AVERTING THE UNLIKELY: FEARING, ASSESSING, AND PREVENTING
THREATS OF RAMPAGE VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A dissertation presented

by

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to
The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of
Sociology

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
June 2012
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, school rampage shootings have taken multiple lives and caused widespread fear throughout the United States. During this same period, there have also been dozens of averted incidents where student plots to kill multiple peers and faculty members came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted. This dissertation entails in-depth interviews conducted with school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) directly involved in preventing what many perceived to be potential rampages at eleven public middle and high schools across the Northeastern United States. Interview data were subsequently triangulated via news media reporting and legal documentation about the eleven averted incidents. Additionally, the perspectives of school administrators at demographically similar public schools (i.e. in predominantly white suburban and rural communities) where no rampage threat took place were solicited as a basis of comparison.

This multi-tiered method enabled the investigation of how officials explain their beliefs and concerns about threats of rampage violence, the process by which threats are assessed, and how previous school rampage plots have been averted. The resultant data provide insight into the school cultures and practices that enabled rampage attacks to be foiled, but also serve as a means through which to better understand late modern perspectives on the fear, risk assessment, and surveillance of American youth. Therefore, the way in which school authorities have reacted to the school rampage phenomenon reveals a great deal about our contemporary justice mindset, which often views the identification, surveillance, and management of potentially dangerous individuals as the best approach to the inevitability of crime. As such, my research reveals both
practical implications for school violence prevention and significant theoretical insight regarding the causes and consequences of enhanced school discipline and security.

An exaggerated perception of the likelihood of rampage shootings has led many officials to justify, albeit somewhat reluctantly, the extensive criminalization of their schools via punitive disciplinary policies and enhanced security measures. Close scrutiny of the eleven averted incidents indicate, however, that it is most frequently students coming forward with knowledge about their peers’ violent intentions that has led to rampage attacks being averted. As such, the implications for the future administration of school safety are considerable.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d first like to thank the numerous school administrators, teachers, police officers, and counselors who generously spent their time speaking to me for this project. I hope you find my interpretations accurate and my conclusions critical but fair.

Without the help and support of numerous people, this dissertation and the multiple years of graduate education that preceded it would never have been possible. I have been incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by an eccentric bunch of intensely stimulating and inspirational friends, family members, and teachers.

Since my early undergraduate days, Jack Levin has been nothing short of the ideal mentor. Jack has been a passionate supporter, advocate, counselor, and constructive critic. Jack deserves credit not only for inspiring my initial interest in the sociology of violence and for helping me determine the topic of this dissertation, but he has been crucial in making my graduate school experience as a whole far more bearable. Whenever I had doubts, concerns, or dilemmas, Jack was happy to help affirm my confidence, resolve my conflicts, and without fail, make me laugh. Jack perfectly illustrates how the best scholars are creative minds with diverse interests, good listeners, and riveting teachers with a passion for their subject matter. What’s more, he stands as a testament to how accomplished and successful people can still maintain their integrity and treat everyone around them with the utmost kindness and empathy. I feel extremely fortunate to consider him a dear friend, and I look forward to sharing many more laughs and much more food together.

Arnie Arluke has been an amazingly supportive advisor. Upon concluding meetings with Arnie, I was frequently left astonished by his ability to synthesize data, resolve methodological issues, grapple with complex concepts, and, perhaps most importantly, reinvigorate my energy to
continue writing. Arnie’s high standards made me want to work harder and his compassionate nature never left me feeling overwhelmed. Without his experience, passion, and humor, this dissertation could not have been completed.

From my first graduate course in Deviant Behavior with her, Ineke Marshall has been a constant source of great support and intellectual development. I have profited immeasurably from our many thought-provoking conversations about criminological theory over the past few years, and her constructive criticisms of my writing have vastly improved it. She has also provided me with encouragement and support on a personal level, regularly going out of her way to assure me of the value of my research.

Glenn Muschert’s insightful and rigorous scholarship on school violence and the problematic responses to it directly inspired many of the research questions and conceptual avenues pursued in this project, so having him as an external reader has been a special privilege. Glenn’s perceptive comments have significantly improved this dissertation and working with him has been an immensely rewarding experience.

I must acknowledge the generous financial support afforded to me by the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict and its director, Gordana Rabrenovic. In addition, I am thankful to Gordana for the countless times she helped me navigate university bureaucracy and suggested enlightening reading. Having an office across from Gordana meant that I never suffered from a lack of kind and thoughtful assistance.

I would also like to express my gratitude for the inspiration, support, and guidance provided to me by numerous other faculty members in Northeastern’s Department of Sociology and Anthropology, specifically, Wilfred Holton, Judy Perolle, Steve Vallas, and Kathrin Zippel. Through your research, teaching, and mentorship, you have encouraged not only my passion for
knowledge but my dedication to social justice. Similarly, I’d also like to acknowledge my
gratitude towards Amy Farrell and Natasha Frost in Northeastern’s School of Criminology and
Criminal Justice. Thanks also to Mary Ramsey and Joan Collins for all their help and kindness
over the years.

Graduate school would have been excruciating without the support of the best cohort
known to sociology – Sean Brown, Amanda Crabb, Jill Eshelman, Andrea Hill, Amy Lubitow,
Lauren Nicoll, Kat Rickenbacker, and Leandra Smollin. Together we have built the kind of
community of friends and colleagues that the rest of academia should strive to imitate. I know I
wouldn’t have made it through without you all. Additional thanks to Tammi Arford, Justin Betz,
Chase Billingham, Corina Medley, Trish Morris, Sarah Cope Nicksa, and Stanislav Vysotsky,
who have been and continue to be amazing friends and supportive colleagues. In particular, I’d
like to thank Tammi for being the best editor no money can buy, Andrea for bringing her
brilliance to brainstorming sessions, and Justin for late night adventures to stave off dissertation
writing horrors. Viva L’Accademia Dei Pugni! Thanks also to Padraic Dougherty, Alex
Engelson, and Owen McLean for being wicked awesome.

None of this would have been possible without the tireless support and encouragement of
my mother, Kathy Madfis. For my entire life and throughout some extremely trying times, she
has been there for me in every capacity. I know, without question, that I never would have even
finished high school if she had not been the generous, devoted, warm, fun, and open-minded
person that she is.

Thanks also to my loving family – Josh, Nicole, and Nizhoni Madfis, Roland Packard,
Renee Madfis, and Eunice and Morry Sable. I’d also like to thank Karen Yang, Jen Yang, and
Rose McGahan for always welcoming me into their home and, now, their family. I must also
recognize the love and support give to me over the years from the Lauengers, Franks, and Gitners, who I have always considered to be family members rather than neighbors. Thanks also to my perpetual puppy, Willie Mae, for sitting on my lap during much of the writing of this dissertation – an arrangement that made me feel less like an isolated student sitting in front of a computer screen and more like a Bond villain plotting world domination.

Finally, special thanks to Katie Yang. Without her, I would have been a lot lonelier and far more hungry while writing this dissertation. She is my best friend, staunchest supporter, and most reliable source for ridiculous humor. I can’t wait to start our new life in Washington together.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years in the United States, there have been hundreds of incidents of school rampage plots that have successfully been averted (Daniels et al. 2007; O’Toole 2000; Trump n.d.). During this same time period, however, American schools have prioritized safety and security in a manner which has exaggerated the extent of school violence as a social problem and dramatically transformed education as a social institution. In the wake of numerous highly publicized multiple-victim school homicides at the turn of the 21 St century, American schools responded with massive changes to their disciplinary policies and security apparatuses. With the intention of preventing future rampage incidents, schools implemented increased security through resource officers, cameras, locked doors, and lockdown procedures, and expanded discipline via zero tolerance policies with mandatory arrests and school exclusions. Many school officials and academics also responded by focusing upon the identification of potential school shooters through warning sign check lists, behavioral profiles, and threat assessments.

Whatever failures or successes these varied approaches have had with regard to fighting crime or violence more generally, no prior scholarship has looked at the numerous cases of rampage plots which have actually been averted in order to discern if and when any of these developments have actually played a preventative role. In fact, with the exception of a few very recent studies (Daniels et al 2007; Daniels et al. 2010; Larkin 2009; Pollack et al. 2008), social scientists possess next to no information on the rampage attacks which have been plotted and planned, yet never came to fruition. Through their exploration, this study endeavors to understand not only how schools fear and assess violent threat and construct risk generally and at times problematically, but also what social and individual forces have been at work to practically prevent instances of rampage violence from taking place.
Key Questions and Purpose

Averted incidents of school rampage offer a unique opportunity for social scientific investigation. As there has been little empirical research on how previous rampage plots have been prevented, most of the rhetorical arguments regarding how future attacks are to be prevented amount to mere speculation and rely on far too many problematic assumptions about the unlimited benefits and minimal consequences of enhanced school securitization, risk assessment, and criminalization. Additionally, the perspectives and rationales behind the implementation of these new practices are not fully understood.

First, this research seeks to comprehend school officials’ attitudes about school rampage threats and the response to them. In particular, how do they understand and explain the causes of and proposed solutions to rampage shootings? To what extent do school officials fear and anticipate future episodes of school rampage violence? Do rampage shootings still frame debates over school safety and security? Second, this dissertation will explore the process by which schools engage in the risk assessment of their students. To what extent are school officials aware of various forms of violence risk assessment and what are their perspectives regarding the utility of these techniques? Which approaches are utilized for what purposes? What criteria do police and school officials deem most important in the assessment of student threat? How do school officials manage student threats and maintain a sense of safety in the school community? The third and final goal of this research project will be to ascertain how student threats of rampage violence have been successfully averted. In particular, how have these threats come to the attention of authorities? What role did the risk assessment,
criminalization, and securitization of schools play in the prevention of the rampage plots? What additional factors, policies, or procedures permitted the rampage to be averted?

This dissertation reveals that, since the year 2000, there have been at least 195 averted incidents where student plots to kill multiple peers and faculty members came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted. I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-two school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) directly involved in preventing potential rampages at eleven middle and high schools around the Northeastern United States, as well as with six administrators at another five Northeastern public schools chosen because of their demographic and geographic similarity to most of the aforementioned schools but which had no publicized record of an averted rampage.

My research explores how officials explain their concerns about threats of rampage violence, the process by which threats are assessed and notions of safety are maintained, and how previous school rampage plots have been averted. The resultant data provide insight into the school cultures, policies, and procedures that enabled rampage attacks to be foiled, but also are a means through which to better understand late modern perspectives on the fear, risk assessment, and surveillance of American youth. Therefore, the way in which school authorities have reacted to the school rampage phenomenon reveals a great deal about our contemporary justice mindset, which often views the identification, surveillance, and management of potentially dangerous individuals as the best approach to the inevitability of crime. As such, my research reveals both practical implications for school violence prevention and significant theoretical insight regarding the causes and consequences of enhanced school discipline and security.
Literature Review

School Rampage as a Social Problem

A dramatic series of mass killings took place in the late 1990’s at several rural and suburban middle and high public schools across the United States. These events were highly publicized as they shocked the American public not only for their brutality, but because of the prior belief that such schools were “safe havens, free of the dangers of street crime” (Lawrence 2007: 147). That such violence could be perpetrated in middle and upper class school districts away from the plight of urban areas was seen as especially perplexing (Kimmel & Mahler 2003). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a great deal of empirical research has since been conducted about the phenomenon.

While the term school shooting has been defined and operationalized in almost countless ways by many different scholars, Newman et al. (2004: 50) can be credited with delineating the fairly new phenomenon as “rampage school shootings” which “take place on a school-related public stage before an audience; involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot simply for their symbolic significance or at random; and involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the school.” While only a portion of school gun violence fit all of these criteria, many of the most publicized events during the last two decades conform to these specifics. In addition to the aforementioned rampage shootings, Muschert (2007: 62) has filled in this typological picture to form the accompanying school shootings categories of “mass murders” committed by older non-students perpetrators, “terrorist attacks” engaged in by individuals or groups to advance their political or ideological goals, “targeted shootings” that involve only specific pre-planned victims, and the “government shootings” of student protesters.

Though rampage school shootings may have constituted a moral panic in terms of the
excesses in media coverage and the overzealous policy reforms that exaggerated their prevalence (Aitken 2001; Best 2002; Burns & Crawford 1999), these events did genuinely occur with greater frequency in middle and high schools in the late 1990’s (Fox, Levin & Quinet 2005) and then on college campuses in the late 2000’s (Fox & Savage 2009), and dozens of plots to commit such heinous crimes continue to be revealed and pre-empted each and every year (Trump n.d.).

Likewise, since the April 1999 Columbine massacre, school shooters in nations around the world have turned to this infamous American case for homicidal inspiration (Larkin, 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012). Rare as these events may be, such incidents warrant serious concern, for when they do occur, they not only cause multiple casualties, but leave many survivors and bystanders with post-traumatic stress (James 2009; Schwarz & Kowalski 1991) and create extensive fear among the larger public (Altheide 2002; Burns & Crawford 1999; Harding et al 2002). In the literature review to follow, the extant scholarship on completed and averted school rampages will be discussed, followed by a review of the current state of discipline, security, and surveillance that has become so widely pervasive in American public schools since the turn of the 21st century and resulted, at least in part, as a reaction to the problem of school rampage shootings.

The Causes of School Rampage

Due to the prolific fear and extensive publicity which school rampages received in the late 1990’s, the bulk of social science research has focused on this particular form of school shooting (Mushert 2007). The etiology of school rampage shootings has been explored by a vast array of academics ranging from sociologists and criminologists to anthropologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Often, scholars have brought one particular causal factor to the fore, whether it is an individual deficiency, the school or community context, or the larger socio-cultural background.
At the individual-level, some have focused upon the depression, mental illness, and personality disorders of said killers (Langman 2009a; Langman 2009b; McGee & DeBernardo 1999). Others have stressed the role played by negative relationships with peers, such as victimization through bullying (Burgess et al. 2006; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein 2006; Larkin 2007; Leary et al. 2003; Levin & Madfis 2009; Meloy et al. 2001; Newman 2004). Both the exclusionary nature of teenage cliques (Larkin 2007; Lickel et al. 2003) and the cohesion of intolerant homogeneous communities (Aronson 2004; Newman et al. 2004) have been implicated in previous rampage attacks. Finally, at the macro-sociological level, various researchers have clarified the role that masculinity (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Mai and Alpert 2000) and the widespread accessibility and acceptance of gun culture (Glassner 2009; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Lawrence and Birkland 2004; Webber 2003) play in reinforcing and legitimizing violent solutions. Of late, scholars (such as Henry 2009; Levin & Madfis 2009; Muschert & Peguero 2010) have attempted to fuse these disparate etiological concerns to achieve a more multi-faceted and cross-disciplinary understanding of the causes of school rampage.

Averted School Rampage

Despite the breadth of research and theorizing on school rampages, far fewer studies have addressed attacks which have been planned yet have not come to fruition. Whereas incidents of school violence that have resulted in multiple fatalities and injuries are often extensively investigated by numerous parties in the government, the justice system, and the media, far less information exists about “near misses” (Verlinden et al. 2000: 28). Pollack et al (2008: 9) pointed out that:

few [schools] track threats made against other students or the school (especially if the event did not result in official law enforcement intervention). The result of this failure to collect and maintain records regarding threats is that very little is known about the extent or nature of the problem.
Some academics have tried to make up for the lack of a comprehensive database by gathering their own samples. O’Toole (2000) first noted the importance of studying averted school rampages, and several scholars (Larkin 2009; Newman et al. 2004) have since compiled incidents of averted rampages but only tangentially discussed them. The only studies which have centrally focused upon averted rampage attacks have been conducted by Daniels and his colleagues (Daniels et al. 2007; Daniels et al. 2010), by Langman (2005), and by those interested in advancing the field of violence risk assessment (Borum et al 2010; Cornell 2003; Cornell et al. 2004; Cornell & Sheras 2006; Fein et al. 2002; Jimerson et al 2005; O’Toole 2000; Randazzo et al 2005; Reddy et al. 2001; Pollack et al. 2008).

Daniels and his colleagues’ (2007) first completed a content analysis of 30 school rampages which were thwarted in 21 states sometime between October 2001 and October 2004. From newspaper accounts, the authors reported data on the details of the plot, how the plot was discovered, what steps were taken by the school and law enforcement once the plot was revealed, and what the legal outcomes of the incidents were. They discovered that the majority of violent schemes occurred in public high schools, though several took place at elementary and middle schools and one happened at a private school. One student acting alone was implicated in half of the incidents, while two to six students were accused in the other half. Guns were the most frequent intended weapon for plotters, though bombs, knives, and swords were mentioned in the reporting of other incidents. The majority of plotters communicated their fatal plans to others with 30% doing so via email or paper notes, 20% verbally informing others, and 15% admitting guilt when questioned by police. Rampage plots were uncovered in a variety of ways. The most common method was other students coming forward to inform school or police officials. This was often a result of plotters informing, and in some cases unsuccessfully recruiting, their peers,
but students who had overheard rumors or themselves been personally threatened also came forward. Other plots were averted by alert school administrators whose suspicions were aroused by rumors or irregular student behavior, while school staff overheard the conversations of plotters in some cases. Still others were prevented by police who were alerted to rumors or found notes or emails which revealed the threat. Two events were avoided when the plots were discovered as a result of the students being investigated for other crimes and one well-developed plan was pre-empted only thirty minutes before it was to be carried out. Schools responded to discovered plots in numerous ways. Students involved in plots were frequently suspended or expelled and also often arrested. Schools also responded by notifying parents and students, making counseling available, conducting internal investigations, calling the police, enhancing school security, and evacuating, searching, and/or closing down the school. Less common school responses were to consider banning trench coats and to avoid doing anything to change the school’s normal routine.

In his next stage of scholarship on this topic, Daniels and his colleagues (2010) conducted interviews with school personnel at four American schools where shooting rampages were averted. The goal of this research was to better understand what roles school officials felt they played in preventing the rampage, what reasons they attributed to the successful outcome, and what advice they would offer to other schools. The research design for this project was ostensibly qualitative, and while the authors categorized respondents’ interview data into helpful domains and core ideas, they then quantified the prevalence of these themes in a manner which subsequently sacrificed what could have been a more in-depth understanding of these themes. This study revealed that the most dominant domains represented in interviews were descriptions of school conditions that focused on securing safety and optimizing learning, intervention
descriptions about how plots were discovered, discussions about crisis planning and preparation, conversations regarding interpersonal relationships between staff and students, debates about the relative merits of violence prevention efforts, and problematic issues at the school which made dealing with the crisis more difficult. In their analysis, Daniels and his colleagues (2010: 88) concluded that anti-bullying programs were perceived to be the “most salient” method of preventing future rampages. Many school officials also believed that supportive and strong relationships between school staff and students encourages people to come forward with knowledge about threats, and formal crisis planning that dictates specific roles helps to both prevent and respond to such potentially dangerous incidents.

The scholarship of Daniels and his colleagues contributed significant knowledge about foiled school rampages through content analyses and interviews with school personnel. Very little research, in contrast, has been conducted by interviewing the failed perpetrators themselves. Such a deficit similarly exists in research on completed school rampage killers and on mass murderers more generally, those who have killed numerous people in a single episode at one or more closely related locations (Fox & Levin 2005). Only one researcher to date (Mullen 2004) attained multiple interviews with successful mass killers, though Langman (2005: 25) wrote about his experiences with “potential school shooters in a locked psychiatric hospital.” In this brief article, Langman described the differences between deniers, admiters, and intenders of school shootings. Deniers refute that they ever intended to do harm to others and minimize or contest any evidence which suggests otherwise. Admiters acknowledge their violent thoughts and sometimes quite detailed plans, but state that they never had any intention to carry them through. Intenders admit that they desire to, or may be at risk for carrying out a homicidal episode, though they may lack any semblance of a plan. This preliminary typology speaks to the
difficulty in assessing seriousness and the complexity inherent in predicting what people, especially teenagers, may do in the future.

**Responding to Rampage – Current School Disciplinary and Security Practices**

The current state of school discipline, security, and surveillance does not resemble the American public schools of even a few decades ago. A regime of tighter social control has manifested itself in schools across the country through punitive zero tolerance disciplinary policies, the proliferation of police officers and surveillance cameras, and various forms of school security designed to prevent crime through environmental design. These developments, which Hirshfield and Celinska (2011, p. 1) have collectively referred to as “school criminalization,” represent a swift and widespread incursion of law enforcement personnel, ideology, and technology into the school setting. As a result, students are increasingly exposed to prison-like regimes of control (Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik 2010; Monahan & Torres 2010).

**Zero Tolerance Disciplinary Policies**

One of the most frequently cited reactions to the various school shooting massacres of the late 1990’s was the implementation of various zero tolerance disciplinary policies, which mandate strict penalties for student misbehavior, regardless of individual or situational circumstances. Though the original formulation took the form of the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act which required schools to expel for a minimum of one year any student caught carrying a firearm in school, various states and individual school districts broadened the scope to include zero tolerance policies for aggressive behavior, possession of other objects deemed weapons, and various controlled substances (Ayers et al. 2001). As a result, schools have expelled, suspended, or sent to alternative schools large numbers of students for sharing over-the-counter medications with their peers, for bringing utensils and toy weapons to school, some made of paper or plastic,
to school grounds, or for making relatively questionable gestures or comments which have been deemed violent or threatening.

More than a decade ago, Skiba and Peterson (1999) documented several of the more egregious examples that showcased the “dark side of zero tolerance” spawned by fear of Columbine and other similar shootings. One particularly egregious incident involved the suspension of an 8 year-old child for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher and saying “Pow, pow, pow” (Times Wire Reports 2001). Though zero tolerance policies have been widely condemned in recent years by various academics (Ayers et al. 2001; Casella 2003; Skiba 2000), the American Bar Association (American Bar Association 2001), and the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008), such punitive absolutism persists. In 2009, a 6 year boy from Newark, Delaware was suspended for bringing his Cub Scouts camping utensil to lunch (Urbina 2009), and, in 2010, a 13-year old female honor roll student in Houston, Texas was expelled and labeled a “terrorist” for pointing a “finger gun” in the general direction of one of her teachers (“Student Suspended” 2010).

**Surveillance through the Proliferation of Police Officers and Security Cameras**

The last few decades have seen a massive increase in the surveillance of school students, whether that means through additional resource officers officially stationed as police liaisons or security cameras which record student movements through school hallways and egresses. Whereas there were less than one hundred police officers in American public schools at the end of the 1970’s (Brady et al., 2007), more than fourteen thousand full-time resource officers were working in public schools by 2003 (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). Thus, 60% of teachers in
suburban middle and high schools (and 67% of teachers in majority-black or Hispanic schools) reported armed police officers working at their schools (Public Agenda, 2004).

Not unlike police officers in schools, security cameras were a rare sight thirty years ago anywhere but in prisons and retail establishments. They did not arrive in schools until the 1990’s and, while urban school districts were the first to implement cameras, wealthy suburban schools are now usually the proud owners of the most sophisticated and expensive surveillance technology (Casella, 2006). During the 1999–2000 school year, only 19% of all public high schools used security cameras to monitor their students (Dinkes et al., 2009: vii). By the 2007-2008 school year, 55% of all public schools (and 76.6% of all public high schools) possessed security cameras (Ruddy et al., 2010). While cameras may have numerous security and monitoring benefits, as well as the potential for various invasions of personal privacy, the security industry markets technological surveillance as an inevitable “way of the future” (Casella, 2003, p. 88).

School Security Designed to Prevent Crime through Environmental Design

Part of a larger field referred to as Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED), attaining school safety via the use of architectural designs such as large windows, skylights, and straight hallways to increase visibility has become extremely lucrative. The advent of gates, specialized door locks, and the limiting of entry and exit to one location during school hours have similarly been adopted to secure areas in numerous school buildings (Casella 2006). Typically affluent communities prefer these environmental designs (as well as surveillance through police and cameras) to the daily use of metal detectors and random weapon searches. These latter invasive security measures are more commonly found in urban schools with predominantly minority students (Hirschfield 2010).
Responding to Rampage - Violence Risk Assessment

According to scholars documenting its origins, the field of violence risk assessment has advanced from early empirical studies in the 1970’s that attempted to predict violence to a more complex, multi-disciplinary research literature which deals not only with the estimation and assessment of future violence potential, but also how best to manage and intervene with high-violence risk individuals (Andrade 2009). Knowledge gleaned from this field is frequently used by numerous practitioners, from “adult and juvenile courts, parole and probation departments, and correctional facilities, as well as for child protective services agencies, school departments, community mental health centers, and more” (Andrade, O’Neill, & Diener 2009: 3). While all methods of risk assessment engage in the “scientific effort to identify ways to improve estimates of future violence,” the approaches vary substantially (Grisso 2009: xvi). Reddy and colleagues (2001) codified and categorized these varied approaches as profiling, guided professional judgment, automated decision making, and threat assessment.¹

Profiling

Profiling, often qualified as criminal profiling (Douglas et al. 1986; Kocsis 2007; Turvey 2008), behavioral profiling (Petherick 2006), or offender profiling (Canter & Youngs 2009; Keppel 2006; Palermo & Kocsis 2005), is practiced in a number of diverse forms but broadly refers to investigative techniques or assessment strategies used to identify current and potential offenders. In its original form developed by the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit, hypotheses regarding offenders’ behavioral, demographic, and personality characteristics were generated from data left at crime scenes (Douglas et al. 1986). The realm of profiling has expanded, however, to include the “prospective identification of would-be criminals” wherein “the typical

¹ Violence risk assessment has been delineated elsewhere into clinical, actuarial, and structured professional judgment (Vincent et al. 2009).
perpetrator of a particular type of crime – such as serial murder or school shootings – is compiled from characteristics shared by known previous perpetrators” (Reddy 2001: 161). This prototypical profile is then used to both identify the types of individuals likely to become perpetrators and to assess an individual’s likelihood of future offending. To this end, the FBI (Band & Harpold 1999: 14) created a prospective profile of the school shooter which included characteristics such as being an isolated white male who dresses sloppily, has a history of mental health treatment, violence, alcohol, and/or drug abuse, and is influenced by “satanic or cult-type belief systems” or violent song lyrics. Similarly, psychologists McGee and DeBernardo (1999) generated their own profile of the classroom avenger as a socially immature and isolated middle class white male who has no prior history of serious school misbehavior and has been rejected and teased by his peers. Many features of these two widely circulated profiles overlap, but they also directly contradict one another on numerous points.

While various profiling techniques have gained some measure of empirical support for other types of perpetrators (Homant & Kennedy 1998; Kocsis et al. 2000; Pinizzotto & Finkel 1990), the profiling of young students has proved particularly problematic. Many students who fit general profiles never commit school violence of any kind, while numerous students who have planned and even completed attacks at their schools did not closely match prior profiles (Sewell & Mendelsohn 2000). Such student profiles have recently fallen out of favor, and a systematic investigation of targeted school shooting incidents revealed that there simply “is no accurate or useful ‘profile’ of students who engaged in targeted school violence” whether demographic, psychological, or social (Vossekuil et al. 2002: 11).

*Guided Professional Judgment and Warning Signs*
Another technique used to appraise students’ violence risk is guided professional judgment, which has also been referred to as structured clinical assessment (Reddy et al. 2001). This approach entails evaluation through the use of checklists of risk factors or warning signs for violence (Borum 2000; Otto 2000). Such assessment is sometimes conducted by licensed mental health professionals (Reddy et al. 2001), though school and law enforcement officials have also utilized the various checklists which have been publicized over the years by the Justice and Education Departments (Dwyer et al. 1998), the International Association of Chiefs of Police (1999), and the collaboration between MTV and the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association 1999). As some of these checklists featured general warning signs such as a “minimal interest in academics,” this approach has been criticized for utilizing criteria that are vague and broad enough to apply to the majority of any student body (Fox & Burstein, 2010: 69; Fox, Levin & Quinet 2008). While standardized psychological tests and instruments used by mental health professionals have been found to be somewhat accurate in certain contexts with violence in general (Reddy et al. 2001), there is no empirical evidence which suggests that they are successful in predicting targeted school violence with pre-selected victims (Borum 2000).

Automated Decision Making

Risk assessment approaches classified as automated decision-making have been broken into two camps, actuarial formulas and artificial intelligence, both of which “produce a decision…rather than leaving the decision to the person conducting the assessment” (Reddy et al. 2001: 166). The actuarial form of automated decision-making is based on purportedly objective algorithms utilizing empirically-based criteria which produce outcome scores to determine judgments about future violence likelihoods (Vincent 2009). Though the use of actuarial
measurements has shown some success (Borum 2000), their accuracy is somewhat questionable (Mossman, 1994).

The use of artificial intelligence programs represents the other automated approach to risk assessment. Computer programs render decisions in a manner thought to reduce human error and bias. One such technology developed by a California company for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the MOSAIC Threat Assessment System, is frequently used on the campus of Yale University even though it remains extremely controversial (Fox & Burstein 2010; Sachsman 1997). Both types of automated decision making have been criticized for not being sufficiently malleable or flexible (Reddy et al. 2009; Sewell & Mendelsohn 2000; Vincent 2009) and for an inordinate focus upon statistical associations or objective conclusions over complex understandings of causality and etiology (Grubin & Wingate 1996).

The Threat Assessment Approach

The threat assessment perspective is a prolific approach which has developed in recent years to advance understanding about the causes and manifestations of targeted school violence, a term which refers to “situations in which an identifiable (or potentially identifiable) perpetrator poses (or may pose) a threat of violence to a particular individual or group” (Fein et al. 1995: 1). Initially developed as a “set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators” (ibid: 1), the last decade has seen a multitude of school violence research conducted under the threat assessment rubric (Cornell 2003; Cornell et al. 2004; Cornell & Sheras 2006; Deisinger et al. 2008; Fein et al. 2002; Jimerson, Brock & Cowan 2005; O’Toole 2000; Randazzo et al. 2006; Rappaport & Barrett 2009; Reddy et al. 2001; Strong & Cornell 2008; Twemlow et al. 2002; Vossekuil et al. 2002).
The threat assessment approach differs from previous attempts to discern dangerousness due to its focus upon the substantive analysis of existing threats rather than predicting the future behavior of people based on typical personality profiles, warning signs, or other aggregate data pertaining to individual characteristics. This approach argues that people who perpetrate acts of targeted violence lack a single homogeneous profile, but the evaluation of threateners’ backgrounds, personalities, lifestyles, and resources may aid in determining the gravity of threats (O’Toole 2000).

Perhaps most significantly, this perspective asserts that not all threats are equivalent—that is, “there is a distinction between making a threat…and posing a threat…Many people who make threats do not pose a serious risk of harm to a target. Conversely, many who pose a serious risk of harm will not issue direct threats prior to the attack” (Reddy et al. 2001: 168). Critical details, such as how direct, detailed, developed, and actionable the threat is, help to further assess seriousness. O’Toole (2000) classified threats into four categories: direct, indirect, veiled, and conditional. A direct threat, announced in a plain and unambiguous manner, specifies that a certain action will be taken against a specific target. An indirect threat with tentative phrasing is less clear and definitive. A veiled threat implies but does not overtly intimidate so that there is some question as to how the threat could be interpreted. A conditional threat warns that violence will occur unless certain demands are met. In addition to forming a typology of threats, O’Toole (2000) differentiated between low, medium, and high risk levels. Low-level threats, which pose minimal risk, are vague, implausible, and lack realism. Medium-level threats, which may be carried out but are not wholly realistic, show evidence that the threatener has thought through the plan, indicated potential locations and times, but lacks any indication that he/she has taken preparatory steps to act on the threat. Finally, high-level threats, which pose an imminent danger
to the safety of others, are direct, detailed, conceivable, and show evidence that concrete steps have been taken toward carrying it out.

Cornell and Sheras (2006) have similarly distinguished between transient and substantive threats. Transient threats are “statements that do not express a lasting intent to harm someone. Transient threats either are intended as figures of speech or reflect feelings that dissipate in a short period when the student thinks about the meaning of what he or she has said” (Cornell & Sheras 2006: 21). In contrast, substantive threats are “statements that express a continuing intent to harm someone…they also indicate a desire to harm someone that extends beyond the immediate incident or argument when the threat was made” (Cornell & Sheras 2006: 22). These scholars further separate substantive threats into serious and very serious threats based on the intended harm to be committed, where a serious threat is a threat to physically assault someone and a very serious threat is to kill, sexually assault, or severely injure someone (Cornell & Sheras 2006).

