

Mass Murders at School Institutions: Children and Parents as Easy Targets

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This article tries to conceptualize the phenomenon of school shooting, which means shooting at kindergartens, elementary and high schools and universities. The most important examples are described (the notoriously known shooting at Columbine High School is analyzed in greater detail). The outcomes of this article are: summarization of facts, an attempt to find generalising tendencies, trends and characteristics and its comparison with the situation in the Czech Republic.

Mass murders at school institutions usually unsettle politicians, teachers, parents as well as general public. People are even more shocked and upset if a „mad shooter“ chooses school environment as a place for shooting (or other violent attack) or attacks pupils, students or school employees. Even more scaring situation emerges if the murderer is former pupil, student or employee of the school he chooses for his attack.

The last example of a killing fury in the institutions for children and youth is the massacre on a high school in Wennenden, Germany. 17-year-old former student shot to death 9 students in the age of 16-18, three teachers and three accidental bystanders. The police later killed him 40 kilometres out of the crime scene, in Wendlingen. The youngster had two more years to graduation, but he left the school. His parents allegedly had 18 guns at home. He entered the school at 9:30 in black military dress and immediately opened fire in one classroom. Then he moved to another one. After the killing fury he probably got to Wendlingen by car, which he had hijacked and in which he probably held a hostage. In Wendlingen he barricaded himself in a supermarket next to the industrial zone. He also killed two bystanders and injured one policeman there. The police says they killed him in the end, but it is also possible that he committed suicide. (iDNES 2009)

Just a few weeks separate this incident from another one, relatively different, which happened in Dendermonde, Belgium. The culprit here entered to the nursery and stabbed to death two children in

the age of 6 and 9 months, as well as their 55-year-old schoolmistress, with a long knife. 10 more children were stabbed, some of them had to undergo plastic surgery.

The culprit of this act was 20-year-old Kim De Gelder, who had a white mask with black circles around his eyes painted on his face. It is likely that he drew inspiration from the character of Joker from Batman; the act happened 1 year and 1 day after the death of the actor Heath Ledger, who got Oscar for his impersonation of this character. The witnesses said that Gelder was rather reserved, solitary man, emotionally unbalanced and depressive.

This extreme version of youth aggression has for a long time been viewed as a problem inherent to the United States of America. However, at the latest from April 2002, when a 19-year-old student entered a school and killed 16 persons (students, teachers and one policeman) in Erfurt, Germany, it is also a matter of concern for Europe (Čírtková 2008). In fact, school shootings are nothing new. Already in 1927 Andrew Kehoe attacked the Bath School (USA). He did not use a gun – although he trained shooting often – but the strength of dynamite. He placed several bombs to the basements of the building, used a timer and blew the school off. His wife had been found in the forest, tattered with dynamite, several months earlier. Based on some evidence, an assumption could be made that Kehoe let his wife blow off at a remote place in the forest in order to test the accuracy of the timer (Badošek 2008).

School environment seems to be an ideal place for mass murderers. There is a high number of persons who, from the point of view of an armed killer, can serve as „easy targets“. These incidents are then referred to as „school shooting“. This term is usually reserved for massacres committed mostly by current or former students in and around the premises of high schools and universities. It is nevertheless necessary to say that the killers could be also employees of the school or even people who have nothing in common with the institution (see the case of Gelder).

Mass killings in which a culprit kills more victims in the school premises at a time, are usually committed with a gun. School shooting with more than 10 victims is usually referred to as „school massacre“. In contrast to an act of revenge, these shootings are usually not aimed at specific persons, on the contrary, the victims are randomly chosen persons and the aim is to kill as many of them as possible.

Currently, there is a huge amount of resources on this issue. However, most of them are case studies focusing on in-depth analysis of particular incidents (see Čírtková 2008).

School shooting is usually distinguished from other types of violence at schools. Among these

belong mass killing committed by terrorists, as is the case of hostages in Beslan. This type of violence is usually described as an „act of terrorism“. Another phenomenon is shooting to crowds during students' riots at two US universities, Kent State and Jackson State, in the seventies, used by members of National Guard and police which caused several fatal injuries.

The most cited example of school shooting is the case of 20th April 1999, described as „Columbine High School massacre“. It took place on the high school in Littleton, Colorado (see the box).

