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Averting Targeted School Violence

A U.S. SECRET SERVICE ANALYSIS OF PLOTS AGAINST SCHOOLS

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NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER
U.S. SECRET SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Every day, the Secret Service employs threat assessment methodologies as part of our protective mission. The agency's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) applies those methodologies to expand the research into the broader field of violence prevention. This work involves closely examining targeted violence impacting communities across the United States. For more than 20 years, NTAC has maintained a particular focus on preventing targeted school violence by assembling a multidisciplinary team of behavioral experts and engaging with state and local leaders throughout the country. Our longstanding, collaborative partnerships with these members of the community are invaluable to enhancing public safety and strengthening the security of our schools. The following report builds upon previous research findings that indicate targeted school violence is preventable.

In this most recent study, *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*, NTAC examined 67 disrupted plots against K-12 schools from 2006-2018. The key findings of the study are clear and consistent: Individuals contemplating violence often exhibit observable behaviors, and when community members report these behaviors, the next tragedy can be averted. The Secret Service encourages its educational, medical and public safety partners to review the information within, and use it to guide best practices for maintaining a safe and healthy learning environment for all children.

For over 120 years, the men and women of the Secret Service have faithfully conducted our integrated mission of protecting the country's leaders and nationally significant facilities and special events, and securing our financial infrastructure and payment systems. In doing so, important lessons have been learned and best practices have been established. By applying these lessons, the Secret Service will continue coordinating with our community partners to work toward ending targeted violence at schools and protecting our children.

James M. Murray
Director

Averting Targeted School Violence:
A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools

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Executive Summary

THREAT ASSESSMENT IS THE BEST PRACTICE for preventing targeted school violence. The averted attacks in this report confirm what the National Threat Assessment Center's (NTAC) research has found on school attacks, specifically that students display a variety of *observable* concerning behaviors as they escalate toward violence. In order to identify, assess, and intervene with students who may pose a risk of harm to themselves or others, schools and communities should develop multidisciplinary threat assessment programs, as outlined in NTAC's ***Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence***.[1] This strategic approach should be guided by the research findings contained in this report, along with NTAC's 2019 examination of school attacks that occurred from 2008 to 2017, titled ***Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence***.[2]

When conducted properly, a threat assessment will involve providing robust interventions and support for students experiencing distress, thereby intervening with and de-escalating situations before they become violent. It should be noted clearly in any school threat assessment policy that the primary objective of a student threat assessment is not to administer discipline or to introduce students into the criminal justice system. While those responses may be necessary at times, especially in situations involving explicit threats, violence, or weapons, the primary objective of a student threat assessment should be providing a student with help and working to ensure positive outcomes for the student and the community.

Prevention and early intervention are paramount. The analysis of 67 averted school attack plots contained in this report demonstrates that there are almost always intervention points available before a student's behavior escalates to violence. **Students who *plotted* school attacks shared many similarities with students who *perpetrated* school attacks**. Both U.S. Secret Service studies, *Protecting America's Schools* and *Averting Targeted School Violence,* included students who:

- Had histories of school discipline and contact with law enforcement.

- Experienced bullying or had mental health issues, frequently involving depression and suicidality.

- Intended or committed suicide as part of the school attack.

- Used drugs or alcohol.

- Had been impacted by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including substance abuse in the home, violence or abuse, parental incarceration, or parental mental health issues. Research from the CDC associates these types of ACEs with a range of health, social, and behavioral problems throughout life.[3]

Based on the current study examining disrupted plots, and building on NTAC's 20-year history of studying targeted school violence, the following operational implications should be considered when developing policies and protocols for multidisciplinary school threat assessment teams.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- **Targeted school violence is preventable when communities identify warning signs and intervene.**
  In every case, tragedy was averted by members of the community coming forward when they observed behaviors that elicited concern.

- **Schools should seek to intervene with students before their behavior warrants legal consequences.** The primary function of a threat assessment is not criminal investigation or conviction. Communities should strive to identify and intervene with students in distress *before* their behavior escalates to criminal actions.

- **Students were most often motivated to plan a school attack because of a grievance with classmates.**
  Like students who perpetrated school attacks, the plotters in this study were most frequently motivated by interpersonal conflicts with classmates, highlighting a need for student interventions and de-escalation programs targeting such issues.

- **Students are best positioned to identify and report concerning behaviors displayed by their classmates.**
  In this study, communications made about the attack plot were most often observed by the plotter's friends, classmates, and peers. Schools and communities must take tangible steps to facilitate student reporting when classmates observe threatening or concerning behaviors. Unfortunately, many cases also involved students observing concerning behaviors and communications *without* reporting them, highlighting the ongoing need for further resources and training for students.

- **The role of parents and families in recognizing concerning behavior is critical to prevention.** Eight plots in this study were reported by family members, illustrating the crucial role families can play in addressing a student's risk of causing harm. In some cases, other parents in the school community received concerning reports about a classmate from their children, then passed the information on to the school or law enforcement. When identifying and assessing concerning student behavior, a collaborative process involving parents or guardians is ideal. Families should be educated on recognizing the warning signs and the supports and resources available to address their concerns, whether in the school or the greater community.

- **School resource officers (SROs) play an important role in school violence prevention.** In nearly one-third of the cases, an SRO played a role in either reporting the plot or responding to a report made by someone else. In eight cases, it was the SRO who received the initial report of an attack plot from students or others, highlighting their role as a trusted adult within the school community.

- **Removing a student from school does not eliminate the risk they might pose to themselves or others.** Five plotters in this study were recently former students who had left school within one academic year of the plot, as they had been expelled, enrolled in other schools, graduated, or stopped attending classes. This indicates that simply removing a student from the school, without appropriate supports, may not necessarily remove the risk of harm they pose to themselves or others.

- **Students displaying an interest in violent or hate-filled topics should elicit immediate assessment and intervention.** Consistent with prior NTAC research studying school attackers, many of the plotters in this study displayed such interest, particularly in the Columbine High School attack. Nearly one-third of the plotters conducted research into prior mass attackers as part of their planning. Nine also displayed interest in Hitler, Nazism, and/or white supremacy.

- **Many school attack plots were associated with certain dates, particularly in the month of April.** Some plotters selected dates to emulate notorious people or events, such as the anniversary of the Columbine attack on April 20th, while others chose their dates to coincide with the beginning or end of the school year. School and security professionals should approach these dates with extra consideration.

- **Many of the student plotters had access to weapons, including unimpeded access to firearms.** Threat assessments must examine a student's access to weapons, particularly those in the home. Similar to school attackers, in most of the cases where plotters intended to use firearms, they had unimpeded access to them (e.g., they owned them or their parents allowed access). In seven cases, the plotters acquired secured firearms because they were given access to the safe, pried the safe open, found the key, or stole them when they were left out.

Introduction

THE U.S. SECRET SERVICE has long held that *threat assessment* is the best practice for preventing acts of violence directed at the president and other public officials the agency is mandated to protect. Threat assessment is an investigative approach to identifying and intervening with individuals who may pose a risk of causing harm, and the Secret Service considers threat assessment to be as important as the physical security measures the agency employs.

Through the pioneering research of the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), this proactive approach to violence prevention has been adapted to prevent other forms of targeted violence that impact communities across the United States. For over 20 years, NTAC has closely examined attacks that target the places we work, learn, worship, and otherwise live our daily lives. Within this field of study, the Secret Service prioritizes research and training focused on the safety of children in America's schools.

These efforts began with the publication of the **Safe School Initiative** (2002), which examined incidents of targeted school violence that occurred from 1974 to 2000. The study, and accompanying guide, provided a blueprint for schools to establish threat assessment programs for the purposes of early intervention and prevention. NTAC's **Bystander Study** (2008) showed that classmates and peers are most often the ones with knowledge about a student planning an attack, and it highlighted the importance of promoting safe school climates that empower students and encourage reporting.

In 2018, NTAC provided further guidance to schools nationwide on how to develop targeted violence prevention programs with **Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence**. The guide outlines eight actionable steps schools can use to help identify students of concern, gather information to assess risk, and provide robust management strategies to ensure positive outcomes for the student and community.

ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY
USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

An Operational Guide for
Preventing Targeted School Violence

STOP

U.S. Department of
Homeland Security

**United States
Secret Service** | National Threat Assessment Center
July 2018

Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model (2018)

STEP 1: Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team

STEP 2: Define prohibited and concerning behaviors

STEP 3: Establish and provide training on a central reporting system

STEP 4: Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention

STEP 5: Establish assessment procedures

STEP 6: Develop risk management options

STEP 7: Create and promote a safe school climate

STEP 8: Provide training for all stakeholders

Averting Targeted School Violence:
A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools

PROTECTING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS
A U.S. SECRET SERVICE ANALYSIS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

2019

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
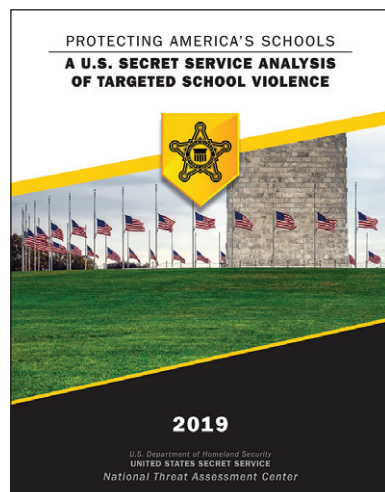**UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE**
National Threat Assessment Center

Protecting America's Schools (2019)

- There is no profile of a student attacker, nor is there a profile for the type of school that has been targeted.

- Attackers usually had multiple motives, the most common involving a grievance with classmates.

- Most attackers used firearms, and firearms were most often acquired from the home.

- Most attackers had experienced psychological, behavioral, or developmental symptoms.

- Half of the attackers had interests in violent topics.

- All attackers experienced social stressors involving their relationships with peers and/or romantic partners.

- Nearly every attacker experienced negative home life factors.

- Most attackers were victims of bullying, which was often observed by others.

- Most attackers had a history of school disciplinary actions, and many had prior contact with law enforcement.

- All attackers exhibited concerning behaviors. Most elicited concern from others, and most communicated their intent to attack.

More recently, in 2019, NTAC published the most comprehensive analysis of school attacks ever produced by the federal government, titled ***Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence.*** The study examined 41 attacks against K-12 schools, perpetrated by current or former students, from 2008 to 2017. By focusing on the backgrounds and behaviors of the attackers, NTAC was able to provide schools across the country with a foundational understanding of the behaviors, circumstances, and personal factors that have led students to target their classmates and school staff. The information presented in the report forms the basis for how communities can use a multidisciplinary threat assessment program to identify students in distress or exhibiting concerning behaviors, and intervene with increased treatment or supports before a tragedy occurs.

As threat assessment programs have become more widely adopted by K-12 schools, NTAC set forth to examine those cases when a crisis at school was successfully thwarted. ***Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*** analyzes 67 instances when a current or former student advanced a plot to attack their school, but was halted before violence occurred. This study is NTAC's latest contribution to a body of research that demonstrates the path forward for school violence prevention. The findings presented herein should be utilized by schools and their surrounding communities to help intervene earlier and more effectively with students in distress.

The cases included in this study are only a sample of the tragedies prevented every day across our country. Put together, these cases affirm that bystanders coming forward to report concerning behaviors can save lives. They further establish how public safety professionals must be deliberate in how they encourage and facilitate bystander reporting. When such concerns are brought forward by the public, those reports must be met with the appropriate degree of investigation, assessment, and management.

Prevention can be challenging, but with preparation and collaboration communities can succeed. The U.S. Secret Service stands ready to support our partners in public safety with this vital mission. We hope the information contained in this report will assist with the continued movement toward more proactive strategies for violence prevention.

Methodology

INCIDENT IDENTIFICATION

To be included in this study, incidents had to involve plots to conduct a school attack that were averted in the United States from 2006 to 2018. An averted attack was defined as a plot in which (i) a current or recently former[4] K-12 school student (ii) took steps to advance an attack plan (iii) to cause physical injury to, or the death of, at least one student and/or school employee.

Certain exclusions were used in order to focus this project on incidents of targeted school violence. This study does not include plots in which the individuals sought to carry out an attack related to gang violence, drug violence, or other incidents with a strong suggestion of a separate criminal nexus. Additionally, the plotters had to have taken actionable steps to advance an attack plan to include, but not limited to, conducting surveillance of a school, soliciting others to assist in the plot, documenting a plan of attack, performing research on previous mass attacks, and attempting to or successfully acquiring a weapon to be used during the commission of the planned attack. A plotter who simply expressed an intent to conduct an act of targeted school violence, without taking any action to advance an attack plan, was not included in the analysis.

To identify averted attacks for this study, NTAC researchers engaged in a systematic review of published reports, public databases, online lists, and media accounts from 2006 through 2018. Special thanks are extended to the **National Police Foundation** for providing data from its Averted School Violence Database to assist with this comprehensive effort.[5] Based on the stated criteria, 67 incidents of averted school attacks, plotted by 100 current or recently former students, were identified. Incidents were included in the sample regardless of the number of subjects involved, and regardless of whether the identities of those involved were publicly disclosed. Though most of those in the study were minors when their plots were discovered, the identities of some plotters were made public depending on the nature of the charges they faced and the laws within the county or state in which they lived.

CASE RESEARCH AND DATA LIMITATIONS

Researchers obtained information for the 67 identified averted attacks through a rigorous, structured review of open source information, including news articles and reports from government and private agencies. We considered publicly available qualitative information to develop data relevant to threat assessment and prevention factors for each case. Multiple layers of review were applied to every stage of the project to ensure accuracy and reliability of reported findings.

There were a few limitations in conducting this analysis. In some cases, very little information was found about the case. The majority of media coverage of these averted attacks focused on the details of the plots; often, very little was provided on the plotters' backgrounds. This limited our ability to confirm the presence or absence of certain background variables.

To account for this variability, when discussing the backgrounds of the plotters, researchers focused on 43 of the 100 plotters for which there was some degree of information available that would address the areas of inquiry. The small sample size limits the conclusions that can be drawn based on statistical analysis of events and thus in some sections, statistics were not reported. Though case study research is not designed for establishing generalizable truths or making predictions, it does allow the reader to learn from the attacks that have been prevented.

Part I: Overview of the Plots

THIS STUDY INCLUDES AN ANALYSIS OF 67 PLOTS to attack schools that were reported and averted from 2006 through 2018. Though we present the number of plots by year, we caution that this information should not be interpreted as an increase in frequency of these types of incidents as this sample of cases does not include every plot against a K-12 school during this timeframe. This study identified plots through open sources, and averted attacks typically receive less attention than completed attacks that involve victims injured or killed. While researchers are unable to identify every planned attack that was disrupted, the sample of cases included in this study demonstrates that targeted school violence is preventable. Part I of this report describes how these plots were planned, who planned them, and how they were successfully averted so that communities can increase their understanding of these cases and enhance their prevention efforts.

Plots by Year Reported
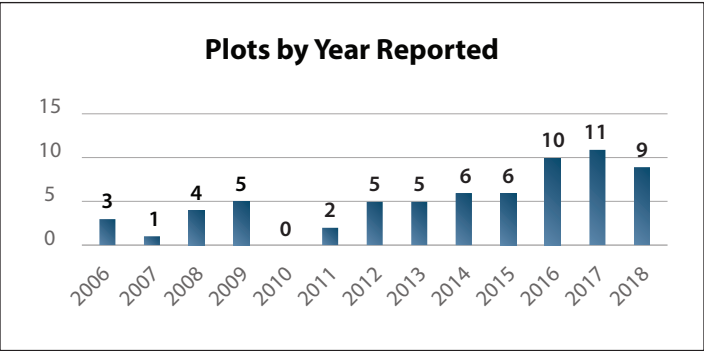
School Characteristics

School Types: All but one of the targeted schools were public, including four charter schools and four magnet schools. One target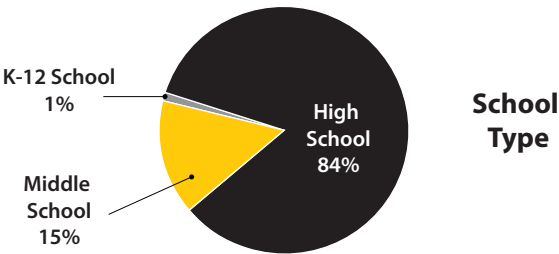ed school was private. Most of the targeted schools were high schools (*n* = 56, 84%),[6] four of which were connected to, or in the same building as, a middle or elementary school. One of these high schools was an alternative school, and the other was a vocational school. Of the remaining 11, one was grades K-12 (1%) and the rest were middle schools (*n* = 15%).

Community Types: The plots were averted across 33 states. Over one-third (*n* = 25, 37%) were located in suburban communities, one-quarter (*n* = 17, 25%) were in rural communities, and 14 (21%) were in cities. Eleven (16%) of the targeted schools were in towns.

Teacher-to-Student Ratios: Thirteen (19%) of the targeted schools were at the national average for teacher-to-student ratio at 1:15 to 1:16. Fourteen (21%) of the schools had lower ratios than the average, while 40 (60%) had higher ratios.

School Type

TEACHER-TO-STUDENT RATIOS		
	n = 67	%**
1:10 to 1:14	14	21%
1:15 to 1:16*	13	19%
1:17 to 1:19	21	31%
1:20 to 1:24	11	16%
1:25 to 1:29	8	12%

*National average[7]
**Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

School Size: Student enrollment varied among the targeted schools. While nearly half (45%) of U.S. high schools have enrollment of less than 500, the 56 targeted high schools in this study had more widely distributed enrollment sizes. In addition, all 10 of the middle schools in this study had enrollment numbers between 500 and 999. This was also the case for the one K-12 school.

