

# ACTIVE SHOOTER

UNCOVERING WHAT DRIVES YOUR ATTACKER





A person wearing a dark blue hoodie and blue jeans is sitting on a wooden bench. They are looking down, and their hands are clasped together in their lap. The background is dark and out of focus.

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## UNCOVERING WHAT DRIVES YOUR ATTACKER

BY MICHAEL MARTIN

### **THERE IS NO SINGLE PROFILE THAT DEFINES THE MASS SHOOTER.**

Some can be categorized as psychotic, such as the Virginia Tech shooter was. Others are motivated or inspired by ISIS or other terrorist organizations, such as the San Bernardino and Orlando shooters were. Most are seeking fame.

While no common profile exists, common indicators do exist. In addition, most shooters have left a trail of either physical or electronic evidence – or both – that was missed by friends and family. In 80 percent of the mass shootings since Columbine, the shooter told someone in advance about his or her plans, yet those plans weren't taken seriously.

Picking a potential mass shooter out of a crowded field of students or employees or parishioners won't be

as simple as looking at what the individual is wearing, what music he or she is listening to, or other overt signs. Dr. Peter Langman agrees. In his article, "School Shooters: The Warning Signs," he notes: "The warning signs of school shootings do not relate to students' clothing, the video games they play, their musical preferences, or other aspects of their lifestyles."

In many cases, however, Langman says these shooters are "very disempowered, not succeeding in life in multiple domains, and we see that with college and adult shooters. They're typically failing in academics, failing in the world of work, failing in the world of friendship, in romance, or sexuality. Nothing really is going right in any major domain for them." While outsiders may believe that they are doing "okay," potential shooters may believe that they are failing at everything or, worse, that everyone is

failing them. But not all young men (or women) who are suffering one or more failures become mass shooters.

So what are the warning signs that an individual may be at risk or may have already reached the planning stage? Warning signs can be found in three different areas: risk factors, direct indicators and indirect indicators.

## RISK FACTORS

While the vast majority of individuals who come from broken homes or who have disengaged parents will never become mass shooters, when multiple risk factors exist, an individual should appropriately be considered at risk for violence or suicide. Risk factors can include:

- Multiple failures academically, socially or romantically.
- Troubled, broken or abusive home.
- Disengaged parents and no responsible adult providing oversight in his or her life.
- Psychotic symptoms, including hallucinations and delusions.

## DIRECT INDICATORS

Risk factors simply indicate that an individual may be at risk, but direct indicators show that actual planning may have begun. In case after case, mass shooters have left direct indicators of their plans, either in physical or electronic form or in what they said or did. But in far too many cases, friends or family members didn't take the indicators seriously. Direct indicators can include physical evidence, such as:

- The individual actively seeking out a friend or family member for an illegal firearm purchase when the potential shooter is underage. This is not only a direct indicator but also illegal, and it must be reported.
- An unexplained and uncharacteristic stockpiling of firearms, ammunition or components that could be used to manufacture an explosive.
- Written documentation, such as specific plans for an attack or violent "fictional" stories written with real-world settings or actors.
- Direct warnings for friends or family members to stay away from an area on a specific date.
- Direct threats, specifically stating the individual's grievances and plans verbally or in writing (such as in a journal or as part of a writing assignment).

## DIRECT INDICATORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Direct indicators can also include information left on social media, such as:

- Posts expressing an admiration for past mass shooters; an admiration for ISIS, al-Qaida or other terrorist organizations; positive references to Hitler or Nazi Germany; or comments which could be taken as thoughts of suicide.

- Photos showing the individual pointing a firearm directly at the camera or at his or her own head. (If such a manual existed, both of these photos would be straight out of the Mass Shooter's Instruction Manual.)

While what's listed above might seem laughably obvious, in every one of the 48 mass shootings since Columbine, these direct indicators existed and were either missed or were ignored by family and friends of the shooter(s).

## INDIRECT INDICATORS

While most mass shooters wouldn't be categorized as loners, many will be disengaged from normal social and family relationships, or they may express antisocial behavior. Other indirect indicators include:

- Socially dysfunctional.
- Difficulty relating emotionally with others.
- May show bullying tendencies (contrary to popular belief, most mass shooters have not been bullied but rather tend to BE bullies).

Other indirect indicators can appear on social media or in a student's writing, which may not show a specific desire for violence but which can indicate feelings of despair, disenfranchisement or that the world is conspiring against him or her.

To monitor a student with risk factors, direct indicators or indirect indicators, Dr. Langman suggests that every student in every school have at least one direct connection with a teacher or coach. That doesn't mean that the adult simply asks the student, "How are you doing?" during the occasional hallway conversation. Instead, it means that the adult should take an actual interest in helping the student to remain engaged. It also means taking the responsibility for monitoring that student's social media usage. While other students or friends of the potential mass shooter might miss the signs (or might not take them seriously), having at least one responsible adult who takes an actual interest in the student (and his or her social media) can not only help to identify potential violence before it starts but also reduce or eliminate the possibility that violence (or suicide) is contemplated in the first place.