While the assessment of violence risk is a diverse and developing field, there are numerous issues and unanswered questions regarding their application in practice at schools around the country. Verlinden et al. (2000: 27) noted that there is a total lack of “data at this point to assist a clinician in selecting the ‘best’ strategy for risk assessment for violent school assaults.” Similarly, Reddy et al. (2001: 160) pointed out that “[i]t is not currently known how many schools use which type of assessment” and that no data exist which “describe the prevalence of any of these three approaches (or others) schools may currently use, nor of their effectiveness-perceived or actual.” Thus, while the threat assessment approach arguably has attained the most positive evaluations via empirical testing (see Cornell 2012 for a review), the other forms of risk assessment (not to mention the zero tolerance approach that presumes no
need for risk assessment at all) may still be preferred or more frequently utilized by school and police officials. Specifically as it relates to this research, nothing is known whatsoever about the role that any of these various risk assessment techniques played during the numerous school rampage attacks which have been averted during the last decade.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation explores perceptions of and reactions to threats of rampage school shootings. The second chapter addresses the research design and methodology of the project as well as its potential limitations. The third chapter discusses school and police officials’ fear and perceptions of risk regarding rampage shootings and how this relates to their justification for and acquiescence to the massive expansion in punitive school disciplinary and security measures. The findings in this chapter suggest that prior theoretical insights into the role that moral panics and neoliberal penality play in school criminalization are not mutually exclusive and instead ought to be integrated with one another. Chapter four illustrates how school and police officials engage in violence risk assessment by examining the forms of evidence present when claims are made that a school rampage threat has been averted. In addition to categorizing the forms of risk assessment that have been utilized, this chapter addresses the extent to which and under what circumstances officials express confidence in their use of risk assessment. The fifth chapter covers the manner in which student threats of rampage violence have come to the attention of parents, police, and school authorities in order to be averted and considers the extent to which students have actually broken through a code of silence which discourages them from informing on their peers. Finally, chapter six presents a discussion of the findings as a whole along with
conclusions and the policy and theoretical implications that may be drawn from them and suggests areas for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilized mixed methods and multiple strategies in the research design. The first stage of research entailed searching the Lexis-Nexis newspaper database as well as the internet and various academic and governmental publications in order to gather the population of publically reported school rampage plots that occurred in American public schools from 2000-2009 which were discovered before the perpetrators had the opportunity to commit them. These quantitative data provided a background understanding of the extent of the phenomenon and were also used for descriptive purposes to better understand how rampage threats vary by region and over time. After collecting the population of these events, the next stage of research involved contacting principals at schools around the Northeast to request interviews with them and various other school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) who were directly involved in preventing the potential violence. This stage was necessary in order to glean data regarding perceptions of and reactions to violent threats, violence prevention, and school security. The third and final stage of data collection entailed interviews with officials at schools which were demographically and geographically similar to the aforementioned schools but which had not experienced an averted rampage plot, at least none that have been publically disclosed, in order to compare and gain a more typical perspective on violence, risk assessment, and security in contemporary American public schools. Employing this research strategy was necessary for the exploratory investigation of a fairly new and understudied phenomenon, and it resulted in a wealth of descriptive data triangulated with news reports, court transcripts, and arrest records to assure accuracy.
Operationalizing School Rampage and Averted Threat

Before going into more depth about the mechanics of data collection, the purpose and process of operationalization in this study must be addressed as the definition of a “school shooting,” and even the more specific term “school rampage,” have varied substantially across numerous publications. First, it is vital to note that the notion of an averted rampage leaves room for a wide range of severity between various cases wherein students’ genuine desire to complete a rampage attack is perhaps problematically assumed. For example, scrawling a vague threat referencing Columbine on a school bathroom wall and stockpiling an arsenal of weaponry are both actions that could be classified as evidence of an averted rampage, though the actual level of threat present in these two scenarios varies a great deal (Reddy et al. 2001). Cornell et al. (2004) distinguished between “transient” threats made carelessly in jest or in a moment of anger and the more serious “substantive” threats where genuine harm is intended, and found that only 30% of their sample of school violence threats were of the latter more concerning type and a mere three incidents were deemed genuine threats worthy of expulsion. However, as a main goal of this research is to explore how threat is perceived and assessed by school staff, all cases of potentially violent threats of school rampage were included regardless of the magnitude of evidence present.

Since the highly publicized multiple-homicide attacks of the late 1990’s, school shootings have often become thought of as events with multiple victims, though most murders on school grounds are actually single-victim homicides (Hagan, Hirschfield, & Shedd 2002). Thus, some recent scholarship has moved away from the all-encompassing “school shooting” term to more specifically discuss “rampage” events with multiple victims (Muschert 2007; Newman et al. 2004). In the literature on homicide, the traditional definition of a “mass murder” limits the
phenomenon to those non-state sponsored events wherein at least four victims were killed during a single episode at one or more closely related locations (Duwe 2007; Fox & Levin 2005; Holmes & Holmes 2001; Kelleher 1997). While viewing multiple-victim school attacks as a subset of the larger mass murder phenomenon has certain conceptual benefits (Levin & Madfis 2009), such a focused definition permits little analysis of the cases which have not resulted in one or more deaths (Madfis & Arford 2008). Individuals with the desire and intent to kill numerous people who fail to do so only because their plans come to the attention of authorities before they are to be carried out, or those who severely injure many people but fail to do so fatally have been excluded from prior operationalizations (see White-Hamon 2000 for the sole exception focused upon attempted mass murders). These less-successful perpetrators may be distinguishable by their overall incompetence with weaponry and/or their inability to maintain secrecy about their future actions, but not necessarily by their original motivations and goals.

Thus, there is a certain conceptual utility in including all cases which involve an attempt to kill numerous people in the study of mass murder (White-Hamon 2000). Such cases of attempted school mass murders were included in the sample for this study, though “successful” cases where perpetrators fatally injured multiple victims and those where perpetrators injured multiple victims but failed to kill them were excluded. Numerous prior studies have addressed the nature and extent of completed mass murders generally (Duwe 2004; 2007; Fox & Levin 1994; 1998; 1999; 2005; Holmes & Holmes 2001; Kelleher 1997; Meloy et al. 2001; Meloy et al. 2004; Palermo & Ross 1999; Petee et al. 1997) and at schools in particular (such as Harding, Fox, & Mehta 2002; Levin & Madfis 2009; Moore et al. 2003; Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox 2009; Vossekuil et al. 2002) and it is hoped that future studies will focus upon failed but not averted school mass murders where numerous victims have been non-fatally injured (see
Sullivan & Guerette 2003 for one case study), but these events fall out of the scope of the current research.

Additionally, Newman et al. (2004) limited her definition of school rampage to those school shootings in which multiple people were killed or injured on school property by a student or recent former student of the targeted school and only those cases in which at least some of the victims were chosen in a random and indiscriminate manner. This definition has numerous assets, but also various problems. As mentioned previously, limiting the scope to multiple victims proves helpful in crystallizing the phenomenon and distinguishing it from other types of school shootings. This study similarly limited the cases under investigation to the actions of those committed by current or former students, rather than utilizing Muschert’s (2007) larger net for rampage shootings which also includes the homicidal misdeeds of current and former school employees.

The Newman et al. (2004) definition of rampage becomes somewhat problematic when the subject one desires to study is students’ foiled plots to commit multiple-homicide at their current or former schools, as these authors limit the phenomenon to school “shootings” where firearms were the predominant weaponry. Numerous deadly plots formed by students over the last ten years have involved bombs, explosives, and even knife attacks (Trump n.d.). Though not all were detonated, bombs were a vital component of the Columbine High School killer duo’s plan (Larkin 2007), and the most deadly mass murder at a school in American history involved dynamite and hundreds of pounds of pyrotol, but no firearms (Bernstein 2009). Accordingly, all manner of plots to commit multiple murder on school grounds were included, regardless of the perpetrator’s intended weaponry.
Newman and her colleagues’ (2004) latter qualifying criterion of random or symbolic victims also proves rather nebulous. This distinction has similarly caused Muschert (2007) to distinguish between “targeted” and “rampage” school shootings – the latter of which necessitate random or symbolic victims. While the typological distinction has a great deal of value as it is important to distinguish between symbolic attacks on institutions and targeted attacks on individuals, limiting data collection to include only rampages with random or symbolic victims seems premature for this study of averted mass casualty events at schools. Previous mass murders at schools (and elsewhere, for that matter) have variously included victims who were individually targeted, victims specifically selected due to their group membership or social status, victims chosen randomly for their symbolic significance as representatives of an institution, and random victims harmed merely to increase the overall body count (Larkin 2007; Vossekuiil et al. 2002). Perpetrators have killed across these categories during a single episode (Fox & Levin 2005). As the empirical literature is currently too underdeveloped to definitively conclude that distinct victimological categories inevitably correspond to distinct school shooter typologies or motives, cases which seem to lack symbolic or random victims were not operationally eliminated from investigation. This was especially salient during the initial stage of investigation via newspaper and internet accounts where offender-victim relationships were rarely discernable. Thus, cases which qualify as averted school “rampages” (Daniels 2007; 2010; Newman et al. 2004; Muschert 2007) planned by former or current students with multiple specific and non-specific victims will be included in the operational definition used in this study as well as those which would be deemed attempted “targeted school shootings” (Muschert 2007) with multiple specifically intended victims.
Prior academic definitions have variously limited school rampages by the type of weaponry, by the offender’s connection to the school as former students, current students, staff members, or strangers, by the relationship between offenders and victims as specific or random targets, and by the number of victims killed or injured (Daniels 2007; 2010; Levin & Madfis 2009; Moore et al. 2003; Muschert 2007; Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox 2009; Vossekuil et al. 2002). In order to preserve as general a concept of rampage as possible while still maintaining a focus upon the assessment of student threats, this study has defined averted school rampage plots as those cases of any form of fatal violence planned by one or more students targeting multiple specific or non-specific classmates and/or faculty at their former or current school which was pre-empted from occurring and causing any death or injury and of which there is any evidence of intent.

**Research Design and Sample**

I first located cases through the Lexis-Nexis newspaper database. Like Daniels (et al. 2007), the search terms included “school” and “plot*,” “school” and “rampage*,” and “school” and “shooting*,” though the additional terms “school” and “attack*,” and “school” and “threat*” were added. Cases which occurred outside of the United States were excluded as were any incidents which involved adult strangers and former or current school staff as perpetrators, those which focused upon colleges or universities as desired targets, and those events which resulted in any injury or death or where only one victim was intended. In addition to the cases located through the newspaper database, numerous academic and government-sponsored publications (such as Larkin 2009; Newman et al 2004; Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007), popular press sources (Bower 2001; Lieberman 2009; Robertson 2001) and various internet sites which
compile lists of school violence incidents (Brady Center n.d., “List of School-Related Attacks” n.d.; Trump n.d.) were consulted to gather as comprehensive a list as possible and to confirm the accuracy of data across multiple sources. By means of this method, one hundred and ninety-five cases of averted school rampage attacks which occurred in the United States from 2000 to 2009 were located. This sample constitutes a significant improvement over the thirty cases of averted school rampages that Daniels et al. (2007) located and the eleven cases investigated by Larkin (2009). These quantitative population data for the entire nation were collected for descriptive purposes to look at the quantity of school rampage threats and how they vary by geographical region. This information advances knowledge in this area substantially because, while Kimmel and Mahler (2004) found that school rampage attacks occur by and large in politically conservative suburban and rural communities, no previous data exist regarding the geographic distribution of averted rampages.

The next stage of data collection was exploratory qualitative research which involved contacting the middle and high schools that experienced and averted rampage threats in the last ten years. To make the project a manageable size and to facilitate as many face-to-face in person interviews as possible, the sample was limited to schools in the Northeastern United States (a geographical area which includes the New England states, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware). Of the 195 cases nationwide, twenty-nine incidents occurred in Northeastern schools. To facilitate access, I mailed a letter to the twenty-nine current head principals at these particular schools, informing them about the intended study and requesting permission to conduct interviews. I then emailed and/or telephoned the principals in order to once again request access and to set up a date to conduct interviews with them and any other staff members who possessed personal knowledge of the averted incident.
At the start of each individual interview, I provided further details about the purpose of the study and the respondents’ informed consent. Respondents were notified that they could stop the interview at any time, could skip any question for any reason, and should avoid disclosing any information about criminal activities unknown to the authorities. In addition to my verbal explanation, all of this information was included in a written consent form provided to respondents who were interviewed in person, while respondents interviewed over the telephone were emailed copies of the consent form, if they desired them. Though the interview method could not permit anonymity, I did assure confidentiality to my respondents. This dissertation, as well as any notes, articles, books, or reports to arise from this research will not contain the names of any individuals or schools who participated, and every effort will be made to conceal identifying information.

Of the twenty-nine head principals contacted, eleven were willing to permit me to conduct research about the incident at their school. Three principals refused participation in the study, and the remaining fifteen principals never responded to my repeated attempts to contact them via telephone and email messages. This may be partially explained by job turnover in that my data went back to the year 2000, and many current principals and staff members were not working at the schools in question when the incidents occurred (an extreme example of this was that one of the principals in charge during the course of an averted incident was later removed for having an illicit relationship with a student). Similarly, for some of the cases that had taken place most recently, school administrators were not permitted to speak with me about incidents where hearings and trials were still ongoing. Other rationales for non-participation might be explained by concerns about school reputation, external scrutiny, or simple time limitations (one high school principal informed me that he only agreed to participate because he was impressed
by the dedication I showed in calling and emailing him repeatedly over a period of numerous weeks). In the only available information on averted school rampage that exists to serve as a basis for comparison, Daniels et al. (2010) similarly found that only four out of the thirteen schools they contacted would consent to participation. Pollack et al. (2008) does not reveal their specific response rate for student bystanders or schools involved in averted incidents, but only 15 out of the 29 students they discovered who were involved in either averted or completed rampages agreed to be interviewed.

Though two of the twenty-nine schools that I originally contacted were private institutions, all of the eleven schools that granted me permission for interviews were public institutions. Nine were high schools, one was a middle school, and one was a junior/senior high school. Two were located in Pennsylvania, one was in New York, two were in New Jersey, three were in Massachusetts, and three were in Connecticut. Six of these schools were located in suburban communities where the majority of residents were white and middle class, four of them were located in affluent predominantly white suburban areas, and one school was in a majority white lower middle class rural community.

School A is high school in a middle class suburban community where 93% of town residents are white, household median income is roughly $57,000, and 3.5% of the population is below the poverty line. Of the nearly 1500 students at the high school, 16% receive free or reduced lunch.

School B is a high school in one of the most affluent suburban communities in the nation. In the town where this school is located, 95% of the population is white, the annual median income for a household is more than $140,000, and about 2.5% of the population falls below the
poverty line. Approximately 1300 students attend the school, but no data on how many of them receive free or reduced lunch is available.

School C is a high school in a community with a population that is 72% white, household median income is just under $36,000, and 11.3% of the population is below the poverty line. The school serves roughly 800 students, 45% of which receive either free or reduced lunch.

School D is a high school in a suburban borough where 86% of residents are white, median income for households was just above $43,000, and 6.1% of the population is impoverished. Of the approximately 800 students at the school, 26% are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

School E is a large suburban high school of nearly 3,500 students, 4% of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. In the town as a whole, 92% of residents are white, 3.7% are below the poverty line, and median income for a household is roughly $75,000.

School F, a suburban high school with nearly 1,300 students, has 6% of its students receive free or reduced price lunch. The town is 93% white with 0.9% of the population below the poverty line, and a median household income of roughly $84,000.

School G is a high school in an affluent suburban community where 88% is white, median household income is upwards of 90,000, and 2.1% of the population falls below the poverty line. Of the nearly 1,500 students at the high school, 5% receive free or reduced price lunch.

School H is a combined middle and high school in a rural town. The school has an enrollment of roughly 600 students, 41% of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The borough where the school is located is 99% white, median income for a household is just below $27,000, and 15.6% of the population is below the poverty line.
School I is an affluent suburban high school that enrolls more than 1,200 students, 4% of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The town in which the school is located has a population that is 92% white, 3.9% under the poverty line, and household median income is nearly $116,000.

School J is a middle school of nearly 800 students, 20% of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. It is located in a borough that is 87% white, has a median household income of nearly $61,000, and where 3.6% of the population are below the poverty line.

School K is a large high school in a suburban town. The school has an enrollment of more than 2,000 students, and 23% of them are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. In the town, 73% of residents are white, median income for a household is more than $54,000, and 16% of the population is impoverished.

Many of the principals who agreed to be interviewed also referred me to other individuals at the local schools or police departments who could provide additional insight into the offenders, their threats, and the reactions of the schools and communities. In all, I spoke to thirty-two people (17 administrators, 4 counselors, 7 security and police officers, and 4 teachers) associated with these eleven incidents at schools across the Northeast. Seventeen of these were conducted in person at respondents’ schools or police departments, and the other fifteen interviews took place over the telephone when this was the respondent’s preference or when on-site interviews could not be coordinated. As the interviews were shaped by each respondent’s experience and willingness to talk, they varied in length from 26 minutes to nearly three hours with an average length of 64 minutes. To triangulate the data gleaned from these interviews and confirm the accuracy of what my respondents told me, I cross-checked their accounts of an
incident against their colleagues’ accounts of the same incident, as well as with newspaper reporting, and whenever possible, court transcripts, legal briefs, and police incident reports.

The third and final data collection stage entailed conducting interviews with six administrators at another five Northeastern public schools chosen because of their demographic and geographic similarity to most of the aforementioned schools but which had no publicized record of an averted rampage. Three of these were high schools, one was a middle school, and one was an elementary school, and they were all located in predominantly white middle class or affluent suburban areas. Two of these were conducted over the phone and the other four administrators were interviewed in person. This additional step was done in order to gain a more typical perspective on violence, risk assessment, and security at public schools, as I had hypothesized that the views of administrators who had personally experienced an averted threat at their own institution would be widely divergent from administrators where no such incident had occurred. The additional interview data also serve as a comparison to reveal how American public school officials fear and perceive rampage threats when they are only hypothetical, as is the case with the vast majority of schools. Through the course of my research, I discovered that, while differences between schools which had and had not nearly avoided a violent tragedy were certainly visible, these dissimilarities were less significant than I had previously anticipated. As a result, I stopped these comparative interviews after quite quickly reaching a saturation point (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Kuzel 1999).

**On Qualitative Methodology**

This three-pronged research strategy enabled not only the descriptive investigation of the extent and placement of rampage attacks, but a diverse and in-depth exploratory inquiry into how
school rampages are manifested, perceived, and prevented. This is a necessary first step, as little prior scholarship has focused upon the form and content of averted rampage plots. Qualitative methods are uniquely well suited to the study of new phenomena about which little or no previous research has been conducted, as they allow for the identification of new concepts and concerns via inductive discovery, rather than by forcing respondents to express themselves only within the confines of pre-existing terminology with preset questions and hypotheses.

Furthermore, while the content analysis of newspaper stories is an informative source with which to explore background data on the substance of these incidents, the interpretation of threat and risk are ultimately subjective endeavors which necessitate qualitative methods better suited to “make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 3). As such, the best method to conduct research which carefully investigates the complex motivations, risk calculations, symbolic meanings, and thought processes by which school officials determine their attitudes and beliefs about violent threat assessment and prevention is in-depth interviews with the school officials tasked with such responsibilities. The thoughts and perspectives of a small number of people examined closely will prove more fruitful in the understanding of common underlying processes and the formulation of theory than a comparatively superficial, albeit more generalizable, look at a larger sample of the population (Athens 1992). Additionally, triangulating information on averted rampage threats by cross-checking multiple sources is surely the best way to assure the integrity and accuracy of data.

Violent school threats and the manifold ways in which they are perceived, assessed, and prevented are naturally complex and subjective topics which previous theoretical formulations of crime, violence, and fear in other contexts cannot fully explain. Utilizing an inductive approach, this research did not test specific hypotheses upfront, but rather resulted from the formation of
conceptual schemes which were explored and investigated so that patterns naturally emerged (Schutt 2004). After the data collection stage, I used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2001; Glaser & Strauss 1967) in order to inductively derive typological categories and themes through the process of coding interview transcripts with the QSR software program.

Complications of Relying on the News Media to Build a Sampling Frame

Certain limitations exist by relying on news media accounts to gain a sampling frame of averted school rampage plots. In Duwe’s (2000) study of how the print news media report mass murder, he found that the most widely publicized mass murders nation-wide were disproportionately likely to include large numbers of casualties, victims unknown to the offender, public locations, assault weapons, interracial offender-victim relationships, older offenders, and workplace violence. Cramer’s (1995) study found a similarly biased focus upon gun use in news media accounts of mass murder. Hence, a list compiled from newspaper searches may result in a disproportionate number of cases that fit these descriptions. No similar studies have investigated this bias in the school context and my data are already intentionally limited to plots of multiple-casualty events in public locations. However, if such a finding may be generalized to school rampage plots, this may mean that my data would similarly suffer from an inordinate number of cases where students have targeted victims of different races or ethnicities, as well as from undue attention paid to rampage attacks with random victims rather than targeted attacks and an overrepresentation of school shooting plots, as opposed to schemes involving bombings, knives, or other weaponry.

Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence (McGabe & Martin 2005: 88) that showcases how school administrators responded “quickly and quietly, as the school system did not want
parents or the media notified [to] an emotionally disturbed student [who] had compiled a ‘hit list’ of students” to shoot and kill. As it is often in the interest of principals and other administrators to maintain good reputations for their schools, it should not necessarily be surprising that they would wish to hide potentially embarrassing stories from the media. Accordingly, there are potentially numerous cases of rampage threats which have been handled internally by school officials and thus never publicized by the media.

In his study of mass murders, Duwe (2007: 185) found that only 45% of incidents were reported in the New York Times. Likewise, Cornell et al. (2004) indicated the presence of 188 violent threats in only 35 schools during one school year in a single county in central Virginia, so there is no question that numerous threats go unnoticed and unreported by the media. Though only three of these 188 incidents were deemed genuine threats (wherein students were expelled for planning violence against particular students), they did locate another sixteen cases “involving multiple or nonspecific victims” (Cornell et al. 2004: 537). More than a dozen cases in one county during the course of a single year far outweighs anything found via previously published articles or newspaper accounts, but this high number can likely be accounted for due to the fact that these sixteen events were not deemed sufficiently serious to necessitate law enforcement intervention and thus gain media attention. By engaging in the third stage of my data collection wherein interviews were conducted with schools that had no public record of rampage threats, I anticipated the possibility that I might learn of incidents which had previously been neglected by prior journalists and scholars. In fact, at two of these five schools with no public record of an averted rampage threat, school administrators told me of incidents that had occurred at their institutions during the last ten years in which students had made violent threats. Further, at two of the eleven schools that I interviewed because of their public record of an
averted rampage incident, administrators told me of additional situations which would qualify as rampage threats, though these were both extremely transient threats without much genuine intent to do harm. Daniels (2010) had a similar experience when he had to clarify for a school principal about which particular incident of violent threat he sought information.

**Researcher Objectivity, Rapport, and Reflexivity**

In his critique of the lack of objectivity in qualitative criminology, Higgins (2009: 24) argues that the impersonal nature of quantitative research allows scholars “the opportunity to remain distant and be independent of the phenomena that is being researched.” This argument has been a fixture since the early history of sociology (see, for example, Durkheim 1982 and Weber 1946, though there are scholarly disagreements about the implications of the latter). While Robert Park argued for such a detached ethnographic stance nearly a century ago, Everett Hughes, Howard Becker, and many other notable scholars moved away from this approach out of their realization that intimate involvement and sympathetic emotional connections are essential to social research, though not without their own ethical and methodological dilemmas (Sanders 1999). Further, some social scientists (such as Fine 1993; Christians 2000; Ellis & Bockner 2000; Denzin 2002; Young 2004) have argued that such value neutrality is mere fiction. Denzin (2002: 484), one of the most vocal critics of any “God’s eye view that guarantees absolute methodological certainty,” has declared that “[a]ll inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer” and “[t]here is no possibility of theory- or value-free knowledge” (484).

It does concern me that the notion of pure value neutral objectivity often serves as a thin veneer used to bolster the status quo and existing social structures (see, for example, Becker 1967; Zinn 2002). In fact, dispassionate quantitative data analysis which purports to reveal the
lives and motivations of those marginalized by the justice system, without any of the inconveniently empathetic side effects which often come along with prolonged contact with other humans, is a crucial element if administrative criminology is to locate the most efficient means by which to merely identify and control those deemed dangerous rather than understand or ameliorate the deeper causes of misbehavior and violence. That said, Geertz (2001: 59) once wrote that he was unimpressed by the argument that “as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as of course, it is), one might as well let one’s sentiments run loose.” He felt that this was akin to saying that, “as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer” (ibid: 59). While Geertz might be accused of underestimating the utility of reflexive sentimentality in the pursuit of knowledge (Ellis & Bockner 2000), I recognize that unrestrained subjectivity can be just as problematic as unqualified objectivity. As a result, I embrace Fine’s (1993) argument that though it may be impossible for any one person to overcome the problems of subjectivity and objectivity, qualitative scholars should focus their energy on forcefully admitting the existence of this paradox.

While complete objectivity does not exist, scholars must be committed to investigating phenomena with an open mind and commitment to detach from pre-conceived notions as much as possible. In order to do this, I maintained a non-judgmental attitude throughout my interviews, merely gleaning opinions, perspectives, and experiences from my respondents, and I hope that their voices are presented through my writing as close as possible to what they originally intended to mean. I do not deny, however, that when I ultimately crafted my own sociologically-informed etic analysis of their interviews, my authoritative voice did not emerge ex nihilo from an ahistorical or acontextual vacuum.
In the interest of reflexivity, I recognize the fact that my particular location in the larger social structure matters, and subsequent personal life experiences are not insignificant in my role as a researcher. In studying the perceptions of and reactions to school rampage, my own background as a former public school student and son of a public school teacher is not irrelevant. In particular, various regional distinctions eased rapport, as when my respondents knew people in the town where my mother teaches, or in the town where I grew up and went to school, or were familiar with my affiliated university or had seen my dissertation advisor being interviewed on the news.

Perhaps most importantly, I acknowledge my place as a highly educated white male who was more easily able to attain rapport with school administrators, nearly all of whom were also highly educated white males, as a result of my gender identity, structural position, and advantageous cultural capital. At the same time, conversely, I must acknowledge my own individual personal history as a fairly rebellious adolescent who, while always a devoted student with close relationships to teachers, was never particularly enamored with traditional authority figures – principals and police officers, in particular. Despite my prior predilections (or lack thereof), I gained, through the course of this study, not only temporary feelings of rapport with many of my interview respondents, but an abiding respect for their dedication and sense of service. I was impressed by the sheer magnitude of responsibility that is placed upon the shoulders of today’s principals. I came to view their role as closely akin to mayors who must successfully multi-task in countless diverse ways simultaneously and satisfy scores of people with divergent opinions and desires all while maintaining an environment that is both safe and educationally stimulating. Likewise, I was humbled by many of the school resource officers who took the time to speak with me. I saw how these officers struggle with the awkward task of
navigating the conflicting roles of student counselor and law enforcer, and was humbled by their unwavering commitment to sacrifice their own lives if necessary to preserve students’ safety. Ultimately, I recognize that I must walk a fine line as an empathetic scholar striving to genuinely understand the perspectives and priorities of school and police officials and a fierce critic of the expansion and criminalization of school social control networks. Hopefully, my honest and reflexive stance will permit those who read my work to more effectively evaluate how close I have come to the lofty ideal of objectivity.

Generalizability in Qualitative Research

Another common critique of qualitative methods is that the conclusions drawn from small non-random samples cannot be generalized to the population at large. With regard to this study in particular, my sample is not strictly representative of, nor are its results generalizable to, all averted rampages in the classic quantitative sense. Though I started with as close to the population of averted rampage incidents as possible, those willing to grant me access to their schools may have been running better environments less complicit in the creation of school cultures where students want to engage in rampage attacks in the first place. Additionally, the fact that my interviews were limited to the Northeast means that we still know little about similar incidents in the rest of the country or the world at large. This is particularly significant because the majority of both attempted and completed school shootings have taken place in the Southern and Midwestern regions of the United States.

However, acknowledging the inability of qualitative work to achieve classical notions of generalizability because of a lack of large random samples, some scholars have attempted to form alternative conceptions more useful for qualitative research (see Schofield 2002 for a
detailed review of some recent developments in meta-ethnography, the case survey method, and the qualitative comparative method). One of the more famous may be found in the work of Guba and Lincoln (Guba 1981; Guba & Lincoln 1982; Lincoln & Guba 1985), who favor the term “transferability” to replace the goal of context-free laws desired via generalizability. In their conceptualization, analytic leaps across times, people, and places are desirable but permissible only under particular circumstances which may be assessed if sufficient thick description is available “to make a reasoned judgment about the degree of transferability possible” (Guba & Lincoln 1982: 247). Still other qualitative researchers view generalizability as “unimportant, unachievable, or both” (Schofield 2002: 173) and reject it as a goal because every subject “must be seen as carrying its own logic, sense of order, structure, and meaning” (Denzin 1983: 134). Whether or not this same critique applies to the newer qualitative notion of transferability, qualitative studies still maintain their underlying significance, as whatever they lack in generalizable knowledge of those outside the site of interest, they more than make up for with analytic generalizability (Kleinman et al. 1997) as a force to formulate knowledge on “larger generic theoretical concerns” (Sanders 2004: xi). Particular behavioral motives, patterns, and outcomes are best understood in complete context, but theoretical constructs transcend their specific circumstances. For example, the conflict between Cohen’s (1972) infamous youth subcultures, the Mods and the Rockers, and a public which was so fearful of and fascinated by them, must be situated in post-war English class relations and the demography of youth at the time, but his theoretical construct of moral panics need not be. Thus, while qualitative research may be less useful for specifying definitive beliefs or behaviors that apply across peoples and locales, it is vital for the generation of new insights, particularly in areas of research which have been understudied. While the manner in which threat is constructed, manifested, and perceived
will surely vary across school districts, between regions of the country, and over time, the analytic categories, discourses, and relationships unearthed by the detailed qualitative investigation of violent school threats may prove useful regardless of the setting or epoch.
CHAPTER THREE:
REACTING TO SCHOOL RAMPAGE: RISK PERCEPTION AND SCHOOL CRIMINALIZATION IN THE POST-COLUMBINE ERA

“There’s really been a fairly big swing in the way that we respond to things compared to the past. There is definitely education in a post-Columbine era.” - Mr. Sacco, principal of an affluent suburban high school in New England

There has been a dramatic transformation of school discipline and security in American public schools since the turn of the 21st century. Over the last 10-15 years, school anti-violence policies and other forms of discipline seem, in part, driven by fear of extreme violence, such as multiple-victim rampage-type attacks with guns and explosives. Just as law enforcement and anti-terror squads refer to our contemporary climate as the post-9/11 era, many practitioners of school discipline refer to the post-Columbine era in schools, meaning that everyone must now think about school safety in an entirely new manner. This new way of thinking entails a school disciplinary regime which has expanded zero-tolerance policies that dictate mandatory suspensions, expulsions, and arrests of students, surveillance through the proliferation of police officers and security cameras in schools, and school security which is designed to prevent crime through the environmental design of the school building itself. These developments, which Hirshfield and Celinska (2011: 39) have collectively referred to as school criminalization, all represent a swift and widespread “penetration of law enforcement personnel and technology into urban, suburban, and rural schools.” The contemporary regime is characterized by a one-size-fits-all approach, as school discipline takes remarkably similar forms in widely divergent school contexts, regardless of whether or not schools have high levels of student misbehavior (Kupchik 2010). This chapter will reveal school officials’ fear and perceived risk of school rampage violence in order to outline the impact that these rare but devastating events have had upon contemporary school discipline and thus forge a more nuanced and sophisticated explanation of the process of school criminalization.

Numerous authors (such as Burns & Crawford 1999; Muschert & Peguero 2010; Muschert & Madfis 2013) have attributed many of the new disciplinary and security developments broadly as a response to the school shooting rampage at Columbine High School and those similar attacks which
preceded and followed it. However, prior analyses have lacked an understanding of exactly how this cultural transition towards school criminalization was facilitated and, in particular, any consideration of the agency and perspectives of those tasked with transforming educational institutions in the aftermath of the school massacres. Additionally, prior scholars (such as Bracy 2010; Kupchik 2010; Nolan 2011; Weiss 2010) have spoken with teachers and students about their perspectives regarding the new school regime, but none have focused upon the administrators in charge of making decisions. Through in-depth interviews with school and police officials², this study reveals the administrative perspective that is crucial if one is to understand how and to what extent the fear and anticipated risk of school rampage have transformed contemporary school security and disciplinary practices in the post-Columbine era of education.

**Explaining School Criminalization**

Though scholars have been describing the changing features of school discipline and security for decades, theoretical insight into the causes of this process has been slower to emerge. Though prominent social theorists tackling diverse topics ranging from the sociology of punishment and education/juvenile delinquency to public policy and legal studies have addressed how they perceive the origins and development of school criminalization, the investigation of this emergent phenomenon has rarely been their sole focus. In addition, the explanatory literature as a whole remains largely disjointed and uncategorized. In one of the few attempts at synthesizing theoretical explanations for school criminalization, Hirshfield and Celinska (2011) assert that two broad approaches exist.

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² Though the majority of the interviews utilized in the other chapters of this dissertation were conducted with officials at schools that successfully averted a rampage (and who, as a consequence, might be thought to have especially exaggerated fears and anticipated risks associated with that particular type of event), the findings from this chapter were culled mostly from the perspectives of respondents who had not experienced a significant threat of rampage in their own schools. It should be noted, however, that the fear and anticipated risk at schools that had averted a rampage did not, in fact, differ all that greatly from those that had no such experience. This speaks to the impact that the moral panic over Columbine (as opposed to any individual experience with a similar incident) has had upon American public schools as a whole.
The first is “essentially a sociology of fear [which] depicts school criminalization as a social and political response to fears of school crime and associated social insecurities” (ibid: 5). Though Hirshfield and Celinska (2011) do not address how this perspective relates to the emergent literature on “The Columbine Effect” (Muschert & Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013), such work broadly comes out of a constructionist social problems framework and so may be seen as the latest development in this first “sociology of fear” tradition.