School Resource Officers: Over two-thirds of the schools ($n = 45$, 67%) had one or more school resource officers (SROs) assigned to their campus, either full-time or part-time. Most ($n = 36$) of the SROs were sworn police officers, while two were not. For the remaining ($n = 7$), the SRO's authority could not be confirmed in open sources.

Other than SROs, one school had a security specialist and another school employed campus officers. In six cases (9%), we were able to confirm that the targeted school did not employ an SRO or other security professional. The absence of security professionals was sometimes attributed to school budget cuts or other funding constraints.

Reporting Tools: One-third ($n = 23$, 34%) of the schools had some type of system to notify designated officials of threatening or concerning student behavior. Reporting systems usually included tip lines, phone numbers, online incident forms, email addresses, smartphone applications, help lines, and text messaging systems. Four additional schools directed those wanting to report a person of concern to community-based reporting systems, such as local Crime Stoppers programs or 24-hour police call centers. Additionally, at the time of plot discovery, a few states had implemented comprehensive statewide reporting programs that were available to the schools.

Assessment & Intervention Resources: Information regarding whether a school had resources to properly assess students exhibiting concerning or harmful behavior was not usually available in open source reporting. This study found that at least 21 schools (31%), had staff with training applicable to assessing some form of student behaviors. This included school psychologists or social workers, counselors with training and responsibilities beyond academic or career guidance, individual or group counseling programs, and behavioral assessment programs. In fact, seven schools were found to have had threat assessment teams or a similarly focused group at the time the plots were discovered. These included behavior assessment and crisis intervention teams, an interdisciplinary intervention and referral service team, and student success team, each of which had the common goal of assessing for and proactively intervening with concerning and potentially harmful student behavior.

HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT		
	*Plots** (n = 56)	*National Distribution*[7] (n = 17,615)
<500	13%	45%
500 – 999	29%	23%
1000 – 1499	20%	14%
1500 – 1999	18%	9%
2000+	21%	9%

Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

State-Operated Reporting Programs

A number of states have implemented state-operated reporting programs for community members to report concerning behaviors. Some of these programs are geared toward students reporting concerning behaviors displayed by their classmates, including self-harm, bullying, threats of violence, drug use, and depression. In many of these programs, students can report their concerns through a mobile app, phone number, text, or website.

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

Safe2Tell™ Colorado • OK2SAY Michigan • Safe2Help Nebraska Safer Ohio School Tip Line Safe2Say Something Pennsylvania Kansas School Safety Hotline FortifyFL • Courage2Report Missouri

Plotter Demographics

The 67 cases in this study involved 100 plotters. In nearly two-thirds (*n* = 43, 64%) of the cases, only one plotter was involved in planning the attack.[8] In about one-quarter (*n* = 18, 27%) of the cases, two plotters were involved, and in the remaining six cases (9%), between three and six plotters were involved.

This section offers basic information regarding all 100 plotters who were involved in the 67 plots. Part II of this report will provide more in-depth analysis on a smaller group of plotters for whom sufficient information was found in open sources to address the key behavioral themes examined.

Cases Involving Adult Accomplices

- A 16-year-old plotter, who had his own Columbine forum on MySpace, met a 33-year-old male online. Together they plotted to carry out simultaneous attacks on 9/11 in different states.
- A 17-year-old plotter and his 22-year-old friend planned an attack on the 17-year-old's school.
- A 16-year-old plotter and his 19-year-old friend planned to attack the 16-year-old's school.

Gender & Age: While the majority of the plotters were male (*n* = 95, 95%), five were female (5%). They ranged in age from 11 to 19, with an average age of 16. The ages for four plotters were unknown.

Youngest: *An 11-year-old male's mother called the school to report that kitchen knives were missing and she suspected her son had taken them to school. When the student was pulled from class he had the knives, a handgun, and more than 460 rounds of ammunition in his backpack.*

Oldest: *A 19-year-old male was arrested after making threats to "shoot up" his school's graduation ceremony. The plot came to light after a student reported to school authorities that they overheard the threat. The prior month, the plotter had been arrested and expelled from his previous school for threatening to open fire at that school's graduation.*

Gender
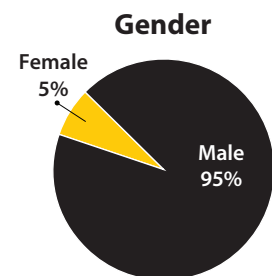
Affiliation to the School or District: Most of the plotters (*n* = 95, 95%) were current students. The remaining five (5%) were recently former students who had attended the targeted school, or a school from the same district, within one academic year of the plot. The former students included those who had been expelled, enrolled in other schools, graduated, or stopped attending classes.
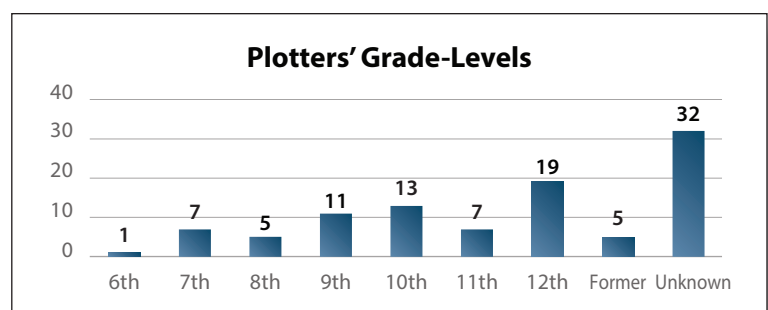
An 18-year-old male, who was planning an attack at his high school, kept a journal where he detailed the timing of his movements and the weapons he planned to use during his attack. Also included in the journal was an entry titled "Coin flip of Fate." In this entry, the plotter was referencing the fact that a coin flip would decide whether he was going to target his current high school or the high school he attended the year prior. He wrote, "The results: I'm coming for you [targeted high school]."

Though the grade levels of the plotters ranged from 6th to 12th grade, the majority were in grades 9 through 12.

Motives

When identifying motives, all available information about the plotters' thinking and behavior in the time leading up to the discovery of their plots was considered, including information the plotters themselves provided through verbal statements, in suicide notes or journals, through multimedia messaging applications, and during post-discovery interviews with law enforcement.

Similar to previous Secret Service research on different forms of targeted violence, including school attacks, plotters had varying and often multiple motives for planning to carry out an attack. Due to the nature of the reporting on averted attacks, motives were unknown for 24 (36%) of the cases. For the remaining 43 (64%) cases, motives that most strongly contributed to the plotter's decision to conduct a violent act were identified.

The ranked order of motives identified in this report, from most common to least common, was nearly identical to the ranked order of motives among school attackers examined previously by NTAC in *Protecting America's Schools.* Like the plotters in this study, school attackers in the prior study were also most frequently motivated by grievances, followed by a desire to kill, suicidality, and a desire for fame or notoriety. Only a small percentage of attackers from the prior study were motivated by psychotic symptoms, which was seen in this study as well.

MOTIVE		
	n = 67	%
Grievances	30	45%
Peers	*21*	*31 %*
Related to bullying	*14*	*21%*
Staff	*7*	*10%*
Romantic	*4*	*6%*
Other issues	*5*	*7%*
Desire to kill	10	15%
Suicidal	9	13%
Fame/notoriety	8	12%
Anti-female sentiment	2	3%
White supremacy	2	3%
Psychotic symptoms	1	1%
Other	2	3%
Unknown	24	36%

Grievances: For many of the cases (*n* = 30, 45%), retaliating for a grievance played a role in the motivation of the plotters. They sought revenge for perceived wrongs, held specific grudges, or had feelings of resentment toward others.

- Most frequently, grievances involved **peers** (*n* = 21, 31%), and for many of these, the plotters were retaliating for being bullied by their peers (*n* = 14, 21%). This included one plotter who targeted the soon-to-be high school students who had bullied him in 7th grade, even though the plotter was not going to attend high school in person. Other examples of peer grievances included plotters targeting peers they were not happy with, those who spread rumors or talked badly about them, and those who were mean or mistreated them or their friends.

  > *Two 13-year-old males planned to use firearms and bombs to attack their middle school. The plotters had researched how to build bombs, how to make tear gas, and even practiced making Molotov cocktails. A "kill list" was also drafted by the plotters to "punish" specific classmates and most of the school's football team. The plotters specifically selected these fellow students because they had subjected the 13-year-olds to years of bullying.*

- Other grievances were related to **school staff** ($n = 7$, 10%), **romantic relationships** ($n = 4$, 6%), or involved other issues ($n = 5$, 7%), including the desire to make others pay, wanting to teach the world a lesson, and anger over a specific event, such as being arrested and expelled for selling marijuana on school grounds.

> *An 18-year-old male crafted a plan to detonate pipe bombs at his high school. A few weeks prior to plot discovery, he had been suspended from his high school for making sexual advances toward another student. He planned to "blow [the school] up" because of the disciplinary actions he had received. The plotter was vocal about his grievances, as he directly relayed them to a high school counselor.*

Desire to Kill: The second most prevalent motive found in these cases ($n = 10$, 15%) was a desire to kill, evidenced by plotters' aspirations of killing others, sadistic interest in violence and previous incidents of mass violence, pleasurable feelings derived from animal abuse or thoughts of causing physical harm to others, and desires for power over their victims. While it is possible that a desire to kill could be associated with psychological symptoms (e.g., homicidal thoughts), it more often appeared to develop as a response to the plotter's personal circumstances and life experiences.

> *A 19-year-old male made threats to "shoot up" the graduation ceremony of his school. According to authorities, the plotter got a "rush" from studying mass shootings. He emulated the attacker who killed 12 and wounded 70 at a movie theater in Aurora, CO in 2012, even dying his hair like him and advocating for the attacker to be removed from death row, so the two could meet. In reality, this mass shooter was not on death row as he had been sentenced to life. One month prior to the discovery of the plot, he had been expelled from his previous school for making a similar threat.*

Suicidal: In nine cases (13%), plotters were motivated by suicide to carry out their attacks. However, suicidal ideations were rarely the sole factor in these plotters' motivation for violence. In all but one case, the plotters had additional motives, most frequently involving a grievance with peers related to bullying, followed by seeking fame or notoriety.

> *A 15-year-old male stole a shotgun and rifle from his grandfather and planned to shoot his classmates the following day. The plotter experienced relentless bullying at his school in the form of other students knocking him down, pushing him into lockers, and punching him. He wanted to die by suicide, but not in a way that would make his mother feel bad. He thought that killing other students would allow him to accomplish this goal, because his family would hate him instead of feeling sad.*

Fame/Notoriety: Eight cases (12%) involved plotters motivated by a desire for fame and notoriety. This was evidenced by the plotters expressing a desire to make a name for themselves or achieve national recognition, emulate previous mass attackers, exceed the number of victims by previous mass shooters, or inspire a following after their deaths. In all eight of these cases, the plotters showed an interest in the shooting at Columbine High School.

> *A 16-year-old male planned to carry out a Columbine-style attack at his school. The student was depressed and frustrated with his school and felt that others mistreated him. His MySpace username included "TCMI," which stands for "Trench Coat Mafia International," a reference to the Columbine shooters. The plotter also ran an online group for members who sympathized with the Columbine shooters. He wrote in his journal that he wanted to carry out a Columbine-style attack at the school, saying "I wanna break the current shooting record. I wanna get instant recognition."*

In four cases, the plotters were influenced in some part by certain beliefs or ideologies typically associated with hateful or violent rhetoric or action. Two cases involved plotters who held **white supremacist** views that contributed to their reasons for planning an attack. In one case, the plotter had a history of using racial slurs and referencing white power and Nazis through statements, drawings, and gestures at school. The plotter selected his targets based on their race and sexual orientation. The other case involved two plotters who belonged to a white supremacy group, one of whom was the leader of the group and wrote a suicide note describing his readiness to die for his beliefs. The other two cases in which a belief or ideology influenced the plotter's motive included plotters who held **anti-female sentiment**. Both plotters wrote misogynistic and degrading comments about women in their journals. One of the plotters wrote these comments in the form of a hit list that included the names of the females he was targeting and the reasons why. Of note, though not reported previously, anti-female sentiment was also identified in the motives of three attackers in NTAC's *Protecting America's Schools* report.

In just one case, evidence suggested the plotter may have been influenced by **psychotic symptoms**. That plotter had been treated for suicidal thoughts in the past and had contact with mental health professionals on at least three occasions within the month prior. He reported that a "voice in his head" told him to kill a classmate.

For two plotters, the factors contributing to their motive did not fall under any of the above categories. In one case, the plotter planned to carry out an attack to honor his biological father who had recently passed away. His biological father had told him once that he had served time in prison for plotting to carry out a school shooting, which the plotter wanted to emulate. In the second case, a plotter did not want to be perceived as a coward by his friends so he went along with their plans to carry out an attack at the school.

Planning

Across all 67 plots, 11 categories of observable planning behaviors were identified. Most of these behaviors are similar to those found in NTAC's *Protecting America's Schools* report, with a few additions. Overall, the average number of behaviors identified per case was 3.7. For just under three-quarters ($n = 47$, 70%) of the cases, the plotters engaged in two to four of these behaviors. In just over one-quarter ($n = 19$, 28%), they engaged in five to eight.

Weapons-related planning: The majority ($n = 57$, 85%) of the plotters engaged in planning related to weapons. This included plotters who:

- *Acquired* weapons specifically for their attacks ($n = 38$, 57%).

- *Researched* information about various weapons ($n = 24$, 36%), including how to make bombs, the lethality and efficiency of different weapons, or how to obtain them. Five of the plotters were known to have acquired or sought The Anarchist Cookbook to learn more about bomb-making.

- *Manufactured* bombs or incendiary devices ($n = 18$, 27%), such as pipe bombs, pressure cooker bombs, or Molotov cocktails.

PLANNING BEHAVIORS		
	$n = 67$	%
1. Weapons-related planning	57	85%
2. Planned the execution of the attack	49	73%
3. Documented plans	38	57%
4. Researched prior attacks	21	31%
5. Attempted to recruit others	11	16%
6. Chose clothing and/or music	8	12%
7. Surveilled target and researched security measures	6	9%
8. Researched other relevant topics	5	7%
9. Acquired gear and other items	5	7%
10. Played video games for training and skill learning	4	6%
11. Prepped a bag	3	4%

- *Practiced* firing or detonating weapons ($n = 12$, 18%). In one case where the plotters had been planning for at least two years, a small shooting range was found in one of their homes. Police also found two mannequin heads, one of which had green pellets embedded into the forehead. The second mannequin head was positioned on a tripod, on its knees with its hands behind its back, and a homemade knife in its head.

- *Stole* weapons ($n = 6$, 9%) in preparation for their planned attack. This included plotters who stole the weapons from their family or stole them as part of a series of burglaries.

- Attempted but *failed to acquire* weapons ($n = 4$, 6%) by trying to steal them from their family's safe, asking others for help in acquiring them, or failing to purchase weapons themselves.

> *A 19-year-old male was detained by police after it was reported that he wanted to carry out a shooting at his school. An investigation revealed that, nine days prior, the plotter asked a friend to drive him to a sporting goods store to buy a gun. On the way, he told his friend that he intended to open fire at a school event. The friend pulled over and told him to get out of the car. A few days later, the friend and his brother saw the plotter at a convenience store, at which time the plotter again stated his intentions to carry out a shooting. Though neither of these incidents were reported, the friend told a peer that he feared the plotter would carry out his threat.*

Planned the execution of the attack: Nearly three-quarters ($n = 49$, 73%) of the plotters detailed how they would execute their attacks, including the timing of when they would initiate the attack, where they would stage any bombs, routes they would take through the school, and how they would handle the police presence or response. Plotters also arranged for transportation to the school to bring in their weapons, brought extra clothes "to avoid getting caught," and crafted a story to deny culpability.

Documented plans: Over half ($n = 38$, 57%) of the plotters documented some of their thoughts and intentions regarding their planned attacks in the form of to-do lists, full narratives of their motives and justifications, or step-by-step action plans. Documentation included journals and manifestos ($n = 19$, 28%), lists ($n = 17$, 25%) of persons whom the plotters wanted to harm or keep safe, and maps or diagrams of the school ($n = 16$, 24%). The latter included floor plans issued by the school, maps generated from various websites, and hand-drawn sketches. Often, these diagrams showed where the plotters intended to place explosive devices, routes they planned to take when firing on students, or locations where they planned to trap students so they could maximize the harm caused in "kill zones."

