



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAMPUS CRIME , YOUTH VIOLENCE

The Columbine legacy - Still strong after all these years

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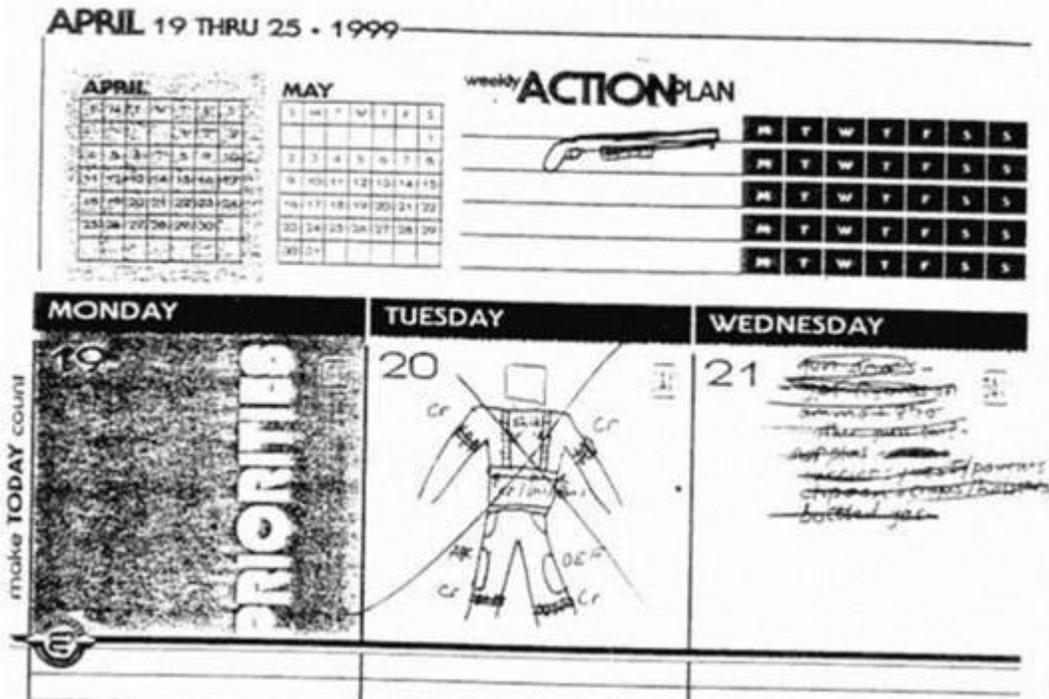
It hardly seems like a dozen years since the April 20, 1999 Columbine massacre in which Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris turned a Denver-suburban high school into their personal battle ground, killing 12 students and one teacher, before committing suicide. Despite the fact that today's high school students are too young to recall the event and to have watched the horrible tragedy unfold as it was broadcasted live by TV news crews, the shooting continues to impact the way in which schools operate.

Educators across America have been compelled to invest large sums of money in security devices that are of questionable value, such as metal detectors that don't deter and surveillance systems that don't function. Meanwhile, they continue to trim budgets for the more fundamental needs, such as books and faculty.

And many schools across America still launch so-called Columbine drills to prepare their students for such a catastrophe in the same way that an earlier generation of students was trained for a possible A-Bomb through regular air-raid simulations. There is little reason to believe that such lockdown drills do anything other than frighten and traumatize impressionable children. At the same time, several private entrepreneurs have developed personal safety equipment for students, including bullet-resistant backpacks and body shields.

In terms of today's best practice security strategies, Columbine High School was fairly well-prepared even in advance of the shooting spree. It was equipped with a surveillance camera system, which apparently served no other role than to capture dark images of Klebold and Harris taking aim inside the school cafeteria. Columbine also employed an armed school resource officer, but he could do little to protect a sprawling campus that enrolled 1,400 students.

The problem at the time -- and now -- is that a determined assailant wielding a deadly weapon is difficult to deter. And if nothing else, Klebold and Harris were ready for battle and ready to die infamously. As shown below, they had carefully anticipated the fateful day, scheduling it to coincide with the birthday of Adolph Hitler, a figure whom they admired for this power. Additionally ironic, given events that transpired later, is an entry in Harris's diary suggesting that, should they survive, their next move might be to hijack an airplane and fly it into the skyline of New York City.



The lasting legacy of the Columbine massacre is hardly positive. Even a decade after Columbine, as many as 25% of parents remain concerned about school safety and fear for their child while he or she is at school.

Although these fears are quite understandable, they are also well out of proportion with the risk. For some perspective, the table below compares the number of school-related homicide victims for the years 1999 to 2005 with cause-specific mortality figures drawn from coroner reports compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). As the top portion of the table confirms, the number of children slain at or near school (a total of 89 victims over the seven-year time frame) is akin to that of other rare occurrences such as deaths from storms/lightning (105 cases) or animal bites (79 cases). Moreover, the risk of school homicide is substantially lower than that of accidental deaths due to careless handling of guns or of drowning in swimming pools.

At the extreme, children are killed while on a bicycle 12 times more often than murdered while attending school. Yet, rather than ensuring that their children wear a helmet when bicycling around the neighborhood, too many parents worry more deeply about the safety of their children when they are at school and demand tighter security measures to protect them, unfortunately at the expense of a quality education.

Cause of death by age of child, 1999-2005

Cause of death	5-9	10-14	15-19	Total
Bicycle accident	283	480	337	1,100
Accidental fall	132	187	680	999
Pool drowning	349	234	223	806
Gun accident	17	66	131	214
Storm/Lightning	22	35	48	105
School homicide	7	18	64	89
Animal attack	42	23	14	79
Bus accident	7	21	18	46
Homicide	850	1,274	12,690	14,814
Percentage at school	0.8%	1.4%	0.5%	0.6%

How many anniversaries of the Columbine shooting will have to come and go before the event becomes a distant memory of only historical note? How many years will pass before Columbine is more a reminder of the Colorado state flower than of one of the state's darkest days? Unfortunately, it may take a generation or two for the images of the massacre to fade to the point that school safety no longer demands so much attention and resources.