The second approach “theorizes school criminalization as efforts to accommodate or bolster emergent structural realities and realignments of power” (Hirshfield & Celinska 2011: 5). This view sees the process as an expression and consequence of a neo-liberal agenda that neglects structural problems in favor of creating docile and self-regulating individuals who easily submit to being disciplined by an ever-expanding justice system and for-profit security technologies. Hirshfield and Celinska (2011) only address the work which directly pertains to school criminalization in this second approach. However, the broader critique of neoliberalism inherent here shares much in common with similar recent scholarship on punitiveness (Pratt et al. 2005), the culture of control (Garland 2001), governing through crime (Simon 2006), and actuarial justice (Feeley & Simon 1994; Harcourt 2007; 2010), all of which significantly bolster this explanatory approach to school criminalization.

In the sections to follow, these two perspectives will be addressed in more depth to showcase their relevance with regard to how the respondents in this study understood the need for enhanced discipline and security. Specifically, Hirshfield and Celinska (2011: 7) point out that neither of the previous two approaches “fully explain[s] why school professionals, who often espouse progressive rather than neo-liberal ideals, are generally complicit in school criminalization.” In order to remedy this deficit, a nuanced consideration of school officials’ perspectives reveals that both conceptions hold a measure of truth, as fear and political economic circumstances coincide in the acquiescence of school criminalization.

Neo-Liberal Penality and Culture of Control
As the prominent political and legal scholar Bernard Harcourt (2010: 77) has recently stated, neoliberal penalty is “today in full fruition.” He (ibid: 77) defines this term as:

a form of rationality in which the penal sphere is pushed outside political economy and serves the function of a boundary: the penal sanction is marked off from the dominant logic of classical economics as the only space where order is legitimately enforced by the State. On this view, the bulk of human interaction—which consists of economic exchange—is viewed as voluntary, compensated, orderly, and tending toward the common good; the penal sphere is the outer bound, where the government can legitimately interfere, there and there alone.

In many ways, this parallels and augments prior theoretical work on a late modern culture of control (Garland 2001) and governing through crime (Simon 2006), which emphasize the manner in which anxieties and insecurities about all manner of larger structural concerns (about job security, economic prosperity, income inequality, family stability, etc.) are addressed via increasingly callous crime fighting measures. Bell (2011) suggests that a neoliberal form of government, no longer able to attain legitimacy through public services or a social safety net, attempts legitimation through a tough law and order mentality that appeals across class lines. This may be aligned with what many have described as the more general penal turn towards a “new punitiveness” which encourages longer sentences and harsher treatment for adult offenders (Pratt et al. 2005).

American public schools have a lengthy tradition of harsh punitive focus on obedience and discipline whose likely origins lie with Puritan asceticism and the needs of industrial labor (Brint 1998). However, the criminalized lens through which student discipline is viewed (wherein school misbehavior is transferred to the juvenile and adult justice systems and even childish threats are redefined as terrorist acts) and the securitized lens through which school safety is viewed (wherein schools are made to resemble airports if not prisons) do represent fairly new developments. Simon (2006: 207) attributes the acceleration of school criminalization
to “fresh historical memories of the high tides of youthful violence during the 1960s and again in
the 1980s…, the association of youth culture with drugs…[and] a growing right wing movement
against public schools” with teachers unions who “found it extremely useful to frame the public
schools as being rife with crime.”

The extent to which a new punitiveness has bled into juvenile justice remains a contested topic
(Goldson 2002; Muncie 2008; Wald & Losen 2003), but there is another aspect of the wider change in
penal philosophy that has undoubtedly altered the face of school discipline and security. In his discussion
of the transition to a late modern culture of control, Garland (2001: 128) stated that:

In the past, official criminology has usually viewed crime retrospectively and individually, in
order to itemize individual wrongdoing and allocate punishment or treatment. The new
 crimino
gies tend to view crime prospectively and in aggregate terms, for the purpose of
calculating risk and shaping preventative measures.

Thus, both Garland’s (2001: 129) notion of new criminologies (which he also refers to as
“supply side criminology”) and Harcourt’s (2010) neoliberal penality are situated within a
cultural context wherein society is increasingly concerned with the prediction and alleviation of
risk (Beck 1992; Giddens 1999). The modern “risk society” (Beck 1992) or “actuarial age”
(Harcourt 2007) entails a mindset where there is a preoccupation with the future and the
systematic manipulation of risk is achievable, global, and primary. The administration of justice,
in particular, has moved towards an “actuarial justice” mindset that reorients penology towards
“techniques for identifying, classifying, and managing groups assorted by levels of
dangerousness” (Feeley & Simon 1994: 173). Rather than opting for intervention as a means of
retribution or rehabilitation, this so-called “new penology” sees crime as inevitable and seeks
instead to manage risk and regulate danger (Rigakos & Hadden, 2001). Likewise, Steiker (2001:
774) argues that our justice system increasingly attempts
to identify and neutralize dangerous individuals before they commit crimes by restricting their
liberty in a variety of ways. In pursuing this goal, the state often will expand the functions of the institutions primarily involved in the criminal justice system – namely, the police and the prison. But other analogous institutions, such as the juvenile justice system and the civil commitment process, are also sometimes tools of, to coin another phrase, the “preventive state.”

O’Malley (2008) points out that the focus on risk and predictive measures need not be solely punitive and Garland (2001: 138) notes that a neoliberal view would likely understand “high rates of imprisonment [as] an ineffective waste of scarce resources.” However, Harcourt (2010; 2011), through an insightful reading of Foucault’s (2009) later work on governmentality, explains how broad trends in neoliberalism relate directly to the transition in governance away from ameliorative forms of preventative treatment (such as with anti-poverty programs and mental health facilities) towards the assessment and management of large numbers of people as dangerous populations in penal institutions. This punitive and carceral form of prevention and the actuarial mindset that criminal conduct is an unavoidable but manageable risk have certainly expanded into school disciplinary and security practices (Casella 2006; Kupchik & Monahan 2006; Lyons & Drew 2006; Simon 2006). With this frame of mind, it may be inevitable for certain school students to possess the desire to fatally harm their peers, but the risk of rampage killing may be mitigated through various police and prison expansions – the systematic prediction and surveillance of prospective school shooters and by monitoring and securing the physical space of school buildings. Therefore, it makes sense that, by and large, the response to school rampage as a social problem has been to predict it with risk assessments, punish anything resembling it (such as weapons violations and threatening comments) with harsh zero tolerance policies and transfers to the justice system, deter it with police officers and cameras, and make it more difficult to accomplish through target hardening procedures like locked doors and metal detectors. This stands in stark contrast to less punitive but more ameliorative forms of school
violence prevention (which Garland 2001 would describe as a correctionist criminological approach) like increased mental health services, adult mentoring and support systems, conflict resolution, peer mediation, or anti-bullying programs.

In addition to being punitive and risk centered, neoliberal penality in schooling is thought to move control from public to private institutions and, in the process, help reinforce if not exacerbate existing inequalities. For example, Kupchik and Monahan (2006: 268) describe the manner in which:

the New American School facilitates the criminalization of poor students in order to establish and maintain a criminal class to legitimate systems of inequality in modern capitalist states. It rewards flexible students who can adapt or submit to labor instability, invasive monitoring and exploitative work conditions. It accommodates industry's desire for new markets by creating a demand for costly high-tech equipment that can only be provided by private companies, and can only be paid for, seemingly, with public funds.

Throughout their history, American public schools have served the function of socializing youth to be compliant and productive members of society. This has often been referred to as the “hidden curriculum” through a disciplinary focus upon order and efficiency (Raby 2005). For more than a century, harsh school rules were meant to develop student populations, and eventually adult citizens and workers, who become docile and deferential to capitalist hegemony and the authority of the status quo (Brint 1998; Noguera 1995; Raby 2005). It is not new to suggest that the latest function of public education is the reinforcement of existing inequalities (Willis 1977), but a new literature has emerged which takes this one step further in the contemporary neoliberal era. Many of these scholars refer to an emergent “school-to-prison pipeline” where the punishment of school misbehavior is transferred from the educational system to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Advancement Project 2005; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt 2010; Wald & Losen 2003) and suggest that the criminalized and securitized school culture ultimately amounts to preparing students for lives behind bars through gradual acquiescence and desensitization (Hirschfield 2008; Simon 2006).
From the perspective of neoliberal penality, broadly speaking, the school rampage incidents that occurred at the turn of the 21st century did help to exacerbate school criminalization, but they played a relatively minor role in a far larger political-economic trend that was already underway. Kupchik’s (2010) recent ethnographic work finds a great deal of support for many of the above assertions regarding neoliberal penality and a culture of control in the American public school system. However, larger macro-structural forces and prevailing political and criminological sentiments are not the only explanations that have been proffered to theorize school criminalization.

**The Sociology of Fear and Moral Panics**

In contrast to the critical emphasis on neoliberal power dynamics and punitive risk management, the second broad perspective that seeks to comprehend the expansion of school criminalization in recent years derives from the labeling/constructionist tradition in sociology. This literature, by and large, depicts school criminalization as a response to fears of youth violence and school crime and fits in a long legacy of scholarship investigating moral panics surrounding youth culture and behavior. Cohen (2002: 1) originally defined a moral panic as occurring when:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people…Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.

Thus, moral panics describe the reaction to a behavior or group based on the false or exaggerated perception that the people or phenomena are sufficiently dangerous as to threaten social order. What’s more, people often base their fears not on the actual extent of the objective phenomenon but upon the feelings and emotions stirred up by a few powerful or particularly vocal and concerned people (Glassner 2009).
One of the defining features of moral panic scholarship is the focus upon what Cohen (2002: 19) called “exaggeration and distortion” and what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) called “disproportionality,” both of which similarly refer to an overreaction to the actual threat. Numerous scholars (such as Aitken 2001; Altheide 2009; Best 2002; Burns & Crawford 1999; Frymer 2009; Maguire et al. 2002) have emphasized the disproportionality inherent in much of the reaction to school rampage. The events at Columbine High School amounted to the most followed story for the entire year of 1999 (Pew Research Center 1999). As a result, fear of schoolyard killers became rather commonplace throughout the United States (Gallup 1999; Kiefer 2005; Newport 2006), though the rate of juvenile offense and victimization (particularly in violent crimes) declined precipitously from 1994 onwards (Butts 2000). If youth were becoming less violent in general, schools were becoming safer as well, for students and teachers alike. Indeed, the percentage of teachers who had been threatened or physically attacked by their students similarly declined (Fox & Burstein 2010). More generally in terms of probability, “only about 1 in 2,000,000 school-age youth will die from homicide or suicide at school each year (Muschert 2007: 61) and “any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years” (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). This background knowledge was lost on many Americans who consumed a wave of school rampage coverage which greatly exaggerated their prevalence and potential risk (Aitken, 2001; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Cornell, 2006).

Glassner (2004: 820) described this sort of phenomenon as a fear mongering narrative technique called “the christening of isolated incidents as trends.” Indeed, after the attack at Columbine, thirty percent of students polled said that “there [were] groups at their schools that remind[ed] them of the infamous ‘Trenchcoat Mafia’ at Columbine High School,” while 36% stated that there were individuals at their schools who were “potentially violent enough to cause a situation such as the one that occurred at Columbine High School” (Gallup 1999). A year after Columbine, Nagy and Danitz (2000) discovered that 71% of parents felt that the event changed their perspective about how safe their children’s schools actually were, with only 40% of respondents stating that they regarded them as “very safe.” The Gallup
survey conducted immediately after Columbine found that two thirds of Americans believed that a similar shooting was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to occur in their own community (Saad 1999), while the same poll conducted right after the school shooting incident on the Red Lake Native American reservation in Minnesota in March of 2005 revealed that nearly three-fourths of Americans believed that a similar attack was “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to happen in their communities (Kiefer 2005).

Over the years, parental fear has dissipated somewhat. While a polling conducted shortly after the Columbine shootings discovered that 55% of parents with school-aged children expressed concern about their children’s safety while in school (Newport 2006), only 26% of parents expressing the same fear in 2009 (Gallup n.d.). Though widespread fear of school rampage has gone down to some extent in recent years, many scholars still assert its significance in terms of shaping current school policy (Muschert & Peguero 2010; Muschert & Madfis 2013).

In his original description of a moral panic, Cohen (2002: 1) pointed out that, “Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten…at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.” Many academics (such as Aitken 2001; Best 2002; Burns & Crawford 1999) writing at the time when the media and public response to school rampage shootings was most intense discussed the phenomenon as a contemporary exemplar of moral panic. More generally, scholars have written a great deal about moral panics with fairly highly levels of what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) referred to as “volatility,” that is, their tendency to disappear as quickly as they first emerge as public interest and concern wanes. Cohen’s “serious and long lasting repercussions” of the school rampage moral panic, however, warrant additional attention, for their enduring consequences have received far less consideration.

One of the few exceptions to this gap is the emergent literature on “The Columbine Effect” (Muschert & Peguero 2010; Muschert et al. 2013), which describes “the leveraging of anxiety about youth social problems in the expansion of school discipline, particularly punitive measures aimed at
preventing extreme forms of violence” (Muschert & Madfis 2013). The notion of the Columbine Effect fits in the moral panic tradition by emphasizing the exaggeration among much of the reaction to rampage, but also how the specter of Columbine has, to continue with Cohen’s (2002: 27) language, achieved long lasting “symbolization” where various words or objects come to symbolize complex negative emotions and meanings. Cohen specifically addressed the manner in which place-names like Pearl Harbor or Hiroshima attain such problematic symbolization wherein “it became meaningful to say ‘we don’t want another Clacton [the infamous location of a street fight between the Mods and Rocker youth subcultures] here.’” In this vein, Muschert & Madfis (2013) point out the manner in which:

[T]he term Columbine has taken on a life of its own. Thus, in reference to discipline and security in schools we hear such statements as pulling a Columbine (meaning when someone undertakes a Columbine-style rampage attack), journalists refer to more recent rampage attacks on high schools as another Columbine that takes place in the Columbine-style (meaning all subsequent attacks rhetorically refer back to Columbine), and we hear about the pre-Columbine and post-Columbine eras (meaning that Columbine changed things so much that we now have to think about school crime and safety in entirely new ways).

Due to its notoriety, Columbine, as a “problem-defining event,” came to characterize the general understanding of youth misbehavior, and the fear of rampage violence still exerts significant leverage on decisions about school safety (Lawrence 2001). From the Columbine Effect perspective, the United States has seen so much school criminalization and securitization because many of these new measures were directly designed to prevent rare but extreme cases of violence, rather than ordinary student misbehavior.

Numerous studies of the media have focused upon how fear of school rampages is constructed and propagated (Altheide 2009; Frymer 2009; Maguire et al. 2002), yet research reveals little of substance about the manner and extent to which contemporary school personnel fear and anticipate multiple-victim homicide events. The moral panic literature as a whole has long been critiqued for emphasizing research on media coverage rather than on moral entrepreneurs or policy makers (McRobbie & Thornton 1995), and such criticism is just as warranted among the scholarship that depicts school rampage as a moral
panic. The work of Muschert and his various collaborators have provided a much-needed explanatory framework regarding the significant changes in school safety discourse and policy. However, the majority of these insights were gleaned through the analyses of school rampage media coverage, and thus the field lacks an understanding of the agency and perspective of those school authorities tasked with transforming educational institutions in the aftermath of Columbine.

More than a decade after Columbine, rates of youth violence and school violence in particular continue to stay far lower than the early 1990’s (Fox & Blumstein 2010), yet most of the policies and procedures formed in the initial wake of public anxiety over school rampage shootings remain in place to this day. It is vital to understand the current state of fear and perceived risk surrounding school rampage because, while surveys indicate that fear of school rampage remains somewhat high (though rates often increase immediately after an event and then slowly decrease), these data lack depth, and prior studies leave it entirely unknown to what extent school personnel still craft school safety policies and procedures with the problem of school rampage in mind.

Ultimately, the motivations for enhanced discipline and security are myriad. While my research findings support elements of numerous prior theoretical notions, these prior conceptions lack the subtlety and nuance that only a detailed qualitative account can provide. In particular, the way in which prior notions relate to one another and may be integrated is a crucial but neglected matter. As such, it is vital to fully comprehend the thought processes and motives of the school and police authorities who have undertaken the project of post-Columbine school safety, if one is to understand how the fear and exaggerated risk associated with The Columbine Effect resulted in a rapid transition towards neoliberal penalty at American schools.

Findings

The Post-Columbine Era

First and foremost, it is vital to get a sense of just how significant the Columbine event itself continues to be in the minds of school officials and how as a result, educational institutions have been
altered since the late 1990’s. As scholars of the Columbine Effect (Muschert & Peguero 2010; Muschert & Madfis 2013) suggest, many respondents discussed the radical transformation of school discipline and security over the last ten years, frequently referring to the rampage at Columbine High school as decisive transition point. Some of them looked back at a bygone era where various transgressions were then perceived as trivial. One high school principal from an affluent suburban community stated that, when he was a student in the 1960’s and later when he taught high school in the late 1970’s and into the 1990’s, students frequently called in bomb scares in an attempt to cancel school during months with warm weather. Principal Sacco noted that:

You’d get bomb scares in the spring, and there was a cavalier attitude even among kids. Now, they don’t happen, but when you have one, you’re mopping up for days and you have to do press releases and you have to do everything….Back in my time, if I said I don’t want to go to school because there was a bomb scare yesterday, my parents would say, “Shut up, you know?”…And I think if you talk to baby boomers, they’ll say, “Yeah, we had bomb scares.” Of course we did and especially in the spring when it was nice outside.

Similarly, another principal from a middle class suburban high school pointed out the significant change in how schools respond to threats. Principal Walsh said that:

There’s really been a fairly big swing in the way that we respond to things compared to the past, I always joked that the greatest weapon in a school is a pen because simply writing something on a bathroom wall can shut the whole school down. So, during MCAS [Massachusetts State] Exams, there will sometimes be threats and other things written that, depending upon how you respond, could shut the school down, while 20 years ago the custodian would go in and wipe it off. That was the response. And now we’re at a point where you have some really critical judgments to make.

No longer can anything be taken for granted. Mr. McGowan, the principal of a middle class suburban high school, expressed this sentiment when he declared that, “Welfare, safety, and security is always the top priority. That’s the change that happened with Columbine.” Likewise, the principal of another high school in middle class suburbia, Mr. Waits noted that at his middle class suburban high school, “Even though we’d [himself and the vice principal] like to say that education is our number one priority, it really has to be the safety and security of the school, the students, of the teachers and of the staff, and of our
visitors.” The notion that safety and security, as opposed to education, would be the top priority of principals at schools in low crime middle class suburban areas is a fairly new development, and likely one seldom present before the influence of Columbine. Though Simon (2006: 201) correctly notes that “[p]unishment and policing have come to at least compete with, if not replace, teaching as the dominant modes of socialization,” he underemphasizes the crucial role that school rampage shootings have had upon the process.

This change towards risk aversion and constant diligence with regard to student threat has taken place not only at the high school level, but in middle schools, as well. The principal of a middle school in a middle class suburban area, Mr. Anderson, said:

We’re getting more and more incidents each year we take more and more steps to educate. Gone are the days where you can bring a toy gun to school. Some of these look real and if you get a kid outside the school that’s got a toy gun that’s pretending to shoot people and an Officer drives by, he has to make a split decision that’s life or death. So you have to let these kids know ahead of time, you can't do that, you can't even bring fake guns or knives or things like that. You know, Eric, we didn't have to worry about that 15 years ago.

In the Post-Columbine Era, bomb scares and bathroom graffiti are no joke, while toy guns might very well get students shot and killed. This is a remarkable transition from only a decade or two ago when such actions were mostly deemed as fairly innocent childish pranks. Not only did the vast majority of respondents refer to Columbine as a decisive transition point, but in their discussions of the emergent regime of school discipline and security, the prevention of and preparation for rampage shootings were frequently mentioned as a significant part of their decision making process.

The Columbine Effect and the Fear of School Rampage

My data support the argument put forth by scholars of the Columbine Effect that school rampage shootings, and the specter of Columbine in particular, has dramatically altered the discourse surrounding school safety. More than a decade after the highly publicized shootings of the 90’s, rampage shootings continue to exert immense symbolic leverage and frame debates over school safety. As Principal Anderson stated:
This is the biggest thing, when I drive into work in the morning, I say to myself, I hope nothing like [Columbine] happens today, meaning it’s always in the back of my mind, always in the front of my mind, and I’m always ready for something like that. And with that I’ve done all I can to keep our staff and our teachers and our students equally prepared and ready.

Many respondents used various rhetorical arguments emphasizing the need for enhanced discipline and security that were justified specifically through the lens of Columbine. That is, they often suggested the need to perform a specific procedure or implement a certain policy in preparation and anticipation a future rampage shooting incident. Therefore, Muschert and Madfis (2013) correctly assert that school officials frequently craft policy and make decisions regarding broader issues of school discipline and security with the problem of school rampage in mind, despite the fact that the vast majority of student misbehavior is far less serious or violent.

My respondents assured me that many of the current features of school criminalization and securitization were in place to prevent future events of school rampage. This was often discussed through an appeal to deterrence wherein school resource officers and security cameras would scare off potential killers. A school resource officer for a middle class suburban high school, Detective Brown, put this best when he noted that:

Having an officer in the school is critical, and I think you’re gonna start seeing it in middle schools and elementary schools. Not for the rapport, not for D.A.R.E., not for the parking problems out front, but more than anything, I’m here to protect the kids there. And if you’re thinking about doing something stupid, Joe Blow, who’s going through a divorce, or planning to go out Columbine style, you’ve got to come through me now. Even just having a black and white [police car] outside the school, what does that do? That sets some type of level of deterrent, right? I’m a bad guy, I want to go to Eastern High School and kill everyone. But Jeez, there’s a black and white right up front, what does that mean? It means there’s an armed person in there who’s authorized and will use force to stop me, shit! Right?

Detective Brown shares his faith in the deterrent value of resource officers to prevent school rampage with a recent report that was presented to the 2011 National Association of School Resource Officers Conference where Chief Ronald Glidden argued that:

Armed uniformed officers (like school resource officers) are the simplest form of deterrent. While other security measures may serve as a deterrent, none will work as well as an armed presence.
Remember, none of the school shooters were looking for a confrontation. They were looking for a body count.

It is worth noting that the presence of school resource officers and university police did not deter the rampage shootings at Columbine, nor at Virginia Tech or many other tragic incidents (Seibert 2000; Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007). The more pertinent point here, though, is that a substantial number of school and police officials justify the presence of armed police on school grounds specifically as preparation for extremely rare incidents of rampage shooting, rather than for the myriad traditional rationales used to explain the police presence in schools, such as for improved rapport between students and police officers as a long-established goal of community-oriented policing, for drug prevention programming like D.A.R.E., or for traditional policing duties like controlling traffic. Though the assertion that school resource officers (or zero tolerance policies and security cameras, for that matter) actually work as deterrents for multiple homicide lacks any empirical basis, the pervasiveness of this rhetorical argument indicates a widespread fear and concern with school rampage that is rooted in a gross exaggeration of the extent of the problem.

**Enhanced Risk Perception – Rampage Happening Everywhere at Random**

It must be noted that a crucial reason that school rampage shootings have had such a powerful impact upon American consciousness, and accordingly, school discipline and security, is the demographic characteristics of many of the offenders and victims in these incidents. For example, the Columbine killers, Harris and Klebold, were Caucasian males from respectable middle class families, and their victims were also by and large similarly privileged students at a respectable suburban school. Thus, the fascination with (and subsequent media and public attention devoted to) rampage shootings resulted not only from the fact that they were cold-blooded teen murders on a massive scale, but also because they were multiple homicides that occurred in middle and upper class school districts previously thought to be “safe havens, free of the dangers of street crime” (Lawrence 2007: 147). Principal Sacco noted just this

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3 The problematic and inaccurate notion of school resource officers (as well as security cameras and zero tolerance policies) as deterrents for rampage will be discussed in further detail during chapter 5 on preventing school rampage.
sentiment when he stated that, “What Columbine did, once and for all, was that it at least straightened people’s heads out about school violence, that it wasn’t solely an urban problem.” Likewise, the superintendent of an affluent suburban community, Dr. Stone, shared her belief that, “before Columbine, I think people would attribute violence to inner-cities and say it won't happen here. But I think what Columbine made us all realize is that it can happen anywhere at any time.” As these quotes indicate, administrators, teachers, and parents in predominantly white middle class and affluent areas were previously able to disassociate themselves from school violence as a social problem by relegating the issue to different locales and populations. Suburban and rural Americans understood the nation’s school violence problem as one of another class of people – namely, racial/ethnic minorities living in impoverished urban neighborhoods with high rates of poverty. However, the shootings of the late 90’s changed the problem awareness of school violence in such a manner that even predominantly white suburban and rural communities were no longer able to disassociate from the potential threat posed by cases of extreme violence. Further, as an apparent widespread phenomenon, these types of communities no longer perceived school violence as an unfortunate problem unique to distant urban areas.

In addition to the expansion of the school violence problem into communities which had previously felt more or less immune to the phenomenon, rampage violence has emerged as a social construct into a broadly universal threat that is possible, and even likely, to plague any school at any time. The reality is that schools are the safest location that exists for American children, school shootings are rare events, and rampage attacks in the infamous model of Columbine High School where multiple victims are killed are even less likely (Borum et al. 2010; Donahue et al., 1998; Muschert 2007). Despite this actual rarity, the risk perception of school rampage has vastly increased since the turn of the 21st century. For example, Principal Anderson stated that, “There used to be a day where people would say, ‘Well, that’s not going to happen in my town.’ And we all know now you can't say that anymore.” Likewise, Officer Dudley, a school resource officer who was stationed at a suburban high school, informed me that he “truly believe[s] that [school rampages] could happen anywhere…Don’t think it
couldn’t happen in your town.” Cohen (2002: xii) wrote in the 30th anniversary edition of his seminal text, “the slide towards moral panic rhetoric depends less on the sheer volume of cases, than a cognitive shift from ‘how could it happen in a place like this?’ to ‘it could happen anyplace.’” Thus, many school officials continue to exhibit a perspective which almost perfectly exemplifies the reaction of a moral panic.

Such a perspective also reflects what Tversky and Kahneman (1986: 49) refer to as the “anchoring” heuristic whereby people identify harm and estimate likelihoods by basing their knowledge on a particular starting point that may not reflect reality. As the media disproportionately focuses on particularly sensational and violent events such as school shootings, these types of occurrences are misperceived to be more commonplace. Certainly rare but devastating events must be taken seriously (as Posner 2004 points out), but it is not necessarily a given that high potential costs (even the lives of innocent youth) automatically supersede low probabilities.4 Given the current news/entertainment environment in which media conglomerates capitalize on the most rare and sensational events in order to instill fear and maintain viewership (Kappeler & Potter, 2005), however, the perception that a series of school rampage shootings at the turn of the 21st Century constituted a full-fledged crime wave became rather commonplace.

The above quotations and the many more similar comments that school administrators revealed to me echo what Best (1999) critiques as the problematic construct of patternless and pointless “random violence.” The pervasive misperception that school rampages are random acts of violence not only distorts the level of risk and increases fear such that they seem more likely to occur than in reality, but it also encourages people to think that there are no recognizable patterns in terms of who the victims and offenders of this crime are, nor that any real identifiable

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4 For example, one might argue that while bullying may not typically be fatal, it affects the lives of a far larger segment of American school children than school rampage. Therefore, if one were to employ Bentham’s (1789/1970) utilitarian principal concerning the greatest good for the greatest number of people, school programming and policy should be directed away from concerns about school rampage and towards bullying prevention.
causes exist. As Best (1999) points out, crime is not patternless, as victimization and offending patterns vary substantially by gender, race, class, and age. The trope of randomness perpetuates the misleading notion that violence is equally likely to happen to anyone and similarly that anyone can equally become a perpetrator. Secondly, the idea of random violence inaccurately depicts crime as pointless, though even the most seemingly irrational misdeeds typically have a purpose in the mind of the offender.

It is true that suburban and rural schools that were not used to having to deal with much violence of any kind did have to contend with a particularly terrifying threat specific to their types of communities that was occurring with greater frequency at the end of the 20th century (Fox, Levin & Quinet 2008). However, it is vital to recall the frequently overlooked facts that these events are still unevenly distributed across suburban and rural schools (Kimmel & Mahler 2004; Kimmel 2008) and that they do tend to occur in the context of particular social circumstances (Levin & Madfis 2009; Newman et al. 2004). School rampage shootings occur almost exclusively in less populated homogeneous communities in ideologically conservative districts (Kimmel & Mahler 2004; Newman et al. 2004). This fact has led various scholars to locate the cause of these events in a pervasive gun culture (Glassner 2009; Haider-Markel & Joslyn 2001; Lawrence & Birkland 2004; Webber 2003) and the stultifying closeness and pressure to conform in small towns (Newman et al. 2004; Madfis & Levin 2012). Rampage shootings also tend to occur more often than not when particular social circumstances arise, such as when the school staff and student body are intolerant of differences (especially regarding gender nonconformity) and when bullying is not addressed or taken seriously by teachers or administrators (Kimmel & Mahler 2004; Levin & Madfis 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Madfis & Levin 2012; Vossekuil et al. 2002).
Finally, while school rampage perpetrators lack a single unifying profile (Vossekuil et al. 2002), they do tend to share various troubling life experiences (Levin & Madfis 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012) and are often motivated by the desire to attain vengeance and lasting recognition via a masculine display of power asserting violence (Larkin 2009; Larkin 2010; Levin & Madfis 2009; Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2004; Klein 2006b; Neroni 2000; Tonso 2009), while females have been heavily disproportionately represented among the victims (Klein 2005; Klein 2006a). Despite these fairly clear and consistent patterns, the way that many school administrators, taking their cue from members of the media, utilize the random trope (i.e. the notion that school rampages are happening everywhere at any time in a pointless and patternless random fashion) distorts the meaning and magnitude of the threat, in the same manner that depicting violence more generally as random distracts people from its genuine causes and consequences. Best (1999) argued specifically that the problematic rhetoric of randomness is useful for mobilizing social concern while eliminating the need to explain crime patterns and causes. As a result of the fact that school and police authorities mistake school rampage as random meaningless patternless violence, we can understand their use of a risk control approach that stresses assessment, target hardening, and preventative deterrence rather than solutions to alleviate underlying problems and tensions.

*Increased Desire for Risk Control and the Pull of Neoliberal Penalty*

When the genuinely high potential cost of school rampage fused with the perception of high probability that it can happen anywhere, school rampages came to be viewed as a risk that could not be tolerated and must be avoided at nearly any cost. The primacy of such risk consciousness takes priority in the risk society and so every locale must be wary and take whatever measures might be necessary to prepare for the onslaught of random violence. Thus, the exaggerated risk perception of these tragic incidents (the moral panic) has directly corresponded to increased desire for risk control via risk assessment, surveillance, securitization, and criminalization (solutions of neoliberal penalty) rather than more ameliorative forms of prevention. As Mr.Sacco, a suburban principal, put it, “This kind of thing can
happen anywhere and so there’s no room for complacency.” In the same vein, another suburban principal, Mr. Decocco, stated that, “As a school administrator, people have to feel safe and they have to feel comfortable. So [Columbine] made people vigilant and some cases hyper-vigilant.” He continued, “Ninety-nine percent of the time, it’s nothing, but you only have to be wrong once, you know, so it’s better to overreact than under-react.” In response to the perception that school violence was newly pervasive in suburban and rural schools and a widespread problem without much in the way of pattern or motive, administrators even in low crime areas acquiesced to a regime of “hyper-vigilance” where an overreaction (with widespread arrests, expulsions, and suspensions for minor disciplinary infractions and prison-like school buildings with armed guards, locked doors, and security cameras) was preferable to neglecting the extremely unlikely catastrophe of a rampage attack. This sentiment perhaps most clearly represents the fusion of moral panic and a punitive form of actuarial justice, for while Mr. Sacco explicitly recognized the fact that his approach will leave him overly aggressive 99% of the time, he conceives of this as a wholly rational calculation. In this process, students’ civil liberties and schools’ limited financial resources were both worth sacrificing in the name of school safety.

Ultimately, in order to argue that the current school disciplinary and security regime exemplifies that of neoliberal penalty, it is necessary to investigate the manner in which school authorities characterize student misconduct and police intervention at their schools. Several common themes run through much of the literature on the criminology of risk and punitive neoliberal governance. These include the expansion of the crime control industry in place of any other governmental agencies or components of the welfare state, the mindset wherein crimes are viewed as inevitable risks to be managed, and the growth of an increasingly docile citizenry who have come to willingly engage in their own self regulation. Many of my respondents described the adjudication of justice and the logic of discipline and security at their schools in a manner which often prominently displayed these features.

