

20 Years of Columbine:
The Declining Effectiveness of Prevention Efforts

Welcome to Columbine High School, home of the Rebels. And Eric Harris. And Dylan Klebold. What seems to be the veneer of a typical high school reveals a sinister climate of rampant bullying, mental agony, and within all this the little shoots, the makings of the worst school shooting to that date are concocted. Amidst the bullying and social hierarchy of Columbine High School in the late 1990s, with the cultural influences of violent music and films from the early 90s, two teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who were both suffering from mental health issues, obtained weapons from an adult acquaintance, constructed propane bombs at home, and planned and executed the deadliest mass school shooting in history at that time in Columbine, Colorado on April 20, 1999. During the Columbine High School shootings, Harris and Klebold tragically killed 12 students, a teacher, and themselves, while wounding 24 others. Out of the factors of bullying, social hierarchy, and mental health, the social hierarchy was the most important cause that all the other causes originated from, resulting in the shooting. This tragedy revealed the underlying problems surrounding social dynamics affecting adolescents. As a result of this tragedy, there has been a triumph in a greater emphasis placed on preventing these same causes that caused the tragedy to occur. It also set a precedent for future protocols to address school violence and efforts to address mental health issues and bullying in schools, through legislation, education, and increased accessibility to services. However, even as efforts have been made to combat these factors, the problem of school violence has been worsening over the past twenty years.

Columbine High School at the time Klebold and Harris attended had, like most other schools, a social hierarchy. However, the severity of which it impacted bullying and mental health differentiated it from other schools. From interviews with students who attended the

school the years prior to the shootings, a general picture of the social hierarchy can be constructed. The “jocks” consisted of the very top of the social hierarchy, and there were small amounts of “outcast” students who were at the bottom. The majority of the school fell somewhere in the middle, however. Compared to other schools, the opposites of the hierarchy were completely separated, unlike most other schools. Therefore, bullying from the jocks could be completely ignored by both the middle group, and, in some cases, administration. Brooks Brown, a friend of Klebold and Harris, describes the situation succinctly in his memoir. “By the end of my junior year, school shootings were making their way into the news. ... When we talked in class about the shootings, kids would make jokes about “it was going to happen at Columbine next.” They would say that Columbine was absolutely primed for because of the bullying and the hate that was so prevalent at our school” (Brown 97)¹. Sue Klebold, Dylan Klebold’s mother, recounts a conversation she had where Dylan references the bullying from the jocks. “Once, during sophomore year, Dylan said something to Tom about “hating the jocks.” Tom asked him if they were giving him a hard time, and Dylan answered with confidence: “They don’t bother me. I’m six four. But they sure give Eric hell.”” (Klebold). Yet another source, Pat Stevens, a teacher at Columbine, corroborated this in an interview with the Denver Post. She stated how the bullying from the jocks affected the students in her special education class. Thus, the social hierarchy was the single most important cause that worsened the bullying and mental health issues at the school.

The bullying contributed greatly to the mental health problems that both Klebold and Harris were suffering. According to Sue Klebold, Dylan showed depression but tried to hide it

¹ Brooks Brown was Klebold and Harris’ childhood friend, who was the previous target of Harris’ threats during high school.

from his family. She also talks about how the bullying led to his depression. “The humiliation and degradation Dylan experienced at the hands of his schoolmates likely did contribute to his psychological state. At some point his anger, which had for years been directed toward himself, began to turn outward, and the idea of personal destruction he found so comforting began to include others” (Klebold). As for Harris, the environment at Columbine allowed his psychopathic tendencies to manifest themselves. For example, Harris was put into a program that was meant to rehabilitate him after him and Klebold were caught breaking into a van. However, as Harris wrote a letter of apology to the owner of the van, he wrote in his diary, “If im free, I cant deprive a stupid fucking dumbshit from his possessions If he leaves then sitting in the front seat of his fucking van out in plain sight and in the middle fucking nowhere on a Fri fucking day night.” Given this, Harris clearly showed signs of his psychopathic tendencies, and revealed mental health issues that were not properly treated. As a result, Columbine would be the place where bullying as a result of the segregated social hierarchy affected the mental health of students such as Klebold and Harris.