> *After a 17-year-old male told a fellow student that he planned to carry out a shooting at their school, the other student reported the threat to a substance abuse counselor, who then notified police. An investigation revealed that the plotter had detailed his plans in a journal, which contained a list of approximately 20 intended targets, including the SRO, the supplies he would need, and his efforts to acquire a firearm. Other details in the journal described his "growing obsession" with carrying out the attack and killing at least 100 people, a crude map of the school, the locations for his bombs, and which doors he would chain so he could isolate his classmates and create a "kill zone."*
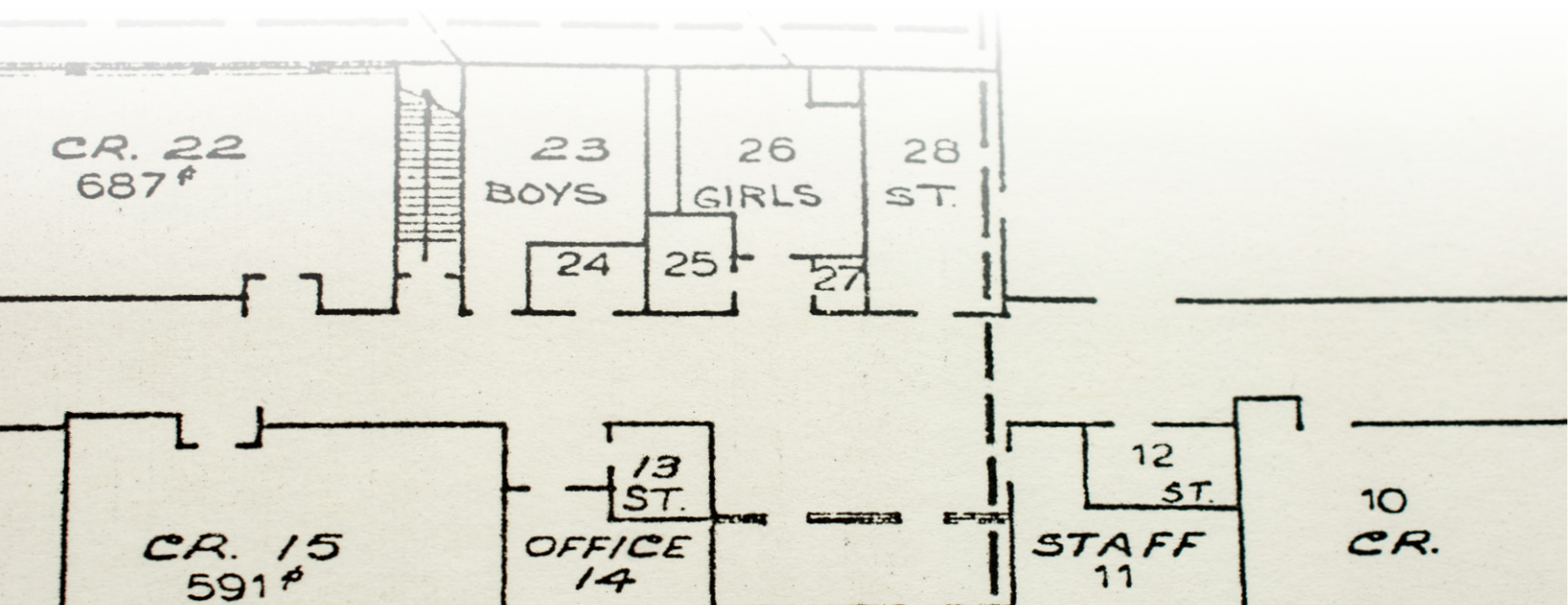
Researched prior attacks: Nearly one-third (*n* = 21, 31%) of the plotters conducted research into prior attacks as part of their planning, including studying tactics of previous attackers. Though many focused on the Columbine attack and the specific tactics those attackers used, others conducted more extensive research into other high-profile acts of violence including the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995; the mass shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007, the movie theater in Aurora, CO in 2012, and Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012; and the attack in Norway in 2011 involving the bombing of a government building and mass shooting at a youth camp.

> *An 18-year-old female planned an attack at her school using firearms and pipe bombs. She planned to end the attack by taking her own life. The plotter believed that she was destined to be the first female mass school shooter. In preparation, she conducted extensive research on prior attacks, including the tactics used in the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings. She also researched school shootings more broadly, including attacks that had been prevented, and applied what she learned. Noticing a concerning change, her father searched her backpack and found ammunition. He then read her journal, which detailed her plans, and he contacted the school. When she was pulled from class, they found she had magnesium tape (a highly flammable material often used in fireworks) and a book about the Sandy Hook shooting. After police were notified, they found a shotgun, which she recently purchased, ammunition, and bomb-making materials in her room.*

Attempted to recruit others: In 11 cases (16%), plotters attempted to recruit others to carry out their attacks. In some cases, the recruitment efforts failed, and in others they were successful.

> *A student notified the school resource officer about comments made by a 16-year-old male classmate on the bus, indicating that he wanted to carry out a mass school shooting. The plotter was suspended the same day and kept under watch by police for two weeks. When police feared he was close to taking action, he was arrested. Investigation revealed that the plotter had researched weapons, how to obtain them, previous school shootings, and Nazi and neo-Nazi imagery. He had also acquired tactical vests, drawn three detailed maps for his plot, and attempted to recruit other students to assist with the attack. He approached four or five fellow students about the plan, both in-person and via an instant messaging app, describing that he would need up to 15 others to help carry out his plot. During their conversations, two classmates allegedly feigned interest and at least one student agreed to participate.*

Chose clothing and/or music for the day of their attack: In eight of the cases (12%), the plotters chose the clothing and/or music they planned to wear or listen to while carrying out their planned attack. In five of the cases, the plotters planned to wear trench coats similar to those used during the Columbine attack. In three of these cases, the plotters chose the music they planned to listen to during their attack, including two who had prepared playlists.

> *A student told his mother that he no longer felt safe at school after a 17-year-old male plotter asked him for help in making a video showing him with bombs and talking about plans to attack his school. The mother called an adult friend who contacted law enforcement on her behalf. That same day, police searched the home of the plotter, finding several homemade bombs and incendiary devices, minute-by-minute plans for his attack, a diagram, and supply lists. They also found a list of items he would take, including a hammer and sickle baseball cap, suspenders, skull and crossbones belt buckle, wool socks, two Russian medallions, trench coat, tactical backpack, and his various weapons. He further documented what song he would have "blasting" from his car when he began his attack.*

Other planning behaviors included:

- **Surveilled target and researched security measures** and procedures, SRO schedules, busiest locations and times, and student movements and traffic patterns. One plotter compiled information on the school's emergency procedures and drills, and spoke with the SRO to gather additional information. Though she told the SRO that she was doing a project for a law enforcement class, in reality she was trying to learn security patterns through casual conversation. She asked the SRO questions, such as whether SROs are armed when they respond to a school emergency.

- **Researched other relevant topics**, such as tactical gear and/or police scanner codes, best tactics to use against law enforcement, getting a maximum kill rate, serial killers, and consequences for school shooters after their attacks.

- **Acquired other gear and supplies**, such as cash, gas masks, and tactical vests.

- **Played video games for training and skill learning**, including practicing with games based on the Columbine attack. Two plotters trained for hours on a flight simulator computer game to learn how to fly a small plane for their escape plan. Another played video games to prepare, believing he could adapt different moves to maximize his kills, such as a 360-degree spin maneuver.

- **Prepped a bag** containing weapons and supplies needed for the attack.

Determining a timeline for when planning was first initiated proved challenging due to the limited amount of information available in open sources. In 22 cases, an approximate date for the earliest reported planning behavior was found. For 7 of these cases, the plotters' first identified act of planning occurred between 1 and 30 days prior to the discovery of the plot. For 9 cases, the earliest planning occurred 31 days to under 4 months prior, and for 5 cases the planning began 6 to 12 months prior. For the remaining case, planning started at least two years prior to the discovery of the plot.

> *Two seniors told their friend about their plan to carry out an attack against their school. An investigation quickly revealed a third plotter, who was a recently former student. For two to three years, the trio planned to carry out a Columbine-style attack that would end in suicide-by-cop. In preparation, they studied the Columbine attack, detailed where they would place their bombs around the school, and on which exits they would ignite jelled gasoline to trap students and staff. They selected fourth period lunch for their attack, which would mainly take place in the cafeteria. They planned to hide their weapons in advance so they were readily available when needed. They had building diagrams and prepared suicide notes. They also stockpiled many explosive and incendiary materials, firearms, ammunition, and other gear, and practiced with these weapons in preparation for their attack.*

Plot Elements

WEAPONS SELECTION & ACCESS

Over half of the plotters (*n* = 37, 55%) chose to use at least two or three types of weapons, while just under half (*n* = 30, 45%) planned to use just one type of weapon to carry out their attacks. For nearly all of the cases (*n* = 64, 96%), the weapon(s) of choice included one or more firearms. The second most frequently chosen weapon was explosives (*n* = 34, 51%), followed by incendiary devices (*n* = 12, 18%) and bladed weapons (*n* = 8, 12%).

In three-quarters (*n* = 51, 76%) of the cases, **one or more of the plotters had potential access to at least one weapon**. In over one-third (*n* = 24, 36%) of the cases, the plotters had access to two to four types of weapons at the time their plots were discovered. Access included instances where the plotters' families, with whom they lived or were close, had weapons in the home, plotters who claimed they could access weapons at a friend's house, and plotters who possessed or manufactured the weapons themselves. In 10 cases (15%), the plotters did not appear to have had access to any kind of weapon, and in 6 (9%) the level of access was unknown

| WEAPONS SELECTED		
	n = 67	%
Firearms	64	96%
Explosives	34	51%
Incendiary Devices	12	18%
Bladed Weapons	8	12%

The weapons plotters had access to included firearms (*n* = 43, 64%), constructed explosives (*n* = 11, 16%), incendiary devices (*n* = 11, 16%), unconventional bladed weapons (*n* = 12, 18%), materials to make explosives (*n* = 7, 10%), and other weapons (*n* = 3, 4%). The unconventional blades included hunting knives, swords, machetes, and throwing knives, and the other weapons included acid bombs, a crossbow, and nonlethal yet harmful items such as tear gas. In two cases, plotters had access to four different types of weapons.

> *Two 17-year-olds and an 18-year-old were arrested after it was discovered that they had been planning to attack their school for over two years. Police found a room in one of their homes that was used to manufacture explosive devices and napalm. They also found a stockpile of 20 handmade explosive devices, 6 one-quart jars of jelled gasoline, 9 long guns (one of which was an AK47-style rifle), a .40 caliber Ruger handgun, pellet guns, helmets, holsters, machetes, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. The bombs included devices similar to pipe bombs which were manufactured with toilet paper, duct tape, gun powder, firecrackers, and bottle rocket fuses.*

Plotters who chose to use certain types of weapons, alone or in combination with other weapons, typically had access to them:

- For the 64 cases where the plotters intended to use firearms, two-thirds (*n* = 43, 67%) had potential access to one or more firearms.

- For the 34 cases where the plotters planned to use explosives, half (50%) had constructed the explosives (*n* = 11) or had acquired components to make them (*n* = 6).

- For the 12 cases where a plotter planned to use an incendiary device, most (83%) had made Molotov cocktails or had access to materials to make a similar device.

- For the 8 cases where plotters planned to use bladed weapons, half (50%) of them had possession of unconventional bladed weapons.
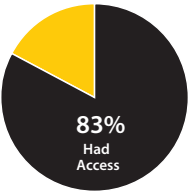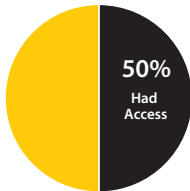
64 Selected Firearms

Had Access
67%
Unimpeded Access
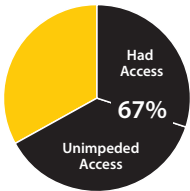
34 Selected Explosives

50%*
Had Access
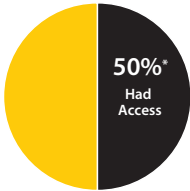
12 Selected Incendiary

83%
Had Access

8 Selected Bladed

50%
Had Access

*Includes 11 cases with completed explosives, and 6 with bomb-making materials only.
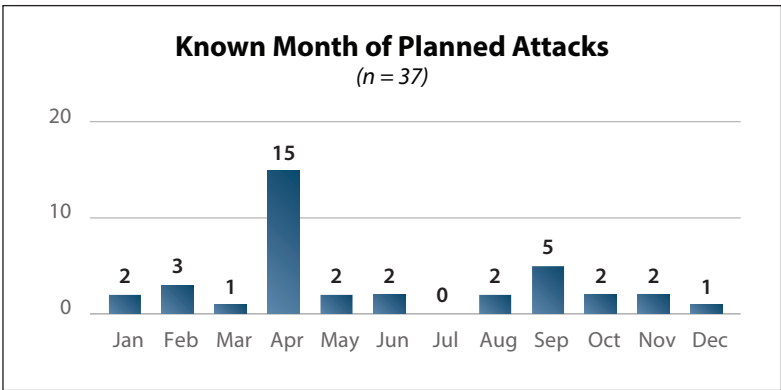
FIREARMS ACCESS

Plotters were identified as having access to firearms if a weapon was known to be in their possession or in the home, regardless of whether it was secured. Based on these criteria, plotters had access to firearms in 43 cases.

In most (*n* = 30, 70%) of these cases, plotters had access to a family member's firearm in their home. In 27 (63%), **the plotter's access to firearms was unimpeded** as they owned the weapons, stole them from family members, had them in their possession when the plot was discovered, or had permission to access the secure location where they were kept. Four plotters purchased a firearm themselves, including:

- An 18-year-old female who legally purchased a Remington 870 shotgun, ammunition, and bomb-making materials.
- An 18-year-old male who claimed to have purchased a .45 caliber handgun, though it was not located in the investigation.
- An 18-year-old male who legally purchased a 9mm carbine rifle.
- A 17-year-old male who illegally purchased a .45 caliber handgun.

> *A 14-year-old male told other students on the school bus that he was going to kill four classmates and his uncle. He stated he had selected a date for the attack, planned to use a sniper rifle or shotgun as his weapon, and thought he could easily get his weapon inside the school using his backpack. Another student alerted her parents, who then contacted police. Through the investigation, multiple weapons were found in the plotter's bedroom, including a 20-gauge shotgun, a .22 caliber semiautomatic rifle, two .22 caliber lever-action rifles, a .22 caliber revolver, bulk ammunition for all firearms, throwing knives, two machetes, a crossbow, and arrows. Weeks after the plotter's arrest, his mother was charged for intentionally providing a firearm to a minor. She reportedly explained that she allowed him to keep the weapons in his room to teach him responsibility and allow him to grow up.*

In 13 cases, the firearms that were in the home were secured in a gun safe or other access-controlled location. However, in seven cases, the plotters gained access by prying open the safe, locating the key, finding the firearms left out, or being allowed to access them regularly. Two more claimed they knew the combination or where to find the key. In only one case, the plotter attempted but failed to access a gun safe. In 10 cases, at least one firearm was not secured in a meaningful way.

Known Month of Planned Attacks
(*n* = 37)

Jan 2, Feb 3, Mar 1, Apr 15, May 2, Jun 2, Jul 0, Aug 2, Sep 5, Oct 2, Nov 2, Dec 1

DATE SELECTION

In nearly two-thirds (*n* = 43, 64%) of the cases, the plotters selected or considered a date for their planned attack. In 33 cases, plotters selected or discussed specific days for conducting their attacks, while in 4 cases, only a month was identified. No information on date selection was available for the six remaining cases. For one of those cases, the plotter noted during the investigation that a shooter would never reveal the date and time of a planned mass shooting.

For the 37 cases where a date was identified, the planned attacks were to take place throughout the year. The only month not identified in any plot was July. This was also true for attacks examined in NTAC's *Protecting America's Schools* report. However, findings between the two studies differed for the month of April. While only two attacks were carried out in that month, the largest portion of *planned* attacks (*n* = 15) were to occur in April. Reasons for why the plotters chose their dates were found in 28 cases.

- In 12 cases, the plotters chose the ***anniversaries of prior mass-casualty, high-profile attacks***. For nine of these cases, the plotters chose or considered April 19th or 20th, specifically to mark the anniversary of the Columbine attack. For some of these, their choice was driven by additional factors, including one plotter who also wanted to celebrate Hitler's birthday, which is on the same date as the Columbine attack. Another chose April 19th, not only for its proximity to the Columbine anniversary, but also possibly because it was the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. This latter terrorist attack also influenced another plotter's decision-making for what date to choose, but he ended up changing his plans to an undisclosed date. In two cases, the plotters chose to mark the terrorist attacks on 9/11, noting it would increase the impact of their attacks.

In late April, police responded to a call from a member of the community regarding a 17-year-old male who appeared to be acting suspiciously at a storage unit. When they arrived, they found him with a large cache of weapons including explosives and incendiary materials. He admitted to officers that he was planning an attack at his school. The plotter originally planned for his attack to take place sometime in April, his favorite month, because this month marks a few high-profile tragedies including the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the Columbine attack in 1999, and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. He originally wanted April 19th to mark the Oklahoma City bombing, but could not execute an attack on that date because it was a Saturday. He also ruled out April 18th as it was too close to "4/20," which, outside of being the anniversary of Columbine, was the day many students smoke marijuana and he worried that drug sniffing dogs would be on campus and might detect his explosives.

DATE	
	n = 15
April 5	1
April 7	1
April 13	1
April 18	1
April 19	3*
April 20 (Columbine)	7
April 28	1

*One plotter considered either April 18th or 19th for the attack, while another considered the 19th or 20th. Both of these cases are included under April 19th.

- In seven cases, plotters chose or discussed the dates to coincide with the *start or end of school breaks*. In two cases, the plotters targeted the first day of school, and in two more, the plotters selected the end of the school year. One plotter chose the last day of school but later changed the date to sometime before early May, as more students would be in attendance compared to the last day of school. In two other cases, the plotters intended to carry out their attacks on the second day of school after spring break and on the last day before winter break. In the plot targeting the last day before winter break, the plotter ultimately changed the date after she connected with her accomplice and they both decided to allow more time to acquire weapons.

- In three cases, the plotters wanted to *target a school event*, including an assembly, graduation, or other unnamed event.

- In two cases, the plotters chose the dates for more *personal reasons*, including one who decided to carry out a shooting the day after he found out his birth father had passed away, and another who wanted to mark his own birthday with his attack.