*Expanding the Pipeline through Criminalizing Student Misbehavior*
Prior commentators (such as Advancement Project 2005; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt 2010; Wald & Losen 2003) have noted the way in which emergent disciplinary and security practices amount to a “school-to-prison pipeline” wherein student misbehavior that used to be handled by school administrators within the institution increasingly is handled over to external authorizes within the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Such an approach fits directly within the logic of neoliberal penality where all governance (such as the public schools) should cede authority to the private sector (such as private prisons and security companies) or the penal system. While some of those interviewed expressed a great deal of resistance towards zero tolerance policies and the presence of school resource officers and security technologies in their schools (and these respondents were disproportionately teachers rather than administrators), nearly all of my respondents agreed that the behavior problems of students had been increasingly criminalized and that law enforcement exerted new and expanded control in their schools.

For example, Principal Owens expressed great frustration in seeing the disciplinary autonomy of his school encroached upon by the presence of police in his building. After emitting an audible sigh, he stated:

We were used to handling things as a school. For example, when a student brought in a weapon or a student had drug paraphernalia or drugs, we were used to handling that on our own and not necessarily reporting every single incident that came across our desks. And honestly when I was going through Administration classes, we were encouraged to keep things within the school community and not to sound the alarm bells every single time a student had a small quantity of marijuana or a pot pipe or something like that. Those were relatively minor things and we didn't always feel it necessary to call in the cavalry. And we would eventually let our School Resource Officer know what we had found, and we’d turn over what we found to him, but it evolved over time where that wasn’t really good enough for law enforcement. And they made it clear that whenever we encountered paraphernalia or weapons or that sort of thing they wanted to know about it immediately. And to immediately step in and get involved.

He went on to complain about a police officer recently assigned to his school whom he found to be particularly invasive. He described her as wanting “to work with us, but also she was aiming to please her higher ups. She was being told that there were certain standards that needed to be adhered to in terms of reportage. They got all uppity when we didn't report immediately that we had found a quantity of
marijuana which really wasn’t much at all.” Similarly, Mr. Schwartz, the principal at a very large high school, said:

The expected response is different now, and it’s not just with violence. Just to give you an example, look at drugs. If you go back I would say even within the last ten years, if you caught a kid with a little bit of pot, the Assistant Principal would throw it in their drawer, and the kid would get suspended. The cops were not called. The thing would go in the drawer, and at the end of the year, that was a joke. Everybody would empty out their drawers into the dumpster, and god knows what you’d find. But now, and I would say, within the last seven to eight years, that’s completely changed. I mean everything has to be documented. Everything has to be reported. Police are often involved, not just for drugs, but for fights where injuries occur. It’s a much more documented system now.

Thus, schools experience increased pressure to report all crimes, even minor ones, to external police authorities, rather than dealing with issues internally or with less formal sanctions.

Principal Owens further described that, while his school has not necessarily increased the severity of punishment through zero tolerance policies internal to the school, the police presence made a significant difference in the doling out of more harsh sanctions. Describing the current practices at his school, he noted that:

Students get the usual discipline from the school. I don’t think that necessarily changed, but they would also face the specter of a court appearance or an arrest or what have you. And there were some times, when the State Police were hovering outside of our Administrative office door waiting to take this kid away, while we’re trying to complete our own investigation, and they didn't like to wait [for us to notify parents or other issues related to due process]…that presented some uncomfortable situations.

In addition to the presence of the police themselves, Hirshfield & Celinska (2011: 3) discuss a “law enforcement logic” that spreads to teachers and administrators wherein student problems become increasingly defined “as crime problems demanding a response that emphasizes enforcement over education or capacity-building.” This is perfectly illustrated by Principal Owens’ ultimate take-away message, after prolonged exposure to having the police intervene in school disciplinary affairs. He concluded that “it required us to work with law enforcement in a new more involved way. And it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it required us to kind of change our thinking.”
Dr. Warner, a school administrator in charge of pupil services who had a significant distaste for handing schools’ decision-making abilities over to the police department, felt that educators and police officers differ on a “fundamental basic philosophy” where the latter assume the worst about kids and needlessly stress punishment over conflict resolution. He believed that resource officers and other “security people identify more with the law enforcement end of the community than they do with the educators,” and noted that:

One of the issues I have is that we try as related services people, I’m talking about psychologists, social workers, guidance people, our methodology to deal with student difficulties is a verbal de-escalation methodology…now that’s significantly contrary to what resource officers are trained to do. They’re training is command and control, not verbal de-escalation.

He then expounded upon a story emphasizing the utility of verbal de-escalation over police use of force. In his account of a recent experience, Dr. Warner was called into a classroom where he witnessed an enraged student screaming at one of his teachers, while several school resource officers observed the argument in preparation to intervene at any moment. After knocking on the door to gain everyone in the room’s attention, Dr. Warner was able to defuse the situation by calmly talking to the student one-on-one and then getting both parties to come to a reasonable agreement about what was needed to resolve the conflict, rather than allowing the school resource officers in the room to solve the problem their way, by physically dragging the student out of the room. Dr. Warner was able to handle this situation successfully, but he was concerned for the future as he noted that, “It depends on the leadership in the building, but today, quite frankly, some of our building principals are more likely to call their resource officers rather than try to solve it internally first.”

Despite Principal Owens’ reservations about ceding school decision-making authority to the police and the best efforts of people like Dr. Warner to limit the use of police to resolve conflicts, many other school officials demonstrated how actions that would have traditionally been seen as typical student misbehavior came to be understood as a crime problem in need of a law enforcement solution. For example, Principal Flaherty who ran a large suburban high school stated that:
We call [SRO’s] in all the time because they’re in our building. It’s so much easier here…we call them in all the time, even if there’s no crime. We call them in all sorts of instances just because we need their advice, and they’re going to be able to tell us if there’s something that’s a crime, and they’ll help us with the investigation.

The result of this manner of thinking is, ultimately, increased criminalization and net widening of the justice system, just as scholars who speak of a “school-to-prison pipeline” describe. When officers are called in for incidents that school administrators don’t recognize as crimes (whether by choice or ignorance) and in those cases where the offense would previously have been treated as misbehavior rather than criminal conduct, the presence and input of the police officer increases the likelihood of arrest or other more serious penalty. These results complement several prior studies showcasing that bringing new or additional police officers into schools increases the number of crimes reported to police (Brady et al. 2007; Torres & Stefkovich 2009), as well as additional arrests for minor offenses like disorderly conduct (Theriot 2009). While some might view these facts as successes, the continued expansion of an already unprecedentedly high number of people incarcerated in the United States, a disproportionate amount of whom are poor and minority (Chesney-Lind & Mauer 2003; Alexander 2010; Pattillo et al 2004), is hardly worthy of unqualified praise.

Neoliberal Penality without Rampage – the Inevitability of School Criminalization

If there is a debate to be had between the broad trend towards late modern neoliberal penalty and a more specific moral panic about school rampage, it lies in the suggestion that many of the policies and practices of school criminalization would have ultimately occurred even without the attention heaped upon rampage violence. While there is no empirical mechanism that permits the evaluation of such a counterfactual in a causal manner (though one may look to comparative penal policy in other nations), some respondents certainly alluded to the inevitability of various forms of school criminalization.

For instance, several of the school personnel interviewed suggested that enhanced security and surveillance systems at public schools were merely an unavoidable feature of contemporary times. As one assistant principal at a suburban high school, Mr. Yadarski, told me, “With the change in society, I
think that [installing cameras] was just a sign of the times. I think that we’re just moving along with that.” Ms. Hanson, the guidance counselor at a middle school, similarly expounded upon the seemingly ceaseless push towards expanded school criminalization. She said:

I think, as society, we’re going through metal detectors, we’re going through screenings at airports. We have Police Officers in the school. We never had that anywhere, not even with the [large urban city] schools. But this is reality. This is the society we’re in. Now that we’re here, well yeah, we have extra security. We have to do that. But is it a bad thing? No, I don’t think it’s a bad thing. It’s just a thing that we have to adjust to.

These quotes are notable, in part, because they showcase a rather uncritical view of any technological or security development as progress (an assertion that has been greatly criticized by various Frankfurt School and postmodern thinkers). Thus, regardless of effectiveness, school criminalization is perceived as the correct course for a changing and notably less stable world. This fits directly in line with scholars who argue that late modern anxieties and insecurities are channeled into widespread fear (Bauman 2006) and punitive crime policy (Garland 2001; Simon 2006).

The aforementioned observations are not intended to suggest that any respondents were less than genuine in their concerns about the likelihood of rampage or the practicality of school criminalization as the best way to mitigate risk. Nor do I intend to suggest that all or even most of my respondents willingly acquiesced to school criminalization without attempts to redirect or subvert the process. However, to the extent that school criminalization is seen as an inevitable solution to be uncritically accepted, neoliberal penalty will be expanded. In fact, this will be the case even if cases such as Columbine fade into obscurity and no future school rampages occur to capture the public imagination and inspire widespread fear.

Discussion – Integrating Theoretical Perspectives on School Criminalization

The process of school criminalization began far before the highly publicized school shootings of the late 1990’s. For example, zero tolerance policies were adopted widely across the country by as early as 1993 in response to public fears about drugs, gangs, and weapons (Skiba 2000). Likewise, according
to a National School Boards Association 1993 report on the survey results of school districts nationwide, half of the districts reported conducting locker searches, 24% utilized drug-sniffing dogs, and 15% had metal detectors (Sautter 1995), though these practices were, and still are, more frequently utilized in urban schools with predominantly minority student populations (Hirschfield 2010). This pre-Columbine legacy of school criminalization indicates that, at least in part, these punitive practices are symptomatic of larger socio-political forces, and it would be overly simplistic to suggest that the current disciplinary regime may be solely rooted in the fearful response to a moral panic over school rampage. Many interview respondents even indicated that enhanced school criminalization might have proceeded and been justified even without the fear of Columbine-like crimes – by referring to the inevitable and unqualified progression towards law enforcement personnel and technology.

At the same time, however, many of the scholars working from the perspective that emphasizes the role of neoliberal governance and control have downplayed how significant an impact school rampage has had upon the rhetorical frames and decision making processes of school officials. Nearly all of my interview respondents found Columbine to be a decisive and momentous transition point in the transformation of school safety, and they continually referenced the prevention of school rampage as a fundamental component of contemporary public education.

Ultimately, my interview data reveal empirical support for both of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives and perhaps most significantly, suggests that they do not stand as contrasting explanations, but rather as two components of the same process. That is, when the threat of rampage violence was exaggerated in the context of a moral panic, the neoliberal expansion of school risk assessment, criminalization, and securitization were perceived to be the natural and inevitable solution to manage and control the risk.

Some recent scholarship (such as Rohloff & Wright 2010; Ungar 2001) has argued for the incompatibility of (or, at least, the potentially contradictory implications within) the older moral panic and newer neoliberal governance/risk perspectives. Others (such as Ajzenstadt 2009; Critcher 2008; Hier
2008; Miller 2006) have emphasized the potential importance of understanding how moral panics maintain their significance in a late modern neoliberal risk society. The fault lines in this debate are too far afield to address here, but suffice it to say that I ascribe to the latter viewpoint wherein moral panics still emerge today – though perhaps with greater frequency and in a less culturally monolithic manner than they did thirty years ago.

Through the exploration of how school and police authorities currently fear and perceive the risks associated with rampage violence and the solutions they propose to alleviate such concerns, these two somewhat divergent theoretical approaches may be linked. Naomi Klein (2007) described “The Shock Doctrine” as the manner in which otherwise unpopular free market policies have been imposed on nations around the globe through capitalizing on the fear and disorder which ensue in the aftermath of massive collective tragedies such as wars, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. In a similar manner, several incidents of school rampage caused such a degree of fear and anxiety across the country that even otherwise progressive educators (with best interests of their students at heart) felt it necessary and appropriate to transform educational institutions into neo-liberal projects of punitive discipline and advanced (not to mention expensive) surveillance and security (Lewis 2003). Certainly the move towards punitiveness and associated “tough on crime” policies were largely embraced by President Clinton and the Democratic Party long before the Columbine event (Wacquant 2009), but it took the heightened fear and risk perception of school rampage for school authorities to broadly fall in line with neoliberal penalty and acquiesce to the criminalization of their schools.

**Conclusion**

Ben-Yehuda (2009: 3) recently noted that:

> It has frequently been said that moral panics are ephemeral phenomena. And sometimes they are. Yet, however temporary they may seem to be, moral panics…may also pave the way to new institutional arrangements, as well as to long-lasting bureaucratic structures.
It seems clear that while the initial moral panic surrounding school rampage peaked in terms of media coverage more than a decade ago in the year 1999 (Muschert & Carr 2006), rampage shootings remain remarkably relevant in contemporary discussions and practices of school safety and discipline. The fear of school rampage gained traction as a pervasive problem perceived to strike indiscriminately across the nation. Amid a neoliberal socio-political climate that stresses risk management and the expansion of the penal state to the exclusion of all other government functions, the media-hyped concern over school rampage was leveraged to expand school networks of social control via enhanced criminalization and securitization.

Consistent with Klein’s (2007) notion of “The Shock Doctrine” in which neoliberal agendas are implemented in the wake of tragedies, the various punitive disciplinary policies and increased security and surveillance technologies discussed in this chapter were often conspicuously implemented in direct response to the fear of extreme violent events like Columbine. However, they are routinely applied in schools to stigmatize and penalize students for relatively petty crimes like drug use, disorderly conduct, and vandalism, not violence. In practice, this serves to expand the “school-to-prison pipeline” and transfer issues of ordinary school misbehavior to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Advancement Project 2005; Wald & Losen 2003). Such a transfer is accomplished not only through increased law enforcement presence and authority in schools, but via the acceptance of a more general law enforcement mindset among school staff and the perception that crime is an intractable problem with school criminalization as an inevitable solution to assuage late modern anxiety and insecurity.

Birkland and Lawrence (2009: 1412) have suggested that the Columbine event didn’t create “novel policy responses” or new forms of discipline and security from whole cloth (as an extreme reading of the moral panic perspective would indicate), nor was the tragedy a minor factor in the transition towards enhanced neoliberal penalty (as some scholars have discounted the importance of school rampage). They correctly point out that the incident “mostly spurred more rapid implementation of existing policies and tools that were already available to schools” (ibid: 1412). If the trend towards
school criminalization is to be reversed, there may be some utility in advancing a rational discourse about school rampage that emphasizes the true rarity of these events and the lack of empirical evidence indicating the success of enhanced security and discipline in deterring rampage. However, this will ultimately accomplish little until the larger forces of neoliberal penalty significantly diminish.
CHAPTER FOUR:
DISCIPHERING AVERTED SCHOOL RAMPAGE: ASSESSING THE SUBSTANCE AND RISK OF STUDENT THREATS

In the wake of numerous highly publicized multiple-victim shooting sprees which occurred at the close of the 20th century in mostly rural and suburban American public schools, academics, politicians, and media figures weighed in on what should be done to prevent similar events from occurring in the future. One such commentator, Kay Hymowitz, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, wrote an impassioned essay in favor of emergent zero-tolerance policies which automatically mandate strict penalties for student misbehavior such as making threats or bringing weapons to school, regardless of individual or situational circumstances. Hymowitz (2005: 24) stated that such policies:

have been criticized for resulting in severe penalties for seemingly minor offenses, such as offhand comments about violence, violent drawings, or playful simulations of violent acts. However, the policies have headed off potentially catastrophic shootings and bombings nationwide. Because it is impossible to discern a teenager’s true intentions, any hint of potential violence must be taken seriously in order to protect the safety of other students.

Though formed to argue in favor of a policy which has been widely condemned in recent years by various academics (Ayers et al. 2001; Casella 2004; Skiba 2000) and political commentators on both the left (Grace 2005; Holcomb & Allen 2009) and right (Schlafly 2003; Whitehead 2001) as well as by the American Bar Association (American Bar Association 2001), and the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008), her assertion nevertheless directly addresses the difficulty of predicting and responding appropriately to student threats to commit school violence on a massive scale.

Ultimately, zero-tolerance approaches evoke an artificial simplicity and certainty to the imminently complicated issue of appraising the violent potentiality of students. Hymowitz (2005: 24) alerts us to just this complexity by acknowledging that “it is impossible to discern a
teenager’s true intentions,” yet her insistence that this troubling fact need necessarily lead to serious investigations and consequences for violent drawings or rowdy play neglects the impact that such an overzealous school disciplinary environment can have upon the quality, not to mention cost, of American education. Moreover, though she briefly acknowledges the depth of complexity inherent in discerning the true intentions of young people, she ultimately retreats to punitive ideology in the pursuit of the simplicity that zero tolerance claims to provide. While Hymowitz is correct that many school rampage attacks have been averted over the last ten years in the United States (Daniels et al. 2007; O’Toole 2000; Trump n.d.), there is absolutely no empirical evidence of any kind attributing zero tolerance policies to these positive outcomes. As Cornell and Sheras (2006; Cornell 2012) have pointed out, simply excluding students from school via suspensions or expulsions does nothing to resolve the original causes of problems or to prevent conflicts from escalating. In fact, a zero tolerance punishment has the potential to exacerbate the isolation and anger of a student contemplating a rampage attack at their school as various disciplinary infractions have been vital precipitating factors in numerous previous school rampages around the world (Levin & Madfis 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012).

What’s more, during this same decade long time period, schools have expelled, suspended, and sent to alternative schools countless students for inadvertently bringing over-the-counter medications, utensils and toy weapons, some made of paper or plastic, to school grounds or for making relatively benign gestures or comments which have been curiously deemed violent or threatening. More than a decade ago, Skiba and Peterson (1999) documented several of the more egregious examples, showcasing the “dark side of zero tolerance” spawned by fear of Columbine and other similar shootings. One particularly egregious incident involved the suspension of an 8 year-old child for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher and saying “Pow,
pow, pow” (Times Wire Reports 2001). In just two recent examples, a 6 year boy from Florida was suspended for bringing his Cub Scouts camping utensil to lunch (Urbina 2009) and a 13-year old female honor roll student in Houston was expelled and labeled a “terrorist” for pointing a “finger gun” in the general direction of one of her teachers (“Student Suspended” 2010).

Thus, determining how to respond to the threatening behavior of students has become an important and controversial task. Some commentators have concluded that schools ought to move beyond the punitive simplicity of zero tolerance discipline, and instead adopt an emergent approach that purports to appraise if not predict violent behavior. While this approach takes numerous names in varied disciplines and specializations that pertain to the academic understanding of aggressive behavior, they are often collectively referred to as “violence risk assessment” (Reddy et al 2001; Andrade 2009). Much like the enhancements of school discipline and security described in the previous chapter (and of which zero tolerance policies constitute one component), the increased value placed upon risk evaluation, control, and management in a post-Columbine actuarial age can similarly explain the major development and popular implementation of risk assessment procedures.

While there have undoubtedly been major advancements in diverse literatures that claim to aid in the contemporary understanding of violent threats and their relationship to violence prediction, the success and underlying consequences of these techniques remain hotly contested (Harcourt 2007; Mossman 2006; Sacco & Larsen 2003) and lacking in extensive empirical testing in the school context (Reddy et al. 2001; Verlinden et al. 2000). In particular, little is known about the manner in which assessments of violence risk are actually understood and conducted by school and police officials, nor how these authorities feel about the evaluative certainty such techniques are designed to provide. The phenomenon of averted school rampage
violence represents a crucial arena for the investigation of violence risk assessment in the school context as these incidents, at least in theory, represent the ultimate institutional goal of successful evaluation and intervention during one of the most potentially devastating hazards that schools may potentially face. In addition, the entirety of scholarship on averted school rampage is surprisingly sparse, and as a result, is often rife with unexplored and problematic assumptions about what the phenomenon entails and how it may be assessed.

Accordingly, the goals of this chapter are to 1) problematize the notion of averted rampage and clarify what have often been haphazard linguistic distinctions between threat, risk, and plot, 2) to examine the forms of evidence present when claims are made that a school rampage threat has been averted, and 3) explore how school and police officials interpret the magnitude of this evidence in their assessments of the likelihood of a potential rampage. The resultant data prove vital as the phenomenon of averted rampage has yet to be subjected to careful conceptual scrutiny or extensive empirical study. Likewise, it is hoped that the findings and discussion to follow may lead to more sophisticated threat assessment language and guidelines and subsequently away from both simplistic and overzealous zero tolerance solutions and comparatively more problematic predictive and characteristic-based forms of violence risk assessment. Finally, understanding how school and police officials manage and sometimes fail to come to terms with deciphering whether or not homicidal plots would actually have been carried out may also lead to a more realistic expectation of what the practice of violence risk assessment can ultimately strive to achieve – namely, the targeting of at-risk youth for additional preventative measures rather than punitive punishment across the board and the punishment of people for the crimes they have committed rather than maintaining unrealistic and unfounded expectations about our abilities to predict students’ future violent behavior.
Distinguishing Threats, Risks, Plots, and Genuine Aversion among the Sample

The data for this chapter are culled from the in-depth analysis of eleven incidents in which at least some school administrators, police officers, parents, and/or news reporters believed that an incident of school rampage violence was planned but ultimately prevented. As previously noted in the second chapter on methodology, the notion of an averted rampage leaves room for a wide range of severity between cases wherein students’ genuine desire to complete a rampage attack is problematically assumed. While numerous comments or actions by students have the potential to be classified as evidence of an averted rampage, the application of this uniform label glosses over major differences between cases in terms of the level of premeditated planning, the substance of the threat, and the actual level of risk present (Reddy et al. 2001). Likewise, as the academic study of averted rampage is still new and emergent, it is vital to note what a mistake it would be for future researchers to assume too much similarity among the numerous cases described by the media as averted school rampages, plots, risks, and/or threats. The scholarship on violence risk assessment, and the threat assessment literature in particular, help to distinguish between these too easily conflated terms and the associated levels of severity that must be recognized if schools are to have an accurate understanding of the extent of the problem of school rampage, let alone how to prevent its occurrence or mitigate its risk.

The multi-faceted process by which school and police officials implement these techniques and actually discern the severity of threats in practice warrants far more empirical evidence to follow comes from a range of diverse sources, most centrally through the personal accounts of police and school authorities, but print and electronic newspapers, police incident reports, legal briefs, and court transcripts from trials and hearings were also consulted as a way of assuring accuracy via the triangulation of data. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms will be used for all individuals and schools, particular incidents will be referred to as cases A-K, and no sources (whether news media reporting or legal documentation on specific cases) can be explicitly referenced or cited. This is consistent with how Daniels and his colleagues (2007; 2009) presented their findings on incidents of averted school rampage.
investigation, and my data reveals the actual criteria utilized in these cases as a means to assess the level of risk. However, before these forms of assessment criteria can be described, it is necessary to problematize the concept of averted school rampage. Beyond the initial operationalization of completed school rampage debated in previous works (such as Newman et al. 2004; Muschert 2007) and addressed in the prior methods section, my data have helped to elucidate the fact that the phenomenon of averted rampage has its own conceptual concerns which must be addressed. Though the terms “threat,” “risk,” “plot,” and “averted” are often used uncritically if not interchangeably by the media and many academics to address the phenomenon, they represent different components of a rampage event and its assessment. Each one of these features warrants specific discussion.

**Examining the Form and Content of Threats in Averted Rampage**

First, as the threat assessment literature makes clear, one must not conflate the terms threat and risk (Cornell & Sheras 2006; O’Toole 2000). While risks refer broadly to the potential exposure to harm, threats refer more specifically to the declaration of an intention to inflict harm. Thus, threats themselves constitute a major evidentiary factor in the assessment of risk. As some (such as O’Toole 2000; Reddy et al. 2001) have previously noted, not all threats signify serious risk, and some very high risk incidents may likewise take place in the absence of a direct threat – this latter point is often discussed as a problematic feature of the threat assessment approach which is only useful in the presence of an existent threat.

In ten out of the eleven cases under investigation in this study, however, there was evidence of a threat of violence declared against others in some form. The one possible exception, case G, entailed a student’s list of several of his current and former teachers where the word “fuck” was inserted into the middle of each of the teachers’ last names. There is no
indication that this handwritten list, found in a notebook in the student’s locker, ever would have been shared with anyone else and therefore represented an actual communication of harmful intent, yet it was interpreted as both a threat and hit list by some (though not all) members of school staff. Aside from this particular incident, threats were clearly expressed in the remaining ten cases, and they took at least three distinct forms – via verbal, written, and electronic media.

Verbal threats were the most common. In one occurrence (hereby referred to as case F), there were numerous verbal threats, including when a male student offered to kill anyone that his female friend didn’t like for her, when he told another girl who drove him to school that he wanted to blow people up at a large public park in the center of the city of Boston, and when he threatened to cut out the tongue of any of his co-conspirators or other peers aware of their plot if they were to reveal anything to authorities. In another instance (case A) of verbal threatening, a student offered to kill the girlfriend of one of his friends for him, after the friend discussed some issues he was having in his relationship. In addition, in at least five more cases (A, B, C, E, and F), there is evidence that students verbally made mention of attacking their school to various peers, though these comments were often but not always perceived as flippant jokes rather than legitimate threats.

This research also revealed numerous electronic threats. In one electronic threat (case A), a student posted youtube clips of himself shooting a rifle and blowing up pipe bombs which he communicated were “1/8 of the size were gonna use” and which he sent to at least one other student. In another incident (case H), students made death threats against various members of the football team and other popular students on a social networking site. In a similar but much more elaborate electronic threat (case E), several students created detailed profiles on a social networking website where they referred to themselves as NTS420, the Northtown Shooters April
20th. These online profiles featured a digital countdown clock ticking down to the anniversary of Columbine on April 20th, the Columbine killers listed as heroes, pictures of guns, and publicly visible communications discussing how serious each member was about the plot, with one comment explicitly stating plans to “kill everyone.” In addition to their social network profiles, the students in this case also posted three disturbingly violent and threatening videos on youtube, one of which shared the same title as a recording made by the Columbine killers called “Hitmen for Hire.” Juxtaposed with a series of violent images from Columbine and elsewhere, the students’ video montage stated, “Nine years ago two boys has a vision…but they never got to accomplish it…but nine years later two boys will carry out that vision and restore that lost fear into the hearts of millions…coming [sic] this Thanksgiving.” While no individuals were directly threatened by name in this latter incident, the video still qualifies as a direct threat in O’Toole’s (2000) classification system, for it was expressed in a straightforward manner and identified a specific date and particular albeit symbolic target – the school as a whole.

Several cases also involved written threats. Two (cases I and K) included deadly warnings written on the walls of boys’ bathroom stalls in high school buildings. One such note declared that “Tomorrow will be worse than Virginia Tech,” and another one stated that “Columbine could happen here.” The other written form of threat was the presence of physical hit lists. These were believed to be present in four (A, D, G, and J) of the eleven instances. One such hit list consisted of a sheet of paper that was clearly entitled “people to kill,” another was labeled “targets” and “social targets,” a third list found on students included only the names of several of their peers known to have bullied them, and the fourth one previously mentioned as less clearly a threat consisted of a student listing and cursing the names of several teachers in his notebook.
Examining the Levels of Risk in Averted Rampage

Secondly, the actual level of risk for violence present in a given incident of threat is, likewise, not uniform. It is here where the terms risk and threat remain problematically conflated, even in the more nuanced threat assessment literature which first strove to clarify these distinctions. For example, the scholars (Cornell 2012; Cornell & Sheras 2006; O’Toole 2000) who have written what are otherwise arguably the most sophisticated classification schematics for assessing the severity of risk in the presence of existent threats, continue to use the term “threat,” as in “high level threats” (O’Toole 2000: 9) and “very serious threats” (Cornell & Sheras 2006: 30) when they are clearly referring to risk, the potential exposure to harm (and thus, the terms “high level risks” and “very serious risks” would be more consistent terminology). This confusing linguistic inconsistency aside, the threat assessment approach of these scholars can be very useful in determining the level of risk present in each of the eleven cases.

According to the threat assessment standards laid out by Cornell (2012; Cornell & Sheras 2006), none of the eleven incidents under investigation in this study could be strictly classified as transient threats, those made carelessly in jest or in moments of anger. Six cases (A, B, C, D, E, and F) should certainly be classified as very serious substantive threats, as they were death threats with much specificity. These same six cases would also qualify as a “high level of threat,” using O’Toole’s (2000) classification system, because of the direct, detailed and plausible nature of their plans and the fact that concrete steps were taken in these cases toward carrying them out.

In contrast, the remaining five cases are less clearly defined for, while they were not momentary acts of anger, they lacked much specificity or any clear indication that the students
had taken any steps towards actually carrying them out. They would qualify as either low or medium level threats, according to O’Toole’s (2000) system. This is consistent with Cornell’s (2012) observation that “threats are a frequent but largely unrecognized occurrence in schools,” many of which are not particularly serious. In two of these lower risk incidents (cases G and J), students who had written lists of the names of people they disliked saw these interpreted as hit lists for rampage shootings. In another case (H), students threatened their classmates with violence on a social networking website in a manner that some parents, police, and the media interpreted as genuine and fatal. In the final two incidents (cases I and K), threats referencing previous school rampage shootings were written on bathroom walls. While the eleven incidents varied widely in severity, at least according to how they would be evaluated via the threat assessment approach, if one was to rely on media coverage alone, it would be rather difficult to discern these very significant differences, as all eleven incidents were covered (albeit not to the same extent) as potentially averted rampage plots.

**Examining Plots and Planning in Averted Rampage**

Third, the term school “plot,” which is often used interchangeably with school rampage in the media, implies a certain amount of previous planning and forethought, but this should more properly be understood an empirical question. Can there be an averted rampage without a plot in place? As the findings section on planning will later reveal, my data indicates that while extensive planning represents one of the strongest features to convince officials of students’ intentions to do harm, students have been accused, both by their schools and in the press, of being engaged in an averted rampage without any indication of the presence of detailed planning. Thus, evidence of a rampage plot, while a very common feature of averted rampages (and likely
one of the best indicators of genuine intent), is not a necessary component for some school
officials or the news media to label a student’s action as an averted rampage.

**Examining the Notion of Aversion in Rampage**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the term “averted” rampage implies that an attack
was inevitably and certainly going to take place before it was prevented. Perhaps, for instance, a
student’s flippant verbal remarks or written personal grievances could be misinterpreted as
genuine threats. Even a carefully planned attack might likewise represent only a hypothetical
fantasy for a student who never intended to carry it out. As the findings in this chapter will later
indicate, the contentious question of “what would have happened” remains disturbingly unsettled
terrain for numerous (though by no means all) school and police officials who have been directly
involved in these events. They are often not entirely certain of the genuine intentions of students
accused of plotting school rampages, though these officials may increase their certainty through
the use of various risk assessment criteria.

**The Assessment of Evidence in Averted Rampage**

The categories of evidence utilized as a means to assess the seriousness of a rampage
violence threats are myriad, but they may essentially be divided into two distinct types. The
threat assessment approach emphasizes criteria that signify detailed planning for the crime and
active preparations undertaken towards carrying it out. As such, plot details entailing specific
people, places, or timing and the training in or existent, potential, or desired access to weapons
all represent forms of threat assessment criteria. In contrast, risk assessments based on the
identification of individual or group characteristics are more in line with a profiling or warning
sign approach. As both types of assessment criteria were either implicitly or explicitly discussed
by school and police officials as important for making decisions during the course of handling these cases, they both warrant extensive discussion. These findings will begin with an exploration of the forms of evidence utilized that may be classified as threat assessment criteria (i.e. plot details and the role of weaponry) and then turn to those forms that may be understood as relating to profiles and warning signs of likely school rampage offenders (i.e. individual and group characteristics).

**Assessing the Plot’s Detail**

The first major category used by school and police officials to determine risk is the level of detail involved in the planning of violence. This criterion is already a vital feature of the threat assessment approach, as O’Toole (2000) pointed out more than a decade ago that the planning involved in carrying out a school rampage is often a lengthy process. According to Vossekuil et al. (2004), most school rampage shooters create a plan at least two days before initiating their attack on students and/or teachers. Many of them develop and fantasize about their plots for weeks or even months prior to carrying them out (Fox & Levin 1994; Madfis & Levin 2012; Newman et al. 2004; Verlinden et al. 2000; Vossekuil et al. 2002). The Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, spent more than a year extensively preparing their attack (Larkin 2007). While it is quite popular to depict mass shootings as the result of individuals simply “snapping” and committing violent onslaughts in a spur-of-the-moment manner, this does not accurately describe the vast majority of mass murders, whether they occur on school grounds or elsewhere (Levin & Madfis 2009). In many of the cases under investigation in this study, evidence of planning a school rampage attack was often extensive and constituted a major determinant in the assessment of a threat’s severity. For example, Dr. Sable, an adjustment counselor at one school with a rampage threat (case F), noted that, “they spent so much time
thinking about the attack that if it was a fleeting thought, they wouldn’t have had maps or this whole list. They also spent so much time coming up with a list of people to harm.”

In terms of the physical and digital evidence collected by police and/or school authorities, the existence of detailed plots were determined by the presence of hit lists and even no kill lists, suicide notes, maps of the school with attack plans drawn on them, daily planners and journals describing the desired targets, methods, and outcomes, supply shopping lists, discussions about the plots on social media websites, and internet searches relating to research on how to execute an attack (such as for details about previous rampage shootings, attaining firearms, or building bombs). These various forms of evidence convinced school and police officials that the risk of rampage violence was more significant because of the detailed nature of how the plan was to be strategically implemented. Specifically, plots were comprised of details such as who was to be purposely targeted, what locations were to be attacked in what order, and when the attacks were to take place.

