

School shooting in Canada, wave of "copy-cat" threats in US follow Columbine tragedy

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The tragedy at Columbine High School has been followed by a rifle assault at a high school in Alberta, Canada on April 28 and a wave of "copy-cat" threats at public schools throughout the US.

In an event eerily similar to the Colorado killings, a 14-year-old Canadian boy walked into his high school with a .22 semi-automatic rifle last Wednesday and shot and killed one 17-year-old student and seriously injured another 11th grade student. The incident occurred during lunchtime at WR Myers High School in Taber, a quiet farming community of 7,200 people, about 110 miles southeast of Calgary, Alberta.

Students described the shooter, who attended the school until this year, as unpopular and often ridiculed. Jason Loeppsky, 20, whose younger brother is a former classmate of the assailant, said, "I think everybody saw the kid needed attention and love basically and that's something the kid didn't get from everybody in the community." Witnesses said the youth was wearing a long, dark trench coat similar to those worn by the two killers in Columbine when he carried out the attack.

In the aftermath of the Taber shooting commentary in the Canadian media varied from discussion about the impact of budget cuts that have eliminated assistance to emotionally-disturbed children to that fact that Alberta has the highest percentage of gun ownership in Canada.

Like their counterparts in America, the Canadian officials and opinion-makers chose not to focus on the social and political climate that contributed to the shooting. Alberta, just north of the US border state of Montana, is the center of the country's Religious Right and the right-wing Reform Party, the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament. To enthusiastic applause from the Reform party, the provincial Conservative government has carried out savage cuts in social welfare programs and reduced taxes on big

business, further intensifying the social polarization in the province. Reform politicians, including party leader Preston Manning, have promoted gun ownership as the epitome of individual freedom, while appealing to backward sentiments against gays, the poor and French-speaking Canadians in Quebec.

Although Canadian commentators have generally presented violence as an American phenomenon, bound up with the higher gun ownership in the US, such eruptions have increasingly taken place in the country. Just last month a former transit worker in Ottawa killed four coworkers at the city's main bus station.

Meanwhile in the days following the April 20 shootings at Columbine High School a wave of real and imagined violence has swept through school districts throughout the US. Reports of "copy-cat" threats came from every state in the nation, except Vermont. Overwhelmed by worried parents and perplexed by the scale of the threats, school administrators evacuated affected buildings and stepped up security and police patrols. Authorities arrested or suspended students for casual threats or for using words deemed "terroristic," banned trench coats like those worn by the young killers in Colorado, and investigated students' Internet web sites. Officials said they were particularly on alert last Friday, April 30, because it was the anniversary of Hitler's suicide in 1945.

"It's a kind of hysteria. It has a mind of its own, a face of its own. It has taken on its own personality. I've never experienced it as a professional" for 40 years, said Dale Glynn, principal of Everett High School in Lansing, Michigan, where Monday a student hurled homemade chemical bombs on a 52-acre campus.

A New Hampshire high school received a threat just hours before the vice president's wife Tipper Gore was scheduled to arrive for a discussion about the

Columbine shootings. In the nation's capital thousands of high school students were evacuated last week after an unidentified caller said a bomb had been placed in one of Washington's public high schools. An 11-year-old elementary student in a Washington suburb was arrested after classmates told a teacher he had been spreading rumors about bombs.

In Brooklyn, New York, five 13-year-old eighth graders were arrested last Wednesday and charged with conspiracy to blow up McKinley Junior High School in Bay Ridge. The boys were overheard by a fellow student discussing a bomb plot and were found to be in possession of a bomb-making manual. In Fairport, New York, near Rochester, police confiscated gunpowder, propane and bomb-making books at the home of a 12-year-old sixth grader that they said was plotting to blow up his middle school.

In Hillsborough, New Jersey, the district's schools were ordered closed Friday, after students received e-mail threats, reportedly sent by an 11-year-old student, which said: "If we think what happened in Colorado was bad, wait until you see what happens in Hillsborough Middle School on Friday." Near Philadelphia, a 16-year-old was reportedly turned in by his mother after he threatened her with a reference to the Littleton tragedy. Law enforcement officials later discovered a homemade videotape showing the teenager building what appeared to be a bomb.

In Longwood, Florida, a 13-year-old student at Rock Lake Middle School was arrested Tuesday after reportedly threatening to place a bomb at the school and kill eighth graders who picked on him. A note on a crudely drawn map included the phrase "revenge will be sweet," the *Orlando Sentinel* reported.

Pennsylvania officials reported at least 60 bomb scares or other threats at schools; dozens of schools were evacuated in the Detroit area; and at a private school in suburban Oak Lawn, outside of Chicago, a 15-year-old was arrested after telling two girls he was going to kill the principal and a student and plant bombs at the school. An ax, knives, a rifle, shotguns and 150 rounds of ammunition were reportedly found in his home.

In California, three teenage students were arrested after police raided their homes and found bomb-making ingredients, a hand grenade and a map of their high school. In Wimberley, Texas four eighth-grade students

from Danforth Junior High School were charged for allegedly plotting to blow up the school. And in Enid, Oklahoma a pipe bomb was found in a school bathroom.

Commenting on the wave of copy-cat actions and threats sweeping the nation's schools, Marice Elias, a Rutgers University psychologist who specializes in children, said, this behavior could be "a signal of how disconnected and disaffected kids feel from schools. I think kids are angry at schools ... because they feel schools have no place for them and no concern for them. The only ones who are valued are very smart or very athletic. If you're not at the top of the game, you don't matter."

One-third of teenagers who responded to a recent CNN/Time poll said they thought an incident similar to the Columbine shootings would be likely to occur in their own schools. One in five students said they knew someone their age who has talked about committing a serious act of violence at their school, such as shooting a student or setting off a bomb.

The widespread character of these incidents underscores the fact that the alienation and social tensions that have been expressed through the eruption of violence in Colorado and other states is reaching an epidemic level. While US politicians, from President Clinton on down, and the news media have focused on guns, parental responsibility and violence in movies and video games, they are only dealing with the symptoms of a much larger problem. None have addressed the underlying social and political sickness in America which contributes to such tragedies.



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