## REVERSING THE TREND

While society as a whole is shifting to elevate fame over sacrifice, service and hard work, parents have an opportunity to counteract that pull by following some simple advice:

- If your child is lacking success academically, set aside time for homework every single evening and check his or her work. Success gives rise to success, which may reawaken the idea that hard work academically is all the success and fame that the child needs.
- If your son is lacking success socially or on the play-





ing field, encourage him to sign up for Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts or a similar organization such as your local Police or Fire Explorer post. Keep this one in mind: Eagle Scouts are not out shooting up schools, malls or churches.

- Monitor your child's social media accounts. Act like the grown-up in your relationship with simple rules. If you're not allowed to monitor your child's social media accounts, then the social media accounts should go away.

- Monitor your child's computer use. While it's possible to hide or delete web searches or create hidden files or folders, investigations post-shooting have almost always found an obvious electronic trail. Monitoring your child's computer use doesn't mean that you'll find a document labeled "My Mass Shooting To-Do List," but it will alert you if your child is spending time on neo-Nazi forums, forums dedicated to the glorification of past shootings, or forums that advocate racist, xenophobic or homophobic views.

- It's your house. No place should be off limits to a search, whether it's your child's bedroom, bank statement, cellphone, computer or any other nook or cranny where something could be hidden.

- Be a model for your child in your behavior and actions. See the best in people, not the worst. If your dinner conversation consists of complaining about what's wrong with the world and who's to blame, you'll pass that losing attitude on to your child. While you may not turn him or her

into a mass shooter, you will create an adult with built-in excuses on why his or her life is failing rather than giving him or her the tools and attitude to achieve real success.

### **SANDY HOOK PROMISE: 'SAY SOMETHING' CAMPAIGN**

To help prevent future mass shootings and even suicide, Sandy Hook Promise — a movement designed to educate and empower communities through gun-violence-prevention programs — has launched a "Say Something" campaign which teaches students, educators and family members not only how to spot the signs but also what to do about it. The Say Something campaign teaches:

1. Look for warning signs, signals and threats.
2. Act immediately; take it seriously.
3. Say something to a trusted adult.

As part of the campaign, Sandy Hook Promise has created handouts for parents, students and educators. The organization has also produced a PowerPoint presentation and a number of student activities in an educator guide.

In addition to the Say Something campaign, Sandy Hook Promise also recently launched an outstanding new video, which shows how easy it is to miss the signs unless you're watching closely and actively. The two-and-



a-half minute video, titled "Evan," follows the budding love interest of a high school student, who trades notes with an anonymous girl by scratching them onto a desk in the library. The video does an outstanding job of showing how the noise and activities of everyday life can cause us to miss the signs until it's too late.

While the viewer is focused on Evan (and hoping that he meets the girl), it's easy to miss the signs of an angry, disengaged student in the background, who ultimately walks through the gym door with a bag of guns.

I'll add that you can disagree with the video's supposition that one of the indirect indicators that we should watch for is a student who reads gun magazines or watches shooting videos on YouTube, but taken in its entirety, the video does a good job painting a picture of a troubled teenager who is in need of help – *before* it's too late.

## THE SAY SOMETHING CAMPAIGN TEACHES:

- 1** LOOK FOR WARNING SIGNS, SIGNALS AND THREATS.
- 2** ACT IMMEDIATELY; TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.
- 3** SAY SOMETHING TO A TRUSTED ADULT.

**SAY SOMETHING**

**Two simple words with the power to save lives**

**Schools ARE safe. But we can do better.**

**4 OUT OF 5**  
In 4 out of 5 shootings, the attacker told other people of his plans ahead of time.

**70%**  
70% of people who commit suicide tell someone of their plans, or give warning signs.

**7% felt unsafe**  
7% of students in grades 6-12 reported not going to school or missing days in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe.

**Program Benefits:**

- FREE to grades 6-12 in all schools and community organizations.
- Easy to implement - 20 and 40 minute lessons.
- Flexible delivery - curriculum available for assembly programs, group and classroom discussions.
- Sustainable throughout the year; integrates into daily activities.
- Based on research by Dr. Dewey Cornell and Dr. Reid Meloy, two leading national experts in threat assessment and intervention.
- In-person training by Sandy Hook Promise available to educators, group leaders and/or students, or download the digital kit and do it yourself.
- Can reduce violence/suicide and create a safer, healthier school climate.

**Say Something**  
Say Something is designed to help students recognize the signs of potentially violent or at-risk behavior in their peers through all forms of communication, particularly social media, and intervene by telling a trusted adult.

**Students are the eyes and ears of a school - they know what's going on with their friends and have the power to look out for each other.**

**1. LOOK**  
Look for Warning Signs, Signals & Threats.

**2. ACT**  
Act Immediately, Take it Seriously.

**3. SAY SOMETHING**  
Say Something to a Trusted Adult.

**Bring Say Something to your school or organization. Teach your students to be Upstanders, not Bystanders, and make the pledge to SAY SOMETHING.**

To register your school or community organization to Say Something, please visit our website or email us.  
Website | [sandyhookpromise.org](http://sandyhookpromise.org)  
Email | [programs@sandyhookpromise.org](mailto:programs@sandyhookpromise.org)  
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**Sandy Hook PROMISE**

In addition to the handout shown here, Sandy Hook Promise also offers a free PowerPoint presentation and downloadable guides for parents, students and educators, including a number of valuable practical exercises.



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