



Threat Management Institute

Warning Signs: Behaviors that Precede Targeted Acts of Violence and Implications for Risk Management and Threat Assessment

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In May 1927, the worse school massacre in United States history occurred in a small town in Michigan. The person responsible was a 55-year-old man who was a well-respected and trusted member of the community. Friends and neighbors were shocked and thought Andrew must have snapped. But it took months of deliberate planning and preparation for him to carry out his crime. No one saw the massacre coming... or, did they just miss the warning signs? Identifying and correctly interpreting behaviors that are likely to precede a targeted act of violence are an essential component of threat assessment. One of the most predictive components of warning behaviors is “leakage” – which has been noted in a variety of violent attacks, including school and campus violence; adult mass murders, workplace violence; adolescent mass murders and public figure attacks.

A popularly held belief about people who act out violently and seemingly without warning or precedent is that they just “snapped”. However, current research in threat assessment and targeted violence indicates that this is simply not true. The offender exhibits certain behaviors before hand – either intentionally or unintentionally – which are predictive of his or her violent intentions. The ability to identify and interpret these behaviors will result in a much more accurate threat assessment and risk management strategy that can actually prevent an event from occurring.

Reasons that warning behaviors are missed, overlooked, or ignored have resulted in acts of violence occurring seemingly “out of the blue” – leaving family friends and co-workers saying, “what did we miss”? Knowing where to look for warning behaviors, when to look for them, and who is most likely to observe these behaviors will be discussed.

Case examples will be presented to illustrate the value of these behaviors and how they should be evaluated within the context of the overall threat assessment process. Implications for intervention strategies will also be discussed.