In the U.S.A. the school violence is often seen in connection with the existence of armed gangs which operate in densely populated areas. Schools in downtown centres report violent crimes much more often (17% against 11% in other city schools, 10% in village schools and 5% in suburban schools – data from 1997). The culprits of school shooting in the U.S.A. are usually white middle-class students. In some cases the attackers were exposed to bullying or other types of violence from the victims (see Hewstone, Stroebe 2006: 377) or other psychical pressure (see Mikšík 2005: 83). School shooting in other countries can have stronger nationalistic or religious dimensions – such as shooting in jeshiva (religious school) Merkaz HaRav in Israel in March 2008, in which a young Palestinian killed 9 potential Rabbis.

The search for reasons of school massacres has not found a universal response yet. The research of suspects is problematic from the point of view of methodology because of small amount of cases, high suicide rate of suspects and unreliability of secondary and tertiary information sources. Biological and psychopathological attempts to explain these are taken into account with caution. It is not possible to determine exactly how high is the psychopathological burden of the suspects. Some of them suffer from psychopathological disorders, whereas others do not. Consensus has been reached on the point that some particular type of personality is an undisputable risk factor for committing a mass murder. Despite that, only some persons identified with this particular type of personality actually commit this type of crime. In this respect, it is necessary to identify more risk factors as only their summary can offer a more complex picture of circumstances, reasons and motives (Čírtková 2008).

Shooting in school institutions is the subject of intensive research in the U.S.A. Although companies like MOSAIC offer products and services aimed at identification of potential threats, a thorough study of all the incidents of shooting in American schools worked out by U. S. Secret Service warned against the belief that a certain „type“ of student can be a culprit of such a crime. Some of the culprits grew up in a complete, „ideal and all-American“ family. Some of them were children of divorced parents or grew up in foster-families. Some of them were loners, but most of them had close friends.

However, there were some similarities found among the murderers. Most of „school shooters“ did not act spontaneously and got their guns in advance. Moreover, these persons usually have aggressive tendencies and a history of assault threats. These outsiders often want to use the shooting to change their social status from „loser“ to „master of violence“. Many shooters told FBI inspectors that they were brought to the act of violence by persecution and alienation. Surprisingly, outsiders are much more dangerous than typical bullies. Bullies find their fulfillment in the act of bullying and give way to their negative emotions continuously. On the other hand, a student who is

unsuccessful, invisible, excluded, seen as eccentric or with some other more or less real peculiarity, does not give way to his frustration till the last and irreversible moment (Badošek 2008).

The F.B.I. worked out the following general profile of the culprit, based on an analysis of six particular cases: absence of family support, narcissistic character, feeling of injustice or grievance, easy access to guns, connection to satanistic or other aggressive subcultures, social inexpressivity, vernalisation of aggressive issues, feeling of helplessness, absence of feeling of blame, media impact and diminishing of mechanisms suppressing aggression, other circumstances supporting violence or removing buffers for aggression (for more information see Čírtková 2008).

Loren Christensen, the author of the book *Surviving a School Shooting*, sees three general differences that allowed the expansion of this phenomenon from the 90s till today:

- The growth of and the availability of more sophisticated firepower. While only a few school shooters have used sophisticated weaponry—one of the shooters at Columbine fired a 9mm Intratec Tec-9 semiautomatic—just the existence of such weapons and their visibility in videogames and movies likely stirs the imagination of some kids. When I was in school, there was only Wild Bill Hickok's six shooter.

- The sheer volume of violent media—movies, TV, videogames, and music videos. While these things don't affect everyone, the stats show that many school shooters were fascinated by them. Also, a general theme that runs through so many of these is that all problems can be easily settled with a gun or bomb. The school shooter in Finland, Matti Juhani Saari (see below), liked a German Goth singer named Wumpscut and quoted his lyrics on Youtube. Some of Wumpscut's songs refer to child murder and burned corpses. One song is titled "Death for the Masses." Well, the Finnish shooter indeed brought death to the masses and then burned some of their corpses with Molotov cocktails.

- The Internet, specifically YouTube and MySpace. As if it weren't bad enough that there are blogs and chat rooms where people can criticize, defame, challenge, mock, and threaten others, now these same types can download photos, movies, and essays on YouTube and MySpace to do the same thing. Case in point: That kid in Finland, who shot and killed 10 students and then killed himself, had earlier posted three videos on YouTube of himself shooting his gun. In one clip, he fired just below the camera and said, "You will be next." In this case, YouTube served as a forum for his narcissism and allowed him too see through the camera's eye what his victims would see.