The cultural influences of the 1990s, through the form of mass media in music, movies, and video games, contributed to the shootings by providing an influence of violent behavior. The most visible influence was a first person shooter, DOOM². Eric Harris’ website prominently displayed his self-created DOOM levels, which he often referred to in their videos, including the basement tapes, explaining the type of violence they wanted to emulate. The movie Natural Born Killers was also another influence attributed to Harris and Klebold’s behavior. In Harris’ diary, he refers shortly before the shootings to the shootings as NBK, the acronym for the movie.

² Both Harris and Klebold showed the influence of DOOM when they tried to detonate a propane bomb by shooting at it, which is a mechanic in DOOM.

“someones bound to say "what were they thinking?" when we go NBK or when we were planning it, so this what I am thinking.“ (Harris) Thus, Harris and Klebold were influenced by mass media in many forms. Combined, these cultural influences were seen in the way the two planned the shootings, and their execution.

In the past 20 years following the shootings, a direct result of Columbine was a heightened awareness towards school violence and its causes. Many efforts have been made to pinpoint the causes of the shootings and address these issues to prevent further tragedies. Directly after the shootings, the Secret Service commissioned a report examining the causes behind and identifying a trend between events of school violence. This data was meant to be used to identify potentially violent students before they commit any acts. In addition, it gave the opportunity to prepare for these situations and to defend against them effectively. It used a wide variety of data from a variety of time periods. The report states, “In the end, researchers identified 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers that occurred in the United States from 1974, the year in which the earliest incident identified took place, through June 2000, when data collection for the study was completed.” This report was also a way to draw attention towards trends in behavior exhibited by shooters such as Klebold and Harris. For example, the study reports that “Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.” This coincides with what is known about the background surrounding the Columbine shootings, and suggests that the causes that led to Columbine were not isolated. In addition, the study identified the way that perpetrators targeted students, which would assist with tactics to try and subdue the attackers.³

³ Examples are included in the next paragraph.

From this data, there have been efforts to target the causes identified through legislation, education, and accessibility to services. Legislation was the first method in which action was taken by individual states. From the Safe School Initiative report, published slightly more than a year after the shootings, ‘Several states have enacted legislation that makes it easier for schools to share student information with law enforcement agencies and others who are trying to determine whether a student might be moving toward a school-based attack’” In addition, policies arising from legislation have provided police forces with better tactics to confront school attackers. According to Dave Cullen, new police tactics have been put into place to better confront a school shooter. During Columbine, SWAT teams slowly moved through the building, but for a quicker response times, the tactic has shifted to directly and quickly confronting the shooter, as in the case of Virginia Tech. According to Lt. Terry Manwaring, the SWAT teams that went through Columbine used the old tactics. “During the next 11/2 hours, three SWAT teams made up of nearly 50 officers from four jurisdictions gingerly walked through debris-filled hallways as explosions echoed, fire alarms blared, water flowed from sprinkler systems and emergency strobe lights flashed.” This resulted in a slow response compared to the newer tactics. In 2013, at a school in Colorado, a shooting was quickly neutralized thanks to tactics developed since Columbine. In an interview with CNN, Kenneth Trump, president of a security consulting firm, said “The goal is to proceed and neutralize the shooter. Columbine really revolutionized the way law enforcement responds to active shooters.” Finally, legislation was put into place by all 50 states against bullying at various times after Columbine. Georgia was the first state to do so, a month after the shootings. (1999 Georgia Laws, H.B. 84, Chap. 282)

Education regarding these causes has also seen an increase as the result of these shootings. Most of the time, this has been the direct result of legislation passed. For example, Georgia's first law regarding bullying was mainly targeted to improving education surrounding bullying. According to *An Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies* by the US Department of Education, "from 1999 to 2010 there were more than 120 bills enacted by state legislatures nationally that have either introduced or amended education or criminal statutes to address bullying and related behaviors in schools". As a result, the improvement in education has been correlated with the continued increase in legislation. As of 2011, 25 states have mandated that districts train teachers to respond to bullying situations. These efforts have served to spread awareness about bullying, in order to prevent further acts of violence.