The first subcategory of planning, the extent to which certain individuals or groups were targeted as potential victims, is important not only because school and police officials viewed this as indicative of more serious intent, but because this very issue constitutes a hotly contested debate, both internal and external to academia, about whether or not specific targets are victimized during a rampage attack. Cullen (2010) rather famously argued that prior news accounts misreported the “myth” that the Columbine shooters specifically targeted minorities and jocks (see also Ogle et al. 2003 on the media revisionism of this issue). Likewise, some scholars (Kimmel & Mahler 2004; Volokh 2000) have characterized school rampage shootings as “random” events at least in part because of the much touted (though not empirically tested) notion that school rampage shooters attack peers and teachers in an indiscriminate manner
without deliberate targets in mind. In fact, the presence of random victims has often been used as an operational criterion for rampage shootings. For example, Newman et al (2004) specifically limited her definition of school rampage to include only those cases in which at least some of the victims were chosen randomly or symbolically. Likewise, Muschert (2007) distinguished “targeted” school shootings with multiple specifically intended victims from “rampage” school shootings which necessitate random or symbolic victims. This study is uniquely suited to tackle this particular question for at least two reasons. First, unlike many of the school rampage killers who have committed suicide after completing their deadly plans, my entire sample of would-be school attackers was still alive when they were caught and thus could explain their intentions to police and other officials with whom I was then able to speak. Secondly, in averted incidents, the plots themselves are the criminal offenses and so the extant news media reporting and legal documentation are far more focused on the planning aspects of these cases rather than on other issues more prominently featured in the aftermath of completed rampages, such as offenders’ actions on the day of their attacks, the manner in which victims were killed or injured, or the victims’ identities. This wealth of data revealed that most of my sample did in fact desire to target specific individuals or groups of people rather than or in addition to random victims and the school as a whole.

In case A, the people the student planned to kill on the day of his attack were specifically chosen because they were individuals who he felt had slighted him in the past. For example, the sheet of paper found in his bedroom labeled “targets” contained the names of thirty students at the school, as well as the names of four additional students with “NK” (no kill) listed next to their names, and a distinct “Do Not Kill” section listing the names of another sixteen students. The student did tell police that his plan was not to kill strangers and only to kill those students
who had been picking on him for years. There was also one girl in particular who he wanted to
kill, and he had extensive written notes about her, such as where she lived and worked, what
vehicle she drove, as well as exactly how he wanted to kill her by shooting her in the head. He
also told a friend about wanting to kill her specifically. Further, he informed police that he
added the names one by one gradually over time. However, he also selected what Newman et al
(2004: 50) called “symbolic” targets and what the student, in his notebook, called “social
targets.” These included various cliques such as “Goths,” “Punks,” “Commies,” “Hippies,”
“Preps,” “Gays,” “Ghetto Wiggers,” and “Muslims” where asterisks were placed next to the
names of certain students to indicate to which groups they belonged. One of his journal entries
repeated this theme, as he indicated that he thought many people needed to die, but he singled
out “muslims, niggers, spics, towelheads, Goths, punks, and especially faggots.”

Many of the other incidents echo this theme. In case C, the would-be rampage killer
specifically planned to execute the students he did not like, and even intended to tell his friends
at the high school not to attend class on the day of the attack. In fact, this student even
convinced one of his friends to hold onto his stolen weapons for him because he promised the
friend that he would warn him in advance to assure that he and his girlfriend would not be on the
premises. In case D, the three students apprehended with an arsenal of weaponry on them also
carried a hit list of particular students who had teased them. In case E, the students did target
specific people such as the school resource officer and other administrators, but also discussed
attacking people more widely and randomly.

In at least one case (F), the importance of who was to be targeted was so paramount to
the student plotters that all of the other elements of their planning criteria (such as what locations
were to be targeted, when the attacks were to take place, and how the plan was to be strategically
implemented) reflected a desire to harm specific people while protecting the safety of others. In this incident, some of the student plotters argued that their group was originally formed to protect kids who were being bullied and only intended to hurt certain individuals. In a binder found at the home of one of the students, police found a hit list with the names of roughly a dozen people on it, including both students and staff. The star football player at the school was a particularly significant target for another member of the group, who felt that that this student athlete constantly harassed him. They also intended to kill members of the school administration including the principal and assistant principal, the school resource officer, and the gym teacher. They harbored special resentment for the gym teacher and desired to torture her by cutting her Achilles tendon, forcing her to run a mile in seven minutes as she had made them do in gym class, and then shooting her in the head if she could not succeed. In addition, they planned to put CO2 bombs in the lockers of the students that they didn’t like. So concerned with seeking revenge upon their targets, they even developed a contingency plan if Plan A, the school rampage, didn’t work out. Plan B, which they all concluded was far less preferable, was to break into each of their targets’ homes to cut their throats. Conversely, they took time to discuss the most strategic way to get all of their friends into the cafeteria in order to protect these certain students from harm. Despite these precautions and the focus on particular targets, the student plotters still desired to kill as many people as possible. They sought to specifically time their attack for 2:02 PM when school was dismissed because they concluded that this was when the most students would be in the hallways.

In three additional cases (G, H, and J), threats were made against specific people either online or through written documents which were interpreted as hit lists. In the remaining three cases (B, I, and K), it is unclear from all available evidence if those threatened as potential
victims would have been randomly selected, targeted as individuals or social groups, or some combination of both. Ultimately, this finding suggests that strict dichotomous distinctions between targeted and rampage violence are at least somewhat untenable. Moreover, whenever specific groups of people or individuals were targeted in the planning process of a rampage plot, school and police officials viewed this as substantially magnifying the risk.

The second subcategory of planning that school and police authorities understood to be a vital risk factor was the extent to which certain locations, both external and internal to the school, were targeted with in depth planning. These plans typically entailed targeting just the school building itself. However, in case D, the goal was to attack the town at large in addition to the school, and, as previously mentioned in case F, homicidal home invasions were discussed as a secondary option if a school attack would not be feasible. Case F is also notable here because, in the plan these students devised, they intended first to blow up a gas station on the opposite side of town from the school in order to divert emergency personnel away during the time of their school attack.

Strategic decision making regarding location could also be seen in how some students designated certain areas of the school as targets in their attempt to maximize carnage. In case A, police found a floor plan map of the school building when they searched the student’s bedroom. The map had been extensively written on with lines and arrows to indicate his intended travel routes during the attack and where several propane bombs would be placed. When questioned about this map of the school, he informed the school’s resource officer that his plan was to start the attack by going to this officer’s room in the school and incapacitating him by handcuffing and taking his radio. He would then proceed to kill his intended targets by starting in the cafeteria and then moving around the building in a counterclockwise circle which would
culminate with him committing suicide in the library. In another incident (case E), school administrators also found a detailed map of the school, but in this case it was publically available on the website of one of the student plotters, while an additional physical map was found in a student’s backpack. These maps had the names of the three students listed on them in different colors, matching color-coded dots and lines going around the building which identified areas within the school that were to be targeted, including the boys’ locker room, and the offices of the principal, building security, and the resource officer. In case F, as in the previous two cases, the students also possessed maps of their high school. One was hand drawn and the other was a building floor plan stolen from the resource officer’s desk. The plan these students devised also included a division of labor so that one student would move to one wing of the school to shoot the jocks where they were in class, while another student killed the resource officer, and a third student murdered the administration. Another component of their plan was to put one of them on the roof of the school to kill any approaching emergency personnel who tried to intervene.

A third subcategory of planning was decisions detailing when the attacks were to take place, both in terms of the desired date to execute the rampage and the timing of how the rampage was to proceed on that day. The desired date was frequently the anniversary of the Columbine massacre, which occurred on April 20, 1999. However, in any given year, when April 20\(^\text{th}\) fell on a weekend or during a school vacation, students made due with a date in close proximity. In case A, school officials found a daily planner in the high school student’s locker in which he had highlighted a particular date in April that was the closest school day to April 20\(^\text{th}\). Likewise, in case F, the attack was originally scheduled to take place on April 20\(^\text{th}\), specifically because of the fact that this was both Hitler’s birthday and the anniversary of Columbine, but the date was later changed to April 15\(^\text{th}\) as classes would not be in session on the 20\(^\text{th}\) due to school
vacation. However, an April date was not planned in every case. In case E, for example, the students engaged in a detailed conversation on a social networking site about what day should be chosen for their attack. They debated over whether they should choose a random day, the date that Martin Luther King was assassinated, or the first day of school during the following year.

In addition to choosing a specific date for the attack, some students also designed plans for what was to take place in what order on the day itself. The example of this which occurred in case A was so extreme that Detective Brown, the school resource officer at the scene when the student’s planning folder was discovered, had the following to say about it: “He had it written, verbatim, in chronological order...Exact with detail, step by step. It was wicked wicked detailed. Almost like a briefing that a swat team would have.” In fact, the crime/incident report on this case included a copy of what was originally a handwritten document titled “April 10, 2007 NBK Plan” that contained a detailed timeline for the day of the attack. It stated the following:

6:00  1. Wake up at 6:00  
6:15  2. Take caffeine pills, energy drinks, and xtra energy etc.  
6:40  3. Make sure all guns ammo are ready, bombs are prepped, guns clean, all equipment ready, cigs, lighters, slings, ammo holders, alcohol  
7:00  4. Have last meal, place all equipment on side of house  
7:15  5. Get dropped off/walk to school  
9:30  6. Wait until 9:30 then go back home  
10:00  7. Prep, bombs, guns explosive in car  
10:15  8. Get cell phone numbers  
10:20  9. Enjoy life for half an hour  
10:50  10. Go to parking lot, call friends  
11:00  11. Prep car bomb, ANFO  
11:05  12. Go inside have some fun  
13. When done have some vodka, a smoke  
14. Commit suicide

While other students may have made similarly sophisticated schedules for the day of their attacks (such as in cases E and F), only the student in case A took the time and care to write it down chronologically moment to moment in such an explicit fashion.
Whether the level of detail present in a rampage plot was found to be about who was to be targeted, where the rampage was to take place, or how and when it would be executed, these specifics were interpreted as signs that threats ought to be considered less improvident or transient. Thus, broadly in line with the threat assessment approach, school and police officials felt that the existence of any and all detailed facets of planning dramatically enhanced the potential risk for violence.

Appraising the Role of Weaponry

Clearly, the role that weaponry plays in school rampage cannot be overstated. As Levin & Madfis (2009) and Madfis & Levin (2012) note, the availability of and training in firearms are crucial facilitating factors in carrying out a mass murder. Police and school officials consider various aspects of weaponry when they seek to discern if a student has engaged in a plot to commit school rampage. These aspects include the existent, potential, or desired access to weapons, evidence of weapons training, the glorification and fascination with weapons, and threats mentioning the use of weapons.

The first crucial subcategory is the presence of weapons or evidence that students were attempting to attain or manufacture weapons. This criterion has long been cited as crucial in the threat assessment literature in terms of judging how “actionable” a threat may be (Cornell 2012; Cornell & Sheras 2006; O’Toole’s 2000) and punishment for students bringing guns to school was the impetus for the initial zero tolerance policies (Ayers et al. 2001; Skiba & Peterson 1999). Though weapons were present in some cases, they were not present in every case, nor was there evidence that the accused students sought out or had access to weaponry in all instances. Thus, while weapons possession or access was not viewed as a fundamental necessity in terms of being perceived as a potential rampage, it undoubtedly signified increased severity and an enhanced
potential for lethal violence to both school and police officials. As Officer Jones, the school resource officer at the affluent high school in case I, stated:

We seriously consider whether he has access to weapons. I always go back and check the in-house computer and see if mom or dad has weapons at home. I’ve called home and said, “Hi, we’re concerned. Are there weapons in the household? Is there access to weapons?” We always find that out. So you take that factor into account, majorly.

Understandably, access to large amounts of lethal weapons represented one of the most significant concerns for school and police authorities.

In one incident (case A), a high school student amassed a vast arsenal of weaponry including knives, ammunition, two assault rifles, and at least two additional guns all legally registered in his father’s name. With his father’s permission, the student kept all of these in his bedroom closet. This student had also made numerous pipe bombs in his basement and many other materials used to manufacture a wide variety of bombs were found in his bedroom. There, police also found a written shopping list of desired supplies that included different firearms, bombs, and bomb making materials. Another incident (case B) involved a student bringing tennis balls to his high school that had been filled with explosives. Police later found four additional explosive devices at the student’s home. A third event (case C) entailed a student stealing three guns and hundreds of rounds of ammunition from his father’s safe before giving them to a friend to hold onto until they would be needed to execute the plot. Yet another (case D) entailed three teenagers arrested walking down a street while carrying rifles, handguns, swords, knives, and a shotgun along with thousands of rounds of ammunition, after failing in their attempt to steal a car to embark on a killing spree meant to include the local high school. A fifth incident (case E) involved numerous students who had taken a large arsenal of weapons, including rifles, shotguns, and handguns, from their parents’ collections. On a social networking
website, they discussed the need to attain earplugs to protect their hearing while firing the weapons.

Unlike the previous five cases, in case F, none of the four student plotters were found with firearms or explosives, but they were stockpiling gunpowder and had previously created and tested many homemade explosives including napalm. According to a shopping list found in the bedroom of one of the boys, they were also actively attempting to attain trip wire explosives, cannon fuses, PVC piping, semi-automatic weaponry, propane tanks, as well as chains and bike locks to seal the rear and main doors of the school. One of the accused plotters approached at least two other students on separate occasions to request that firearms be purchased or lent out to him, but he was denied in both attempts. This same student also indicated that he could access guns by stealing them from his father who was a police officer. In each of the aforementioned four cases where juveniles gained access to firearms, these weapons were legally registered in their parents’ names. In all of the six cases listed above, a large portion of school and police officials expressed serious concerns about students’ intentions which were directly linked to their access to weapons. In contrast, in the remaining five incidents (G-K), there was no evidentiary or even speculative indication of the presence of any weapons of any kind, nor the attempt on the part of the plotters to attain weapons, and confidence that students intended to carry out their threats was far less uniform in these cases.

Another major criterion noted by school and police officials was evidence that students had actively been training with weapons for their attack (no officials indicated the presence or importance of any other form of training such as physical training, though firearms and explosives surely make mass murder easier to accomplish in the absence of physical fitness). Though even the Columbine shooters videotaped footage of themselves engaged in target
practice in the foothills near their homes, weapons training has not previously emerged or been addressed in any of the risk assessment literature. Evidence of training with weapons included physical remnants or damages left after the activity took place or any account or documentation that such preparation occurred. In only two of the cases under investigation did officials confirm that students actively trained with weapons for a school rampage assault, but the training evident in both of these cases was abundant. In one averted incident (case A), a student admitted to making over 40 pipe bombs over a four year period, including CO2 bombs, copper pipe bombs, dry ice bombs, and cherry bombs. One of his bomb-making friends put the number closer to one hundred bombs over a two year period. The student also filmed himself on numerous occasions blowing up his homemade bombs along with footage of himself firing his father’s guns at a shooting range to improve his aim. After being informed about his frequent training sessions in the woods near his parent’s home, police searching this area found the remnants of numerous explosive devices. The other plot (case F) which involved extensive training for a school attack similarly entailed a great deal of time devoted to weapons preparation. In this instance, the students also admitted that they spent time in a deserted wooded area where they did target practice and blew up homemade explosives. They experimented by blowing up gun powder in various containers, and even made napalm by thickening gasoline with Styrofoam and lighting it on fire. Though these students, despite their best efforts, were never able to attain their own firearms, they did acquire BB guns, knives, and axes, all of which they practiced shooting and throwing at trees which they pretended were their intended victims. Police searching these woods found cans and bottles that had been exploded as well as large gashes in the trees of the surrounding area.
In both of these cases, the intensity of weapon preparation and training was extensive. While an interest in firearms may be a fairly common trait among American adolescent boys (Shapiro et al. 1997), the level of experimentation and fascination present in these two incidents is certainly out of the norm of typical youth behavior, and rightly concerned the school and police officials who learned about these activities. Therefore, the notion of training may be appropriately considered a new addition to the threat assessment literature, and one which certainly qualifies as the sort of concrete steps taken towards carrying out an attack which O’Toole (2000) described as indicative of high level threats.

In contrast, though school and police officials certainly noted that the student plotters in several of these incidents demonstrated a longstanding fascination with weaponry such as firearms and explosives, the broad interest in weapons more generally did not constitute a vital indicator in their assessments. Despite the fact that a fascination with weapons has been described as a warning sign for school shootings going back to some of the earliest research (Band & Harpold 1999; Leary et al. 2003; McGee & DeBernardo 1999), the officials seeming lack of concern here might reflect the adoption of the more nuanced threat assessment evaluative mindset over an emphasis on warning signs and profiles which may apply to a broad swath of the population. In other words, a student’s interest in weapons (which may be a potential warning sign for school rampage but also applies to many adolescents who would never dream of committing such a crime) didn’t represent a significant concern for school and police authorities unless their access to or desire for weapons occurred in the context of an existent threat.

This more nuanced approach to assessing violence risk played out in one incident (case E) where several school administrators and the school resource officer were monitoring the social networking sites of some of their students about whom they were concerned because the
students had posted numerous references praising the Columbine massacre in great detail. The school staff did not collectively make the determination to intervene until they saw a picture of a gun posted as the wallpaper on one of the student’s websites along with a conditional threat referencing a firearm that stated, “I swear to god. One more mother fucker says the wrong fucking thing to me and I will pull out a goddamn 45 and kill their sorry asses.” Mr. Dougherty, one of the house principals at the school, clarified that at that crucial point in time, “We said, ‘All right. Now we’ve got a mention of a 45. We’ve got an actual mention.’ And Trooper Smith [the SRO] said, ‘Okay, now is the time to do something about this.’” Thus, the threat referencing a gun combined with the firearm imagery used as wallpaper represented the decisive criteria in this incident. Similarly, in another school (case A), it was a threat to utilize bombs communicated electronically that ultimately initiated serious investigation into the student’s activities and already well-known enthrallment with firearms and explosives.

Ultimately, while the existent, potential, or desired access to weapons and evidence of weapons training represented significant assessment criteria for school and police authorities (i.e. a sufficient cause for concern), it was not a necessary condition to be judged an averted rampage as several incidents did not involve evidence of weapons in any way. Likewise, though a fascination with weapons amplified concern in the presence of an existent threat alluding to their use, an interest in weapons did not by itself foster great concern among school authorities.

**Assessing the Role of Personal and Group Characteristics:**

In addition to the significance of weaponry and detailed planning, various personal and group characteristics were often considered as a component of the assessment process. Unlike the previous two evaluative categories which fit more in line with a threat assessment approach, this concern with individual characteristics and personality traits is more closely aligned with the
profiling and guided professional judgment (warning sign) approach to violence risk assessment. Within this grouping of criteria, individual characteristics (such as ethnic/racial and gender identity as well as previous behavior and mental health concerns) and social characteristics (such as school social status and an affiliation with the culture of deviant groups) both represented significant evaluative factors for police and school officials as part of stereotypical school shooter profiles or warning signs.

Both of the original school shooter profiles (Band & Harpold 1999; McGee and DeBernardo 1999) described typical offenders as white males. Though mass murder, of which school rampage constitutes a subset, is the only form of homicide that is committed by non-Hispanic whites in numbers disproportionately high relative to their share of the population (Fox & Levin 1998: 435) and some (Schiele & Stewart 2001; Wise 2001) have attempted to theoretically link white racial identity and privilege to rampage, subsequent cases have not seen this racial supposition borne out without fail – as in the rampages at Red Lake Senior High School, Virginia Tech, Monash University, or the Tasso da Silveira Municipal School. Additionally, many researchers (Collier 1998; Consalvo 2003; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005; 2006; 2012; Mai & Alpert 2000; Neroni 2000; Schiele & Stewart 2001) have observed that the vast majority of rampage school shooters have been male (in fact, Latina Williams of Louisiana Technical College is the only female multiple-victim school shooter in American history who was a current or former student of the school she attacked) and asserted the role that dominant notions of masculinity play reinforcing and legitimizing such violence.

Despite these myriad academic studies asserting the significance of demographic variables, none of my respondents would acknowledge that race/ethnicity or sex/gender played any role in how schools or the police assessed risk. This omission may simply reflect social
desirability bias on the part of respondents wary that the use of any such criteria would be interpreted as prejudicial. However, as African American youth are vastly overrepresented in school suspensions and expulsions when compared to white students who commit identical infractions (Fenning & Rose 2007; Robbins 2005), the adjudication of school discipline is anything but colorblind and profiling based on whiteness would go markedly against the grain.

In contrast, maleness has long been associated with increased rates of offending and arrest for violence and delinquency (Messerschmidt 1993), and so it would have been less surprising to hear some respondents acknowledge that they might, for example, be more suspicious upon hearing rumors of a rampage plot hatched by male students than by female students. This was not the case, as nearly all of my respondents, regardless of whether they were school administrators, police officers, teachers, or counselors, emphatically stated that gender was not something they take into consideration in making assessments about the risk for student violence. In one of the more frank statements in this regard, the vice principal in case C, Mr. O’Brien, stated, “It doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or girl, I’ve seen some girls do serious damage.” In fact, most respondents reacted to questions pertaining to gender by dismissing its significance entirely and recounting personal experiences dealing with violent female students. For example, when asked whether he would assess the homicidal threats made by both boys and girls in the identical manner, Dr. Phelps, a school psychologist, responded affirmatively that:

Oh absolutely, yes. Girls sometimes are significantly violent. We had a situation at the high school…There were two sisters, I think one was grade nine and the other one may have been grade eleven. They took on two security people and four police department people trying to get them off the bus. I mean they could be tough. We’re not gender specific. We’re more tuned into the degree of threat.

Stories that discounted the role of gender by alluding to female violence were common. Not only do such tales amount to discounting aggregate patterns through idiosyncratic examples, but
they blur the distinction between fairly typical assaults, which girls may commit with some frequency, and multiple homicides, which are, by and large, committed exclusively by boys and men (Fox & Levin 2011).

Interestingly, of the twenty-three students\(^6\) accused of being involved with planning a rampage attack at the eleven schools under investigation in this study, only one was a female. Notably, this girl was accused in case J, which was previously discussed as a low to medium level threat without any indication of an existent, potential, or desired access to weapons and little evidence of detailed planning outside of having written a list of people she disliked on a sheet of paper that her teacher discovered. The principal of her middle school, Mr. Anderson, did take this girl’s gender into account regarding her ultimate lack of genuine intent as he ascribed the girl’s motivation for writing the list in the following manner:

> It was because of all the stuff that we see in middle school, especially with girls. It’s the jealousy. It’s the cliques, okay… The girl who wrote this list, she just was mad at people. That’s all. She was mad at these kids. Maybe somebody stole a boyfriend. Maybe they didn’t want to be her friend, and she wanted to be their friend. And so she was frustrated and she wrote it on paper and that was as far as it was ever going to go, in my determination, 99.9 percent, you know.

Thus, while nearly all respondents dismissed the role of male gender as a relevant factor both in theory (i.e. that any connection could be found between masculinity and rampage) and in practice (as gender was not deemed germane in the ten incidents involving male students), gender became a suitable mitigating factor for the girl’s behavior in her case. This inconsistency becomes particularly distinct when one considers that the same descriptors which were used to mitigate this girl’s actions (frustration with peer cliques and relationship troubles) have been used by many scholars to help explain the actions of male school shooters (for example, see

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\(^6\) One student was accused in cases A, B, G, I, J, and K, two students in case C, three students in cases D and E, four students in case F, and five students in case H.
Burgess et al. 2006; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2006; Larkin 2007; Leary et al. 2003; Levin & Madfis 2009; Meloy et al. 2001; Newman 2004). That said, and notwithstanding the lack of additional evidence in case J which likely suggests that this girl did not genuinely intend to cause harm, Mr. Anderson is entirely correct, in probabilistic terms, to view her gender as indicative of decreased risk for committing a school rampage. What’s more, the unwillingness, or at least hesitation, on the part of respondents to consider gender as a relevant factor in cases with accused male students may reflect larger patterns of privilege where male (just like white) operates as the default, thus rendering the discussion of gender only pertinent to females (Irigaray 1985).

Another element of personal characteristics frequently considered was the previous misbehavior of accused students. One school administrator, Dr. Warner, stated that, “the best predictor of violence is past aggression and violence. That’s unequivocal.” While this may be the case for violence in general (Campbell 1991; Campbell et al. 1986; Farrington 1991; Moeller 2001; Robins 1966), the same cannot necessarily be said for school rampage offenders (Verlinden et al. 2000; Vossekuil et al. 2002). In their study of school shooters, Verlinden and his colleagues (2000) found that nine out of the ten under investigation had some history of aggression and seven out of ten had a history of discipline problems. However, a report commissioned by The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education (Vossekuil et al. 2002: 22) on incidents of targeted school violence (a broader category than that of Verlinden et al. 2000) found that just 13% of their sample of “attackers were known to have acted violently toward others at some point prior to the incident.” Similarly, this study (ibid: 20-22) found that only 27% had any prior arrest history, another 27% of the offending students had ever been
suspended and 10% had ever been expelled at some point in their lives, and 63% had never been or were rarely in trouble at school.

Prior histories of aggression and school discipline, and the lack thereof, were, however, often brought up as influential factors in the assessment of risk. For example, the principal, adjustment counselor, and school resource officer all directly involved in case F each noted the prior troubling behavior of at least one of the accused students. In addition, the police officer who arrested these students made it clear that he already knew three out of four of them as they “had a history” with the town police department.

In the same way, during the numerous instances when the accused students had no prior behavioral issues, this led school and police officials to express doubt regarding the authenticity of the risk. In case E, for example, Mr. Dougherty, a house principal, vividly recalled that:

None of these kids had a discipline record or anything. When I heard it was the one kid Kyle who I had met before, I was like, no way! What are you kidding? No way! Which is why we were thinking that he would be the first kid to approach about this, but as time passed, as things turned out, he was pretty involved.

Similarly, the assistant principal of the high school in case C, Mr. O’Brien, pointed out that when a parent came to express concern over the deadly intentions of one of his son’s friends, he originally discounted the risk because that student had not previously been in trouble. He stated:

I remember thinking, well, whatever, I’ve never seen this kid for any type of discipline before that I can remember that was a major problem or issue. Both of these students really were not what you would call major behavior problems. I did not even know who these two students were until this whole incident started to unravel.

Therefore, though having a history of aggression and school misbehavior may not be unequivocally linked empirically to school rampage, school and police authorities certainly valued this criteria, whether that meant giving students they had not previously come across in a disciplinary setting the benefit of the doubt, assuming students they did have prior positive
relationships with would be less likely to plot a violent act, or deeming past misbehavior indicative of enhanced risk for violence.

The next factor that school and police officials weighed in their assessments of personal characteristics was the mental health issues of accused students which were often perceived to be indicative of a troubled mind and increased likelihood of violence risk. Subsumed under this category were formal mental health diagnoses, but also comments, notes, or drawings revealing suicidal or depressed thoughts. Many of these criteria have already been subjected to extensive empirical testing. In their investigation of sixteen cases, McGee and Bernardo (1999: 11) included severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder, as “characteristics NOT associated with classroom avengers.” Similarly, Vossekuil and his colleagues (2002: 21-22) found that just over a third (34%) of student attackers in their study had received a mental health evaluation during their life, and less than a fifth (17%) had been diagnosed with a mental health or behavior disorder prior to the attack. However, this study also indicated that 78% of attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts at some point before their attack and 61% had a documented history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.

Likewise, in their sample of ten rampage school shooters, Verlinden et al. (2000: 43) found that only two of them had previously experienced mental health treatment, but eight out of ten exhibited signs of depression, six had made suicidal threats, and another six had created violent writings or drawings.

While mental health concerns such as depression, personality disorders, and psychoses were discussed as a key hypothetical cause of rampage school shootings by a large portion of respondents, evidence of these mental health concerns was rarely abundant in these cases. However, any indication that students were of poor mental health was taken very seriously and
seen as a profoundly significant warning sign for violence. For example, in only one case (F) was there an accused student with a documented history of being institutionalized for mental illness, which occurred after the student was thought to be a suicide risk – though some school officials incorrectly believed he had been institutionalized for threatening his mother with a knife. This troubled history was discussed by everyone interviewed about the incident and was brought up during legal proceedings, thus it surely played a significant role in how both risk and intent were assessed in this case.

Likewise, school and police officials weighed heavily evidence of depression or suicidal thoughts, though these were existent in the minority of incidents (only in cases A, C, and F). Thus, the school principal in case C, Mr. Fernandez, explicitly noted the vital role that he thought depression, if not suicidal thinking, played in motivating the student’s threat which enhanced his concern. Mr. Fernandez said:

I started talking to around 10-15 students that were in class with the student who had [been accused of stealing his father’s gun] and I kind of got the same picture, basically that he doesn’t have any friends, maybe one friend, they said. He doesn’t talk in class. He doesn’t participate in class. They don’t really think he has any hobbies or that he’s into anything…He just presented as someone who was kind of down in the dumps, anxious and I don’t know if you’d say suicidal, but he just looked like he was in pain when I was talking to him. He just didn’t look like he was feeling well.

The presence of suicidal thoughts or comments more generally was cause for concern. When Detective Brown, the school’s resource officer, initially questioned the accused student in case A, this student admitted to being suicidal, and this did factor into the officer’s ultimate conclusion about intent. Police later discovered in the student’s bedroom two typed suicide notes. One of these was a detailed note for his parents and the other was intended for everyone else and addressed to a few of his friends. According to the police incident report, the student stated in the second letter that:
I want to commit suicide, but I don’t want all of you to be heartbroken, so to make it easier for you all by shooting up the school, that way you all would hate me, and I won’t worry about anybody missing me. Except my family…I would save everyone’s grief by committing suicide but I figured I would rather have some fun and revenge and then kill myself.”

Commenting upon the existence of these notes, Detective Brown stated, “That kind of clinched it.”

Similarly, in case C, Assistant Principal O’Brien discussed becoming increasingly distressed about the student under suspicion when he spoke with the student’s English teacher who recalled finding a particular assignment strange and disturbing. According to Mr. O’Brien, the drawing was “a picture of a tombstone and it said rest in peace and it had [the student’s] name and it had some year in the future.” Yet another of the student’s drawings depicted a person being shot along with the words, “I wish this was me. I hate my life.” Thus, in addition to documented mental health concerns, comments, notes, or drawings that reflected depression or suicidal ideation drew a great deal of attention from school and police officials as they represented stark indicators of concern if not culpability.

In addition to the role of individual identity characteristics, school and police officials also considered group dynamics and membership affiliations. The first criterion deemed relevant was social status at the school. Being marginalized by and socially isolated from the rest of the school community are traits long associated with school shooter profiles and warning signs (Band & Harpold 1999; Dwyer et al. 1998; McGee and DeBernardo 1999), but subsequent empirical scholarship has provided mixed results. Though some scholars (such as Langman 2009; O’Toole 2000; Vossekuiil 2002) have rejected the characterization of all rampage school shooters as “loners,” much case study research has found plentiful evidence of isolation and marginalization (for example, Lieberman 2006; Madfis & Levin 2012; Meloy et al. 2004;
Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox 2009). A careful reading across these studies indicates that
the characterization of school rampage offenders as significantly marginalized if not entirely
isolated is accurate for a large portion, though by no means all, of previous offenders.

The view that social marginalization and peer group conflict plays a considerable role in
causing school rampage violence was common among the vast majority of my respondents who
often described accused students as “isolated,” “unpopular,” “socially different,” “unconnected,”
or “on the periphery.” For instance, the principal who ran the school during case F, Mr.
McGowan, explained his general belief in how social marginalization plays a role in leading to
extreme violence. He explained that:

I think when you look at all of the school violence issues that have happened, usually it’s
a kid that for some reason hasn’t been able to make or create positive relationships in
school. And so, they pull back, and they spend more time either introverted in the
internet world, or they pull back and they find a small group of people that are all of the
same likeness and then they start talking about, “Why are we the outcasts? Why aren’t
we part, you know?” So I think there’s a pretty clear picture as to the understanding of
who those kids are.

The significance of social marginalization was not only theoretically linked to the assessment of
a rampage plot for the school officials involved in this incident. The school’s adjustment
counselor, Dr. Sable, recounted witnessing some of the students who would later be accused of
planning an attack on the school being mistreated by their peers at a school-sponsored gathering.
She recalled that:

Those two kids just didn’t seem to fit. They fit with each other, and they don’t seem to
fit anywhere else. Those two kids were trying to dance and be with another group of
kids, and the kids just kind of kept turning their back to them and turning their back to
them and just leaving them out. Whether the kids truly understood what they were doing,
they just kept shutting these two boys out, just shut them down, just kept, you know, with
their body language, just kind of kept pushing them out on the periphery…And you know
this is a leadership camp where these kids are expected to be leaders and this is how
they’re treating other kids and it was very telling.
Dr. Sable described witnessing this episode as “a turning point” for both herself and the principal, and she reflected that “as we look back, we were both thinking that it was interesting that we would sit there and take that all in, watch it all unfold, and then have that huge thing happen.” Thus, for both Mr. McGowan and Dr. Sable, there was a direct link between how the students were treated by their peers and their creation of a rampage plot, and their witnessing of this event certainly impacted how they later assessed the seriousness of the threat.