Reasons for Date Selection

Anniversaries of mass attacks

———

School breaks

———

School events

———

Personal reasons

SPECIFIC TARGETS		
	n = 67	%*
Classmates/peers	27	40%
Administrators and staff	19	28%
SROs	9	13%
Family	6	9%
Other law enforcement	4	6%
Unnamed	2	3%

* Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

In eight of the cases, four of which are described above, the plotters were forced to change their selected date of attacks. One plotter wanted to wait out a police investigation initiated by his father, who had reported his guns missing after the plotter stole them from a gun safe. In another case, a group of six plotters were forced to delay one day as the plotter who was supposed to bring the weapons to school did not show up. For the third, the plotter, who reportedly brought a gun to school on a Friday with intentions of carrying out his attack, delayed to the following Monday because he was too drunk and forgot his explosives. Other reasons included wanting more time to gather weapons, planning for a day when more students would be at the school, timing the attack to avoid weekends or specific dates, and being convinced to change the date by co-conspirators.

TARGET SELECTION

Many plotters wanted to harm random students and/or staff. In half of the cases (n = 34, 51%), the plotters *also* selected specific people they wanted to harm. Specific targets included classmates and other peers (n = 27, 40%), school administrators and staff (n = 19, 28%), SROs (n = 9, 13%), the plotter's family (n = 6, 9%), and other law enforcement (n = 4, 6%). In two cases, the plotters had specific targets that were unnamed in open sources.

Given that the most prevalent motive amongst the plotters was related to grievances, typically against peers or school staff, it is not surprising that these two groups were the most frequently targeted. Most of the plotters who planned to target SROs did so to maximize their chances of carrying out the attack without being stopped. The six cases where plotters targeted family included four who wanted to kill their immediate family members prior to their attacks, one who wanted to kill an uncle, and another who wanted to kill "parents," but it is unclear if this was in reference to their own parent or parents of fellow classmates.

> A 16-year-old male confessed to a police officer about his plans to carry out a mass shooting at school during an unrelated interview about recent vehicular burglaries. When the officer pressed the 16-year-old about the break-ins, he admitted to the thefts and provided some of the items he had stolen. The father then took the officer aside and said that his handgun had gone missing from his workplace and he suspected his son. When the officer asked the 16-year-old about the gun, he confessed his plans. The plotter intended to kill his family, drive to the school, kill the SRO, take the SRO's weapon and ammunition, deploy homemade explosives, and kill the students who had bullied him and anyone else who attempted to disrupt his attack plan.

LOCATIONS

In about 25 of the plots, information was found to describe where in the school the plotters wanted to cause harm or otherwise stage their attacks. In some cases, more than one location was named. Some of the plotters chose the cafeteria ($n = 10$) for their attacks, while equal numbers chose the hallways ($n = 8$), a location on school grounds like a courtyard ($n = 8$), and at egress points ($n = 8$). Those who chose egress points, planned to place bombs there or otherwise cause harm to those in the area. Some plotters selected the gym, classrooms, the library, and offices. Other plotters selected specific campus buildings (e.g., auditorium) or had plans to shoot at evacuees and first responders from a rooftop.

LOCATIONS	
	Cases
Cafeteria	10
Hallways	8
School grounds	8
Egress points	8
Gym	4
Classrooms	3
Library	3
Offices	2
Other	4

TACTICS

Many plotters designed specific strategies for the execution of their attacks; some were related to the tactics employed and others were related to the resolution for the attack.

End in Suicide: In 25 cases (37%), plotters expressed a willingness to die, intended to commit suicide, or planned to commit suicide-by-cop as part of their attacks. For some, this appeared to be the result of the plotter's history of depression or suicidal ideations. For others, it was a product of their fascination with the Columbine attack. For a few, there was an indifference as to whether they survived the attack.

School Security/Infrastructure: In 13 cases (19%), plotters targeted security measures. This included those who targeted the SRO to stifle the security response or steal the SRO's weapon for use in the attack. This also included efforts to compromise physical security measures by disabling cameras, cutting off phone and power systems, and disabling the vehicles used by school security to respond to campus emergencies.

> *Six males in the 7th grade planned to kill classmates and faculty with guns and knives, seeking revenge against staff they disliked and other students who had picked on them. Nine other students were found to have had knowledge and/or involvement in the plot. The detailed plans involved the six main plotters initiating the attack by firing warning shots so that the nine others could get certain students to safety. They had diagrams and assigned tasks for each person, which included disabling the school's phone system and power, thereby giving the rest of the plotters enough time to kill more classmates and staff. One of the plotters told his father months after the plot was averted that he still would have gone through with it if they had not been caught.*

Trap Potential Victims: In seven cases (10%), plotters intended to block doors or otherwise trap victims in a specific location to maximize casualties. This included plans to chain or zip-tie the doors or set the doors on fire.

Targeting of Evacuees: In four cases (6%), the plan was to cause a mass exodus by calling in a threat or by initiating the attacks. The plotters then intended to take up strategic positions for firing on those evacuating or responding to the building.

> *Police received a tip regarding a plot to carry out an attack at the local high school. The plot involved a 16-year-old male student enrolled in the school and his 19-year-old friend who had no known affiliation with the targeted school or the school district. Their plan involved killing the principal and superintendent, then killing the sheriff and his undersheriff to use their service weapons in the attack. They would then target students in the 7th grade and higher in addition to several students who picked on the 16-year-old when he was there, as he had stopped attending. They planned to lock up the school, and, while one of the plotters held students in the gym to then kill them, the other would take a position on the roof and watch for law enforcement to arrive. They would then shoot responding officers, as well as anyone who tried to flee.*

Escape Plans: In four cases (6%), plans included the plotters' escape, which varied from identifying an escape route out of the school to taking a train out of the area and living under assumed names. It also included plans to steal an aircraft from the municipal airport.

> *The plotters, ages 16 and 18, sent a text message to a friend implying they were planning an act of violence at their school. After notifying the SRO, the police were called and the two were taken out of class and arrested. Their plan was to set off a bomb during a school assembly and then escape by stealing a plane from a local airport and flying to a country without extradition agreements. In preparation, they had logged what was described as hundreds of hours on an advanced flight-simulator computer game. Searches of both plotters' homes did not reveal any explosives or explosive material but did reveal plans to make explosive devices, as well as maps of the school and detailed information about its security system.*

Divert Responders: In two cases (3%), plotters planned to divert first responders by starting a fire or detonating bombs away from the school.

Plot Detection & Reporting

PLOTTER COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT THEIR INTENT

In nearly all (*n* = 63, 94%) of the cases, the **plotters shared their intentions about carrying out an attack** targeting the school in various ways, including verbal statements, electronic messaging, and online posts.[9] In about two-fifths (*n* = 29, 43%) of the cases, plotters also documented their intentions in journals, documents, videos, and audio recordings that were not shared with others prior to plot discovery. The most common of these were journals, which were found in at least 16 cases.

Outside of co-conspirators, communications about the plots were **most often observed by the plotters' friends, classmates, or other peers** (*n* = 46, 69%). An adult was aware of the communications in 13 cases (19%). In the 9 remaining cases (13%), it is unclear who observed the plotter's communication, three of which involved plotters posting their communications on a social media platform.

In 13 cases (19%), **plotters warned friends and other peers about their impending attacks** by telling them something big was going to happen, or not to come to school on certain dates or if they received a text from the plotter. In two cases, the warnings were about how they could avoid injury on the day of the attack. This included sharing a signal that would be used amongst the plotters to initiate the attack or a code word that could be used so that the student receiving the warning would not be harmed.

WHO OBSERVED		
	n = 67	%
Friends, classmates, peers	46	69%
Any adult	13	19%
School employee	10	*15%*
Family	3	*4%*
Non-school adult	2	*3%*
Unknown recipients, including online	9	13%

> *Two males, ages 13 and 14, told other students that they should not come to school in three days as they were planning a Columbine-style attack. They told them they could use a certain code name when the shooting started to avoid being shot, or they could wear a white shirt and they would not be harmed. Investigators later revealed that this was a trick and that they intended to shoot students in white shirts so they could see the blood more easily. This idea may have been sparked by the fact that the school had planned to distribute white T-shirts as part of a school spirit event.*

DISCOVERY OF THE PLOT

Three-quarters (*n* = 50, 75%) of the 67 plots were detected solely because of what the plotters communicated about their intent. In seven cases (10%), another behavior led to the discovery of the plot, and in five cases (7%), it was a combination of both communications and behaviors. In three cases (4%), the plotters self-identified by coming forward to a school counselor or making comments to a teacher, and in the remaining two (3%), it was unclear how the plot was discovered. Social media played a role in the discovery of the plotters' communications in only 11 cases (16%). The platforms used in these instances included Snapchat, MySpace, Omegle, Twitter, and YouTube.

LED TO DISCOVERY		
	n = 67	%*
Communications only	50	75%
Behavior only	7	10%
Communication and behavior	5	7%
Self-identified	3	4%
Unknown	2	3%

Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

The 12 cases in which a *behavior* led to the discovery of the plot included:

- In seven cases, **weapons-related behaviors** were noted by family or friends. This included instances where weapons were found missing, causing the family to call the school or search their child's room, only to find journals and other items detailing their plans. It also included instances where friends or classmates were shown, given, or otherwise noticed that the plotter had a firearm or knives.

- For two cases, it was during **police investigations that weapons were noted as missing** and the plots were revealed when the plotters were confronted. In one case, the stepfather of the plotter reported his guns missing and in the other, an officer was investigating vehicular burglaries when the father told the officer his guns were missing and that he suspected his son. In neither case was there a suspicion of intent to carry out a school attack that prompted the report to law enforcement.

- In two cases, a parent or a friend noticed a **behavior change**, causing them to inquire further or take previous concerning statements made by the plotters more seriously.

- In one case, **suspicious behavior observed by a member of the community** prompted her to call police. Specifically, she saw a teenage male walking through her backyard to access a self-storage facility, instead of using the public pathway. She notified law enforcement, who found the student inside a storage facility garage, where he kept a stockpile of weapons.

TIMING OF THE REPORTS

This section examines the timing of when reports about the plots were made to school officials or law enforcement authorities, including how far before the date of attack the plot was reported, how fast they were reported once detected, and what day of the week these reports were made. Due to the nature of reporting regarding plots, precise dates were not always available to address these questions. For this reason, the number of cases considered for each question varied.

How far before the planned attack was the plot reported?

In 33 of the cases, the specific dates the plotters chose or discussed for their attacks were found in open sources.[9] In just over one-quarter ($n = 9$, 27%) of these cases, the plot was reported on the same day it was supposed to happen. This includes seven cases where the attacks appeared to be imminent because the plotters had brought weapons to school for the attack or were on their way to school with the weapons. In five of these cases, the plotters brought one or more firearms; in another, the plotter brought knives; and in the last, the plotter brought both guns and knives.

> *A 17-year-old male stole an AK-47, a .45 caliber handgun, a .22 caliber handgun, a 12-inch Bowie knife, and extra ammunition from his parents' gun safe at home. He planned to take control of the announcement system at school and make unspecified demands. If those demands were not met, he intended to take hostages and/or commit violence. In preparation, he had placed the AK-47 in a trash can in a restroom either before school started or just as classes were beginning. Meanwhile, when his parents awoke that morning, they found he was not home and reported him to the police as a missing person around 6:47 a.m. They later noticed that their weapons were missing, so they went to the school but did not immediate notify school personnel about the missing weapons at that time. When they arrived, the plotter was pulled out of class and brought into the office. His parents asked that his backpack be searched, at which point the handguns and knife were found.*

In one-third (*n* = 12, 33%) of these cases, the plots were reported within one to two days of the date of the attack. In the remaining cases, seven were reported within one month and five were reported over a month prior. Three of these latter cases were reported far in advance of the planned attack, including two reported four to six months prior, and one reported nearly three years prior to the planned attack. Each of these three were to occur on the anniversaries of the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Columbine High School shooting.

How quickly after observing the behavior was it reported?

The speed with which concerning behaviors were reported may be the key as to why the attacks were successfully averted. In 43 of the cases, precise dates were found for when the behavior indicative of a plot was detected and when it was reported to the school or law enforcement. In three-quarters (*n* = 32, 74%) of these cases, **the concern was reported the same day it was observed**. In nine more cases (21%), the report was made within one to two days. The case with the longest lag between observation and reporting involved a student who reported the activities of his friend 62 days after the plotter first talked about wanting to outdo Columbine.

DAYS BETWEEN REPORT AND PLANNED DAY OF ATTACK		
	n = 33	%*
0 days (same day)	9	27%
1-2 days	12	36%
3-7 days	4	12%
8-31 days	3	9%
32+	5	15%

Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

DAYS BETWEEN OBSERVATION OF PLOT AND REPORT		
	n = 43	%*
0 days	32	74%
1-2 days	9	21%
24 days	1	2%
62 days	1	2%

Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

A student notified police regarding statements his 17-year-old male friend made indicating his interest in carrying out a school shooting. The plotter had been expelled from the school the previous academic year, and he planned to target the school on the first day of classes. The plotter created cell phone videos in which he discussed his plot, stating he would kill more people than died at Columbine, Virginia Tech, or the attacks in Norway. Though this kind of talk had been going on for two months, the friend became more concerned after a conversation the day prior. The plotter spoke about purchasing an AK-47 with a laser sight, told him that he perfected a timer for bombs, and showed his friend a map of the school. The friend described the plotter as different and anxious during this conversation. He told police that the plotter questioned him, would not allow him into his bedroom, and watched everything the friend did. The friend, who became uncomfortable, called his mother to pick him up.
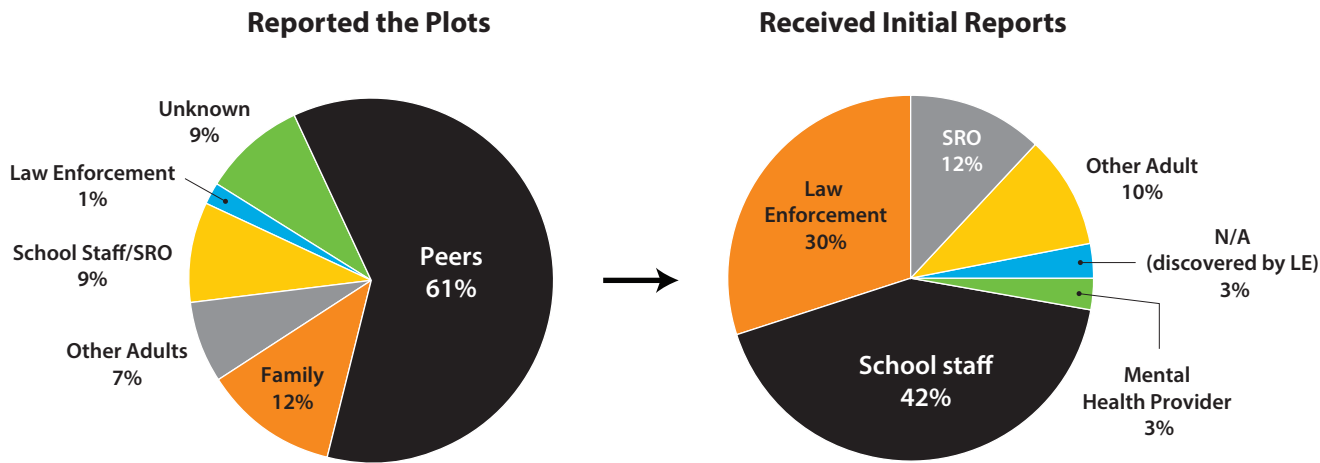
What day of the week was the plot reported to the school or law enforcement?

The date of the report was known in all but one case (*n* = 66). Those concerned raised the alarm on every day of the week. Six of the cases (9%) were reported over the weekend. Combined with the finding that many of the plots were reported within 0-2 days of the planned day of attack, *protocols to assess these reports must be in place 24/7 for schools and law enforcement*, both of which may receive initial reports of concern at any time.

Day of the Week on Which the Report was Received

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa	Unknown
3	11	12	16	15	6	3	1
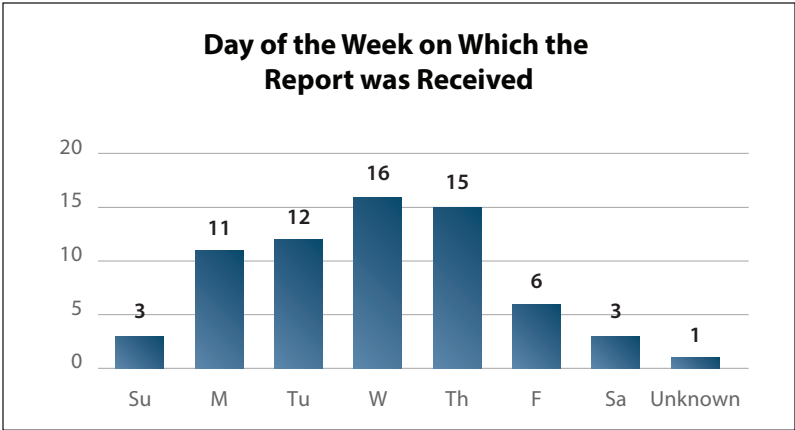
FLOW OF REPORTED INFORMATION

Those who *reported the plots* included classmates, friends, and other peers (*n* = 41, 61%), family members (*n* = 8, 12%), school staff or the SRO (*n* = 6, 9%), and other adults (*n* = 5, 7%). In one case, local law enforcement uncovered the plot while investigating a report of missing weapons.[10]

Reported the Plots

- Unknown 9%
- Law Enforcement 1%
- School Staff/SRO 9%
- Other Adults 7%
- Family 12%
- Peers 61%

Received Initial Reports

- SRO 12%
- Law Enforcement 30%
- Other Adult 10%
- N/A (discovered by LE) 3%
- School staff 42%
- Mental Health Provider 3%

Those who *received the initial reports* included school staff (*n* = 28, 42%), law enforcement (*n* = 20, 30%), SROs (*n* = 8, 12%), and other adults (*n* = 7, 10%), including parents of other students. In two cases, a mental health professional received the initial report of concern. In the remaining two cases, the plot was discovered firsthand by an SRO or local law enforcement. To learn more, reporting paths were traced to understand who initially received the information about the plot, and how information flowed from there.

