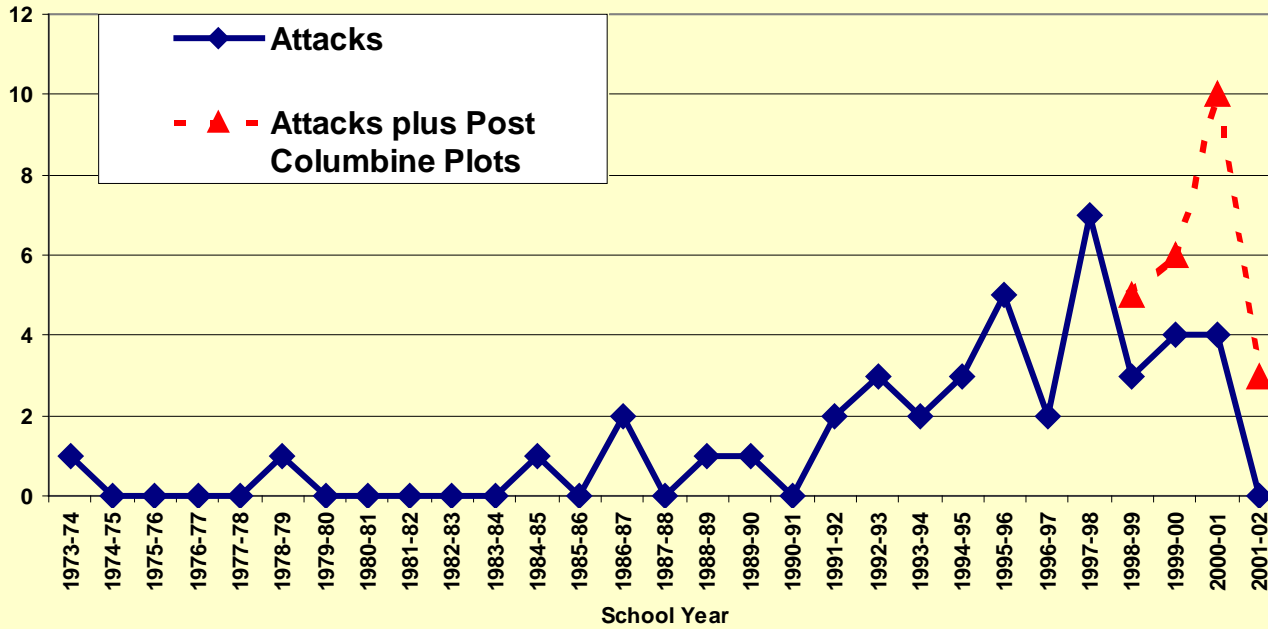


Figure 10.1: Location of Rampage School Shootings, 1974-2002



- Two case studies:
Westside, Arkansas and Heath, Kentucky
- Three sociological questions:
 - What motivates the shooter?
 - Why was the school unable to see the catastrophe coming?
 - Why was the community in the dark?

Jonesboro, Arkansas



Population: 55,000

The Bible Belt



Bono, Arkansas



Population: 1000+
8

Cash, Arkansas



Population: 280

Egypt, Arkansas



Population: 112





The Shooting

Westside Middle School

- 6th and 7th grades
- 250 students
- Middle class, Christian and white
- No background violence
- Excellent reputation
- 1/3 of students qualify for free lunch

March 24, 1998

- Johnson steals family car
- Johnson and Golden steal guns
- Firing position on hillside
- Andrew pulls fire alarm
- Students and teachers file out
- Shooters kill 5 and wound 10
- Police arrest Andrew and Mitchell



The Shooters

Mitchell Johnson

- Father verbally abusive
- Sexually assaulted
- Tense divorce
- Frequent moves, but Jonesboro was positive
- Good student (As and Bs)
- Model child, swaggering bully



Andrew Golden

- 11 years old, 6th grade
- “Solid Family”
- “Golden Child”
- Avid hunters and gun enthusiasts
- Average to good student (As and Bs)
- No real disciplinary history
- Unnoticed at school; menace in the ‘hood’



Heath, Kentucky

- Rural and west of Paducah, KY
- Farming economy gives way to services
- Rural working class old timers
- New professionals and managers
- Small and “tightly knit”
- Economically diverse, racially homogenous
- Bible Belt











The Shooting

Heath High School



- Center of small town life
- 60% college bound
- No major discipline issues
- No violence prevention in place

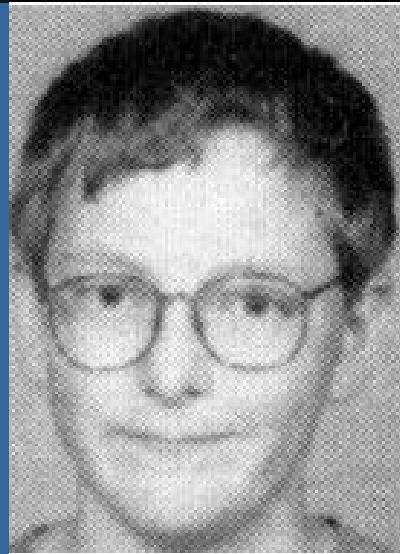
The Shooting: Dec 1, 1997

- Shooter: Michael Carneal
- Locale: prayer group in school lobby
- Eight shots, eight victims
- Shooter drops gun and surrenders to principal



The Shooter

Michael Carneal



- Age 14, freshman
- Stable family
- Jokester; prankster
- High IQ
- Minor discipline problems
- Schizotypal personality disorder



Background events

Mitchell

Past events

- Molestation

Proximate events

- Left stranded in Chicago
- Sex-talk phone calls
- Father threatens to take him from his mother
- Kicked off basketball team
- Dumped by girlfriend

Andrew

- No evidence of precipitating events
- Threatens suicide or to harm others

Mystery #1:

What motivates the shooters?

- Failing at manhood
- Frictional marginality
- Magnification of slights
- Problem solving
 - Reputational reversal
 - Escalating commitments



Mystery #2: Why Schools are in the Dark

- **Structural secrecy**
 - The Clean Slate
 - The Perils of Confidentiality
- **Mixed signals**
 - The Jekyll-and-Hyde Problem
 - Information Fragmentation
- **The liabilities of loosely coupled systems**
 - Squeaky Wheels
- **Why kids don't tell**

Mystery #3:

Why the community did not see this coming...

- Residential stability
- Inter-generational closure
- High levels of social capital
- Gossip and reputation
- Below the radar

The Underbelly of Social Capital: Why Terrible Things Happen in 'Perfect' Places

- Consequences:
 - Concealment games
 - False confidence in surveillance systems
 - Misinterpreting signals
 - Conflict avoidance & information restriction
 - Blame the messenger

Conclusions

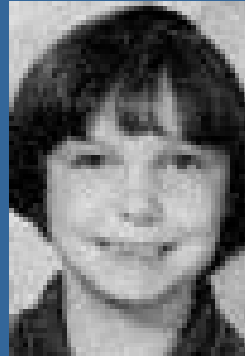
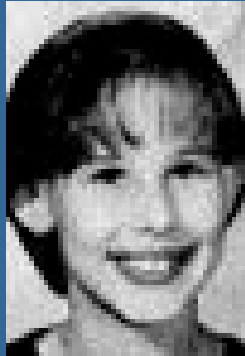
- Why the sociological perspective matters
 - Adolescent problem solving
 - Organizational deviance
 - Liabilities of social capital

- Necessary, but not sufficient conditions
 - Prediction impossible
 - Tipping the odds via interdiction

Michael Carneal, Age 19 Kentucky State Reformatory



The Westside Victims



5 dead

10 injured