

Red Flags, Warning Signs and Indicators

Following are some warning signs (indicators and red flags) associated with school shootings in the United States. Schools, places of employment, and other entities that are creating threat assessment capability may want to be aware of these red flags.

Violent fantasy content

- Writings (stories, essays, compositions)
- Drawings (Artwork depicting violence)
- Reading and viewing materials (preference for books, magazines, television, video tapes and discs, movies, music, websites, and chat rooms with violent themes and degrading subject matter), and role playing acts of violence and degradation.

Anger problems

- Difficulty controlling anger, loss of temper, impulsivity
- Making threats

Fascination with weapons and accoutrements

- Especially those designed and most often used to kill people (such as machine guns, semiautomatic pistols, snub nose revolvers, stilettos, bayonets, daggers, brass knuckles, special ammunition and explosives)

Boasting and practicing of fighting and combat proficiency

- Military and sharpshooter training, martial arts, use of garrotes, and knife fighting

Loner

- Isolated and socially withdrawn, misfit, prefers own company to the company of others

Suicidal ideation

- Depressed and expresses hopelessness and despair
- Reveals suicidal preparatory behavior

Homicidal ideation

- Expresses contempt for others
- Makes comments and/or gestures indicating violence aggression

Stalking

- Follows, harasses, surveils, attempts to contact regardless of the victim's expressed annoyance and demands to cease and desist

Non-compliance and disciplinary problems

- Refusal to abide by written and/or verbal rules

Imitation of other murderers

- Appearance, dress, grooming, possessions like those of violent shooters in past episodes (e.g., long black trench coat)

Interest in previous shooting situations

- Drawn toward media, books, entertainment, conversations dealing with past murders

Victim/martyr self-concept

- Fantasy that some day he will represent the oppressed and wreak vengeance on the oppressors

Strangeness and aberrant behavior

- Actions and words that cause people around him to become fearful and suspicious

Paranoia

- Belief that he is being singled out for unfair treatment and/or abuse; feeling persecuted

Violence and cruelty

- A history of using violence to solve problems (fighting, hitting, etc.) abusing animals or weaker individuals

Inappropriate affect

- Enjoying cruel behavior and/or being able to view cruelty without being disturbed

Acting out

- Expressing disproportionate anger or humor in situations not warranting it, attacking surrogate targets

Police contact

- A history of contact with police for anger, stalking, disorderly conduct
- Past temporary restraining orders (or similar court orders)
- A jail/prison record for aggressive crimes

Mental health history related to dangerousness

- A history of referral or commitments to mental health facilities for aggressive/destructive behavior

Expressionless face/anhedonia

- An inability to express and/or experience joy and pleasure

Unusual interest in police, military, terrorist activities and materials

- Vehicles resembling police cars, military vehicles, surveillance equipment, handcuffs, weapons, clothing (camouflage, ski masks, etc.)

Use of alcohol/drugs

- Alcohol/drugs are used to reduce inhibitions so that aggressive behaviors are more easily expressed

This material is excerpted from Appendix M of the Virginia Tech Review Panel Report and was contributed by Roger Depue, Ph. D.