It is nevertheless necessary to say that these tendencies can be only partly blamed in some cases, as the phenomenon of school shooting - as we say above - is much older and definitively not caused

solely by these three factors. (Paladin Press 2009)

Čírtková (2008) also writes about (para)military tendencies of culprits, high psychological vulnerability and a tendency to withdraw from the ordinary public life (see the box).

One of the aspects of this issue has not been examined in-depth yet: the question of gender. The suspects are almost exclusively young men and their killing fury is usually aimed at the opposite sex. Several studies focusing at the crime of murder show that women compose 10-15% of the culprits of this crime. (Záhorská 2007). Likewise, most of the described cases of mass killing in school institutions are committed by young men (more than 90%).

Examples of school shooting and its research

School shooting is usually ended with the suicide of culprits (approx. 65%). 29% of culprits are arrested. Only a little percentage of culprits is killed by police, etc. The reason is usually short time interval between the start and the end of the murder and the act of suicide.

Guns used in school shooting are miscellaneous; according to research studies the most commonly used are short guns, followed by rifles and shotguns. There are a few exceptional cases in which culprits used guns that are atypical and extreme. One of this attacks was done in a catholic elementary school in Köln-Volkhoven by Walter Seifert in 1964. The culprit used a flame-thrower and a spear. He entered the school courtyard, blocked the entrance to prevent anyone from escaping, broke the classroom and through the hole in the window he ignited the whole classroom with children. When he was confronted by the teacher, he stabbed her with the spear. Before the police arrived, Seifert swallowed a toxic insecticide with the hope of avoiding the punishment. He was arrested, but the next day he died of intoxication. He killed 8 children and 2 teachers, 20 more were injured (Badošek 2008).

Some similar aspects can be seen in the attack done by Thomas Hamilton in Dunblane, Scotland in 1996. The culprit made his way by shooting to the gym and there he killed 16 children at the age of 5-6 years and a teacher. What are the similarities between the two cases? Hamilton, as well as Seifert, had written a letter to the queen one week before the attack, in which he claimed that there was a campaign held against him. It is the same generalising tendency without any particular culprit to whom he could revenge. Both murderers were over 30 years old. Culprits of this age form a very specific group among the school shooters, about 80% of them shoot in elementary schools. This is to say, their attack is deliberately aimed at those who cannot defend themselves at all (Badošek 2008).

This is usually the case in kindergartens and elementary schools. On the other hand, persons committing massacres at high schools are usually absolvents, current or shortly before the massacre excluded students. High school massacres are the most common (48%), followed by massacres at universities (24%) and elementary schools (21%). From the above mentioned we can conclude that the most typical type of school shooting is a high school massacre to which the culprit has some affiliations and bonds. (http://www.guncite.com/gun_control_gcgscho.html)

As previously indicated, the attackers very often write their own diaries. They usually express their emotions, thoughts and wishes in them. These days such a diary can also be kept in the form of a blog or web pages. Several murderers also used the web sites to publish a video in which they sent a message or tried to explain their act to the whole world. These culprits at least made an attempt to communicate with the public. An ideal example is the massacre done by Matti Juhani Saari at a high school in Finland on the 23rd September 2008, in which 10 schoolmates were killed. According to his own words, he „hated people“ and „wanted to kill as much of them as possible“. According to the witnesses, he „walked calmly and killed automatically as a robot“.
(<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/09/23/finland.school.shooting/index.htm>)

The most distressing fact in this case is that the police suspected the culprit from the preparation of the massacre and they even interrogated him in this respect one day before the attack. They identified him as a potential killer because of a violent video record found on the internet server youtube.com, where he shoots to a target, to the camera and the whole film is ended with his words: „You will die next!“ In the end, however, they released him because they came to a conclusion that he is not dangerous – just one day before committing the massacre.
(<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/09/23/finland.school.shooting/index.html>; cp. Badošek 2008)

In many cases the need of sending a message via internet is understandable, the culprits often miss close friends and belong among low-achieving students, therefore, they do not have a chance to change their status of a „loser“.