Though this view was dominant, it did not amount to universal consensus. For example, Dr. England, the school psychologist during case B, diminished the role of school social status and peer group conflict as a cause of rampage. She stated:

When you think of Columbine, you think, you know, the jocks and then these guys who felt really put down by them, and so forth. But that happens with a lot of cliques who are part of high school culture, so I certainly wouldn’t just put the blame on that. I mean I think there are much more deeper issues for those students...really mental illness.

Dr. England makes a valid point that social marginalization and bullying are widespread features of school life, and this cannot, by itself, explain rare instances of rampage. It can be, however, one crucial component in a larger multi-causal nexus (Muschert & Ragnerda 2010; Henry 2009; Levin & Madfis 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012), and thus it is understandable that so many school and police officials view marginalized social status as an important assessment criterion.

Directly related to the notion of social marginalization, the other important criterion based on group characteristics was an affiliation with the culture of deviant groups. In numerous instances, such affiliations, particularly the music and clothing styles associated with certain subcultures such as neo-Nazi skinheads and Goths, were mentioned as informing perceptions about intent. This may be routed in much of the initial reaction to Columbine when musician Marilyn Manson and the Gothic subculture (through associated attire like black trench coats) were blamed for inspiring the attack (Muzzatti 2004; Ogle et al. 2003) and many scholars
explored the role played by warning signs such as a “preoccupation with violent media/music” (Verlinden et al. 2000: 43) or “some interest in violence, through movies, video games, books, and other media” (Vossekuil et al. 2002: 22).

In one incident (case D), an assistant principal pointed out that all three of the students involved in the incident often wore black trench coats, and were teased by much of the student body for doing so. In two additional cases (A and F), school administrators, police officers, and legal documentation about the incidents all made specific mention about the accused students wearing black trench coats. While one must be careful about forming broad causal links between any item of clothing worn by lots of innocent people and rare instances of extreme violence, there may be some level of legitimacy in linking trench coats with school shootings in that this particular item of clothing has become widely associated with the Columbine killers who did wear them. As the vast majority of rampage plotters around the world since the 1999 Columbine massacre have been directly inspired by that attack (Larkin 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012), signs that students want to repeat elements of Columbine warrant concern. In particular, there are times when clothing choices may genuinely warrant additional suspicion and scrutiny. For example, in case F, one of the students accused of plotting a school rampage once wore a t-shirt to school which featured a picture of the Columbine shooters on it above the words “Remember the Heroes.” This student also reportedly wore swastika t-shirts and drew Nazi symbols on his body in marker. In a separate incident (case A), whereupon, after having police find a black trench coat, a white Jason (from the Friday the 13th horror films) mask, and camouflage cargo pants in his bedroom closet, the student proceeded to inform them of his intent to wear these items on the day he would have attacked the school. Police also found, inside a folder full of other planning materials, a hand drawn image of the student dressed this trench coat, pants, and
mask, while armed with shotgun shells, pipe bombs, magazines, Molotov cocktails, knives, and a duffel bag with bombs. All of these items were labeled individually in the drawing. According to one of the police officers who arrested him, the student additionally commented that he specifically chose the pants and coat in order to hold the maximum amount of pipe bombs.

Certainly, Nazi imagery and specific allusions to Columbine or other school rampages should raise red flags for concerned parents and educators, but these were not the only clothing features that emerged in discussions with police and school officials. In numerous incidents, authorities asserted the significance of certain alternative styles, such as black Gothic attire, tattoos, and the shaved heads and suspenders associated with the skinhead subculture. For example, Ms. Grey, a former teacher of a student accused with writing threatening notes on his school’s bathroom walls (case I), shared her view that:

If you see people walking around in trench coats, hats down over their eyes, drawing weird pictures or covered in, I mean I suppose it’s politically incorrect, but covered in tattoos or whatever, pay attention, do something.

Though youth subcultures are perennially blamed for a myriad of social ills, it is vital to reiterate the fact that both the skinhead (in both its anti-racist and neo-Nazi incarnations) and Gothic subcultures have had long histories before the contemporary era of school rampage violence (Haenfler 2009). Additionally, it is extremely problematic to form broad associations declaring common subcultural stylistic choices such as black clothing and tattoos to be signifiers of delinquency, let alone indicators of the next potential school shooter (Muzzatti 2004). The same can be said for the relationship between violent media and real-world violence, a topic about which prolific research has indicated very mixed results (see Fowles 1999 for an extensive review and critique). Not only does the focus on these cultural preferences have the potential to marginalize a large segment of students who have done nothing wrong other than to subscribe to
less traditional beliefs, values, and/or aesthetics, but it is a flawed guideline with little empirical basis. Numerous students who have attempted and completed school rampage shootings have dressed in a traditional manner. In fact, the official *Columbine Report* by the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office eventually debunked the notion that even Harris and Klebold “regularly cloak[ed] themselves in symbols associated with violence or the Goth culture; rather, they ‘appeared outwardly normal, [sharing] their dark side only with each other’” (Ogle et al. 2003: 23). What’s more, in case A, the student wanted to deliberately target Goths as victims, and the rampage plot by student athletes involved in case C was taken less seriously by school officials, at least preliminarily, as a result of their clean cut appearance.

In contrast, perhaps it should be evidence of an abnormal fascination with rampage violence which should stand out as the disconcerting warning sign. In many cases, evidence indicating just this sort of deep and consuming obsession with the Columbine case and other school rampages did exist (in the form of internet searches, comments to peers, and personal writings) and was noted as a decisive factor for both school and police officials. In this criterion, the presence of the copycat effect, where various features of a highly publicized crime are imitated by others (Coleman 2004), was not lost on the officials assessing these cases. For example, a house principal in case E, Mr. Dougherty, reflected upon how his concern was exacerbated when he found out from several of the peers of one of the accused students that he “was almost obsessed with Columbine and that he literally…would sit in the cafeteria, and he would ask kids to quiz him on Columbine, like ask him any fact about it.” Police and school officials involved in case A pointed out computer records revealing that the student had extensively researched Columbine and numerous other mass shooting events. In this student’s bedroom, police also found a red folder with a picture of Columbine killers, Eric Harris and
Dylan Klebold, on the cover. In multiple journal entries, he referred to his plan to attack the school as “NBK,” the same code name (referencing the film Natural Born Killers) used by Harris and Klebold. The students in case F, like in case A, had also been referring to themselves as the Natural Born Killers. Officer Dudley, their school resource officer, described the accused teenagers as being “fascinated with Columbine” and noted that, when one of the student’s computer was seized, it indicated that someone had been extensively researching the details about Columbine, as well as material on firearms and bomb making.

By and large, evidence of the copycat phenomenon and a clear obsession with the minutia of previous school rampages did produce greater concern among the respondents than affiliations with youth subcultures such as violent media or subcultural attire, but the latter more problematic associations were still present in the views of some respondents. As such, it’s important to recognize this particular assessment criteria for what it is, bias against students with less traditional beliefs, values, and/or aesthetics, and as such, caution against the practice in future empirical research and risk assessment practices.

Risk assessments based upon the identification of characteristics, regardless of whether they are at the individual or group level, remain a contentious area of debate for scholars. Though research has demonstrated that some descriptive traits (i.e. gender and marginalization) have more reliable empirical backing than others (such as race/ethnicity and histories of behavior problems and mental illness), these distinctions are not widely understood. Consequently, such forms of assessment are still broadly considered in the decision making processes of school and police officials.
Confidence and Doubts about Assessing Averted Rampage

In the study of averted incidents of school rampage, one of the most pertinent questions that must be addressed is whether or not the accused students actually intended to carry out their homicidal plans. No one but the perpetrators themselves can possess complete certainty about this vital question, though various forms of risk and threat assessment may provide insight. The aforementioned forms of evidence utilized to assess the seriousness of student threats were significant factors not only for the administration of justice (i.e. the adjudication of offenders in school and/or court) to proceed, but in how school and police officials make sense of what is otherwise a rather confusing and uncertain experience with what ultimately amounts to a hypothetical event.

While all types of school and police officials (administrators, security and police officers, teachers, and counselors) interviewed in this study made use of some forms of risk assessment in coming to conclusions about students’ intent, there was some variation by job type. Broadly it did appear that police and security officers were most convinced by indications of detailed planning and weapons acquisition, counselors were the most reliant upon the use of identifying characteristics, and administrators and teachers fell somewhere in the middle. My data, being qualitative in nature with a small sample that was not randomly selected, cannot assert generalizable relationships between occupations and assessment preferences, and so this finding is, at best, preliminary and tentative.

In comparison, the detailed knowledge gleaned from qualitative exploration into these cases with numerous officials tasked with assessing and intervening in them does facilitate important comparisons regarding how officials interpret the varied forms of evidence. The utilization of various forms of risk assessment criteria (such as detailed and developed plans, the
existent, potential, or desired access to weapons, and conformity to stereotypical school rampage shooter profile characteristics) certainly did enhance how certain people were about their students’ ultimate intentions. The threat assessment criteria are notable for providing people with the greatest amount of certainty, far above and beyond that of identifying characteristics. However, this was not always the case and the recognition of other additional factors, such as different motives and shows of remorse, gave officials doubts about whether students genuinely intended to go through with the attacks they were accused of plotting.

**Certainty Based on a Convergence of Risk Assessment Criteria**

Ideally, at least from a risk assessment approach, the more of the aforementioned types of detailed planning, weapons acquisition, and conformity to profile characteristics evident in particular cases, the more confident officials would be of the students’ genuine intentions to execute their deadly thoughts. Broadly, this was the case, as many school and police officials could pull from the above risk assessment criteria in order to assure themselves of the inevitability of students’ actions. Thus, the numerous forms of assessment criteria matter not just in terms of understanding how threats are practically assessed in situations of school rampage threats, but provide insight into how school and police officials make sense of what is still an extremely misunderstood crime with an uncertain outcome.

In the very serious substantive incident (case A) where Detective Brown was largely responsible for intervening during his time as a school resource officer, he could draw from the myriad evidence against the student plotter he arrested in order to gain the certainly that might otherwise elude him. He stated:

> By the time we caught onto him, he says, “I didn’t wanna do it anymore.” We never will know if he was gonna do it or not. But he had the drawing [of him wearing the clothes he had picked out to wear on the day of the attack]. He had the hit list. And the
map…There was also two suicide notes. Just more and more evidence. What else could this guy have shown us to say he was gonna do it?

In addition to this existent threat assessment criteria, the student in this case also broadly fit many stereotypical school rampage shooter profile characteristics (he was a male described as a being marginalized, suicidal, and fascinated with weapons, though he was half-Asian), and thus both elements of risk assessment converged in this case making it understandable for Detective Brown (and the two other respondents involved in this incident who were also interviewed) to feel a high level of certainty.

**Certainty Based on Lack of Threat Assessment Criteria**

Just as the presence of myriad risk assessment criteria were valued in forging certainty about intent, certainty about a lack of intent was similarly high in the incidents where the evidence of detailed planning and preparation was scarce. This was true regardless of whether or not students had characteristics in common with school shooter profiles. In other words, if, as was the case in some instances in which graffiti warnings were written on bathroom walls, students posted vague and unrealistic threats on social media websites, and lists of disliked people were interpreted as hit lists, proof amounted to a solitary piece of undetailed albeit threatening writing, very few officials believed that the threat at their school amounted to a serious and actionable plot, and this was the case regardless of whether or not the accused students conformed to standard profiles. Such a finding is perhaps more surprising for cases in which students fit much of the stereotypical profile but which lacked the presence of threat assessment criteria than those cases in which students neither fit profiles nor indicated an abundance of threat assessment criteria. The analysis to follow will start with the less surprising latter variety where the lack of both forms of risk assessment criteria remained convergent and
then move to the more interesting phenomenon present in the former variety of cases where the two types of assessment contradict one another.

As might be expected, school and police officials felt more certain about a lack of intent when there was a dearth of threat assessment criteria such as detailed planning and preparation. They especially doubted that students intended to carry out their plans when that lack of planning and preparation converged with students whose identifying characteristics did not conform to that of their expectations regarding what school rampage shooters are commonly believed to look or act like.

For example, in an incident at a suburban middle school (case J), the principal, Mr. Anderson, shared his belief that even the presence of a hit list doesn’t necessarily amount to a genuine risk for violence if the student deviates from stereotypical profile characteristics. As previously mentioned, gender played some role in how he determined that the pre-teen female student at his school was not a significant risk. In addition, Mr. Anderson noted that:

This girl was not what I would call sick. She did not have a mental illness to the best of my knowledge. I’m not a psychologist, okay, but she was a typical teenage girl…and she made a big mistake. Big mistake. I mean I knew the parent. I had a good working relationship with the parent. This was not a kid that would have taken action on her words.

In addition to the fact that this case lacked much evidence of intent to carry out a rampage attack beyond the existence of the hit list, the principal noted that her mental stability, status as a typical teenage girl, and the principal’s prior relationship with the parent all meant that she was not a genuine risk. Thus, he came to his conclusion about the girl’s lack of genuine intent not only via threat assessment criteria (such as a lack of detailed planning and preparation), but through the consideration of conventional profiling characteristics regarding personal identity.
Notably, even when students fit numerous traditional profile characteristics, but lacked evidence of detailed planning and preparation, they were still given the benefit of the doubt and not viewed as genuine threats. For example, Mr. Cross was the principal of a rural junior/senior school (case H) where several students who could be understood as having traits in line with profiles (they were marginalized white male students who had been bullied) posted threats on a social networking website. He felt that:

Our whole incident was totally blown out of proportion. I mean this group that we had, this so-called gang, they were calling themselves the Drive-By Kings. They didn't drive! [He laughs] So that can tell you a little something about the whole thing.

He understood the students’ threats to not be particularly genuine, at least in part, because of their lack of means to carry them out. Thus, the thought process of Mr. Cross is directly in line with that of O’Toole’s (2000) threat assessment approach, wherein implausible unrealistic threats warrant the least concern and the substance of threats signify more than characteristic based profiles.

What’s more, some administrators thought being required to proceed harshly (often as a result of zero tolerance policies) was inappropriate in the incidents at their schools due to the absence of extensive evidence of planning and preparation. In one case at an affluent suburban high school (case G), a student voluntarily left the school rather than facing expulsion after being accused and punished when a note cursing out many of his previous teachers was found and interpreted as a hit list. The principal at the time, Mr. Sacco, stated:

We had to go the full gamut. I was never convinced in my head he was ever a danger and never was. And it was one of the things where you had to act quickly and harshly with the risk you’re going to alienate this kid more if you crush him too hard...The hit list was not a hit list in the true sense. It was his musings about fuck this and fuck that...He had lost of lists, lists of lots of things. He had a list of every teacher he ever had with the twist being the f-bomb planted in the middle of their name. So Mr. Sacco was Mr. Fucko...But, the so-called hit list really was something we had to act on as a school. I
had to go through the whole thing, the expulsion, and, I’ll be honest with you, I was never comfortable with that.

Mr. Sacco’s reaction was not uncommon as numerous teachers and administrators whose schools experienced low level threats with little evidence of planning and preparation (even when their students exhibited some profile characteristics) felt that parents and the media went overboard in characterizing them as dire risks or potential rampages. Additionally, cases such as this one indicate the value of (and likely support among some of the school community for) assessing threats in the manner suggested by Cornell (2012). That is, the punitive rubber stamp of zero tolerance needlessly treats all threats the same and thus punishes the majority of students excessively, and, in contrast, direct, detailed, and actionable plots ought to warrant more investigation and punishment than those of less severity.

**Certainty Based on Threat Assessment Criteria in Spite of Deviation from Profiles**

A convergence of both forms of risk assessment criteria (profiles and threat assessment) led to high degree of certainty among officials that students intended to carry out their attacks. Likewise, a lack of threat assessment criteria meant that school and police officials generally did not consider threats to be serious whether or not the students fit profile characteristics. As a further testament to the broad acceptance of the threat assessment approach, there was still high levels of certainty among the officials when students who did not fit the profile of stereotypical school rampage shooters planned an attack which threat assessment criteria would deem a very serious substantive threat.

This exact phenomenon played out in case E, as the students accused were far off from fitting the profile of stereotypical school rampage shooters. While they were white males, they were popular athletes very involved in school activities. At the same time, there was an abundance of threat assessment criteria to signify detailed planning and preparation. Initially,
this contradiction between the two types of assessment criteria posed quite a dilemma for the school administrators and resource officer attempting to evaluate the risk. Mr. Harris, one of the school’s house principals, revealed his confusion at the fact that:

They weren’t isolated. That was the scary thing. They did not fit what we thought was the profile for the kind of student that would plan something like this. They were engaged in school. They were involved in a sport. They seemed to have a large base of friends. They even had some popularity amongst the student body which was really bizarre.

When asked if the fact that the students did not necessarily fit the classic profile impacted his thinking in how to proceed and assess the seriousness of the threat, Mr. Harris responded, “Definitely. I mean we definitely noticed and were alarmed that they didn't fit the profile. It just didn't fit what we all believed to be the case about the kind of students that would do this sort of thing.”

Another house principal at the school, Mr. Dougherty, confirmed that he also found it particularly difficult to take the threat seriously at first because of the type of students who were involved. He proclaimed:

This is one of those things where people were saying that these guys were angry loners. They weren’t. These guys were on the wrestling team. These guys, when the wrestling team would be out running, they would be talking about Columbine…They looked like normal kids. I mean literally just looked like normal kids. They were on the wrestling team!... Looking at them, I will say this, when I heard it was the one kid who I had met before, I was like no way. What are you kidding? No way!...But as time passed and as things turned out, he was pretty into it.

Mr. Dougherty added that it took the evidence of planning present in the students’ social networking websites that ultimately convinced him and the rest of the school community of the threat’s seriousness. He said:

The news broke on Wednesday. During that next week, [the change in perception] was almost palpable in the building. The Thursday of that week, it was a joke. It’s a joke, it’s a joke, it’s a joke. By Friday, the next day, it was kind of like you could sense the mood amongst the students and parents change. Because what ended up happening was
obviously pretty much every kid and their grandmother went to the MySpace pages because they were still available...So as kids and parents looked at this stuff, by Friday, it was more like, wait, this wasn’t a joke. It was palpable, this shift in the attitude of people here in the building. It truly was.

Thus, the depth of planning evident from the websites convinced not only Mr. Dougherty and the other school officials to take the threat seriously, but the school as a whole. While they were initially more hesitant to see the threat as genuine because of the lack of stereotypical profiling characteristics, the weight of threat assessment criteria (i.e. the intricacy of the students’ detailed plot) eventually changed their minds. Despite his initial skepticism, Mr. Dougherty eventually became the most emphatic of all respondents in his confidence regarding the students’ intentions. He declared, “I am convinced to my dying day they were going to do something. There is no doubt in my mind.”

The Uncertainty that Remains – in Spite of Risk Assessment

All of the aforementioned cases and quotations might give the impression that officials gained immense certainty and clarity by pulling from the threat assessment criteria, even if they could put less faith in the consistent validity of profiling stereotypical characteristics. This was not, however, entirely the case. Some school and police officials expressed significant doubt and uncertainty, even in cases with significant evidence of detailed planning and where students had obtained weapons.

For example, Mr. O’Brien, the vice principal at an urban/suburban high school (case C), initially stated that he and his fellow administrators deserved credit for “taking things seriously and investigating fully that led to us averting what could have been another Columbine, if not worse.” However, he also gave considerable weight to the fact that the student plotter desperately wanted to get away from a father whom he deeply despised. After noting that his
own personal experience meeting the student’s father made it very clear how easy it would be to dislike the man, Mr. O’Brien noted that:

[The accused student] stated to the police that he and his father did not get along. And that he was angry with him, and that’s why he stole his gun. As far as we know, psychologically, we know that he had some issues…He didn't want to go home, that was the bottom line. He wanted to continue being placed somewhere, so it kind of goes back to that question about did he really plan on following through with this or was this his way of getting himself out of his house? Who knows what was happening there. So I don’t know if he felt desperate enough to actually follow through and shoot some students, or if he was just going to see how far he could go until he got caught because he knew that would get him out of the school. I don’t know. I don’t really feel like I can say for certain. I know that this kid wanted help.

Thus, as the vice principal considered this alternative motivation for stealing the gun and calling negative attention to himself, he truly struggled with the student’s genuine intent. Upon further reflection about the student in question, the vice principal then recalled an interaction that he had during trial proceedings in which the student appeared very apologetic. Mr. O’Brien discussed becoming increasingly uncertain that the student ever genuinely intended to go through with his plan in the first place. He noted that:

When I was at the trial and the judge basically placed the student after I testified, and I walked by him, he said “I’m sorry for everything, Mr. O’Brien.” So for him to say something like that tells me that, if I had to guess, I’d say he wasn’t going to follow through, but he was certainly trying to get attention and he got it.

While Mr. O’Brien was not the only official to express doubts and uncertainty about students’ ultimate intentions, he was the only one to thoughtfully address possible additional motivations for making a very serious substantive threat.

He was not, however, alone in his belief that expressions of regret might indicate a lack of genuine intent. In case H, a guidance counselor at the school, Ms. Hanson, similarly emphasized the important role that she believed remorse played in her determination that the students never would have acted upon their threats. She pointed out that:
I think the number one thing I look for is if they’re remorseful or if they realize what they did was wrong. If they were in my office saying, “yeah, I did it and I’m going to still do it,” that would throw up a red flag for me. But these kids were just shocked that they were getting called in for something they didn’t really think was going to happen…It was just a couple of kids, wannabes, you know, trying to sound tough…I knew that it wasn’t as serious as all the hype, just by talking to them that morning. I think that they knew that it kind of went overboard….I think they just thought they were being cool, making some threats here and there, but I don’t think they realized it would turn into a three day shutdown with State Police helicopters landing here.

While expressions of remorse may potentially indicate a lack of intent, this cannot be considered a reliable criterion as numerous perpetrators of completed school rampages have voluntarily expressed regret and publically apologized to their victims and communities (see, for example, “Accused Gunman in Oakland” 2012; Perez 2011; Verhovek 1999).

Conclusion

The phenomenon of averted school rampage presents several unique dilemmas distinct from those of completed school rampages. In these cases, violent schemes and threats have the potential to be either exaggerated or dismissed. Various forms of violence risk assessment provide guidance to school and police officials in how they evaluate the substance of threats – these range from assessing the detail of plots, appraising the role of weaponry, and numerous criteria based on characteristics like ethnic/racial and gender identity, previous disciplinary and mental health history, school social status, and affiliation with deviant groups.

Ultimately, the threat assessment perspective gave officials the greatest confidence in their judgments deciphering if students intended to carry out their threats. This was demonstrated by the manner in which the greatest certainty abounded in cases where detailed planning and preparation were evident, regardless as to whether or not accused students fit traditional profile characteristics. That said, some officials still lacked full confidence in the
infallibility of threat assessment criteria when they perceived alternative motivations for student actions and/or honest displays of regret on the part of students. These empirical findings are significant in revealing how risk assessment is currently understood and conducted in American public schools. However, it is hoped that the other issue to emerge from this research regarding officials’ concerns with and hesitations about the certainty of risk assessment will also suggest the need to better comprehend and critically evaluate the purpose and goals of these practices as means of prediction, prevention, and/or punishment.

Risk assessments based upon individual and group characteristics remain controversial among scholars. This is due as much to the inaccuracies prevalent in early profiles and warning signs as to prior unrealistic expectations that any unifying and singular profile could emerge as a means of predicting future behavior. This study indicates that school and police officials generally share such skepticism about predictive profiles and warning signs, for while they may consider the relevance of said traits as a component of their assessments, such criteria was never deemed sufficiently convincing on its own. While few officials were aware of the empirical studies casting doubt on the reliability of school shooter profiles and warning signs, many were cognizant that these descriptions reflect statistical likelihoods rather than predictive certainties. Officials’ additional confidence in threat assessment criteria may likewise reflect an aversion for the lofty and problematic objective of predicting school rampage threats and reveal potential opportunities to be found in the more achievable goals of preventing and punishing them.

The first emergent feature of the threat assessment approach is its newfound focus on prevention. All of the prior incarnations of risk assessment, including much of the early work on threat assessment, may be critiqued as a form of “administrative criminology” exclusively and perhaps inordinately concerned with the management and control of risky populations over and
above the comprehension and alleviation of underlying forces which lead people to engage in violent and threatening behavior in the first place (Young 1994). In contrast, threat assessment scholars have recently called for a move away from prediction in favor of prevention in violence risk assessment. The former is seen as the ability to correctly estimate which people have the highest probability of being violent under which circumstances, while the latter shifts its emphasis to the most suitable intervention for the particular situation. Randazzo and her colleagues (2006: 153) made their case for this change in focus because “by emphasizing prevention as the outcome, the need to provide necessary services takes precedence over the need to be ‘right’ about whether a given child will become violent.” Likewise, in his most recent scholarship, Cornell (2012; Cornell & Sheras 2006) has argued for a preventative approach to threat assessment, and even developed very specific recommendations as to how to go about implementing such a preventative model for student intervention in schools.

Second, as threat assessment is constrained in its application only to those incidents in which individuals communicate threats in advance (Borum et al. 2010), its domain is limited to the consideration of comments and actions that have already occurred. Rather than positing that any group of identifying characteristics may be predictive (or even, on a less problematic scale, linked to a greater statistical likelihood) of future violence among populations who have yet to do any actual harm or broken any laws by their broad resemblance to previous offenders, most threat assessment criteria are notable for also being criminal offenses themselves. As Daniels and his colleagues (2007: 92) revealed, students accused in these types of cases were often charged with crimes such as making terrorist threats, conspiracy to commit murder or aggravated assault, possession of firearms on school grounds, and interfering with an educational institution. Aside from these, additional charges (whose terms vary by state and thus are not all entirely
distinct from those mentioned by Daniels et al 2007) in my sample included criminal harassment, criminal intent to commit murder, threatening in the first degree, possession of homemade explosives, promotion of anarchy, and conspiracy to commit mass murder. Thus, threat assessment criteria such as communicating threats, forming detailed conspiracies, and weapons possession are all already criminalized, the consideration of these factors amounts to a step away from the unrealistic and problematic aspects of predicting the future via an extreme attempt at actuarial justice and towards the more realistic albeit conventional goal of punishing people for past behavior. As Officer Dudley said about one of the students he dealt with in case F:

None of us will know if it ever would have went down, but it certainly had the potential to be a devastation…He deserves what he got because this wasn’t just picking on somebody, this was conspiracy, and they terrified the whole school, the whole town.

Officer Dudley felt that while predicting students’ ultimate intentions might be impossible, punishment was warranted in this case because of the actions they had already taken. This is not to say that the punishment/crime control paradigm is not without its own share of inherent flaws (Clear 1994), but as the threat assessment approach emphasizes taking context and severity into consideration, its widespread adoption could lead to far more logical, proportionate, and equitable punishments and interventions than that of uniformly harsh zero tolerance policies.
CHAPTER FIVE:
AVERTING SCHOOL RAMPAGE: STUDENT INTERVENTION AMID A PERSISTANT CODE OF SILENCE

The study of averted rampage has clear practical significance beyond theoretical concerns about how school rampages are caused, manifested, and perceived. By learning from the numerous instances were school rampage threats came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted, there exists potential for future interventions and policies to be modeled on prior successes. In addition, empirical knowledge about how school rampage incidents have been averted is particularly important because many of the most popular and widespread school disciplinary policies and security practices implemented in recent years not only cannot be reliably linked to preventing rampage but can actually hinder the few preventative measures with an empirical basis.

The findings to follow indicate that it was people coming forward with knowledge about a potential school rampage to occur at some point in the future that has preempted these nearly fatal occurrences. However, even in many of these successfully averted incidents, numerous student bystanders exposed to threats still did not come forward; those who did were often not close associates or confidants of the accused students; and some of the people who did ultimately come forward did so as a result of being personally threatened or in order to deflect blame away from themselves rather than out of altruistic concern for others. This suggests that schools have not seen as radical a progression away from the student taboo inhibiting information sharing with authorities as previously asserted by scholars, practitioners, and the press. While numerous scholars and many of the school and police officials interviewed in this study acknowledge the important role that encouraging positive student bystander behavior plays in averting school rampage, few recognize how seriously ingrained the code of silence is among students. As a
result, this chapter suggests that scholars and practitioners may be overstating the degree to which students, after the widespread reporting of the Columbine attack, now take the threats of their peers seriously and report them to the authorities.

**Contemporary School Rampage Prevention Practices and the Student Code of Silence**

Since the Columbine massacre occurred in 1999, numerous short-sighted policies have been proposed and implemented in public schools across the nation. The American response has largely been to increase punitive disciplinary measures such as zero tolerance policies, surveillance via security cameras and resource police officers, and security through target hardening practices such as metal detectors and limited entrances. Closer scrutiny, however, indicates that these solutions lack solid empirical grounding as genuinely preventative and more likely reflect short-sighted efforts to reduce the anxieties of faculty, students, and parents. For example, schools continue to install security cameras and armed security guards specifically to prevent “another Columbine,” yet both of these measures were already in place at Columbine High School and did not deter or prevent the killings there (Kupchik & Monahan 2006: 625). Likewise, Red Lake Senior High School rampage killer Jeffrey Weise walked right through the metal detector at his school’s front entrance. When a security officer tried to confront Weise, he immediately shot and killed the man (Meloy & O’Toole 2011). Zero tolerance policies were adopted widely across the country by as early as 1993 (Skiba 2000), yet they did nothing to curb the increased number of multiple-victim rampage shootings that occurred in middle and high schools across the country in the late 1990’s. As Cornell and Sheras (2006; Cornell 2012) have pointed out, excluding students from school via suspensions or expulsions does nothing to resolve the problems or deescalate the conflicts of students, and such punishments have even
exacerbated the existing isolation and anger of previous school shooters (Levin & Madfis 2009; Madfis & Levin 2012).

In contrast, empirical scholarship on averted and completed school rampages has begun to formulate a very different approach towards violence prevention. In an early study of targeted school shootings, O’Toole (2000: 14) wrote about the prevalence and significance of a new concept she called “leakage” that occurs when “a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act. These clues could take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums.” In their seminal report exploring this emergent concept, Vossekuil et al. (2002: 25) found that at least one person had some prior knowledge about the plans of perpetrators in 81 percent of targeted school shooting incidents, while multiple people were aware in 59 percent of their sample. Of those individuals who possessed such important knowledge, 93 percent were the youthful peers of student perpetrators, such as friends, schoolmates, or siblings (ibid: 25).

Meanwhile, a major national report (Gaughan et al. 2001) found that only 54% of student respondents stated that they would tell an adult if they overheard a school peer discussing shooting someone. These discoveries heightened discussions about a student “code of silence” which stigmatizes and prohibits students from coming forward with pivotal information about their peers’ dangerous intentions to school and police authorities (Culley et al. 2006; Epstein 2002; Halbig 2000; MacDonald & Da Costa 1996; Merida 1999; Morris 2010; Stancato 2001; Spitalli 2003; Syvertsen et al. 2009).

The few studies that actually explore how prior incidents of school rampage have been prevented (Daniels et al. 2007; Daniels et al. 2010; Larkin 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Pollack et al. 2008) have largely located one common mechanism by which these potentially devastating
tragedies have been averted – prospective school shooters revealing their violent intentions to others (O’Toole’s leakage), who in turn disclosed this concerning information to school and police authorities. As Daniels and his colleagues (2007) concluded, the most common method by which rampage plots have been averted was by means of students breaking through the code of silence to inform school and/or police officials about the leakage of their peers.

As a result, schools have implemented anonymous hot lines and e-mail systems designed to mitigate the problematic code of silence (Teicher 2006; Wilson-Simmons et al. 2006; Wylie et al. 2010) and employed various bystander prevention programs to encourage young people to be more active about speaking up and stopping the problematic behaviors of their peers (Lodge & Frydenberg 2005; Twemlow et al. 2004). What’s more, Larkin (2009) has suggested that post-Columbine, students have become more likely to respond to threats by reporting them rather than acquiescing to the code of silence as they had before this notorious rampage. In an interview with *The New York Times* about a rampage attack that was averted in 2001, criminologist James Alan Fox declared that “it shows that more and more students are willing to come forward and inform on classmates” and that, while snitching was unacceptable before Columbine, it is “now O.K., and is often the only thing to do when you can prevent a tragedy to classmates” (Butterfield 2001). Likewise, in their study of fifteen student bystanders who had prior knowledge of four averted and four competed school rampage attacks, Pollack and his colleagues (2008: 12) revealed that several students explicitly recognized the Columbine attack as a “wake-up call” after which threats would be taken more seriously by students increasingly willing to break through the code of silence to inform authorities. Even more recently, delinquency expert and director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Delbert Elliott, stated that,
“It’s a very good sign that the norm around ‘snitching’ or being a tattle-tale is changing” (McCrimmon 2009: 5).