- **_Peers:_** In nearly two-thirds (*n* = 41, 61%) of the cases, the plotters' friends, classmates, or peers observed the communication or behavior firsthand. In 22 of these cases, they reported the information to a school administrator or teacher. They also told their own parent (*n* = 7), an SRO (*n* = 6), or outside law enforcement (*n* = 5). In one case, the classmates told a private substance abuse counselor. These findings emphasize the importance of schools establishing and maintaining a safe school climate where students are empowered to speak up if they see a friend or classmate in distress. Building rapport with students and taking the initiative to ensure each student has a positive connection to a member of the staff, not only helps students academically and emotionally, but also fosters trust. As a result, when students have concerns about someone, they are comfortable coming forward with this information.

  > A high school student reported to the assistant principal that his friends told him they were plotting a school attack in which they wanted to kill those they did not like and commit suicide-by-cop. Two of the plotters were current students who had been bullied and harassed by classmates for being overweight and other factors, while the third plotter was a recent graduate. When the student who came forward was asked why he spoke up, he indicated that he wanted to help his friends. If it turned out to be all talk, they would get the help they needed. If it turned out to be all true, he could not live with it on his conscience.

Figure 1: Flow of Information for the 41 Cases Reported by a Peer
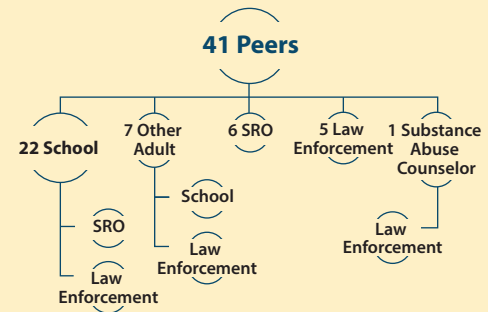
Figure 2: Flow of Information for the 8 Cases Reported by Family
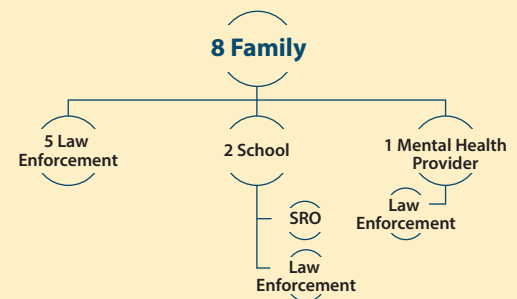
- **_Family:_** In eight cases (12%), a parent or a grandparent, observed the behavior and reported the plot. In several of these cases, the parent first noticed something was wrong and then searched the plotter's room or read their journal. Once the concerns were validated, the parent reached out to law enforcement directly, contacted the school, or contacted a mental health provider.

  > The parents of an 18-year-old male student called police after they had grown fearful of their son who had been acting erratic and strange. The mother had noticed changes in her son's personality whereby he would be quick to escalate and exhibit intense anger and aggression. She was reluctant to notify law enforcement because she did not want him to lose his scholarship. However, this changed after an argument during which he began banging his head against the wall. When she called police, her son told her he was going to shoot them. Deputies responded and transported him to a hospital for a mental health evaluation. The hospital denied the request, so the parents took him to a hospital across state lines, where they were again denied, because the facility could not treat out-of-state residents. For the next two days, the plotter stayed in an abandoned trailer. At this time, his parents intercepted a 20lb package of ammonium nitrate sent to him via mail. Very concerned, they searched his room, where they found a recording he wanted played after his death and writings documenting his plans to attack the school. Quite fearful, his parents called police again and the plotter was arrested.

- *Other Adults:* In five cases (7%), another adult, such as the parent of a peer or a member of the community, reported the plot to the authorities after observing the plotters' communications or behaviors. In one of these cases, the person notified the SRO, while the others reported the information directly to outside law enforcement.

  > *While at a soccer game, the parent of another student heard two male students, both age 16, talking about committing an attack bigger than Columbine, and the effectiveness of various weapons. They reportedly also researched school shootings and how to purchase firearms on their cell phones. Concerned, the parent took photos of the plotters. The following morning, she notified the SRO and provided him with the pictures. The plotters were identified, pulled from their classes, and interviewed by SROs. They admitted to their discussions and voluntarily provided the officers with their cell phones, which revealed evidence of their online research.*

- *School Staff & SROs:* In six cases (9%), a member of the school staff or SRO observed the behaviors or communications firsthand, initiated an inquiry, and notified law enforcement. This included three school administrators, two teachers, and one SRO.

  > *Investigating threats written on a bathroom wall, the SRO searched MySpace for information. There, he found comments written by the plotter on a post related to the threats he was investigating. In these comments, the plotter, who did not write the threatening message, stated that he wished a Columbine-style attack could really happen and he thought the Columbine attackers were martyrs. The SRO contacted additional investigators and the plotter was interviewed. Their investigation revealed that the plotter ran an online forum for members who sympathized with the Columbine attackers. This then led to the discovery of communications between the plotter and a 33-year-old man located out of state, and their plans to commit dual attacks on September 11.*

In four cases, law enforcement from outside of the local jurisdiction received the initial reports regarding the plots and took action. This included two reports that originated in the United States, and two that originated in Canada. The domestic incidents involved a plotter who talked about his plans in an online chatroom, while the other involved a text message sent to an out-of-state friend by the former girlfriend of a plotter who feared she may be a target. The international incidents included one where the owner of a YouTube channel in Canada reported a video post from a user who claimed she was planning to attack her school, and the other involved an online chatroom discussion in which the plotter talked about plans to stab those at his school. In the latter case, once the plotter was promptly identified, the SRO pulled him from class and found that he had brought two knives to school and made a hit list of students he planned to stab that morning. *These findings demonstrate the importance of taking all concerns seriously, being willing to take action, and conducting a thorough assessment by gathering information on the thinking and behavior of the concerning individual.*

COMMUNICATIONS OBSERVED, BUT NOT REPORTED

While this report focuses on the successful outcomes that prevented tragedies when those surrounding the plotters spoke up, it is important to acknowledge that there were instances in which the plotters' communications were **objectively concerning and should have been reported** to a responsible adult, **but were not.** In about two-fifths ($n = 29$, 43%) of the cases, others observed concerning communications about the plots, but did not take action to report the information. In all of these cases, the plotters' statements about their intentions were clear, and were most often either shared directly with their friends or overheard at school by others. Some plotters tried to recruit others during these conversations, shared photos or diagrams of how they were going to carry out the attack, or warned their friends. In eight cases, the plotters asked for help in acquiring weapons, showed others the weapons they already possessed, or asked a friend to hold on to weapons for them.

The reasons why these statements were not reported to a responsible adult were not always described, but some peers later shared that they thought the plotters were joking or they had been threatened by the plotters if they spoke up. Unfortunately, in some cases the peers actually encouraged the plotters. For example, in one case, when a plotter tried to recruit a fellow student to be part of her planned attack, the student declined, but recommended another student who accepted the invitation and became a co-conspirator. In another, when two students found out about the plotter's hit list, they allegedly asked to join the plot.

In two cases, peers tried to report the communications to a parent; however, the adults showed either indifference or outright irresponsible and criminal behavior.

> *Two male students, ages 15 and 16, told fellow students about their plans to carry out a shooting at their school. The 16-year-old had pried open his stepfather's locked safe and stolen two handguns. He gave the weapons to the 15-year-old, who hid them at his residence. On three occasions, the two plotters brought the loaded weapons to school to show to three or four of their friends. They told one friend that they should "shoot up the quad" during an assembly prior to spring break. At some point, one of the friends told their parent about what was going on, but was told not to get involved. The day after the plotters had shown their friends the guns at school for the third time, the stepfather reported his guns missing, leading police to investigate the stepson. The firearms were found under the bed of the 15-year-old and the two were arrested that day.*

> *A high school student reported to his teacher that, three weeks prior, a 15-year-old male friend had asked him to hold on to a duffel bag containing three handguns and between 250 and 300 rounds of ammunition. The plotter had stolen the items that day from his father's secured gun locker. He planned to kill dozens of classmates and teachers who he did not like before he committed suicide. He planned to tell his friends to go home just before the attack, to avoid hurting them. When the student showed the duffel bag and weapons to his stepmother, her response was to drive him to a local creek where she had him dump the weapons without reporting the incident to anyone. Meanwhile, the day after the weapons went missing, the plotter's father reported it to police. During the investigation, police interviewed the stepmother who berated them and told them to look elsewhere. She advised her stepson to lie and she altered her date book to provide him with a false alibi. After the friend told his teacher about the incident three weeks later, he cooperated with police and the weapons were located. The plotter was detained and charged, as was the stepmother.*

Responding to the Reports

Due to the nature of open source research, the plots included in this report were mostly identified through media coverage. Media coverage for averted plots usually occurs when a case involves a law enforcement response. Therefore, all of the identified cases in this study resulted in criminal charges or arrests for one or more of the plotters. This should not be interpreted as the full spectrum of responses or interventions that have been used to prevent plots against schools. The primary objective of a student threat assessment is not to administer discipline or have a student arrested. Rather the goal is to identify students in crisis or distress and provide robust interventions, before their behavior escalates to the point of criminality.

DAYS BETWEEN REPORT AND FIRST DETAINMENT		
	n = 67	%*
0 days (same day)	41	61%
1–2 days	14	21%
3–7 days	7	10%
8–19 days	2	3%
Unknown	3	4%

Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

HOW FAST WERE REPORTS ACTED ON?

When considering response times, plotters were considered to be detained if they were arrested or otherwise removed from their environment to ensure they could not take further action toward advancing their plot.

In nearly two-thirds (*n* = 41, 61%) of the cases, one or more of the plotters were detained the same day they were reported to a responsible adult. This includes the seven cases where the plotters brought weapons to school to carry out the attack or were on their way with the weapons and were arrested. In 14 cases (21%), they were detained within one to two days of the report. For the nine cases (13%) that took three days or more, the delays were due to the ensuing investigation into the plotters' activities. In three cases (4%), the timing was less clear as the police questioned or investigated the plotters but then released them into the custody of their parents until their later arrests. In another case, the plotter had fled after posting threatening tweets, and in another the plotter was kept under watch by law enforcement while the investigation continued.

Though all plotters were eventually arrested, in 12 cases (18%), one or more of the plotters were transported to undergo mental health evaluations by either law enforcement (*n* = 7) or their parents (*n* = 5).

What actions were taken?

- **School intervention:** In nearly one-third of the cases (*n* = 20, 30%), one or more school staff, not including the SRO, took part in the response once the report was received. In these cases, school staff removed the plotters from class, helped question them, called the plotters' parent(s), and/or helped in the search of lockers or school-issued electronic devices. In eight cases, the school suspended or expelled the plotter within one to three days after plot discovery; in all but two of these cases, the suspensions or expulsions occurred before a subsequent arrest.

  > *Prior to the beginning of the school day, a 14-year-old male approached the school counselor and asked to speak to her during second period. Not able to wait, he returned to the counselor's office sooner than planned and asked to talk. The plotter disclosed to the counselor that he planned to carry out an attack and had a gun in his pocket. He intended to shoot faculty, including the SRO, but did not intend to target students. He told her that he went to her because he felt she was the only one who could talk him out of carrying out an attack. Over the course of 90 minutes, the counselor discussed the issues he had been struggling with and she eventually convinced him to surrender his weapon to her. He also agreed that she could use her phone to text for assistance. When the SRO responded, he took the plotter into custody and removed him from the school.*

- *Family Interventions:* Eight cases involved family members taking action to intervene after the plot was reported. In five cases, parents took the plotters to receive a mental health evaluation or treatment. In two cases, after investigations were already underway, parents read their child's journal and discovered details of the planning that was involved. Realizing the breadth and seriousness of the plots, they provided this information to investigators, directly or through a mental health professional. In another case, the parents intervened by keeping the plotter home from school.

> *Police received a tip regarding a 17-year-old male who was planning to shoot two assistant principals and two school resource officers at his school. The plotter had tried to recruit two accomplices to help carry out the attack. Reports indicated that actions were taken to address the immediate threat. A couple of weeks into the investigation, the plotter's parents found notes in his room written by the plotter that were alarming, so they called the police. Investigators reported that the plotter had a journal that contained names of his intended targets, drawings of bombs, and detailed information as to where he would hide weapons at the high school.*

ROLE OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

Considering both the reporting of the plots and the actions taken in response to them, in nearly one-third of the cases ($n = 21$, 31%), an SRO played a role in disrupting an attack plot. This role varied and included the eight SROs who directly received the initial reports about the plots from students and others, the SRO who uncovered the plot during an unrelated investigation, as well as those who took part in the response or ensuing investigation. Their participation included, but was not limited to, removing the plotters from class or intercepting them before they entered the school, conducting interviews, monitoring online activities, searching lockers or backpacks, and arresting the plotters.

> *The assistant principal of a high school received a report from the mother of one of his students regarding a concerning conversation a friend of her son had with an 18-year-old male student. Though not unusual for him, the 18-year-old was absent that day. The safe school coordinator and SRO worked together to establish the veracity and seriousness of the report. After conducting interviews and searching his home, they found that he had access to a .22 caliber rifle. Further, they discovered that he had used a school computer to search for information on various weapons, the Columbine attack, the Virginia Tech attack, and had searched for a map of the campus. His journal writings also revealed a growing obsession with killing, stating that the thought of carrying out an attack was comforting and calming to him. He believed that his actions would change the way kids interact. When he was arrested, some of these journal pages were found in his pocket.*

Part II: Plotters' Backgrounds

The 67 plots in this report involved 100 individuals. However, due to the lack of available information on over half of the plotters, this section will describe the backgrounds of the 43 plotters for whom sufficient information was available in open sources.

Disciplinary History

Over one-third of the plotters (*n* = 16, 37%) received some form of school discipline prior to the discovery of their plots. The behaviors that elicited the disciplinary actions occurred along a continuum of severity, ranging from dress code infractions to engaging in acts of physical violence.

- ***Threatening/Violent Behavior:*** Threatening the school or teachers, punching a locker, fighting with or assaulting a classmate, and brandishing a knife on a classmate. One plotter was disciplined after he dangled a student outside of a school window.

- ***Banned Substances:*** Possessing, selling, or distributing marijuana, and possessing anabolic steroids.

- ***Classroom Misconduct:*** Defiance, disruption, and talking too loudly.

- ***Other Actions:*** Using profanity or swearing at school staff, name-calling, truancy, burglary, and dress code infractions.

Disciplinary History

Yes
37%

No
21%

Unknown
42%
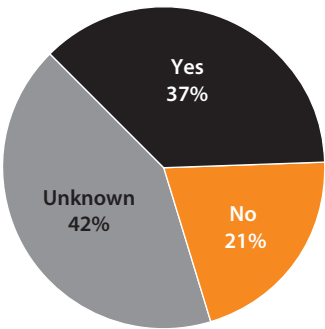
The types and severity of school discipline received as a result of these behaviors varied. Disciplinary actions included conversations with school administration, detention, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and an arrest for selling marijuana on campus.

> *An 18-year-old male was arrested after his plan to attack his high school was discovered. Specifically, the plotter planned to gather students in the school auditorium, chain the doors shut, shoot his classmates, and detonate explosives as first responders arrived to the scene. In the years prior, the plotter had been suspended at least four times. His first suspension was for five days during eighth grade after a fight. He was suspended again in the same month, after he swore at a teacher. The following month, the plotter was suspended for the remainder of the school year for an act of defiance. During his sophomore year in high school, the plotter received a fourth suspension after he punched a locker and used profanity.*

Only one case was identified in which the plotter had been the subject of a threat assessment prior to the discovery of the plot. At the time of the threat assessment, the student was deemed to not pose a risk.

> *The year prior to the discovery of his plot, a 15-year-old male plotter had experienced bullying that involved being knocked down, pushed into lockers, and punched in the throat. An image of the plotter in his underwear had been circulated on social media and around the school. One month before his plot was discovered, he had been referred for a threat assessment after the principal discovered the plotter had a journal containing over six pages of copied text from* The Anarchist Cookbook. *When other students found out, he was labeled the "bomb boy" by classmates. The plotter was assessed to not pose a risk and it was suggested that he follow up with community mental health services. The plotter's mother attempted to establish community treatment services for him; however, she was unsuccessful and the plotter did not receive any treatment before advancing his plot further.*

Prior Law Enforcement Contact

Nearly one-third (*n* = 13, 30%) of the plotters had contact with law enforcement prior to the discovery of their plot. This contact included previous arrests and other encounters, including officers responding to a call from a concerned parent.

- **Criminal Charges:** Eight plotters (19%) faced prior criminal charges for nonviolent offenses, including threats, non-physical altercations with family members, possession of banned substances or drug paraphernalia, discharging firearms, curfew violations, harassing behaviors, and theft. As the majority of the plotters were juveniles, it is likely that a greater number actually had criminal charges that were not revealed in open sources.