Efforts have also been made at improving the accessibility to mental health services for students at high schools across the nation. According to Charles Alperin, an adjustment counselor at Bedford High School, public opinion has changed over time from the late 90s to the current time, which has in turn changed how schools reach out to students with mental health issues, and the resources allocated to this. He states that thanks to efforts by mental health professionals, "Students have become more empowered to...identify risks where we wouldn't have seen it." He adds that the number of professionals specializing in this field in his school has also grown over time.⁴ As a result, high schoolers now have easier access to services that would have been much more difficult to access 20 years ago.

The efforts that have been made to combat the causes of Columbine have largely been ineffective at reducing the rate of school violence in the 20 years following Columbine. Starting

⁴ In 2001, he was the only adjustment counselor, specializing in the mental health of students.

just 8 days after Columbine, there have been numerous occasions where the same issues and causes that were responsible for Columbine resulted in another school shooting. In addition, Columbine has become a source of inspiration for various copycat shootings. According to Ralph Larkin, “Of the eleven school shootings outside the United States between 1999 and 2007, Larkin says six were plainly versions of Columbine; of the eleven cases of thwarted shootings in the same period, Larkin says all were Columbine-inspired. (Gladwell) An example of the efforts of legislation, education, and policies to curb mental health issues failing is the Virginia Tech shooting in 2006, where a student who was suspected to be suffering from schizophrenia and had previously seemed treatment was unknown by both the school and the state. This was another failing of accessibility to services that was originally an effort put forth to prevent acts of violence before they occurred. Throughout the past 20 years, the inability of the countless efforts to address the underlying causes of violence is a tragic failure of the legislation, education, and accessibility to services to prevent school shootings. According to the CDC, there has been a slight upward trend in school-associated violent deaths in the 15 years after 1999.⁵

The cultural influences of the 1990s, coupled with mental health issues and bullying stemming from a segregated social hierarchy were catalysts for Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris to carry out the Columbine High School Shooting. In the 20 years after the shootings, there have been many long-term triumphs and tragedies. After thorough analyses of information surrounding similar acts of violence, and sparked by the shootings, a greater awareness of the plaguing youth today has resulted in efforts to recognize and address these problems. However, these efforts have, for the most part, been unsuccessful because of the continued and frequent

⁵ The slight upward trend can be represented using a best fit line with a slope of 0.67.

occurrence of violence so commonplace that it cannot be construed as anything but a virulent epidemic plaguing schools.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources (9):

Atlanta, et al. Letter to CID and Laboratory. 21 Apr. 1999. *FBI Records: The Vault*, FBI, vault.fbi.gov/Columbine%20High%20School%20/

Columbine%20High%20School%20Part%201%20of%204/view. Accessed 1 Nov. 2018.

The various FBI agencies in the letters have interacted with the shooters directly, both while investigating threats made over the internet as well as investigating suspects who were linked to the shooters. The source is a series of letters that show the series of FBI investigations into Klebold and Harris' internet activities prior to the shooting. It also examined people with connections to the two and whether or not they were involved. It also consists of letters from agencies to laboratories regarding items found at the scene, and a general description of the investigations. There is an archive of Harris' web page attached to the email that show him making threats and complaining about his school. This source reveals the surveillance conducted by the FBI prior to the shootings, and Harris' mental state as he wrote his website. The rage expressed in his posts is extreme, providing context for his personality, which is compared alongside Klebold's. It relates to how tragedy doesn't randomly appear, rather it often comes with warning signs, which are explored in these letters.