In addition to the assertion that peer pressure against “snitching” on or “ratting” out other students has potentially diminished due, at least in part, to recent extreme forms of school violence, Pollack (et al. 2008) found that another aspect of school culture was influential in determining whether or not students came forward to reveal information to school staff regarding threats. This study concluded that bystanders who alerted authorities stated that, “they were influenced by positive relations with one or more adults, teachers, or staff, and/or a feeling within the school that the information would be taken seriously and addressed appropriately” (ibid: 7). Likewise, those students who demonstrated an unwillingness to come forward indicated that they anticipated negative responses from school officials if they had shared information. One student bystander did not come forward because he lacked a positive connection to anyone in a position of authority in the school and commented that he found them “too judgmental,” while another student similarly indicated that he didn’t tell anyone about the gun he knew was on school property because he anticipated negative reactions such as getting into trouble or being interrogated for stepping forward (ibid: 12). This finding is backed up by plentiful research confirming the positive correlation between cohesive, supportive, and trusting school climates and student willingness to report threats of violence in both middle and high schools (Brank et al., 2007; Brinkley & Saarnio 2006; Fein et al. 2002; Syvertson et al 2009: Wylie 2010) and college settings (Sułkowski 2011).

It remains unclear, however, from the available empirical evidence to what extent the student code of silence has in fact been diminished in the post-Columbine era and what role positive student bystander behavior and beneficial school climates have played in averting school
rampage incidents since that infamous day on April 20, 1999. Likewise, scholars of school rampage lack a clear understanding about the types of relationships that exist between the students who leak threats and those who come forward (i.e. close friends vs. strangers or acquaintances), know little about the process by which students come forward (i.e. anonymously or openly), and know almost nothing about which authority figures it is whom students confide in when they do break through the code of silence (i.e. teachers, administrators, counselors, police officers, etc.). This chapter explores these questions via the detailed analysis of eleven instances of averted school rampage. Unlike prior studies that have relied upon content analysis of newspapers (Daniels et al. 2007; Larkin 2009) or interviews with student bystanders (Pollack et al. 2008) or school officials (Daniels et al. 2010), this study entailed triangulating data from media accounts, legal documents, and interviews with school and police officials, and therefore, is able to contrast how interested parties explain their perspectives on what led to successfully averted incidents with news media accounts and official documentation from the justice system. Such triangulation proves crucial, for officials’ perceptions of events did not always form a consensus with one another, nor with news reporting or legal documentation.  

7 While many details described by respondents about the cases can be tested against their colleagues as well as via legal documentation and media reporting, assertions about what occurrences and factors were most crucial in averting potential rampages are inherently subjective and open to interpretation. Thus, while by and large, most respondents involved in the same incident agreed upon the basic elements of their case and how it was prevented generally, several emphasized distinct components as playing the most crucial role in the successful outcome. For example, the respondents involved in case F credited their own connection to the case as being a vital factor, if not the crucial determining one. The police officer who arrested these students, Captain Dante, believed that they came forward at least in part as a result of the active shooter drill he conducted a few months before. He noted that “there was a lot of talk of the perpetrators of this crime saying, ‘Jeez, the police are prepared for it now. Look what they did.’” The Principal, Mr. McGowan, believed the incident was prevented largely because of the trust built between students and staff at a leadership summit he organized, while both a school resource officer and adjustment counselor at the school discussed the role rapport with students played in making them more comfortable coming forward. This is not to say that any of these accounts are necessarily inaccurate, and they may in fact all reflect different elements of the same story. It is, however, important to recognize that all respondents experience events through their own lenses.
data sources consulted in this study enable a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the role of bystander involvement in preventing school rampage.

**A Diminished Student Code of Silence in the Post-Columbine Era**

Many respondents discussed the student code of silence as an incredibly significant factor in rampage violence prevention. Exactly in line with numerous scholars (Elliott in McRimmon 2009; Fox in Butterfield 2001; Larkin 2009; Pollack et al. 2008), this was framed, for the most part, in the context of a new post-Columbine era wherein the code had been vastly diminished as a result of extreme cases of school violence. For example, the head of school security in case A, Mr. Pullman, stated that:

> I think one of the things that Columbine has done is it has broken in the old adage you know don’t rat out your brother kind of a concept. And I think the kids are learning that there is some point when you should be saying something. Obviously, you’re never going to get them to say everything, but I think the point has been made about the more important things.

Echoing this same idea, Mr. Sacco, the principal of the high school where case G occurred, pointed out how he believed things had changed since the Columbine attack. He commented that:

> It absolutely made kids much more vigilant about things going on around them…I think it made kids less afraid to speak up if something wasn’t sitting right with them. And since that era, I’ve often had a kid come by, and they’re pained and they’re tortured because they’re thinking about that. They’re thinking about could I have been carrying this around for an hour or two hours or three hours, and they’ll say, “I’ve got to tell you this,” and so I think that’s the real good thing that’s happened.

One principal, Mr. Cooper, even felt that school lockdown drills, where students practice preparedness for a potential intruder or attack, helped to mitigate the code of silence as a constant reminder of Columbine. He believed that:
Lockdown drills serve as a reminder to students and staff, and students especially, that, unfortunately, in this day and age, we do need to be ready to try to go into a lockdown. If that helps students to be more aware, if they see something that doesn’t sit right with them, then they might report that to somebody.

Thus, it was frequently understood by school and police officials that, in the wake of Columbine, students were much more likely to come forward when they gained knowledge about their peers’ intentions to do something dangerous or destructive.

**Breaking the Code with a Positive School Climate**

In addition to asserting the significance of Columbine as a watershed event easing the stigma against students coming forward, there was near unanimity about the appropriate methods to weaken the student code of silence. When asked the best manner in which to diminish a student code of silence, nearly all of the school and police officials expressed a firm belief in forging cohesive, supportive, and trusting school environments – views very much in sync with existing scholarship (Brank et al., 2007; Brinkley & Saarnio 2006; Fein et al. 2002; Sulkowski 2011; Syvertson et al 2009: Wylie 2010). Almost without exception, respondents noted the importance of fostering an atmosphere where “students care about their school” because they “feel involved and part of the community,” and “students feel supported” and “know they can trust the adults in the building” because of “predictable and consistent” “close relationships” of “dignity and mutual respect.”

This pattern emerged in the abstract, as officials felt confident that a trusting school environment where kids feel safe confiding in the adults in their school building would ultimately mitigate hypothetical threats in the future. For example, Mr. Flaherty, the principal at the high school where incident K took place, stated that:
The best mechanism we have as a deterrent for these sorts of violent acts is good relationships between kids and adults, because kids will tell you. Kids will tell you when something happens. And if they saw a kid with a knife or they heard about it in the locker room... they’ll tell you and that’s the best security you can have, better than any policeman with a gun, better than metal detectors, better than locks and cameras. That’s the best security... That is the best insurance you could ever buy.

On a more experiential level, this pattern of responses was also evident among officials’ statements explaining why the specific incidents at their schools were averted. They often credited their schools’ positive environment with making it easier for the student bystanders involved in their particular threats to break through the student code of silence.

In one instance that demonstrates this typical explanation, the vice principal of the high school during case C, Mr. O’Brien, noted that his current school displays a particularly trusting relationship, in contrast to another school he worked at previously which had “a less respectful and collaborative environment, where what the principal said, goes.” The principal at Mr. O’Brien’s school, Mr. Fernandez, similarly asserted the vital role he felt school culture played when he described why their incident was averted. He stated that:

It was the result of a combination of relationships and taking things seriously and investigating fully that led to us averting what could have been another Columbine, if not worse... So the prevention factors were investigating fully and also having... a positive student culture where kids can talk to us and we can talk to them.

Dr. England, the school psychologist in case B, shared Mr. Fernandez’s belief that positive relationships between school staff and students were crucial in preventing the incident she dealt with at her school. She shared that:

What happened was that students came forward and told us about [the threat], so I think the fact that there are connections, such close connections, between administrators and students here that you’re much more likely to have students share that kind of information with you.

In addition to emphasizing the value of a positive school climate in general, some officials specified particular aspects of their own schools as being important in diminishing the
code of silence. One house principal, Mr. Harris, emphasized the positive impact that smaller class sizes and lower student/faculty ratios played in building the trusting environment which he felt ultimately encouraged a student to come forward in case E. Mr. Harris pointed out that, “We feel that smaller feel created better relationships for kids at their school and more of a connection and more care for their school. And that led to one student coming forward.” Several other officials highlighted the excellent rapport that specific individuals, such as certain teachers, counselors, and resource officers had with students. For example, when Principal Fernandez discussed the student who revealed information about his friend’s plot to his teacher, he described the teacher in the following manner:

The teacher was a favorite among the students. He’s a young teacher…And students report that they like this teacher. They know that he works hard for them and that he cares about the school…I mean this is a guy who will volunteer for anything and go anywhere. He’s a can-do kind of guy, and I’ve been able to depend on him for a number of different things. So he gets relationships with the students, and that’s why he [the student who came forward] knew that he could trust him to do the right thing or genuinely help him when he shared the information.

Similar praise about unique rapport was heaped upon other officials who were the first authority figures entrusted with crucial information about potential attacks. One counselor was said to possess a “supportive and caring personality.” A school resource officer was described in the following manner:

She was not someone you would think of as a police officer. She handed out lollipops. She was very, very easy to talk to. Not scary in the least bit, not strict and formal as you would assume a police officer to be. So she was very caring and kind and very, very different than what you would assume a school resource officer to be.

Therefore, according to the accounts of nearly all school and police officials interviewed in this study, the fact that rampage attacks upon their schools were thwarted could be attributed largely to students coming forward as a result of a positive school climate where staff had forged an inclusive sense of community as well as trusting and supportive relationships with their
students. However, closer scrutiny of the cases themselves reveals a more complicated story and casts doubt on the extent to which the student code of silence has actually been diminished post-Columbine.

**Breaking the Code – Interventions through Leakage**

Intervention as a result of leakage took four distinct forms in terms of who the informants were in relation to the school rampage threats and how these informants came to be aware of crucial information about these threats before coming forward to school and police authorities. These categories included bystanders who gained information indirectly from students accused of planning a school rampage, trusted confidants who were directly informed of plans by accused students, targets who were directly threatened by accused students, and co-conspirators who were directly involved, at least at some point and at some level, in the plots themselves. The discourse surrounding the code of silence and student leakage has heretofore only recognized the first two categories of student intervention by bystanders and confidants (though these have not been previously differentiated), and so the characteristics distinguishing these groupings warrant additional consideration.

*Indirectly Informed Bystanders*

The most common form of intervention, which occurred in five instances in the sample (cases E, G, I, J, and K), was through innocent bystanders who were not intentionally entrusted with secretive information by the accused students themselves, but who came to know details about a rampage threat indirectly by inadvertently coming across web pages, hit lists, or threatening graffiti written on school property. In case E, for example, a student who was a casual acquaintance of the students accused of plotting a rampage attack reported the existence
of disturbing posts and images on their social network website profiles to the school resource officer and an assistant principal. Case G came to light in a fairly analogous manner, when several students expressed their concerns to school administrators about one of their peers having what they perceived to be a hit list of names written in his notebook. Likewise, in case J, a teacher saw one of her students writing out a hit list on a piece of paper at the girl’s desk and subsequently notified the school principal. In case I, a teacher and several students noticed a threatening message scribbled onto a wall in a boy’s bathroom stall and informed the school principal. Similarly, in case K, students who noticed a threatening message written on a wall in one of their boy’s bathroom stalls informed teachers who in turn told the school principal and school resource officer.

**Directly Informed Confidants**

The second most common category of intervention occurred by means of people coming forward who had gained direct information about threats as a result of being confided in by the students accused of plotting attacks. In case A, a student who had been sent threatening messages and video clips through the internet informing her of her friend’s desire to attack his school led her to tell her mother who then called the local police department. When questioned by police, the accused student confessed his plans to commit a rampage attack and an arsenal of weaponry was discovered in his bedroom. In case B, several students came forward to tell administrators that one of their peers had brought explosives to school with him. When school officials later searched this student’s backpack, they discovered numerous explosives. In case C, John, a high school student, stole guns from his father and gave them to his friend Tim to hold onto until they were needed to carry out the attack. John promised Tim that if he held onto the guns for him, he would not harm Tim or Tim’s girlfriend. Tim did ultimately reveal John’s plans
to his parents. Tim’s mother helped Tim get rid of John’s weapons by throwing them into a local stream (an act for which she would later be prosecuted herself), and Tim’s father later informed the school’s principal and vice principal about John’s plans to commit a rampage attack at the school. Shortly after being questioned by the school administrators and denying knowledge about the plot, Tim took it upon himself to tell one of his teachers about his complicity in John’s plot. This teacher then immediately informed the school administration. In case F, the girlfriend of one of the accused students alerted school officials about the numerous detailed threats made by one of her boyfriend’s friends, though she did not come forward until after her boyfriend had already been accused of planning the attack by several of his co-conspirators.

**Threatened Targets**

A third form of intervention to occur was when people who had actually been threatened by students came forward to disclose this ominous behavior. Numerous scholars (Pollack et al. 2008; Reddy et al. 2001; Vossekuil et al. 2002) have noted that targeted attackers who pose serious risks rarely threaten their victims in advance, but Meloy and his colleagues (2001) found that the majority of the adolescent mass murderers studied in their sample did, in fact, directly threaten their targets before committing crimes. The data in this study revealed two incidents (cases D and H) in which people who felt directly threatened by interactions with students accused of plotting school attacks alerted authorities to this threatening behavior, though only one incident of threatening occurred in advance and entailed a student coming forward. The students in case D tried and failed to carjack a vehicle, and police later arrested them while they were walking down a street with an arsenal of weapons. It was their potential carjacking victim, an adult stranger with no connection to the students or school, who alerted police. Perhaps as a result of the student code of silence, it is well established that juvenile victims in general are far
less likely to report crimes committed against them to police than are adult victims (Watkins 2005). However, in case H, it was one of numerous students who had been threatened by name on a social networking website by several other students who informed one of his parents of the troubling website exchange. This parent, in turn, called the President of the School Board to express concern.

**Involved Co-Conspirators**

Academic and public discourse has generally neglected to consider the role of co-conspirators who participate in developing a school rampage plot at some point and at some level but who later come forward to prevent the attack from taking place. The one exception is that of Larkin (2009), who noted that one of the participants in a rampage plot that was averted in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 2001 came forward because she feared for the safety of her favorite teacher. While incidents such as the one at New Bedford High School, where co-conspirators come forward, may be more uncommon than any of the prior categories of intervention through leakage, case F also followed this pattern. The sequence of events in case F is rather complicated, but as this particular incident seriously complicates and extends existing narratives about student bystander behavior and the code of silence, it warrants extensive elaboration.

The facts of this case begin when Tommy, a student who would later be charged and convicted of conspiracy to commit murder and threatening to use deadly weapons, is discovered hiding a knife from his father during the course of an emotional outburst. Fearing that Tommy is suicidal, his father subsequently has him hospitalized at a psychiatric facility. Matthew, the other student later convicted on conspiracy charges, visits Tommy in the hospital. While there, Matthew becomes convinced that Tommy is being “brainwashed” and has abandoned their joint plan to attack the school along with two other students, Sean and Justin. Matthew makes an
angry scene at the hospital in front of Tommy’s family and girlfriend. After Tommy is released from the hospital, other students observe a positive change in his behavior. Eventually, Tommy and Matthew get into a fight with one another at a party, and Tommy tells Matthew never to speak to him again. According to Tommy, Tommy also tells Matthew at this time that he hopes someone finds out about Matthew’s plot.

Matthew then takes Sean and Justin, the other two student co-conspirators, with him to go speak to the adjustment counselor and later one of the school’s resource officers. Matthew tells both Sean and Justin not to speak during these meetings because he should do the talking, since he knows how to handle cops due to the fact that his father is a police officer. Matthew then tells these school officials that they are all afraid of Tommy, who has been threatening them, mentioning how he wanted to attain weapons and commit a rampage attack against the school. Both Sean and Justin go along with this plan out of fear of Matthew, who had assaulted Sean shortly before this at a party, and also because Matthew had threatened to cut out their tongues if they told anyone. Matthew subsequently blames everything on Tommy, while Sean and Justin concur in relative silence. During this time, Matthew assures Sean and Justin that they will get away with concealing their own involvement, and Matthew destroys evidence linking them to the plot. Police search Tommy’s home and find maps and lists of weaponry in his bedroom.

Much later, in front of the grand jury, Justin finally has a conversation with police away from Matthew and informs them of Matthew’s actual deep involvement in the conspiracy. Sean and Justin are granted immunity in exchange for their testimony in the trial of Tommy. The prosecuting attorneys, arresting officers, school resource officers, and adjustment counselor all felt that Matthew went to the police because he believed he might get caught after his relationship with Tommy had deteriorated and he no longer trusted that Tommy would keep
silent about their plan. In contrast, Matthew’s defense attorneys argued that he abandoned his initial participation in the plot and actually stopped the attack from taking place (though they also denied that any of the accused students ever intended to carry out the attack in the first place). The defense’s argument was ultimately unsuccessful in court, and was also not believed by any of the school or police officials interviewed in this study because of the fact that, when Matthew initially came forward, he had clearly lied to everyone in order to hide his true involvement in the plot.

The manner in which this case came to light in order to be averted does not fit in line with the typical rhetoric of an emergent willingness to break the code of silence as a result of Columbine or perhaps a positive school climate. Interestingly, several school officials who handled this case still credited their healthy school environment with how the incident was averted. Mr. McGowan, the principal in case F, noted that:

The bottom line is, it’s about relationships. And when your kids feel comfortable being able to come and talk to you about stuff. We knew about it [the rampage plot] because of what happened in that Leadership Summit, and the fact that that kid trusted [the school resource officer] because she was with him for those two or three days, and he felt comfortable being able to come and say “I don’t know if this is good.”

One of the arresting officers in this case, Captain Dante, shared this sentiment. He stated that the school counselor and resource officers:

were close enough with the kids and built a relationship with the kids that they felt like they could sit down and tell them what was going on…when they thought twice, they went to somebody they felt comfortable talking to because they had built a relationship with them. And then I think that’s the biggest thing.

However, it was not the case that students ultimately decided to turn to adults whom they trusted and reveal hidden plans to them. In fact, the plotters lied to the school officials they approached when they came forward and denied their own involvement. This was not an example of a trusting environment encouraging innocent bystanders to come forward, but one in which three
members of a school rampage conspiracy came forward to inform on the fourth member of their group in order to divert attention and blame away from themselves.

**How Interventions Occurred and Who was Trusted**

All available information about these incidents indicates that when people came forward, they did so openly rather than anonymously. To some extent, this may reflect the fact that the incidents under investigation in this study ranged from the years 2000-2009 and anonymous reporting systems have only been implemented in the last few years – for example, one of the more prominent anonymous tip lines just began serving the state of Colorado in September of 2004 (McMillin 2009; Payne & Elliott 2011).

When people did come forward to reveal information to authorities, they were typically students (as in cases A, B, C, E, F, G, H, I, and K), though it was an adult who notified the police in case D and teachers alerted school administration in cases I and J. This speaks to Stueve and her colleagues’ (2006) call for scholars to expand the definition of bystanders beyond students to include parents, teachers, and school staff members, because they may also possess information about potential violence. In this vein, parents also deserve credit for approaching the authorities in three cases (A, C, and H), as students in these cases revealed information to their parents before or instead of school or police officials.

More generally, beyond the three instances where parents were alerted, students informed resource officers in two cases (E and F), administrators in four cases (B, E, G, I), counselors in one case (F), and teachers in two cases (C and K). It is only the instances in which students came forward to school or police officials that technically qualify as breaks in the code of silence. While these criteria apply in seven out of the eleven cases (B, C, E, F, G, I, and K), the adult victim and teacher involved respectively in cases D and J do not qualify, nor do the two
instances (cases A and H) in which students informed only their parents rather than school or police officials. This suggests that, in addition to the expanded notion of bystanders proposed by Stueve et al. (2006), perhaps scholars should similarly contemplate whether or not students who reveal information to their parents technically qualify as breaching the code of silence.

**Following the Code – The Persistence of Bystander Inaction**

Even in the cases in which some students came forward – and that could subsequently be deemed successes in terms of illustrating positive examples of a broken code of silence – such an unequivocally rosy interpretation oversimplifies the truth. While student bystanders, trusted confidants, and targets deserve credit for individually coming forward and valuing school safety over student norms and concerns about status, positive bystander behavior on the part of a few students often occurred in the larger context of many more students keeping silent about their own knowledge of threats.

Case A perhaps best illustrates this pattern, for while it is true that a female student is responsible for revealing the threatening behavior of one of her friends by informing her parents and then the police, many more friends and acquaintances of this accused student had been exposed by varying degrees to his disturbing comments and actions. In fact, the accused student in this case, Jessie, leaked various elements of his school rampage plot to a great number of his peers. When later questioned by the police, many of his fellow students acknowledged being aware of his deep fascination with the Columbine attack, as well as guns and explosives more generally. He had posted numerous references to Columbine on his social networking profile page, which many of his friends and school acquaintances read.
Further, several students indicated that he had showed them guns, maps, and/or bombs that he had constructed or detonated at some point prior. Jake, a close friend of the student plotter, said that, after fights with his parents, Jessie made comments about shooting up and using bombs in the high school. Jake added that when Jessie was angry, he would take out all of his knives and guns and lay them out from the smallest to the biggest on his bed. Jake also stated that he saw a map of the high school that Jessie had drawn in his bedroom. Jake said that Jessie discussed an attack once every couple of months, but indicated that he hadn’t mentioned it for some time before he was arrested. Tim, another friend of Jessie’s, reported that when Jessie got mad, he would sometimes say that he wanted to shoot the kids whose names he had listed on a sheet of paper, but Tim thought Jessie was only joking. Another student, Anthony, said that throughout the previous fall and spring, Jessie sometime talked about how cool it would be if something like Columbine would happen at their high school, and he said that, if it happened there, he hoped that black and gay people would die. Jessie indicated to Anthony that he would shoot these people if he could, and then he told him that he wanted to shoot up the high school, Columbine style, at the end of their sophomore year. Anthony thought Jessie was joking when he said these things because he would always laugh during or after he said them. Yet another student, Jennifer, said that in the previous spring, Jessie joked that he wanted to bring a gun to school and kill all the kids he hated at lunchtime. She indicated that he brought this idea of a school shooting up many times but always said he was joking. Roughly a month before he got arrested, Jessie said to Jennifer, “Don’t go to school tomorrow.” When she asked him why, he repeated, “Don’t go to school tomorrow. I like you.” Jennifer stated that after this exchange, Jessie said that he was only joking, though she later admitted that she understood this to mean that he was talking about committing a Columbine shooting in the future.
As Detective Brown, the school resource officer directly involved in this incident, commented, “These are all different people, interviewed separately, that are saying the same thing...which makes you wonder why no one said anything.” Thus, at least four students entrusted with intimate knowledge about Jesse’s intentions as his confidants did not come forward to reveal what they knew until after Jesse had been arrested. When only one in five students (and these four were merely those that the police had extensive knowledge about because they were willing to provide testimony) came forward to the authorities, this is perhaps more of an indication of the continued resilience and power of the student code of silence, rather than a success story of a school somehow breaking through the code via a positive school atmosphere.

Case A was not alone in illustrating this problematic trend, as many other instances which could potentially be praised for illustrating positive bystander behavior or broken codes of silence actually revealed, upon closer inspection, many more examples of leakage that had gone unnoticed, dismissed, or ignored. In case E, one student came forward to the school’s resource officer and then to a house principal in order to inform them of his friend’s nefarious plans. However, several other students had been asked to join in on the murderous plot; they declined not only to participate in it, but also to inform any adults about its existence.

In case F, the four student plotters attempted to recruit at least two other students to participate in their conspiracy to attack the school. While these students rejected the offer to join the group of student plotters, none of the reticent would-be recruits ever came forward to reveal what they knew to school or police authorities. One of the school resource officers involved in this case, Officer Dudley, stated that:

We had at least fifteen witnesses that did statements in this case...This evolved from nothing and all of a sudden you’ve got fifteen kids that knew about this for the last year
and a half. And it turned out that a couple of the kids that were key to the verdicts failed to be recruited...and some of those kids turned out to be our best witnesses...But nobody came forward until these boys came forth [to blame their conspiracy on one of their accomplices].

In addition to the students they tried and failed to recruit, one member of the conspiracy also told a female student that if anything were to happen, she would be safe because he considered her a friend, and several other female students were explicitly informed about their plans to shoot up the school without expressly being invited as participants. As previously mentioned, only one of these female students came forward to school officials, and this only took place after initial accusations had already been made.

In case C, the student plotter intended to tell several of his friends not to go to school on the date he planned to carry out his attack, though it is uncertain how many others knew but did not come forward. Likewise, in cases B, G, H, I, and K, while some students came forward, it is uncertain from all available information how many other students knew about these threats or plans in advance who did not do so. In cases D and J, it was adults rather than students who came forward to alert authorities, and it is also unclear if any student bystanders, confidants, or targets were aware of or subjected to their peers’ threats.

**Discussion**

Ultimately, the findings above confirm previous research and reporting about the manner in which it is people coming forward with important information gained via leakage that leads to rampage attacks being averted. They also reveal that the dominant approach to school violence deterrence via punitive disciplinary policies and enhanced security did not play a prominent preventative role. These events were not deterred due to the presence of metal detectors, locked doors, security cameras, or resource officers. In fact, many of the student plotters considered
these developments to be minor stumbling blocks easily resolved through additional preparations among already detailed plans. For example, some plots entailed killing or disarming officers and bringing weapons into the school buildings before entrance doors would be locked for the day. Additionally, though the logic of zero tolerance is similarly deterrence based, wherein strict punishments for threatening behavior or weapons possession in school would dissuade students from these activities, most of the schools where rampages were averted displayed some elements of zero tolerance (though support for the approach varied widely), and all of them were subject to the mandate of the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act wherein bringing a firearm to school warrants a mandatory year long expulsion. Thus, these myriad and copious deterrence based strategies cannot be credited with thwarting these homicidal threats. However, the data do indicate that school resource officers can play a preventative if not deterrent role in averting rampage, as it was resource officers whom students trusted enough to approach in two cases (E and F, though the latter incident is less indicative of a genuine display of trust), and they did help garner vital confessions from accused students in cases A, C, and E.

In addition, the findings suggest that numerous potentially lethal rampage attacks were in fact prevented, at least in part, as a result of school cultures sufficiently positive for students to feel comfortable telling school authorities about threatening behaviors that concerned them. However, in case F, school officials credited a positive school culture for averting the attack, even though this was undoubtedly not how the incident played out. The same could be said for incident A, where the head of school security praised his own school’s positive school culture, when it was actually a student from another town and school district who actually came forward to the authorities, while none of the students at his school who were exposed to leakage did so.
Thus, there may be some tendency on the part of officials to attribute undue credit for averting these incidents to positive school climates.

Certainly, students breaking through the code of silence still constituted the major manner by which most events have been thwarted. That said, close inspection of the details of these cases indicates a murkier and less optimistic picture than the one painted by scholars (Elliott in McCrimmon 2009; Fox in Butterfield 2001; Larkin 2009; Pollack et al. 2008) and generally recognized by the school and police officials interviewed in this study, many of whom agreed that the student code of silence drastically diminished in the wake of numerous highly publicized rampage shooting attacks such as the one at Columbine High School. It seems that both scholars and practitioners came to this conclusion through media reporting (such as Bower 2001; Butterfield 2001; Robertson 2001) upon numerous recent incidents where rampage plots were averted as a result of students coming forward with information gained through leakage. However, by carefully investigating incidents of averted rampage in detail, two distinct elements of the findings of this study suggest previous conclusions based upon superficial accounts in the media are at best premature.

First, those who came forward were not uniformly close friends and confidants of student plotters, as they were also mere acquaintances, the victims of threats, and even the conspirators themselves. MacDonald and Da Costa (1996) found that students were more willing to report victimization if the perpetrator was not a friend of theirs, and Pollack and his colleagues (2008: 13) noted that one of their student respondents came forward in part because of the fact that “he was not close friends with the potential attackers so that allowed him to be more objective when he learned of a possible attack plan.” Thus, it should perhaps not be entirely surprising that authorities are often alerted to the presence of rampage threats by people less close to the
accused perpetrators. This does suggest, however, that a student code of silence among close friends remains a significant challenge. Second, this concern about students maintaining secrecy in their most personal friendships is exacerbated by the fact that many of the adolescents exposed to leakage who were the closest to the students accused of plotting attacks did not in fact come forward to authorities. More generally, several cases entailed more students exposed to the leakage of their peers who did not ultimately come forward than the number of students who did in fact do so. Thus, while some scholars and media coverage have depicted even one student who comes forward and has any type of relationship to an accused plotter as evidence that the code of silence has diminished, this narrative is complicated when one considers the actual relationships between students bystanders and plotters as well as the rarely reported on but numerous students who have not come forward even in these averted incidents.

Therefore, if scholars want to interpret these averted incidents as an indication that the student code of silence has diminished, it is worth considering more specific measures or levels of both leakage and, for lack of a better term, code breaking (i.e. positive bystander intervention by students). Meloy and O’Toole (2011: 525) suggested that researchers need more sophisticated studies of leakage that explore the various forms it takes in order to ultimately discern which, if any, are the most “predictive of actual targeted violence.” In the same way, breaks in the code of silence are not uniform and should not be depicted as such by scholars proclaiming their significance and increased occurrence. It may be the case that students who come to be directly informed of threatening information by their closest friends are exposed to the most profoundly significant form of leakage. It is almost certainly the case, however, that these close confidants who then share that knowledge with authorities engage in a far more substantial breech in the code of silence than students who come forward after being targeted
themselves or who only know the students they are accusing as distant acquaintances. Thus, instances in line with the former type (such as in cases A, B, and C) constitute a far better indicator of a broken student code of silence than instances of the latter types (such as E, G, H, I, and K),\(^8\) though all of these latter cases do demonstrate some indication of a willingness to break through the code. At the same time, when only one student comes forward though many more possess information about a threat of violence (as was documented in cases A and E), this should not be counted as equivalent evidence of a broken code of silence as would an incident in which multiple or even all students with relevant information came forward. Thus, future scholarship on both leakage and the code of silence must consider these nuanced distinctions in order to properly measure and understand the role that both phenomena play in averting school rampage and other forms of targeted school violence.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study ultimately suggest that, while students’ coming forward with important information about threats constitutes the key manner by which rampage attacks are averted, a student code of silence persists beyond the previous assumptions and expectations of academics, police officers, and school officials. This confers with Wylie and colleagues (2010: 351) assertion that “[a]lthough policies aimed at improving school climate may increase a student’s willingness to report and are important in their own right, improving a school’s climate may be a daunting task.” Syvertson, Flanagan, and Stout (2009: 230) point out that there are potentially “scores of reasons” suggested by decades of bystander research which may explain

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\(^8\) Cases D and J involved adults coming forward rather than students so neither represents a breach in the student code of silence. While the particulars of case F also disqualify it from counting as breaking the code, the averted New Bedford case indicates that co-conspirators coming forward may still constitute code breaking under some circumstances.
why students do not intervene in dangerous situations, beyond that of a strict adherence to the code of silence. Bystander scholarship highlights the importance of diffused responsibility, the disinclination to intercede while part of a group because individuals anticipate that others will respond instead (Mathes & Kahn 1975). As numerous students were aware of the threats made in several of these cases, it is feasible that some students neglected to come forward because they expected their peers to do so. The literature on bystanders also considers the role of ambiguity about the situation (Latane´ & Darley 1968). Within the school context, students may not approach adults if they lack certainty about their peers’ intentions, and perhaps interpret legitimate threats as innocent jokes or comments. Though inaction on the part of students exposed to leakage likely results from a combination of these forces (Pollack et al. 2008), and much work remains to be done in the realm of student bystander awareness and education generally, the findings of this study reveal an important misunderstanding in how both many academics and practitioners discuss healthy and successful school environments.

Plentiful empirical evidence (such as Brank et al., 2007; Brinkley & Saarnio 2006; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Fein et al. 2002; Sulkowski 2011; Syvertson et al 2009; Wylie et al. 2010) exists to indicate the relationship between cohesive, supportive, and trusting school climates and positive student bystander behavior, and so the problem is not so much that scholars and educators mistake the importance of a beneficial school climate. Rather, the problem is that they are largely mischaracterizing the current atmosphere of American public schools. Despite institutional objectives of inclusiveness and the unquestionable significance of certain especially kind and empathetic school and police officials, any honest examination of the recent developments in American schooling reveals a significant trend away from inclusivity, empathy, and supportiveness, and towards the punitive discipline and enhanced security that Hirschfield
and Celinska (2011) label “school criminalization” (see also Hirschfield 2008; Kupchik 2010; Kupchik & Monahan 2006; Lyons & Drew 2006; Monahan & Torres 2010; Muschert & Peguero 2010; Nolan 2011). The increased use of law enforcement mindsets, personnel, and technologies in schools, as well as the increasing transfer of school discipline to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Advancement Project 2005; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt 2010; Wald & Losen 2003), have direct consequences upon the overall school climate. As Casella (2001: 35) aptly described, such “policies…bolster punishment in favor of pedagogy, control in favor of understanding.” The result is that many of these features erode trusting relationships between school staff and students (Lintott 2004; Noguera 1995; Watts & Erevelles 2004).