  > *A 15-year-old plotter was arrested after he carved a swastika into a frozen section of a local pond. He was adjudicated in family court and placed on probation for that offense. Less than a year later, local law enforcement received a tip that led to a search of the plotter's home. At his residence, police discovered weapons and supplies that the plotter planned to use in an attack against his former high school.*

- **Other Contact with Law Enforcement:** Some of the plotters (*n* = 8) had prior interactions with law enforcement that did not result in arrests or charges, or were related to issues with their families. These types of interactions included instances where a plotter set fire to personal property, posted concerning content on social media, or was taken for mental health evaluation at the request of the parents. On one occasion, a plotter was escorted to a patrol vehicle after the plotter's parent got into a physical altercation with the plotter's romantic partner. Similarly, law enforcement arrived to another plotter's home in response to a physical altercation between the plotter's mother and father. One plotter had multiple contacts with law enforcement for reasons including running away, possessing a stun gun, possession of tobacco underage, violating a bicycle ordinance, and loitering after dark. In the one case that involved a prior threat assessment, the plotter's assessment was conducted in coordination with the SRO, local law enforcement, and federal authorities. In another case, one plotter was reported to a counselor approximately two months prior for violent content posted online. When law enforcement looked into the matter, they found no criminal wrongdoing.

Mental Health and Substance Use

Many plotters (70%) exhibited behaviors indicating the presence of some type of mental health symptom in the time leading up to, or around, the discovery of their plots. Information on these factors was evident in their journal writings, statements and behaviors observed by others, and histories of prior mental health treatment. Though some of the subjects were born with psychiatric or neurological conditions, others had mental health issues as a result of severe life stressors.

Mental health factors were divided into three categories for reporting in this study: psychological, behavioral, and neurological/developmental. Most of the plotters with mental health factors experienced psychological symptoms. This is consistent with NTAC's *Protecting America's Schools* report, which found that psychological symptoms were the most prevalent category observed among those who attacked their K-12 schools. Some plotters experienced multiple types or overlapping symptom categories.

> *The vast majority of individuals in the United States who display the symptoms or traits identified in this section do not commit acts of crime or violence. The symptoms described in this section constitute potential contributing factors, as part of a constellation of other factors, and should not be viewed as causal explanations for why plotters engaged in attack planning.*

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Twenty-seven plotters (63%) exhibited emotional or psychological symptoms, the information for which was identified through statements made by the plotters, reports from family or friends, statements issued by school districts or administrators, law enforcement, media interviews with attorneys, social media posts, and journal writings.

An 18-year-old male was discovered to be plotting a suicide bombing attack against his high school after his parents intercepted a package of bomb-making materials in the mail. Upon searching his room, the parents found a recording that he had made, which was meant to be played after his death, along with other documents indicating his desire to carry out a bombing and shooting at his school. Two days prior to their discovery of the plot, his parents had contacted the police because they had grown fearful of the plotter's increasing mental health and behavioral issues. The plotter was described as angry, and had engaged in aggressive and violent behavior. He experienced both suicidal and homicidal thoughts, and on at least one occasion would bang his head against a wall. He had previously been prescribed medication for anxiety.

Psychological Symptoms

- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Reactive attachment
- ▶ Nightmares
- ▶ Homicidal thoughts
- ▶ Feelings of insecurity
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Psychosis
- ▶ Emotional dysregulation
- ▶ Bipolar disorder
- ▶ Symptoms of trauma

- ***Depression:*** According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is the fourth leading cause of adolescent disability globally.[11] Furthermore, those suffering from depression were more likely to have another mental health disorder such as anxiety or a behavioral condition.[12] Two-fifths of the plotters experienced symptoms related to depression, making it the most frequent type of symptom observed in the histories of the plotters. Symptoms of depression could include feeling sad or despondent, feelings of hopelessness, and difficulty sleeping.

> *Two female students planned an attack against their high school. Both plotters idolized the Columbine attackers, and each had taken steps on their own to research and acquire weapons to conduct an attack, prior to working together. One of the plotters suffered from several mental health conditions. Roughly two years prior to the discovery of the plot, she began attending therapy for depression, and, at an unknown time, she had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. She expressed in her journal feeling apathetic, having increasing anger at the world, and suicidal thoughts.*

- ***Suicidal Thoughts:*** The WHO reports that the third leading cause of death among older adolescents is suicide.[13] Just under half of plotters with psychological symptoms experienced suicidal thoughts and ideations. Several plotters documented their thoughts of suicide in personal journals or on social media. Many of the plotters who experienced suicidal thoughts planned to commit suicide at the end of their attacks.

> *A 14-year-old male told classmates about his thoughts of calling in a bomb threat, shooting students as they exited the school, and then committing suicide. Two days after the plotter shared these thoughts with classmates, a fellow student reported these comments to the school principal and the SRO, which resulted in the plotter being sent to a mental health center. The plotter had a history of depression and was obsessed with mass shootings. School officials confirmed to police that the plotter had "expressed thoughts of suicide" in the past.*

BEHAVIORAL

Several plotters displayed symptoms of, or were diagnosed with, behavioral disorders, including disruptive disorders. One plotter was admitted to the hospital for a mental health evaluation after a tip was received about the attack. Prior to this, she had been diagnosed with multiple conditions, to include conduct disorder. She had been prescribed medication but stopped taking it due to its side effects, and she irregularly attended treatment due to the cost of the sessions.

NEUROLOGICAL/DEVELOPMENTAL

Several plotters evidenced a history of developmental issues and neurological conditions, including developmental delays, learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), neurological conditions or symptoms (e.g., fetal alcohol syndrome, sensory sensitivity), and diagnoses within the autism spectrum.

> *A 14-year-old male was arrested after a classmate told the principal that the student had two guns and was plotting an attack. The plotter had shown several students his firearms and told them of his intentions to target students and staff whom he felt mistreated and bullied him. When the plotter was an infant he had been removed from the custody of his biological parents due to their drug and alcohol abuse. He was subsequently diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome along with reactive attachment disorder due to childhood neglect.*

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Fifteen plotters had histories of receiving some type of mental health treatment, with some dating back to elementary school. Some plotters were still actively receiving treatment when their plots were discovered. Treatment varied widely, and included counseling, prescription medication, and involuntary hospitalization.

> *A 17-year-old male planned to shoot two assistant principals and two SROs at his high school, and he attempted to recruit two accomplices to help carry out his attack. Police received a tip about the plotter's plans during winter break. As the investigation was underway, the plotter's parents alerted mental health professionals who then contacted police due to alarming notes they found in his bedroom. The plotter had a history of mental health issues and had been receiving treatment since childhood. Prior to his arrest, he self-medicated for his mental health symptoms with marijuana, methamphetamine, pills, and cocaine.*

Though some of the plotters in this report were able to obtain access to care, treatment fidelity and compliance varied. In some instances, plotters were unable to afford treatment, which resulted in irregular attendance; others chose to manage symptoms on their own rather than deal with the negative side effects of medication; and others were unable to find appropriate treatment options due to the complex nature of their conditions. For example, one plotter had a difficult time finding a treatment that was appropriate for his neurological condition given the fact that he also suffered from a physical impediment.

SUBSTANCE USE

Over one-third of plotters (*n* = 14, 33%) had a history of substance use and/or abuse.[14] The most commonly used substances were alcohol and marijuana. Five plotters used other illicit substances such as methamphetamine, inhalants, anabolic steroids, and cocaine. Many of the plotters who engaged in substance use tended to use more than one type of substance.

For some plotters, their substance use reached the level of abuse, defined here as use that caused some negative consequences or problems in their lives such as legal consequences (e.g., arrests, drug-related criminal charges, mandatory urinalysis), negative social or academic impacts, and school disciplinary actions (e.g., suspensions or expulsions).

> *An 18-year-old male attempted to recruit other students in his plan to "shoot up" the school. The following day, the mother of one of those students notified the high school assistant principal about the plot. The plotter had a long history of substance use starting at the age of five when he began smoking marijuana. He began drinking at the age of eight, and by the age of twelve, described himself as an alcoholic. The plotter stated that he often attended school while intoxicated and drank throughout the day.*

High-Risk Adolescent Substance Use

According to the CDC, high-risk substance use is any substance use by adolescents with an increased risk of adverse outcomes. This type of substance use refers to the use of illicit substances, injections, and prescription drugs. High-risk substance use also increases an adolescent's risk factors associated with physical or sexual assault, being the victim or witness to violence, and mental health and suicidal risk factors.
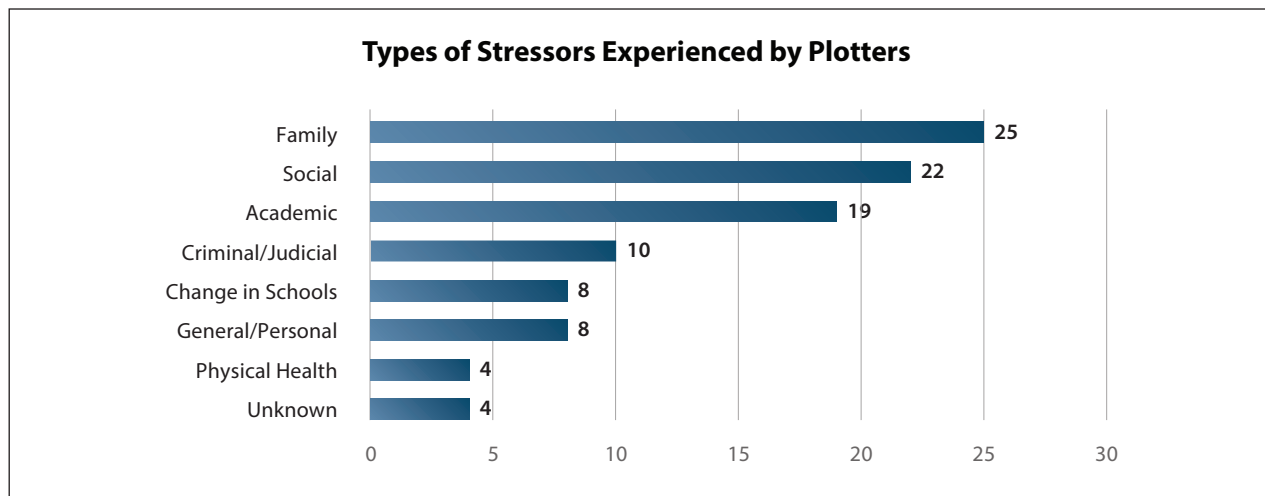
CO-OCCURRING MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE USE

Eleven plotters experienced mental health symptoms and had a history of substance use and/or abuse. The mental health symptoms that most frequently co-occurred with substance use were depression and suicidal ideations. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, more than half of adolescents in substance abuse treatment also have symptoms of mental health conditions.[15]

Stressors

The majority of plotters (*n* = 39, 91%) experienced life stressors in the five years prior to their averted attack. For most (*n* = 35, 81%), the stressors happened in the year leading up to the discovery of their plot or were ongoing at the time it was discovered. Research indicates that high stress levels are associated with emotional and behavioral problems for children.[16] While many children may be able to cope with stress in a prosocial way, with the emotional support of close relatives for example, compounding stressors or intense familial issues may result in a range of responses in children, from depression to hyperactivity.[17]

Types of Stressors Experienced by Plotters

Stressor	Value
Family	25
Social	22
Academic	19
Criminal/Judicial	10
Change in Schools	8
General/Personal	8
Physical Health	4
Unknown	4

- **Family:** More than half (*n* = 25, 58%) of the plotters experienced stressors related to their families, including parent separation or divorce, substance abuse in the home, violence or abuse, parental incarceration, and parental health issues or illness.

> *A 17-year-old male was arrested after a friend notified police of a detailed threat against his high school. Growing up, the plotter suffered physical and emotional abuse by his father who had an extensive criminal history, including domestic violence charges. Both parents abused alcohol and possibly drugs; the plotter's mother spent eight months away from home when he was nine to receive treatment for an unknown problem. Even after the plotter's father was incarcerated, the plotter's family was investigated by a child protection agency for abuse and neglect.*

- **Social:** Half of the plotters (*n* = 22, 51%) experienced social stressors, including stress related to the plotters' relationships with their peers or romantic partners, as well as bullying and other peer conflicts. Nineteen plotters were bullied or treated poorly by their peers and for most of them, the bullying appeared to be a persistent pattern that lasted weeks, months, or years.

- *Academic:* Nearly half of the plotters (n = 19, 44%) experienced school stressors related to academic or disciplinary actions, including failing grades, suspensions, and expulsions.

- *Criminal/Judicial:* Ten plotters (23%) experienced stressors related to criminal actions, including arrests, charges, and other criminal activity that did not result in formal charges. The latter included plotters who had been the subjects of investigations due to violent content posted on social media, had been under investigation in a neighboring county, had multiple run-ins with law enforcement, and had been the subject of a domestic violence call made by a parent.

- *Changing Schools:* Eight plotters (19%) had changed schools within the year leading up to the discovery, because of expulsion, moving, or for another reason.

- *General Personal:* Eight plotters (19%) experienced stressors that were unique or personal in nature and therefore not as easily categorized. This included general frustrations with one's personal life, feeling dismissed by school administrators, homelessness, and experiencing a sexual assault.

- *Physical Health:* Four plotters (9%) experienced stressors related to their physical health, including health issues from childhood, such as fetal alcohol syndrome, hearing loss, and neurological disabilities, as well as sudden medical issues, such as those resulting from a car accident.

The number of contexts in which plotters experienced stressors ranged from one to six, with an average of two. For just under half of the plotters (n = 19, 44%), the stressors experienced were ongoing at the time the plot was discovered.
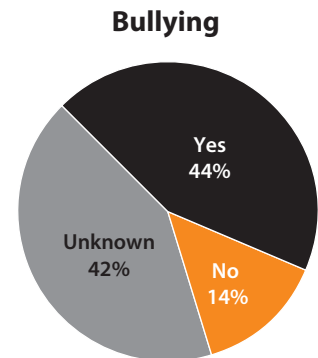
Bullying

Understanding Bullying

Bullying includes unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children with an intent to do physical, social, or emotional harm. It must involve a real or perceived power imbalance, and is or could be repeated.[18] The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services warns of lasting negative effects for those who are bullied, those who bully others, and those who witness bullying.

The evidence presented in this report supports past research findings that bullying can cause significant stress and harmful outcomes for students. Schools should adopt and enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying and encourage students to report when they witness or are victims of bullying. School officials and other authorities must act to intervene and stop bullying when it is reported. **Bullying does not have to meet a legal threshold before schools can intervene.**

Nearly one-half (n = 19, 44%) of the plotters in this analysis were bullied by their classmates. The types of bullying they experienced included:

Bullying

- **Verbal:** Spoken forms of aggression, including shaming, name-calling, chastising, taunting, harassing, and suggestions that they kill themselves.

- **Physical:** Physical aggression, including knocking down, pushing, punching, or being jumped.

- **Social:** Words or actions designed to harm the victim's reputation or social standing, including being publicly embarrassed or having rumors spread about them.

Consistent information regarding who may have known about the bullying in these cases was not available. In some cases, at least one of the plotter's parents was aware, and in other cases, a classmate or school official was aware of the bullying. In a few cases, there was information that the school officials knew about the bullying a plotter was experiencing, but there was no indication that the school responded to address the bullying in a meaningful way.

> A 14-year-old male was arrested after a peer provided a tip to law enforcement about his planned attack against a high school. The plotter was a former student in that school district who was pulled out of school by his parents for being bullied. He was homeschooled from the previous academic year. Months prior to the discovery of the plot, he began to plan an attack against the high school where his former classmates, who had bullied him, were about to start as freshmen. The plotter described, "at first I tried to discuss [the bullying] with different people… whether it was various teachers, or counselors, and all of them really ignored the problem. And when they start to ignore the problem, the person who is going through it starts to internalize [the bullying]."

Concerning Communications

Not including communications made specifically about their attack plots, three-quarters of the plotters (*n* = 32, 74%) made some type of other written, visual, verbal, or online statements that were concerning.

For half of the plotters (*n* = 21, 49%), **these communications illustrated their fascination with violent acts, homicide, weapons, and ideologies and beliefs that are often associated with violence.** For example, plotters talked about bombs at school or expressed admiration for the Columbine attackers, with some even sharing that they wished they could have assisted in the Columbine attack.

> *On his social media profiles, a 14-year-old male posted multiple photos of, and tribute videos to, the Columbine attackers. One of his profile backgrounds showed multiple rifles, and he created his own "military group," called "Imperial Cobra Army." The group's purpose was described as to "overthrow the corupt [sic] and evil governments of today and bring about a new world order of tommorow [sic]." Additionally, a friend's parent described him as having a "preoccupation with guns" and the plotter stated if he could time travel he "would love to be in all the wars, expecialy [sic] ww2."*

For over one-third of the plotters (*n* = 17, 40%), concerning communications included threats to harm others, such as specific individuals, specific groups of people, or former schools.

> *Prior to the discovery of his current plot, a 19-year-old male previously made threats to "shoot up" a graduation ceremony at a vocational school where he may have been dual-enrolled. He also made derogatory social media posts about the school's students and staff. As a result, the 19-year-old male was arrested for threatening communications. He admitted to authorities that he made the statements. He was suspended for nine days and then homeschooled for the rest of the year before being permanently removed from that school.*

Other concerning communications referenced *suicide or self-harm, drug use, the concept of death, and final messages.* In this latter category, 10 plotters (23%) prepared or delivered final messages in the form of suicide notes or farewell videos. While the majority of these plotters kept these communications to themselves, some with the expectation that they would be viewed after their deaths, a few sent them to friends. One plotter asked an ex-girlfriend for forgiveness, while another had texted a friend that he was going to die. In another, the plotter wrote a will, in which he left his belongings to his sisters and his friends, as well as stated what should happen to his ashes.