Brown, Brooks, and Rob Merritt. *No Easy Answers: the Truth behind Death at Columbine*. Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2006.

The author is Klebold and Harris' childhood friend, who was familiar with the social hierarchy of the school he went to. The source is more specifically a recount of how the students at Columbine viewed the bullying and the inevitable event that would result. This source reveals what students thought about the social hierarchy and how it lent itself to bullying, which is important in piecing together the social hierarchy.

Harris, Eric. "Eric Harris' Writing - Journals, Diaries and School Papers." *A Columbine Site*, 10 Apr. 1998, www.acolumbinesite.com/eric/writing/journal/journal.php.

The journal of Eric Harris is a collection of his thoughts about the people around him and the school, which directly reflect his own intentions. As it is a primary source, there aren't any biases besides Harris' own, which is part of the reason why it is analyzed. The source is a text-transcribed version of his diary entries spanning a year before the shootings. Even though it uses the language typical of teenagers at that time, he often makes references to natural selection

and his hatred of everyone around him, as he says “The human race sucks. human nature is smothered out by society, jobs, and work and school. instincts are deleted by laws.” His pessimism is reflected in his reference to Hitler countless times, pledging to continue his work except for all of mankind. This source is significant because it contributes to the idea that Harris wasn’t merely preparing for the shootings in reaction to his treatment from others, he was actually doing it because he hated the entire human race.

Harris, Eric, and Dylan Klebold. “Basement Tapes.” *Weapons Used during the Shootings at Columbine High School*, 16 Mar. 1999, acolumbinesite.com/quotes1.html.

The basement tapes are transcripts of primary source home videos that Harris and Klebold directly recorded themselves, which makes this primary source a credible source regarding their own intentions. The site is hosted on a compilation of primary sources, so there isn’t bias except for the choice of which sources to include. The source is showing the different ways they viewed the other students in their school, as well as testing out their explosives and weapons. It shows Eric and Dylan’s idolizing of Hitler and their desire to be known for the deaths they cause, to quote them “niggers, spics, Jews*, fucking whites”. Given this information, it is easy to draw a connection between their planned violence and their hatred of other students that caused it. This source reveals the attitude that Harris and Klebold had towards their comrades and their eventual goal for the shootings. However, it does not talk about why they hated their classmates or the social hierarchy of the school.

Klebold, Dylan. “Dylan Klebold's Writing - Journals, Diaries and School Papers.” *A Columbine Site*, 31 Mar. 1997, www.acolumbinesite.com/dylan/writing/journal/jindex.php.

Klebold’s journal paints him as a depressed individual, corroborating evidence from other sources. Because he is writing it himself, there can’t be any biases not present in his original recollection. This source consists of Klebold writing about his painful desire for romance and desires for violence to himself, but not to others. He says “ooh god i want to die sooo bad... such a sad, desolate, lonely, unsalvageable i feel i am”. It also shows he attributes it to himself, not others unlike Harris, providing evidence that it wasn’t entirely due to social hierarchy. The source reveals that Harris does not put blame on others, unlike Harris, which means that his own depressive personality was also to blame for the shootings. Its significance is that he blamed himself and expressed his views through his relationship with Harris.

Klebold, Sue. *A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2016. Print.

The author is Klebold’s mother, who lived with him and was able to see some of the emotions he was feeling before the shooting. The source is a testimony from Sue Klebold who has a first-hand account of the shootings, as well as a slightly biased description of Dylan’s personality. It also outlines the actions taken by the media and the authorities directly following the shootings. Sue talks about Dylan’s childhood and his actions leading up to the shootings, and the difference between his outward personality and the shooting. This source reveals Dylan’s personality and background, which help to understand the motive of the shooting, and to provide

context for why he participated in the shootings. Tragedy is not always apparent at first to everyone, and we can see how social change drastically affects people, as exhibited leading up to Columbine.

Pankratz, Howard. "Columbine Bullying No Myth, Panel Told." *Denver Entertainment: The Denver Post*, The Denver Post, 3 Oct. 2000, [extras.denverpost.com/news/col1003a.htm](https://www.denverpost.com/news/col1003a.htm).

The author, Howard Pankratz, is the legal affairs writer for the Denver Post. This source is a recount of events, however, so the author is mostly unimportant. The source consists of a teacher, Patti Stevens, recounting the bullying climate prevalent at Columbine High School, as well as her own students' experiences with it. This source reveals the outcomes of the social hierarchy at Columbine, and how it affected students who didn't belong to any group, just like Harris and Klebold.

Sanchez, Ray. "Lessons of Columbine and Other School Shootings Helped in Arapahoe." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 Dec. 2013,

www.cnn.com/2013/12/14/us/colorado-school-shooting-response/index.html.

The author is Ray Sanchez, a journalist for CNN, who only repeats what is stated by the sheriff who was directly involved, as well as a consulting firm specializing in school safety. The source is a summary and reflection of the different tactics used to neutralize school shooters, and how it has changed since Columbine. This source reveals the steps taken by law enforcement to better respond to violent situations in schools.

Wang, Alan, and Charles Alperin. "Mental Health Resources in Schools." 15 Jan. 2019.

The source is an interview conducted with the adjustment counselor of Bedford High School, Mr. Alperin, who has been working in the field since 2001, and thus has a conclusive view of the changing circumstances surrounding mental health issues in students for the majority of the time after Columbine. The source examines examples of measures taken in Bedford High School to help students with mental health issues, as well as give a summary of the changing landscape and how schools approach these students over time. This source reveals how public opinion has shifted in regards to viewing mental illness, and the increase in resources allocated over time.

Secondary Sources (4):

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Violence Prevention." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 Oct. 2018,

www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/SAVD.html.

The author is the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, which is centered around the health of people, including students. The source is a study that has data regarding the amount of deaths resulting from school violence in the 15 years after Columbine. This source reveals a slight upward trend in deaths caused by school violence, signalling a failure to address the root causes of the problem.

Larkin, Ralph W. *Comprehending Columbine*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007. Print.

The author, Ralph Larkin, is a PhD in sociology and professor who analyzes the social interactions and factors surrounding Columbine. He has done research on social movements, especially surrounding youth social change. The source examines the multitude of personal,

local, and social factors that caused the shootings, It refers back to the tapes that Harris and Klebold recorded in their basement, and how it related to their actions during the shootings. It also explores the social structure of Columbine leading up the shootings and how Harris and Klebold were affected by it. It describes how since Harris and Klebold were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they targeted anyone, although specifically jocks. Through interviews with members of the student body, Larkin pieces together what the social status of Harris and Klebold would have been and their interactions with their peers. This source reveals the attitudes that Klebold and Harris had when they started shooting, as well as to explain the motive behind their actions, such as placing the bombs under the table where the jocks sat. The social factors also explain the mental situation of Harris and Klebold as a result of their position in the social hierarchy. It relates to the theme of tragedy through understanding how a societal tragedy can lead to further tragedy.

US Department of Education. "Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies." *US Department of Education*, 2011, www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/bullying/state-bullying-laws/state-bullying-laws.pdf.

The author is the US Department of Education, which is a government agency with the power to compile state laws. The source is a list of the various laws enacted against bullying, and some of these laws can be directly traced back to Columbine. This source reveals the response to the bullying crisis in schools by lawmakers.

Vossekuil, Bryan, and Robert A Fein. "THE FINAL REPORT AND FINDINGS OF THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE:" *United States Department of Education*, July 2004, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf.

The author is the United States Department of Education, which is the agency responsible for compiling the data about school shootings. The source consists of statistics regarding the identities of school shooter, outlining trends and providing information on how to better identify and prepare for violent situations. It was originally created in response to Columbine. This source reveals that most of the perpetrators were mostly sociable, white students who felt bullied prior to the incident, as well as trends regarding actions during the violent situation.