It is not always the case that the status of a loser is connected to low-achieving at school – the illustrious case is the killing fury of Steven Phillip Kazmierczak, who killed 5 people at the University of Illinois in 2008. He was considered a brilliant student, who also committed himself to criminology and published an article about correctional system in the U.S.A. in a prestigious scientific journal. However, his act can to a great extent be attributed to the fact that he had stopped using medication against anxiety some time before the killing. Consequently, his behavior gradually became less and less predictable and finally led to the tragedy.

(<http://pysih.com/2008/02/15/steve-kazmierczak/>; cp. Badošek 2008) The similar case happened also in 1966 in Austin, Texas, where Charles Whitman, a white student from upper middle class, killed 14 and wounded 32 people. In his case the reason was probably the frustration that grew out of the conflict he experienced in his family – authoritative and strict father versus nurturing and forgiving mother. (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Whitman, see also Whiticker 2007, Čermák 1998)

His emotional instability was further enhanced by the small brain tumor situated close to the emotional centre. The report ordered by Texas governor John Connally claimed that the tumor was malign and it would probably kill Whitman in less than a year. So the illness was probably the reason why the former navy marine one summer day in 1969 lost kontrol (Whiticker 2007, cp. Čermák 1998)

Other recent examples of violence in school institutions are a gun battle at Bailey, Colorado, the shooting of Pekka-Eric Auvinan in Tuusula, Finland, the stabbing of two Japanese pupils close to Ósaka, the Chinese stabbing of high-school students in Zhu-Chou and many others.

In the Czech Republic there has been no incidence of school shooting so far; only once, in 2006, a 19-year-old student Vojtěch Žižka brought a shotgun to the High Arts and Crafts School in Český Krumlov. He planned to kill a boyfriend of the girl he had splitted with. However, in the end he changed his mind and used the gun only to frighten his rival.

In general, Czech student usually bring knives or boxers to schools. The reason is much worse availability of guns in the Czech Republic in comparison with both the U.S.A. and Finland, where many persons are devoted hunters and so a gun can be found in many families. Besides that, a gun is a very expensive article for a majority of Czechs; legally it is possible to buy a used gun for minimum 6.000 CZK (210 €) and a new one from 16.000 CZK (560 €), which is simply too expensive for most of pupils and students. Moreover, to be a legal holder of a gun, a man has to be at least 18 years of age, have a clean criminal record, pass a medical and a test where he shows the ability to handle a gun. Psychologic tests were also discussed, but in the end they were not established as a part of the exam. (iDNES 2007)

Solution?

Case-study approaches as well as attempts at theoretical generalization share the same goal – prediction and besides all prevention of the phenomenon. Simpler strategies of prevention are aimed at strengthening of security apparatus at schools (security frames in the entrances, controls aimed at bringing guns to schools, etc.). Nevertheless, according to many studies schools guarded by security agencies are not an ideal solution. More complex programmes of prevention are thus focused on educational strategies, such as strengthening of identification with the school, removing of students´ anonymity, strenghtening of students´ coping strategies, minimizing of the effects of school frustration, promotion of school social work, etc. In some states, there is also a range of specialised seminars offered to teachers, in which the risk factors are explained and it is shown how they can be used to identify potential threats and its holders (Čírtková 2008; see also Boyd 2009).

Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that availability of guns for culprits is closely connected to the school shooting itself. We can anticipate more frequent occurrence of this phenomenon in the states with more liberal approach to holding a gun (such as the U.S.A. and Finland). After the Finnish shootings (where guns can be held yet by 15-year-old persons) the European Union reacted to this situation. The European Parliament confirmed that from 2010 only a person older than 18 years and registered in national evidence will be allowed to obtain and hold a gun legally. (European Parliament 2007)

Box 1

Signs of future tragedy were visible at high school in Columbine yet before fatal 20th April 1999. Yet in 1996 an 18-year-old student Eric Harris started to present solutions to various situations

applicable in the computer game Doom on the internet web pages and to present his sharply negative stance against the society. (In this respect it is good to emphasize the fact that some of the „mad shooters“ leave the message on the Internet before their act of violence.)

Harris also published a list of guns he was able to collect with the second culprit, 17-years-old Dean Klebold, and a recipe for a home-made bomb made from metal horns. After he started to threaten one of his class-mates with death, the police entered the case, but the planned inspection of Harris's house was not realised in the end.