Concerning Communications

Interest in violence

Hate speech

Suicide or self-harm

Homicidal thoughts

Interest in weapons

Concept of death

Threats to others

Drugs

Interest In Violence

Two-thirds of plotters ($n = 29$, 67%) had an interest in violence evidenced by their planning behaviors (e.g., researching prior attacks or other violent themes), communications, having an unusual or inappropriate interest in consuming violent content (e.g., serial killers, terrorist attacks, assassinations, violent or graphic media), and/or an inappropriate interest in weapons. The latter included conducting extensive research on weapons, stockpiling a variety of weapons, and being described by others as obsessed with weapons.

> *A student alerted the SRO after they overheard a 16-year-old male on the school bus discussing carrying out a shooting at his high school. The plotter was suspended the same day. In the months before his plot was discovered, he had conversations with friends about Nazi and neo-Nazi philosophy. He had also researched how to make explosives, and how to obtain weapons, weapon parts, and ammunition. He looked up the birthdays of previous mass attackers and saved photographs encouraging school shootings and memes making light of the Holocaust. He collected imagery of incest and dead animals as well as videos of the assassination of JFK and people blowing themselves up.*

COLUMBINE

In two-fifths of the 67 plots, at least one co-conspirator had an interest in the Columbine attack that went beyond a fleeting reference. This was demonstrated through the plotters referencing the attack in their planning, plotting an attack on or near the anniversary of the Columbine attack, and conducting research on the attack or the attackers themselves.[19] As indicated by their planning behaviors, some plotters used the attack as inspiration for their plot by modeling their plan after it, selecting the same weapons as the shooters, watching documentaries or videos about it, studying the tactics used, or playing video games about the attackers. The plotters also consumed movies or books that they knew the Columbine attackers liked, tried to emulate the attackers by wearing the same clothes, called each other the same nicknames, talked to friends about them, and wrote about their infatuation with the attack in their journals.

> *A 16-year-old male traveled to Littleton, CO, approximately one month prior to his plot being discovered. The plotter had a long fascination with the Columbine High School tragedy. Previously, he had researched, written, and talked to classmates about it. Without the knowledge of his parents, he flew to Denver, drove to Columbine High School, and then flew home all within a single day. The plotter went there to interview the principal under the guise of preparing an article for the school newspaper, which he never published. He questioned the principal about the events following the attack and how the school had since healed.*

HITLER/NAZISM

Nine plotters (21%) made concerning statements that revealed their interest in Hitler, Nazism, and/or white supremacy. This interest was displayed through shouting "white power" in the hallways at school, regularly reading *Mein Kampf*, collecting Nazi paraphernalia, drawing swastikas and other neo-Nazi imagery in journals or on a desk, leading a white supremacist group, and having conversations with classmates about these topics. As noted earlier, one plotter carved a swastika on a frozen pond, for which he was later arrested.

Concerned Others

Previous Secret Service research examining targeted school violence found that attackers exhibited a range of concerning behaviors prior to their attacks. Plotters exhibited similar behaviors in this report. These include behaviors that are **objectively concerning or prohibited** and should elicit an immediate response. Examples include acts of physical violence, threats of physical harm, bringing weapons to school, and suicidal ideations. Of note, references to suicide, though not necessarily an indication of potential violence, are concerning and require immediate intervention to protect the student or students involved. Nine plotters ($n = 9$, 21%) engaged in physically violent behavior before their plots were discovered. These behaviors included hurting animals and violence toward a family member or classmates. This included one plotter who was suspended after he dangled a fellow student from a classroom window, and another plotter who was suspended for fighting.

Plotters also often displayed a range of lower-level behaviors that observers may not have recognized as concerning without knowing the full context of the situation. These behaviors are seen as being part of a **constellation of lower-level behaviors**, and may not warrant an immediate safety response, though they should still elicit some level of intervention. Examples of these behaviors include a depressed or angry mood, conflicts between classmates, and an interest in violent topics. When these types of behaviors are assessed in context with other factors, the level of concern could increase.

> **Timing of Concerning Behaviors**
>
> Nine of the plotters displayed a concerning behavior in the month prior to the discovery of their plot. It should be noted, however, that these behaviors were not necessarily new. In fact, many of these same plotters elicited concern from others in the months and, in some cases, years prior to the discovery of their plots.

Nearly half ($n = 19$, 44%) of the plotters elicited concern in others by exhibiting either objectively concerning and/or constellation behaviors prior to the discovery of their plots. For just over one-third ($n = 15$, 35%) these behaviors reached the level of being **objectively concerning**. All but two of these objectively concerning behaviors caused the observer to be concerned about the safety of themselves or others. Ten plotters (23%) elicited concern by exhibiting a **constellation of lower-level behaviors**.

Those concerned included peers ($n = 10$) and adults ($n = 14$), including the plotter's own parent, school staff, or other adults (e.g., parents of peers, a therapist, law enforcement, a neighbor, or grandparent). For one plotter, after several visits to a mental health provider, his parents were advised to secure their home. In another, the mother sought the help of her son's therapist.

> *An 18-year-old plotter planned an attack against his high school to "show them all they do is wrong." Two days prior to plot discovery, the plotter sent a text to his mother and indicated he wanted to "shoot up" the school and that he was having "bad thoughts." In response to receiving the concerning text messages, the plotter's mother showed the messages to the plotter's therapist, asking for help.*

BEHAVIORS THAT ELICITED CONCERN

The types of behaviors that elicited concern fell along several themes.

- **Threats indicating an intent to attack:** In all but four of the 67 plots, at least one of the plotters engaged in communications about their plans to attack the school. In some of these instances, those around them expressed their concern, regardless of whether they took action to report it.

- **Interest in violence or topics associated with violence:** Two-thirds of the plotters (n = 29, 67%) expressed an interest in violence, including expressing white supremacist views and watching animal cruelty videos.

- **Weapons-related behaviors:** Plotters expressed an unusual or concerning level of interest in weapons, with some bringing the weapons to school to show their peers. For some of these plotters, this interest was expressed through drawings and journal entries, brandishing a firearm, and asking a friend to hold firearms for them.

- **Harassing or threatening others:** Plotters engaged in harassing, harming, or threatening behaviors. This included physical altercations with family members, making threats, name-calling, and making incessant phone calls. One plotter dangled a classmate out of a school window, while another held a friend against her will in his car.

- **Exhibiting a concerning mental status:** Some plotters communicated about, or engaged in behaviors, related to suicide or self-harm. Others asked to see a therapist, experienced emotional issues, or had a depressed mood.

  > *A 17-year-old male planned with others to carry out a Columbine-style attack. Their plan included ending the attack by committing suicide-by-cop. The plotter had a history of exhibiting concerning behavior. Following the termination of a romantic relationship, two days prior to the discovery of the plot, he attempted suicide by laying in the middle of the street for several minutes hoping to be struck by a vehicle.*

- **Changes in behavior:** Plotters exhibited behavior changes that included engaging in increasingly rebellious behavior, increased instances of anger, and a decline in academic performance or attendance.

Common Themes that Elicited Concern

Threats indicating an intent to attack

Interest in violence

Weapons-related behaviors

Harassing/ threatening others

Concerning mental status

Changes in behavior

RESPONSES TO CONCERNS

For two-fifths (*n* = 17, 40%) of the plotters, at least one person who was concerned expressed their apprehension to someone or took some kind of action in response. More ***cautious responses*** included actively avoiding the plotter, expressing concern to other peers about them, and approaching the plotters to ask if they were okay, offer help, and ask more in-depth questions about their well-being.

> *A 17-year-old male acquired material to build bombs in a plot to attack his high school. In the months prior to plot discovery, his grandfather became concerned about his well-being because he believed the plotter was depressed. At the time, he asked the plotter if he was going to "do a Columbine." In response, the plotter became upset. The grandfather remained worried enough that he expressed this concern to the plotter's therapist, specifically stating that he was worried about the plotter committing an attack like the one that occurred at Columbine High School.*

For one-third (*n* = 14, 33%) of the plotters, the observed behavior elicited a more ***significant response***, including family members seeking mental health treatment or in-patient therapy for the plotter, family members or classmates calling law enforcement in response to a criminal act or a safety concern, and the school suspending or expelling the plotter. In one case, the plotter herself asked for mental health treatment. Conversely, for nearly one-quarter (10, 23%) of the plotters, there was at least one behavior that elicited concern to which there was no response.

> *An 18-year-old male, who was known for his anger, planned an attack against his former high school. The plotter's anger reportedly intensified after he was arrested and expelled from the targeted school for selling marijuana on school grounds. Subsequent to that arrest, he informed a friend that he planned to attack the school on September 11. The friend did not notify an authority figure about the planned attack as the plotter had threatened to kill him and his girlfriend if the information was reported.*

Judicial Outcome

The analysis in this section is based on all 100 plotters.

CHARGES

The types of charges the plotters received ranged from misdemeanor disorderly conduct to high-level felonies, including first degree conspiracy to commit murder, engaging in terrorist activity, and attempting to use explosives on a building. Two plotters received federal charges, one of which resulted in deportation.

> *An 18-year-old male, who was an exchange student, was arrested in a plot to attack his high school. The investigation revealed that the plotter had researched how to purchase guns and had amassed a significant amount of ammunition. He also built a functional handgun from parts bought online. The plotter was deported back to his home country after pleading guilty to state and federal charges.*

ADULT/JUVENILE CLASSIFICATION

Thirty-six of the plotters received some form of an adult charge, while 44 received a juvenile charge. Five of these plotters received both adult and juvenile charges. In three additional cases, the plotters had their cases dismissed or dropped.

There was no information in open sources to determine the classification of charges for 22 plotters.

> *A 16-year-old female was arrested (along with a 16-year-old co-conspirator) in a plot to attack her high school. She pled guilty to an adult felony menacing charge and a juvenile conspiracy to commit murder charge. As a result, she received a split sentence of incarceration in a detention center followed by probation.*

JUDGMENTS

Sixty-three plotters were convicted (or adjudicated delinquent) due to a plea bargain, a plea of no contest, or a guilty/delinquent finding. Two were acquitted. Their sentences varied from probation to incarceration in state and federal facilities.

- Thirty-four received formal confinement, of which the judge immediately released two for time served, and another was deported.

- Twenty-one did not receive any confinement, instead they received probation or placement into a treatment facility.

- Seventeen received split sentences that included a period of confinement and community supervision that ran consecutively.

Recognizing that judges have more information when determining sentences than available in open sources, we found that sentences for convicted and adjudicated delinquent plotters varied drastically and appeared unrelated to the sophistication of the plot or maturity of the plotter. For example, in three cases in which well-performing students who struggled with mental health issues began planning Columbine-style attacks, all received dramatically different sentences.

> *A 17-year-old male planned to kill his family and attack his high school. He had accumulated multiple firearms and explosive components for more than a year and had built and tested viable explosive devices. As part of a plea deal, he was sentenced to ten years of probation and spent four months in a treatment facility.*

> *An 18-year-old male was arrested in a plot to attack his school. He had similarly been accumulating explosive materials – including ammonium nitrate by mail – and testing explosive devices for more than a year. He also intended to purchase firearms. He received a split sentence of 10 years imprisonment at a federal correctional facility, followed by 3 years of supervised release.*

> *An 18-year-old female was arrested for plotting to attack her high school. She had also acquired firearms and explosive materials. She received a split sentence of 25 years in prison (with 5 years suspended) followed by 5 years of probation.*

Classification of Charges for 78 Plotters
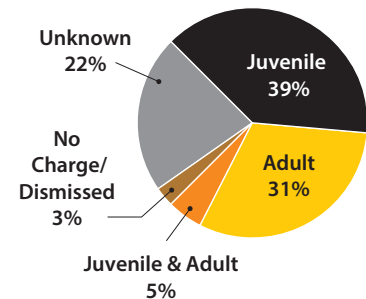
JUDGMENT	
	n = 100
Guilty - found	4
Guilty - pled	49
Not guilty - found	2
No contest	10
No charge / dismissed	4
Not found	31
SENTENCE	
	n = 100
Confinement only	17
Confinement & probation	17
Probation only	20
Other	2
No charge / dismissed	4
Not found	40

LATER LIFE

Efforts were made to identify both positive and negative life events that the plotters may have experienced since their plots were averted.

- The secondary school educational outcomes for 31 of the plotters were found. About half of them enrolled in an alternative, military, or vocational school, or they enrolled in new high schools. Some continued their education online.

- Some plotters were able to enroll in college or another higher education institution (e.g., technical, trade, or art school). Others became gainfully employed or started their own businesses. One plotter became an artist and his work has received recognition, with exhibits in multiple cities around the country. Another was named student of the month at a technical school he attended years later.

- Some plotters experienced negative life events that ranged from bankruptcy and civil suits to criminal activity. Sadly, one of the plotters committed suicide two years after his averted attack. Subsequent criminal activity, not including minor traffic violations, was found for a handful of the plotters. These charges mainly included non-violent criminal activity, such as drug charges, driving while intoxicated, criminal trespassing, shoplifting, and theft. However, a few plotters incurred violent or weapons-related charges, such as carrying a concealed weapon and assault. Some plotters received multiple charges into adulthood, including a combination of violent and non-violent offenses.

  > *A 15-year-old male warned a fellow student not to ride the bus anymore, which ultimately led to the discovery of his plot. Less than three years later, the plotter was arrested and charged for third-degree assault and second-degree strangulation. He had attacked a woman and then held her head against a car window during a domestic dispute. He was sentenced to four years in prison. While at a halfway house after his incarceration, he absconded. He was charged with escape in the first degree and was sentenced to another year of incarceration. At the age of 24, the plotter was shot and killed by law enforcement after he broke into a home holding an iron rod and a knife.*

Part III: Implications

Threat assessment is the best practice for preventing targeted school violence. For over 20 years, NTAC's research on school attacks, as well as the averted attacks examined in this report, have shown that students display a variety of observable concerning behaviors as they escalate toward violence. To identify, assess, and intervene with students who may pose a risk of harm to themselves or others, schools and communities should develop multidisciplinary threat assessment programs, as outlined in NTAC's *Enhancing School Safety* guide.

When conducted properly, a threat assessment will involve providing robust interventions and supports for students experiencing distress, thereby effectively intervening and de-escalating situations before they become violent. It should be noted clearly in any school threat assessment policy that the primary objective of a student threat assessment is not to administer discipline or introduce students into the criminal justice system. While those responses may be necessary at times, especially in the situations involving explicit threats, violence, or weapons, the primary objective of a student threat assessment should be providing a student with help and working to ensure positive outcomes for the student and the community.

This analysis of averted school attacks demonstrates that there are almost always intervention points available before a student's behavior escalates to the point where an arrest may be warranted. These intervention points may include addressing bullying, providing mental health supports, assessing the impact of home-life factors, and mediating conflicts between classmates. A threat assessment program establishes a system for implementing these types of interventions and entrusts a team with responsibility for ensuring that no student falls through the cracks.

School communities are right to consider whether any school-based program will disproportionately impact students who belong to minority groups or students with disabilities. The best data available demonstrate that this is not the case with threat assessment programs, which are based on understanding and addressing student behavior, *rather than* on profiles or types of students. The Commonwealth of Virginia has the longest standing statewide mandate for K-12 school threat assessment programs, and the University of Virginia has studied statewide threat assessment data over a number of years, to gauge the programs' impacts and to identify any disproportionality.

In 2018, the University of Virginia examined 1,836 threat cases from 779 elementary, middle, and high schools.[20] This study found no statistically significant differences between Black, Hispanic, and White students in regards to school suspensions, and found no racial disparities in the rates of arrests, incarcerations, or legal charges. The study found that only about 1% of students were expelled and only 1% were arrested, even though every threat assessment team incorporated a police officer as a team member. Another study actually found that threat assessment programs reduced the racial disproportionality of suspensions in Virginia schools.[21]

Prevention and early intervention are paramount. The analysis of 67 averted school attack plots contained in this report demonstrates that there are intervention points available before a student's behavior escalates to violence. **Students who *plotted* school attacks shared many similarities with students who *perpetrated* school attacks**. Both U.S. Secret Service studies, *Protecting America's Schools* and *Averting Targeted School Violence*, included students who:

- Had histories of school discipline and contact with law enforcement.

- Experienced bullying or had mental health issues, frequently involving depression and suicidality.

- Intended or committed suicide as part of the school attack.

- Used drugs or alcohol.

- Been impacted by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including substance abuse in the home, violence or abuse, parental incarceration, and parental mental health issues. Research from the CDC associates these types of ACEs with a range of health, social, and behavioral problems throughout life.[22]

Based on the current study examining disrupted plots, and building on NTAC's 20-year history of studying targeted school violence, the following operational implications should be considered when developing policies and protocols for multidisciplinary school threat assessment teams.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- **Targeted school violence is preventable when communities identify warning signs and intervene.** In every case, tragedy was averted by members of the community coming forward when they observed behaviors that elicited concern. Because these reports were met with intervention from public safety professionals, the plots were ended and lives were saved.

- **Schools should seek to intervene with students before their behavior warrants legal consequences.** Because this study identified school attack plots through open sources, the cases described were usually of a very serious and advanced nature. As a result, many of the plots were disrupted using arrests and criminal charges. Readers are reminded that the primary function of a threat assessment is not criminal investigation or conviction. Therefore, communities should strive to identify and intervene with students *before* their behavior escalates to criminal actions.