Perhaps most importantly with regard to this study, this has direct consequences for the prevention of school rampage. Syvertson and her colleagues (2009: 229) describe the dilemma eloquently when they conclude that:

In this post-Columbine era, public education has seen an increase in zero tolerance policies…It is possible that these policies create an environment that actually discourages students from revealing their concerns to teachers because of the increased “costs” of revelation…For most adolescents, divulging a peer’s confidence is a difficult decision that may be intensified by a zero tolerance climate. As was reflected in our findings, the more students believed that going to a teacher or principal would result in trouble, the more likely they were to ignore a peer’s dangerous plan or to simply tell a friend (but not an adult).

Similarly, Cornell (2012) recently explained that, “Students may be more willing to report threats when they see that school authorities are not taking a punitive, zero tolerance approach, but instead are concerned with solving problems and preventing conflicts from escalating into violence.”

School criminalization diminishes positive bystander behavior not only as a result of lost trust due to excessive punitiveness, but the perception that such discipline is prejudicial or unfair may similarly lead to fewer students coming forward. Morris (2010) found a dominant code of
silence at both of the high schools he studied, one a predominantly African American urban school and the other a predominantly white rural school. During his fieldwork, the urban school installed security cameras and began a practice where principals, hall monitors, and school resource officers “scoured school grounds to ensure student rule compliance” (ibid: 258). Upon reflecting on this development, Morris (2010: 270) proposed that:

such criminal justice inspired policies would exacerbate the code of silence…Because stop snitching [culture] emerges…based on ambivalence to authority and an emphasis on independent conflict resolution, cracking down with more authoritarian or invasive measures would only increase the code’s strength. Particularly, if students perceive strict or invasive school discipline as biased, they might resist school authority more vehemently, increasing the social distance between students and the school.

Unfortunately, it has been widely documented that African American youth are vastly overrepresented in school suspensions and expulsions (Casella 2001; 2003). This is the case even when socioeconomic indicators are held constant (Skiba et al. 2002), and when their punishments are compared directly to white students who committed identical infractions (Fenning & Rose 2007). A recent government report (Civil Rights Data Collection 2012) indicated that, during the 2009-2010 school year, over 70% of students involved in school arrests were African American or Hispanic, while African Americans accounted for 46% of those suspended multiple times and 39% of expulsions. Even zero tolerance policies, which were formed at least in part with the goal of objectivity in mind, have resulted in disproportionate application towards minority students (Kupchik 2010; Robbins 2005).

Prolific scholarship indicates that perceptions of racial discrimination erode confidence in the police and criminal justice system, especially among minorities (Bayley & Mendelsohn 1969; Russell-Brown 2008; Weitzer 1996), and that this often results in members of these communities adopting what Anderson (1999) calls a “code of the street,” one component of which is a reluctance to notify or help the police. Morris (2010) suggests that the student of code
of silence is essentially the adolescent version of Anderson’s code, and this suggests that, to the extent that students perceive school discipline as fundamentally unjust due to racial prejudice, they will be far less likely to entrust school and police officials with important but potentially incriminating information.

Therefore, even though many of the recent measures focusing upon punitive discipline and enhanced security were designed specifically to improve school safety in the event of a rampage attack, these very practices significantly hinder the one means by which nearly all rampage attacks are actually thwarted – positive bystander behavior on the part of students aware of leakage. Kohn (2004: 26) deftly clarifies the most salient point here when he states that such punitive policy “isn't merely ineffective—it’s actively counterproductive.” That is, doing nothing in response to school rampage fears would have been better than many of the authoritarian practices schools have put in place. In order to avert future attacks from occurring, schools must abandon these punitive measures and improve upon the means by which these events are actually prevented, via forging genuinely positive school climates that encourage student bystanders to intervene in a responsible manner. The facts that such beneficial learning environments would likely improve educational outcomes and inhibit many of the root causes of school rampage in the first place are merely additional bonuses.
CHAPTER SIX:  
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Through in-depth interviews with school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) as well as content analysis of news reporting and legal documentation covering eleven averted incidents of school rampage in the Northeastern United States, this dissertation explores perceptions of and reactions to threats of multiple-victim school shootings. Given the dearth of empirical scholarship on averted incidents of school rampage, this study unearths important data on how school and police officials explain their concerns about threats of rampage violence, the process by which threats are assessed, and how previous school rampage plots have been averted. The research presented in this dissertation makes a strong contribution to the literatures on mass murder, school criminalization, violence risk assessment, and bystander intervention in the school setting. It also has direct relevance to school violence prevention policy.

Summary and Implications of Findings

The first results chapter of this dissertation, chapter three, entailed a critical discussion of the factors contributing to the expansion of school discipline, surveillance, and security whereby an actuarial justice mindset has been widely adopted by school and police officials. An exaggerated perception of the likelihood of rampage shootings has led many of these officials, even numerous of the most progressive educators, to justify, albeit somewhat reluctantly, the extensive criminalization of their schools. Extending previous discussions about how moral panics and neoliberal penalty relate to enhanced security and punitive discipline in schools, the findings of this chapter suggest the manner in which both prior theoretical conceptions are directly linked to one another. Such a conclusion implies that, even if scholars and practitioners
advance a more rational discourse about school rampage that emphasizes the true rarity of these events, larger political, cultural, and economic forces are at work, which make retraction away from school criminalization a difficult goal to achieve.

The fourth chapter contributes to the literature on violence risk assessment in at least three distinct ways. First, the in-depth analysis of eleven incidents reveals great diversity among even this limited sample and thus indicates the dire need for future scholars to adopt clearer distinctions and stricter operationalizations when using terms such as “threat,” “risk,” “plot,” and especially when characterizing any event as “averted.” Secondly, the findings showcased the wide-ranging manner by which school and police officials make discretionary decisions about how to assess the severity of student threats. Assessment criteria entailed how detailed a plot was (including who was to be purposely targeted, what locations were to be attacked in what order, and when the attacks were to take place), the role of weaponry (such as the existent, potential, or desired access to weapons, evidence of weapons training or manufacture, and threats specifically mentioning the use of weapons), individual traits (including ethnic/racial and gender identity as well as previous behavior and mental health concerns), and group characteristics (specifically school social status and affiliations with deviant subcultures). The fact that some of these criteria are substantially more supported with empirical evidence than others reveals a clear need for increased education and programming to better inform school and police officials about the best practices of violence risk assessment. Finally, this chapter explored which forms of risk assessment provided school and police officials with the most confidence in their determinations. Though numerous respondents did believe in and utilize some problematic and stereotypical profiling characteristics to help them make decisions, they ultimately placed their greatest confidence in threat assessment criteria, such as evidence of detailed planning and preparation to
commit an attack. Many previous studies have revealed the empirical successes that the threat assessment approach has demonstrated in the appraisal of targeted violence threats over other forms of risk assessment (Cornell 2012; Reddy et al. 2001). This finding suggests that, in addition, threat assessment may also be credited for an intuitive appeal which leaves officials more confident that justice has been properly served than is the case when the same officials rely upon comparatively more nebulous forms of statistical prediction through identifying profiles.

In the fifth chapter, close scrutiny of the eleven averted incidents indicated that both scholars and educational practitioners overestimate the extent to which the student code of silence has actually been diminished post-Columbine. This does nothing, however, to lessen the perhaps more significant emergent finding that it is most frequently students coming forward with knowledge about their peers’ violent intentions that has led to rampage attacks being averted. This has considerable implications for the future administration of school safety in that, while some schools have adopted bystander intervention programs and enacted anonymous tip lines, these solutions have largely taken a back seat to more punitive disciplinary policies and enhanced security measures. As zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and other law enforcement solutions cannot be credited with either deterring or preventing the crimes in these cases from being planned let alone committed, their utility and widespread adoption warrants serious reconsideration.

As the findings in chapter three indicate, these reactionary practices were rhetorically justified by, if not wholly put in place as a response to, highly publicized but extremely rare incidents of school rampage. The data, taken as a whole, result in numerous significant implications.
First, when officials in districts with relatively low rates of crime and violence overestimate the occurrence of school rampage and base broad policy decisions on these devastating events, their risk calculation is not only statistically inaccurate, but rhetorically dishonest. The public, including school and police officials but also students and parents, ought to be engaging in a debate over whether or not the negative aspects of punitive zero tolerance policies and enhanced security (such as changes to the school atmosphere as an educational institution, potential violations of students’ civil liberties, expenditures of limited resources for personnel and technology, etc.) are worth the benefits of reducing or preventing typical and relatively minor student misbehavior, rather than having to conduct a cost-benefit analysis where one side of the equation is characterized in such a radically skewed manner (i.e. the cost of not adopting law enforcement solutions in schools will immanently result in multiple students deaths).

Secondly, the findings of chapter five amplify such concerns over a school safety discourse disconnected from rampage prevention policies that have an empirical basis. Not only did the aforementioned punitive measures not play a decisive preventative role in the eleven incidents under investigation in this study, but multiple prior studies suggest that these measures negatively impact the most common means by which school rampages are actually prevented by making students less trustful of adult authority figures and thus less likely to come forward when they possess knowledge about potentially dangerous situations.

At the same time, the findings of this dissertation also necessitate careful consideration of the potentially negative consequences to occur if the student code of silence were to entirely dissolve. While a broken or at least diminished student code of silence may mean that numerous future plots will be brought to the attention of authorities and pre-empted, it also may carry with
it a problematic effect on the overall school environment. It is vital that genuine substantial threats are taken seriously, but a suspicious and fearful school culture that overestimates the likelihood and normalcy of rampage violence threats, and encourages students and teachers to come forward with even minor concerns about students’ dangerous thoughts, questionable actions, and overall violence potential, amounts to a rather unwelcoming learning environment.

The academic conversation on school criminalization, while notable for its critique of expanding forms of directly oppressive surveillance and punishment, neglects, by and large, to consider the ways in which evolving school violence prevention practices also encourage informal and indirect types of coercive control, in particular, the governing of conduct via student surveillance of themselves and their peers. With regard to this development, Foucault proves extremely enlightening. Foucault (1977) famously argued that contemporary societies would move away from formal institutions of social control and towards less official but more omnipresent informal varieties of surveillance and coercion. The main thrust of this proposition has yet to prove accurate, as recent years have seen rapidly expanded levels of incarceration in general (Alexander 2010; Pattillo et al. 2004) and, in the school setting, the advent of a “school-to-prison pipeline” in which school misbehavior is punished in the juvenile and criminal justice systems rather than in the educational system (Advancement Project 2005; Kim, Losen & Hewitt 2010; Wald & Losen 2003). Despite this, Foucault’s later work (1980; 1991) has been utilized in recent discussions of the sociology of risk to explain how individuals come to take the task of surveillance upon themselves in order to regulate and manage their own behavior and that of others (Mythen 2008). In particular, his argument regarding the ubiquity of more subtle and coercive forms of control and surveillance is extremely useful in understanding the potential drawbacks should the student code of silence dissipate in the context of exaggerated risk.
perception regarding school rampage.

For example, a recent controversy at a Kansas high school revealed the potential problems of a risk discourse which over-anticipates rampage violence and consequently encourages students to inform school and police authorities of any potential knowledge about a hypothetical threat. When a student with a grudge against five of his classmates falsely claimed that they planned to shoot up their school, this student’s bogus story was widely believed by school authorities, though not by the majority of the student body, and all five supposed plotters were arrested (Logan 2002). More recently, in the wake of a school shooting in Chardon, Ohio on February 27, 2012, rumors widely circulated among high school students from another Ohio town accused one bullied teenager of planning to bring a gun to school on the following day, which would have marked one week after the Chardon shooting. Though this led police to search the boy’s home and caused half of the student body to be absent on the day in question, it was ultimately determined that he was entirely innocent (Leitsinger 2012). Emergent developments such as anonymous tip lines may, one the one hand, more easily side-step concerns with the student code of silence, but they may also lead to many more instances of false accusations.

Encouraging both students to break through the code of silence and school and police officials to take students seriously when they do come forward is certainly a more productive and empirically-driven approach than reactionary measures such as zero tolerance policies, security cameras, and metal detectors. However, even this reaction may present some troubling manifestations where peers are less trusting of one another, false accusations become prevalent, and relatively benign comments on the part of students may be misinterpreted and subjected to overzealous scrutiny.
Suggested Areas for Future Research

Through the exploration of the averted school rampage phenomenon undertaken in this study, numerous avenues for future research have come to light. As the topic remains in its infancy with regard to empirical scholarship and even careful conceptual scrutiny, important questions remain.

It is vital that the scholarship on averted school rampage be expanded with larger samples in order to gain a more representative picture of the problem and how schools have reacted to it. Distributing surveys to a large random sample of school and police officials would go a long way towards indicating the extent to which the findings in this study are generalizable to the population at large. For example, surveys exploring what violence risk assessment practices are currently utilized by school and police officials and eliciting opinions regarding the perceived efficacy of those assessments would be enlightening and important. Because of the significance of the threat assessment approach indicated in this study, there would perhaps be the greatest utility in nationally representative studies of the threat assessment approach that measure not only its perceived efficacy but also its outcomes when utilized in a preventative manner. What’s more, the findings indicated that the forms of risk assessment utilized by school and police officials varied to some extent by their job types. This qualitative conclusion, however, can only be considered preliminary, and so a larger quantitative survey exploring these variations in a representative manner would prove useful. There is much the same need for a nationally representative survey of school disciplinary policies and security measures, both in terms of how prevalent various forms are and how officials perceive their effectiveness.
Additionally, as the present study was limited to the averted rampages in the Northeastern United States, future scholars should expand to other regions of the country. This is especially important as both averted and completed school rampages are actually more prevalent elsewhere, with the most incidents occurring in the Southern and Midwestern states (Trump N.D.; Kimmel & Mahler 2004). It also remains unknown whether or not school rampages are perceived, assessed, and responded to differently by geographical regions with distinct political and cultural traditions. For example, my respondents were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of calls to arm faculty members in schools via the scaling back of concealed carry firearm restrictions, but this may reflect a Northeastern predilection for gun control that would be far less dominant in other parts of the country.

As this research indicated that many school officials acquiesce to school criminalization rather reluctantly, even in the context of their exaggerated risk perception, it would be of great value for researchers to delve more deeply into the ways in which school faculty and administrators would feel comfortable lessening the punitive nature of their institutions without feeling that they were sacrificing safety and security. In other words, future research ought to explore how stake holders of all stripes might envision attaining school security without sacrificing the civil liberties of their students or the pedagogical goals of their institutions. It would also be beneficial for additional studies to look into the most effective means to diminish the student code of silence without increasing undue surveillance and mistrust in the school environment.

Beyond the American context, school rampage incidents have also been averted in at least two widely publicized incidents in Manchester, England (Carter 2009) and Cologne, Germany (“Attack on German” 2007). However, international cases of averted rampage have
never been systematically studied, even in the superficial manner necessary to provide a basic indication of their prevalence. In addition to an international comparative study of averted rampage incidents, scholars ought to more fully investigate international variations among responses to school rampage. In the aftermath of many school attacks in the United States, Americans have witnessed calls to arm students, teachers, and faculty members, either as a means of deterring future offenders from making an attempt or with the mindset that an armed populace would be able to more easily stop a rampaging killer. In fact, nearly 20 American states considered new legislation to permit students and faculty to carry firearms on college campuses in the wake of a recent massacre that occurred in Tucson, Arizona on January 8, 2011 in which nineteen people, one of them U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, were shot (Gottesdiener 2011). In the face of strong support for the second amendment to the American Constitution, little focus has been placed on reducing the availability of firearms. By contrast, the most common reaction to incidents outside of the United States has been attempts by gun control advocates to reduce teenagers’ access to deadly weapons. Thus, international comparative research has the potential to reveal great insight into the manner in which anti-violence policy is often the result of particular cultural, political, and structural manifestations rather than the uncontested or inevitable solution to particular crises.

While no scholarship has explored averted incidents of school rampage outside of the United States, recent research on completed school rampage incidents beyond the American context (Madfis & Levin 2012) discovered that none of these international school rampage incidents involved students killing in pairs or in groups (like the killer duos of Westside Middle School in Arkansas and Columbine High School in Colorado), while more than one student was accused in five out of the eleven averted incidents in this study (cases C, D, E, F, and H). This
suggests that it may be the case that the more student plotters involved in an incident, the more leakage there will be, and thus the more likely it will be that the students will be caught. However, further in-depth case study research with a larger sample would need to be conducted in order to confirm the existence of this possible relationship.

Finally, averted school rampage can be situated as one subset of the larger phenomenon of averted acts of violence and crime, and thus the findings in this dissertation would be fruitfully compared to similar studies of other prevented transgressions. Averted incidents of mass murder outside of the school setting warrant investigation (as only White-Hamon 2000 has addressed this topic). Likewise, it would be worthwhile to explore whether or not other forms of attempted mass murder (such as those perpetrated by workplace avengers, family annihilators, etc.) were thwarted via similar means as those school rampages investigated in this study. It is unclear how frequently adult mass murders display leakage and inform others about their dangerous intentions. Though adults who have been informed about the homicidal plans of a would-be mass killer may not be subject to a student code of silence, they may still be distrustful of law enforcement and/or perceive of “snitching” as an unacceptable violation of the “code of the street” dominant in low income and minority communities (Anderson 1999; Morris 2010; Rosenfeld et al. 2003). Thus, comparing the role that intervention by the confidants of adult rampage killers played in averting multiple homicides to that of school rampages averted by peer confidants coming forward would prove insightful. Likewise, though adults are not systematically assessed and monitored in the way that schools do to their students, adults with developed and actionable plans to harm many people en masse may similarly engage in leakage or otherwise raise concerns among their family members, friends, coworkers, mental health

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providers, or other acquaintances. This suggests that there may well be value in exploring the role of leakage in incidents of mass murder outside of the school setting.

More broadly, researchers have neglected the much wider phenomenon of attempted and averted incidents of single-victim homicide, even though it’s a far more commonly perpetrated and prosecuted crime than averted rampage. The same may be said for advancing the conceptual and empirical understanding of all attempted crimes, for while this has long been an interesting area of debate in law and philosophy (see, for example, Adams 1998; Arenson 2005; Bayles 1982; Becker 1973/74; Christopher 2004; Davis 1986; Duff 1997; Enker 1977; Feinberg 1995; Ohana 2007; Spjut 1987; Yaffe 2010), the topic has been broadly overlooked by sociologists and criminologists. Even those explicitly exploring the popular topic of crime prevention (such as Clarke 1995; Rosenbaum et al. 1998; Sherman et al. 2002; Trembley & Craig 1995) have neglected to consider how criminal attempts might inform preventative measures. While the existing foci upon understanding the root causes, risk factors, and situational determinants of crime all surely help prevent future offenses, there may be a wealth of knowledge as yet unearthed about the deterrence and hindrance of crime to be gleaned from the study of averted incidents.
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Fearing School Rampages:
1. What are school officials’ attitudes and feelings about school rampage threats? How do they understand and explain these events and their causes? To what extent do school officials fear and anticipate future episodes of school rampage violence? Is the attack at Columbine High School (or are rampage shootings more generally) used as a guiding frame regarding the discussion, prevention, and assessment of violent threats? Do similar fears and “calls to action” exist about gang violence, student bomb plots, knife attacks, or chemical weapon scares? To what extent do they believe that their fears of rampage attacks can be mitigated and what do they believe can and should be done to mitigate their fears?

Constructing, Assessing, and Preventing School Rampage Threats:
2. What policies, procedures, and practices are in place to prevent and react to school rampage attacks? Whose role is it to engage in what types of prevention and reaction? Do the prevention and reaction policies exemplify that of inclusive or exclusive schools? In what contexts are the policies used in which ways? Do school officials believe that the proper people are executing these functions and in the correct manner? How do schools engage in the threat/risk assessment of their students? Do school officials believe that these risk assessment techniques are successful and justified? How do they administratively negotiate disagreements about risk assessments, school policy, and the application of formal procedures?

Presenting School Security and Managing School Rampage Threats:
3. How do school officials formally present the state of school safety and anti-violence policies and programs internally (to students, teachers, administrators, etc.) and externally (to parents, the media, politicians, etc.)? What type of school environment do they wish to present and how do they think that others perceive their school’s security? How do they informally discuss the risk of school rampage threats and any associated policies among their colleagues and students?

Averting School Rampages:
4. What do school rampage threats look like and what evidence exists to prove them? How do these threats come to the attention of authorities? What factors permitted the rampage to be averted? What actions did the school take? What changes do officials believe could or should be made regarding future risk assessment, policies, procedures, public relations, etc?
APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW SCRIPT:

Background Info:
1. What is your official position/title at the school? How long have you been doing this current job? How long have you been at this particular school? Did you work at any other schools previously?
2. What job responsibilities do you have now or have you had in the past that pertain to school safety? Have you ever participated in any academic courses, professional development, or training seminars in violence prevention or control?

Fear of School Rampage Threats:
1. What do you think about when you hear the term “school shooting?” (This term is used to be deliberately ambiguous). What do you know about school shootings? What do you think causes these events? Has your perspective on school violence and safety been altered in any way since the highly publicized school shooting events of the 90’s such as the one at Columbine High School?
2. Do you consider your school to be a “safe” place? What does that mean to you? Is it safe relative to other schools or other similar locations?
3a) If there have been NO averted rampages at the school:
   Do you think a multiple-victim school shooting could happen at your school? Why or why not? If yes, then how likely do you think it is to happen? Do you think school shooting rampages are more or less likely to occur than gang violence, student bomb plots, knife attacks, or chemical weapon scares? Which of these seem the most likely at your school and why? Do you actively think about such event(s) occurring? If so, have you actively helped to prevent future attacks in any way? Have you thought about what you would do personally in such a situation? Please describe what you think your actions would be (whether this reflects professional protocol or your own thoughts).
3b) If there have been averted rampages at the school:
   Has your perspective on school violence and safety been altered since the event at your own school? Did you think a multiple-victim school shooting could have happened at your school? Why or why not? Do you think it is likely to happen again? Do you think the likelihood of another multiple-victim school shooting is more or less likely to occur than gang violence, student bomb plots, knife attacks, or chemical weapon scares? Which of these seem the most likely at your school and why? Do you actively think about such an event occurring again in the future? Have you actively helped to prevent future attacks in any way?
4. How can the threat of multiple-victim school shootings be lessened? What can be done and by whom? Can a school ever achieve complete safety and security? If so, what would this school look like? If not, why not – how safe can schools be made?

Violence Prevention Programs and Policies:
1. What school programs (such as bullying prevention, conflict resolution, peer mediation, etc.) are in place to help prevent school violence from occurring? How do you feel about these programs? Do you think they are necessary? Do you consider them effective or ineffective and in what ways?
2. What school technologies (such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, specialized door locks) are in place to help prevent school violence from occurring? How do you feel about these programs? Do you think they are necessary? Do they consider them effective or ineffective and in what ways?

3. Does your school engage in safety drills of any kind such as evacuation drills, bomb drills, or school shooting drills? What do you think about these drills? Do you think they are necessary? Do you think that they are effective or ineffective and in what ways?

4. Does your school have school resource officers? Does your district permit faculty to carry firearms on campus? What do you think about these measures? Do you think they are necessary? Are they an effective deterrent or would they help in the event of a multiple-victim attack?

5. Has your personal experience dealing with a multiple-victim school shooting plot altered your perspective on any of these policies or programs in any way?

Assessing Violent Threats:

1. What official school policies or procedures are in place to intervene when there is a violent threat made by a student? Are these district-wide or school specific? Are there official guidelines or protocol which dictate when and how to notify the police? Do you have zero-tolerance policies at your school and if so, what are they? Are these guidelines/procedures available anywhere in written format and if so, can I be provided with a copy?

2. How do you determine the seriousness of a threat to commit violence – that is, can you tell when students are making genuine threats and when they are just making idle pranks? How do you think these decisions could or should be determined? What actions constitute genuine threats? Do you think prior personal knowledge of a student (such as info about their home life, personality, disciplinary record, grades, peer social status, etc) would help you better assess the seriousness of a violent threat that they made? Do you think that any certain types of students would be more likely to act upon their threats – for example, would you be more concerned about a threat made by a boy than a girl or by a student with a lengthy disciplinary history versus one with a no disciplinary history? Do you think that any (other) characteristics should be taken into consideration in the assessment of risk? What do you make of aggregate and statistical data about multiple-victim school shootings – such as that most are white middle class males? Do you think that this type of data could help in the assessment of violent threats? Has a personal experience with a violent school threat changed your perspective about risk/threat assessment in any way (for those with averted rampages)?

3. Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a teacher or staff member told you that a student was making a threat to harm people at the school. How would this process be different if it was another student who came forward to discuss a peer?

4. Are there clearly defined institutional guidelines regarding how the seriousness of school violence threats are to be determined? Does your school engage in any sort of violent risk assessment of its students (such as the use of warning signs, behavioral profiles, threat assessments, etc.)? If so, what are they and what do you know about these techniques? If not, how do you think threats would be assessed? Do you think that risk
assessments of students are justified and helpful? In what ways may they be helpful and in what ways may they be problematic?

5. How are school officials educated about risk assessment techniques? How are these techniques utilized in practice? Do you think that the official guidelines are followed exactly? Do you think that risk assessment techniques are objective or subjective? Do you think that professional teaching experience rivals behavioral assessments in their accuracy of assessing violent threats? Why or why not?

6. In the event of a threat of a multiple-victim school shooting, whose role is it to engage in what types of risk assessment and decision making processes at the school? How much power do you have in the decision making process? Do you think that the proper people are executing these functions and in the correct manner?

7. Can you recall any time when you think a threat/situation was blown out of proportion or not taken seriously enough by other school officials? What do you think would happen if other school officials (whether your colleagues or superiors) disagreed with your assessment of a student’s violent threat? What if they didn’t believe your assessment that a threat was serious or what if you thought that they were blowing a threat out of proportion? What would you do? How do you think this process would be negotiated?

8. What do you think are appropriate interventions and punishments for serious threats of multiple-victim school shooting? What about for less serious threats?

Presenting School Security:

1. What type of school environment do you/they try to foster at this school with regard to school safety? How do you think that others perceive your school’s environment or security?

2. How much are students informed about violent incidents when they take place? How would you (or other school officials) present news of a violent threat to young school children? To older students? To parents? To the press? Do you think that there is a need to present this information in a certain manner or using a certain language? If so, what motivations do you think the school has to present safety or security information in a certain manner? Is this different depending on whom they are speaking to? By whom they are speaking about? If you have any examples of written or printed material used to inform your school community, could I have a copy?

3. How much are students informed about anti-violence policies and their rationales? Does the way that certain procedures (such as school shooting drills) are explained vary by the age of students? Is the information explained differently to older students, parents, or the press?

4. How does your school convey information about violent incidents or threats to teachers and administrators? How does your school pass on information about school safety and anti-violence policies and programs to teachers and administrators? How are you/they informed about changes to policy? Do you think the faculty is told the same information as parents, the media, or politicians?

5. How would you informally discuss the risk of multiple-victim school shooting threats and any associated policies among your colleagues? Does this vary from how you would discuss the risk of violence with people from outside of your school (such as friends or family)? Do you think that the way in which school administrators (such as superintendents, principals, or vice principals) discuss school violence threats varies from
how teachers, guidance counselors, or resource officers discuss school violence or consider the risks of school violence?

Averted Rampages:
1. Please describe what you know about the threat made on (fill in date).
2. Did you know this student prior to this incident? If so, from where and how well? Were you surprised to hear that this student was involved in something of this nature?
3. How did the threats come to the attention of authorities? Do you believe that there was a reason why certain authority figures were informed?
4. What actions did the school take? How quickly and with what approaches, policies, guidelines, procedures? How did they determine that the threat was genuine? Under what circumstances would they have treated this threat less seriously?
5. Have any other similar threats been made at your school that you know of? Can you recall any similar experiences where they treated another threat more seriously or less seriously than they should have?
6. Please describe your specific roles (if applicable) that helped to prevent the act of violence from escalating. How involved were you in the decision making process which determined what would happen to the student? How certain were you about the seriousness of the threat? How did you determine this seriousness?
7. To what do you attribute the successful outcome of this situation? Please describe specific systemic conditions (community/school atmosphere or climate) that you believe contributed to the prevention of the violent act.
8. What advice would you give to other school professionals who may face similar situations in the future or may need help developing violence prevention plans?
9. How did the media find out about the plot at your school? How did you feel about the media’s portrayal of the situation, the student, and your school in general? Did you find their coverage to be fair or unfair?

Final Questions:
1. Are there any questions that I have not asked that I should be asking? Is there anything that you feel would be important for me to know about you (or the incident) in order to better understand your perspective?
2. I would like to interview any vice principals, guidance counselors, school psychologists, teachers, or school resource officers at your school who would be willing to participate in this study. Could you provide me with any of their names and contact information?
APPENDIX C: ACCESS LETTERS

The Brudnick Center on Violence & Conflict

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
500 HOLMES HALL
NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115

November 29, 2010

Dr. Stephen McPseudonym
Anonymous High School
7505 North Fakerton Way
Fakesburgh, PA 12345

Principal (name excluded):

My name is Eric Madfis, and I am a graduate student working towards my Ph.D. in sociology at Northeastern University in Boston. As the focus of my doctoral dissertation, I am interested in learning more about the ways in which schools have successfully handled and prevented threats of violence made by their students. Anonymous High School is a remarkable success story in this regard as a potentially serious incident of violence was prevented there on (date excluded). Therefore, I feel that there is a great deal to be learned from your school regarding successful anti-violence intervention strategies, security procedures, and/or school atmosphere that may be utilized to avoid future violent events.

To carry out this study, I am asking that you volunteer roughly an hour or so of your time to be interviewed about this important topic. I would be happy to come to Fakesburgh to speak with you in person, or we could speak over the phone. I recognize that violence related issues are naturally sensitive subjects and care will be taken on my part to assure the confidentiality of all participants. Any notes, articles, books, or reports to arise from this research will not contain the names of any individuals or the school itself, and every effort will be made to conceal any identifying information.

I am currently studying under the direction of Professor Jack Levin, director of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University. He will be closely monitoring my progress during this research project and can provide a professional reference should that be desired.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if additional information is needed. I can be available via email at any time, and I will call you sometime next week to follow up on this request. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric Madfis, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115
Email: e.madfis.e@neu.edu
My name is Eric Madfis, and I am a graduate student working towards my Ph.D. in sociology at Northeastern University in Boston. As the focus of my doctoral dissertation, I am interested in learning more about the current state of anti-violence programming, intervention strategies, and/or safety policies that are being utilized to avoid future incidents of school violence. In particular, my research seeks to better understand the ways in which schools prevent, identify, and assess threats of violence made by their students.

To carry out this study, I am asking that you volunteer roughly an hour or so of your time to be interviewed about this important topic. I would be happy to come to Fakesburgh to speak with you in person, or we could speak over the phone. I recognize that violence related issues are naturally sensitive subjects and care will be taken on my part to assure the confidentiality of all participants. Any notes, articles, books, or reports to arise from this research will not contain the names of any individuals or the school itself, and every effort will be made to conceal any identifying information.

I am currently studying under the direction of Professor Jack Levin, director of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University. He will be closely monitoring my progress during this research project and can provide a professional reference should that be desired. Please do not hesitate to contact me if additional information is needed. I can be available via email at any time, and I will call you sometime next week to follow up on this request. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric Madfis, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115
Email: e.madfis.e@neu.edu
APPENDIX D: UNSIGNED INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Informed Consent Document to Participate in a Research Study

This is a request for your help in a research project. This form will tell you about the study, but I will explain it as well and you may ask me any questions you may have. The purpose of this study is to gain insight about how American public schools perceive and deal with violent threats made by their students. You have been asked to participate because you possess knowledge about the process by which school violence is prevented and threats are assessed, and your perspective about the causes of and solutions to school violence will be very valuable to this research.

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to answer questions about your experiences with and feelings about threats of school violence. You will be interviewed either over the phone, at your place of work, or at a time and place that is convenient to you. The interview will take roughly one hour and you may end the interview at any time even after it has begun.

This research will not result in any direct benefits for participants. Participants, however, may find it rewarding to know that their cooperation will help to provide new insight into the phenomenon of school rampage violence which may help to intervene and perhaps prevent future incidents.

Your part in this study will be entirely confidential. Only I will see the information about you and your school. No reports or publications will use any information that could identify you or your school in any way. Any identifying information from this study will be destroyed upon its completion. The names of individuals and schools will never be mentioned, and pseudonyms will be created and used in their place. Though schools will mostly be discussed in the aggregate, when a specific school is references, the details about it will be kept deliberately vague i.e., “a public middle school in the Northeast.” Though I will do my best to safeguard confidentiality through these means, some specific details about an incident may potentially enable readers to discern the school being described so complete confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed.

If you would like to contact someone about your rights as a participant, please contact:
Human Subject Research Protection, Division of Research Integrity, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115
(617) 373-7570

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Eric Madfis, Ph.D. Candidate
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Boston, MA 02115
e.madfis@neu.edu
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