In January 1998, Harris and Klebold were caught while stealing computer equipment from a van and the court ordered them a psychiatric check-up. Moreover, the judge said that both guys lack the right „moral opinion“. Later it was found that both youths planned the massacre in their private diaries and the correspondence. The massacre should have equaled the bomb attack of Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City (see Smolík, Vařura 2008) and should have been a revenge for the problems of both students in the school. At the beginning of 1999 Harris and Klebold illegally ordered a semi-automatic gun, a carbine and two shotguns with shortened snouts. They found out a recipe for a home-made bomb on the internet server „Anarchist Cook Book“ and according to the recipe they worked out 99 bombs which they planned to dislocate in the school.

The video record, on which both guys present their weapon arsenal, showed that both collected their guns and other equipment at home and were able to hide them against the parents. About 30 minutes before the attack they released a video record in which they said goodbye to friends and relatives. They arrived to the school at 11 in two cars and parked them on the opposite sides of the school. At first, they exploded a bomb on the near field with the aim to temporarily make local firemen busy. Harris and Klebold hoped that after exploding the bombs in the cafeteria they would start a killing spree in the school and shoot all survivors and later also the inhabitants of nearby houses who would come to see what happened. But this plan collapsed when bombs in the cafeteria didn't explode. So the youngsters returned to their cars for weapons they brought with them and with the scream „Go! Go!“ they started a fire. Their killing spree lasted for 50 minutes, which is one of the longer attacks in comparison with other cases. In most cases, the attack takes only a very short time (several minutes or so). The outcome of their attack was horrible: 12 dead classmates (in the age of 14 to 18 years), 1 dead teacher and 27 injured.

Shortly after the massacre both students were pictured in the media as members of the Goth subculture. According to the general belief members of this subculture are outsiders and losers without ordinary and functioning society bonds. These data were later proved untrue, because both Harris and Klebold had a close group of friends and a broader social affiliations. It was also said that they were members of informal school club called „Trenchcoat Mafia“; this connection was also later dismissed. Nevertheless, one of the effects of the massacre was a massive resistance of both students and teachers against the Goth subculture (see Volatire 2004).

Some indicators could also be deduced from the date of massacre. On the 20th April it could be a jubilee of the birth of Adolf Hitler, but this fact probably didn't play a role in this case. According to some informations, the massacre was originally planned a day earlier, on the 19th April, on the jubilee of the bomb attack of Timothy McVeigh, who blew up F.B.I. headquarters in Oklahoma City in

1986 (Smolík, Vaňura 2008). Because both culprits had spoken many times before about „overcoming“ the McVeigh attack, it is possible that the timing of the attack was related to that.

Both Harris and Klebold were excessive players of computer games, such as Doom or Wolfenstein 3D. Some analysts say that it partly influenced their behavior in the form of desensitisation of their view of the world because of the constant exposure of their minds to the violence in computer games, which finally led to depersonalisation. Consequently, they didn't take their victims as living people, but only as „enemies“.

On the 5th jubilee of the Columbine massacre the main FBI investigator presented psychological profiles of both shooters. Harris was said to be a clinical psychopath, Klebold rather a depressive type. The plan was believed to be worked out by Harris, who probably had a messianistic complex of superiority and wanted to present it to the rest of the world.

More recently, a US psychiatrist, Jerald Block, has differed with this opinion, arguing that the killers' actions are not well explained by such diagnoses. Rather, he states that Klebold and Harris were immersed in games like Doom and that their lives were most gratifying while playing in the virtual. As they got into trouble, the two teenagers started to get their computer access restricted. Anger that was being projected into the games was now unleashed into the real world. In addition, the computer restrictions opened up substantial amounts of idle time that would have otherwise gone towards their online activities. They increasingly used that time to express their anger and their antisocial tendencies likewise increased. This, in turn, generated more restrictions. Finally, immediately after being arrested and banned from their computers for about a month, the two teens became homicidal and began documenting plans to attack the school. (Block 2007; cp. Whiticker 2007)

It is nevertheless necessary to say that an excessive playing of computer games is not an automatic part of lifestyle of potential school killers; in the most of cases the culprits did not play computer games at all in the past. In the Columbine case the computer games could be a partial explanation, but a generalisation of these outcomes is at least problematic.

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