- **Students were most often motivated to plan a school attack because of a grievance with classmates.** Like students who perpetrated school attacks, the plotters in this study were most frequently motivated by interpersonal conflicts with classmates, highlighting a need for student interventions and de-escalation programs targeting such issues. Grievances with peers accounted for at least part of the plotter's motive in 21 cases (31%). For many of these situations, the plotters were retaliating for being bullied by their peers (*n* = 14, 21%). Other examples of peer grievances included targeting peers the student was not happy with, those who spread rumors or talked bad about them, and those who were mean or mistreated them or their friends.

- **Students are best positioned to identify and report concerning behaviors displayed by their classmates.** Schools and communities must take tangible steps to facilitate student reporting when classmates observe threatening or concerning behaviors. In this study, communications made about the attack plot were most often observed by the plotter's friends, classmates, and peers. Unfortunately, many cases also involved students observing concerning behaviors and communications *without* reporting them, highlighting the ongoing need for further resources and training for students about how to report their concerns.

- **The role of parents and families in recognizing concerning behavior is critical to prevention**. Eight (12%) plots were reported by family members, illustrating the crucial role families can play in addressing a student's risk of causing harm. In these eight cases, it was a parent or grandparent who observed the concerning behavior from their child and reported it to law enforcement, the school, or a mental health provider. In some cases, other parents in the school community received concerning reports about a classmate from their children, then passed the information on to the school or law enforcement. When identifying and assessing concerning student behavior, a collaborative process involving parents or guardians is ideal. Families should be educated on recognizing the warning signs and the supports and resources available to address their concerns, whether in the school or the greater community.

- **School resource officers (SROs) play an important role in school violence prevention.** In nearly one-third of the cases ($n = 21$, 31%), an SRO played a role in either reporting the plot or responding to a report made by someone else. In eight cases, it was the SRO who received the initial report of an attack plot from students or others, highlighting their role as a trusted adult within the school community. Once plots were identified, SROs provided a variety of support, including helping to conduct interviews, monitoring online activity, intercepting plotters before they entered the school, and finally, making arrests if necessary and appropriate.

- **Removing a student from school does not eliminate the risk they might pose to themselves or others.** Five (5%) plotters in this study were recently former students who had left school within one academic year of the plot. The former students included those who had been expelled, enrolled in other schools, graduated, or stopped attending classes. This finding is similar to previous NTAC research that found that 10% of students who completed an attack at their school were no longer enrolled as students. This indicates that simply removing a student from the school, without appropriate supports, may not necessarily remove the risk of harm they pose to themselves or others.

- **Students displaying an interest in violent or hate-filled topics should elicit immediate assessment and intervention.** Consistent with prior NTAC research studying school attackers, many of the plotters in this study had displayed an interest in topics that should immediately elicit concern from those tasked with school safety. Many of the plots ($n = 29$, 43%) involved at least one student who expressed a concerning interest in the Columbine High School attack. Further, nearly one-third ($n = 21$, 31%) of the plotters conducted *research* into prior attacks as part of their planning, including the Columbine attack, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Virginia Tech shooting, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Beyond previous attacks, nine plotters (21%) in this study displayed an interest in Hitler, Nazism, and/or white supremacy.

- **Many school attack plots were associated with certain dates, particularly in the month of April.** Some plotters selected dates to emulate notorious people or events, while others chose their dates to coincide with the beginning or end of the school year. School and security professionals should approach these dates with extra consideration. In 12 cases, the plotters chose the anniversaries of prior mass casualty, high-profile attacks. For nine of these, the plotters chose or considered April 19th or 20th, specifically to mark the anniversary of the Columbine attack. One attacker was further driven to celebrate Hitler's birthday, which is on the same date as the Columbine attack, and another chose April 19th because it was the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. In two cases, the plotters planned for their attack to occur on 9/11. In seven cases, plotters chose or discussed the dates to coincide with the start or end of school breaks, including the first or last day of school and the last day before winter break. In three cases, the plotters wanted to target a specific school event, such as an assembly or a graduation.

- **Many of the student plotters had access to weapons, including unimpeded access to firearms.** Threat assessments must explore whether a student who elicited concern has access to weapons, particularly access to firearms in the home. Similar to school attackers, in 43 cases (64%), the plotters had access to firearms. In 27 of these cases, the student's access to firearms was unimpeded (e.g., they owned them or their parents allowed access). In seven cases, the plotters acquired secured firearms, either because they were given access to the safe, pried the safe open, found the key, or stole them when they were left out. Two additional plotters claimed to be able to access firearms by knowing the combination to a safe or knowing where to find the key. In only one case did a student attempt to access a gun safe but failed.

Conclusion

THE U.S. SECRET SERVICE HAS LONG HELD THAT PREVENTION is the best form of protection. This is why U.S. Secret Service threat assessments receive the highest priority of all the agency's investigative efforts. By being proactive and preventive, the agency is best able to successfully accomplish our no-fail mission of safeguarding the president and other elected officials.

As communities continue to grapple with the tragic aftermath of targeted attacks, many have turned toward preventive models that address the root causes of violence, instead of reactive approaches that only address violence that has already occurred. Some of these preventive approaches take the form of a three-tiered public health model, which begins by providing resources that promote the well-being of everyone, while further supporting specific individuals in need through the use of secondary and tertiary interventions. NTAC's research has shown that perpetrators of targeted violence frequently experience a variety of stressful and tumultuous personal circumstances, which may include personal losses, grievances, financial instability, drug abuse, mental health conditions, unstable home environments, and bullying and social isolation. These findings support the idea that a public health approach to violence prevention should begin with communities working to address the personal factors frequently associated with violence.

These types of three-tiered models of early intervention have been widely adopted in the school setting and can work in conjunction with a school's multidisciplinary threat assessment program. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) models are one such approach that provides a primary intervention for all students, with secondary and tertiary interventions to support students who may be experiencing distress. These collaborative approaches foster positive school climates and promote student emotional and physical well-being, thereby decreasing the impact of adverse experiences. Approaches that promote successful outcomes for all students will decrease the risk of harm to the school community.

Violence prevention is everyone's responsibility, and we all have a role to play. The findings in this report support a growing body of research that indicates targeted school violence is preventable when bystanders are able to report their concerns to professionals who will appropriately assess and respond to the situation. Consistent with prior NTAC research, these findings also highlight the scope of concerning behaviors that are displayed by students before they engage in targeted school violence and the opportunities that exist for early intervention. We hope this report will serve our partners as they advance proactive violence prevention programs in their communities.

Part IV: Statistics & Comparison

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

Plot Elements

2/3 selected or considered a date, many as they were anniversaries of mass attacks, would be around school breaks, at school events, or other personal events

1/2 had specific target(s)

Over 1/3 selected locations in the school

Over 1/3 intended to end in suicide

Nearly 1/2 were inspired by or had some connection to the Columbine attack

Nearly all planned to use firearms, and half intended to use explosives

Some considered targeting school security or infrastructure, trapping victims to maximize casualties, targeting egress points, developing an escape plan, or diverting responders

Prior Communications

In nearly all cases, plotters communicated about their intent to attack

In 1/5, plotters warned others not to come to school or gave instructions on how to avoid injury during the attack

In nearly 1/2, at least one communication was not reported

Discovery and Report

Most were discovered due to plotters' communications, others due to their observed behaviors

Most were reported by peers who told members of the school staff

Most were reported the same day with near immediate response

Behavioral Overview

THE MAJORITY OF ATTACKERS HAD:
- Communicated their intent
- Experienced stressors within 5 yrs
- A history of mental health symptoms
- Concerning behaviors
- Interest in violent themes

ABOUT HALF HAD:
- Elicited concern in others
- Been bullied
- Experienced suicidal ideations

ABOUT ONE-THIRD HAD
- Mental health treatment
- Prior contact with law enforcement to include criminal charges or other contact
- Substance use

SUMMARY DATA FOR AVERTED ATTACKS

THE SCHOOLS (*n* = 67)		
School Type		
High school	84%	
Middle	15%	
K-12	1%	
Urbanization		
Suburban	37%	
Rural	25%	
City	21%	
Town	16%	
Resources		
School resource officer	67%	
Assessment & intervention resources	36%	
Reporting mechanism	34%	
Threat assessment team	10%	
ALL PLOTTERS (*n* = 100)		
Lone Plotters / Groups	**43 lone plotters / 24 groups**	
Gender	**95% male / 5% female**	
Age: *average / range*	**16 avg / 11-19**	
Resulting Criminal Charge		
Juvenile	39%	
Adult	31%	
Both	5%	
No charges	3%	
Not found	22%	
Judicial Outcome		
Guilty - found	4%	
Guilty - pled	49%	
Not guilty - found	2%	
No contest	10%	
No charges or dismissed	4%	
Not found	31%	

THE PLOTS (*n* = 67)

Motives		
Grievances	45%	
Peers:	*31% (21% related to bullying)*	
Staff, romantic, other:	*24%*	
Desire to kill	15%	
Suicide	13%	
Fame / notoriety	12%	
Anti-female sentiment	3%	
White supremacy	3%	
Psychotic symptoms	1%	
Other	3%	

Columbine Interest		43%

Weapons		
Firearms	96% planned, 2/3 of these had access	
Explosives	51% planned, 1/2 of these had access to (materials or completed)	
Arson/incendiary devices	18% planned, over 3/4 of these had access	
Bladed weapons	12% planned, 1/2 of these had access	

Specific Targets		51%
Classmates/peers	40%	
Administrators and staff	28%	
School resource officers	13%	
Family	9%	
Other law enforcement	6%	
Other	3%	

Top 5 Locations on Campus		
Cafeteria	10 cases	
Hallways	8 cases	
School grounds	8 cases	
Egress points	8 cases	
Gym	4 cases	

Top 3 Tactics		
End in suicide	37%	
Compromise school security or infrastructure	19%	
Trap potential victims	10%	

Top 5 Planning Behaviors		
Any weapons related planning	85%	
Details regarding the attack execution	73%	
Documentation of plans	57%	
Research prior attacks	31%	
Recruitment of others	16%	

Communications about the Plot		94%
Prior warnings of attack	19%	
Failures to report	43%	

What Led to Discovery		
Communication only	75%	
Behavior only	10%	
Communication and behavior	7%	
Plotter self-identified	4%	
Unknown	3%	
Plots Reported Same Day Observed		**74%**
Who Reported the Plots		
Friends, classmates, peers	61%	
Family	12%	
School employee	7%	
Non-school adult	7%	
Law enforcement or SRO	3%	
Unknown	9%	
Who Received Initial Report		
School employee	42%	
Law enforcement	30%	
SRO	12%	
Other adult	10%	
Mental health	3%	
Response Made Same Day		**61%**

SELECT PLOTTERS' BACKGROUND FACTORS ($n = 43$)

Substance Use/Abuse		**33%**
Contact with Law Enforcement		**30%**
Criminal charge(s)	19%	
Other context	19%	
Mental Health		**70%**
Suicide	44%	
Depression	40%	
Treatment	35%	
Bullied		**44%**
Violent interests		**67%**
Stressors within 5 years		**91%**
Family	58%	
Social	51%	
Concerning Communications		**88%**
Intent to attack	84%	
Concerning but not threatening	72%	
Threatening others	40%	
Concerned Others		**44%**

COMPARISON OF SELECT DATA BETWEEN PLOTTERS AND ATTACKERS

OVERVIEW	AVERTED ATTACKS *Averting Targeted School Violence*	COMPLETED ATTACKS *Protecting America's Schools (PAS)*
Intended Suicide[a]	• 37% intended to commit suicide or accepted they would die in the attack	• 22% committed suicide or killed by law enforcement
Schools[a]	• 84% high schools • 67% SRO (part-time or full-time)	• 73% high schools • 66% SRO (part-time or full-time)
Perpetrators[b]	• 95% were current students • 5% female • 43 lone plotters, 24 groups • Age: 11-19, 16 avg	• 90% were current students • 17% female • All lone attackers • Age: 12-18, 15 avg
Grade Levels[c]	**43 Plotters and 41 Attackers by Grade Level** _Averted / Attackers by grade:_ 6th: 2% / 0% 7th: 0% / 12% 8th: 5% / 15% 9th: 16% / 17% 10th: 16% / 20% 11th: 7% / 17% 12th: 33% / 7% Frmr: 9% / 10% Unkn: 12% / 2%	
Communications About Intent[d]	• 84% communicated with others	• 77% communicated with others
Interest in Violence[d]	• 67% interest in violent themes • 21% interest in white supremacy, Nazism, or related topics	• 49% interest in violent themes • 20% interest in white supremacy, Nazism, or related topics
Stressors[d]	• 91% experienced stressors within 5 yrs • Top categories: #1 family, #2 social	• 100% experienced stressors within 5 yrs • Top categories: #1 social, #2 family

[a] *Percentages based on all 67 plots and all 41 attacks.*   [c] *Percentages based on 43 select plotters and all 41 attackers.*
[b] *Percentages based on all 100 plotters and all 41 attackers.*   [d] *Percentages based on 43 select plotters and 35 select attackers.*

FIREARMS ACCESS	*43 plotters who planned to use firearms and had potential access*	*25 attackers who used firearms*
General	• 63% had unimpeded access as they purchased, owned, or their parents allowed access to them	• 32% acquired their weapon on the day of the attack, 20% on the day prior, and 16% within 2-7 days
Firearms in the Home	• 70% had access to a family member's firearm	• 76% acquired the firearm used from their homes
Firearms Not Secured	• 23% lived in, or had access to, a home where at least one firearm was not secured in a meaningful way[23]	• 48% lived in a home where at least one firearm was either readily available or not secured in a meaningful way
Gained Access to Secured Firearms	• Seven gained access by prying open a safe, finding the key, finding the firearms left out, or being allowed regular access; two more claimed they knew the combination or where to find the key • One tried to get into the safe but failed	• Four gained access as they knew or guessed the combination or password, or they knew the location of the key
Purchased Firearms	• Four purchased their firearms themselves; two from individuals and two from retailers	• Three purchased firearms themselves from an acquaintance, gun show, or a retailer

Endnotes

[1] National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence.* U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

[2] National Threat Assessment Center. (2019). *Protecting America's schools: A U.S. Secret Service analysis of targeted school violence.* U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security

[3] Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. (June 2018). *The role of adverse childhood experiences in substance misuse and related behavioral health problems.* Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved March 11, 2021, from https://mnprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aces-behavioral-health-problems.pdf.

[4] Current students included homeschooled students whose education was overseen or otherwise monitored by the targeted school or its school district. A recently former student was defined as one who left the targeted K-12 school or school district within one academic year.

[5] For further information, please see the National Police Foundation. (n.d.). *Averted school violence data collection platform.* Retrieved on March 1, 2021, from https://www.policefoundation.org/averted-school-attacks-data-collection-platform/.

[6] Three of the targeted schools were middle-high schools.

[7] These data represent student enrollment for regular and vocational high schools with at least 50 students for 2017-18 school year. Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Elementary/Secondary Information (ELSi) System. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/.

[8] In three of the cases involving a lone student plotter, an accomplice with no known affiliation with the school or school district was involved in the planning of the attack. These individuals, who were aged 19, 22, and 33, were not included in this study.

[9] For three of the cases, the month and the year were identified but the precise day was not identified.

[10] In six of the cases, information was unclear as to who reported the plot.

[11] World Health Organization. (2020, September 28). *Adolescent mental health.* Retrieved January 14, 2021, from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health.

[12] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, June 15). *Data and statistics on children's mental health.* Retrieved January 14, 2021, from https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html.

[13] World Health Organization. (2020, September 28). *Adolescent mental health.* Retrieved January 14, 2021, from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health.

[14] Due to the age of the plotters, the consumption of alcohol was included in the analysis when evaluating substance use and abuse.

[15] National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2020, May 28). *Part 1: The connection between substance use disorders and mental illness.* Retrieved January 21, 2021, from https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/common-comorbidities-substance-use-disorders/part-1-connection-between-substance-use-disorders-mental-illness.

[16] Grant, K., Compas B., Stuhlmacher A., Thurm A., McMahon S., & Halpert J. (2003). Stressors and child and adolescent psychopathology: Moving from markers to mechanisms of risk. *Psychol Bull, 129*(3), 447-466.

[17] Miller, A. (n.d.) *Stress as a factor in family violence.* UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. Retrieved March 2, 2021, from https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/984-stress-as-a-factor-in-family-violence.html.

[18] This definition was adapted from the definitions found in: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). *What is bullying?* Retrieved March 11, 2020, from https://www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/index.html; and Gladden, R., Vivolo-Kantor, A., Hamburger, M., & Lumpkin, C. (2014). *Bullying surveillance among youths: Uniform definitions for public health and recommended data elements, Version 1.0.* National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the United States Department of Education. Retrieved October 19, 2019, from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-definitions-final-a.pdf.

[19] For three cases, it remains unknown if the plotters had a documented interest in Columbine beyond planning their attack for April 20th or a single search for or mention of the Columbine High School attack.

[20] Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review*, 47(2), 183-195.

[21] JustChildren & Cornell, D. (2013, December 18). *Prevention v. punishment: Threat assessment, school suspensions, and racial disparities.* Retrieved March 11, 2021, from https://www.justice4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Prevention-v-Punishment-Report-FINAL.pdf.

[22] Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. (June 2018). *The role of adverse childhood experiences in substance misuse and related behavioral health problems. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.* Retrieved March 11, 2021, from https://mnprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aces-behavioral-health-problems.pdf.

[23] For 20 cases (47%) where the plotter intended to use and had access to firearms, the security of these firearms was unknown.

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Averting Targeted School Violence:
A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools