

Minnesota: Ten killed in deadliest school shooting since Columbine massacre

Kate Randall
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A high school sophomore in Minnesota went on a shooting rampage on Monday, killing nine people before taking his own life. The shootings took place on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, a poor and remote area in Northern Minnesota about 300 miles north of Minneapolis and 75 miles south of the Canadian border.

It was the deadliest school shooting in the US since April 1999, at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado, when two student gunmen shot 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves.

The tragic events began early Monday afternoon in Red Lake when Jeff Weise, 16, shot his grandfather, Daryl “Dash” Lussier, 58, a longtime member of the local police force, and his grandfather’s girlfriend at their home on the reservation. He then donned his grandfather’s police-issue gunbelt and bulletproof vest, took his police weapons, including two handguns and a shotgun, and drove to the high school in his police vehicle, arriving at about 3 p.m.

He shot dead one of two security guards at the school’s entrance, then went on a rampage through the school, shooting and killing five students and a teacher, apparently at random, before turning the gun on himself. He reportedly asked at least one student whether he believed in God before fatally wounding him. At least a dozen others were wounded.

Monday’s school killings come in the wake of a wave of violent shootings in cities across the country. On February 28, the mother and husband of US District Court Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow were killed execution-style in her North Chicago home. On March 9, Bart Ross, a former cancer patient who had unsuccessfully sued his doctors for malpractice and had appeared in the judge’s courtroom, shot himself near Milwaukee, leaving a detailed confession of the

Chicago killings.

On March 11, in Atlanta, Georgia, Brian Nichols killed four in a shooting spree that began in a courthouse, where he was appearing to be tried for rape. He later gave himself up to police. In another incident the following day, in Brookfield, Wisconsin, Terry Ratzmann killed six people and then himself at a church service.

Although the latest incident in Minnesota was particularly bloody, several such school shootings have occurred almost every year over the past decade. Since October 1997, close to 50 students, teachers and others have died in shooting incidents at schools, and dozens more have been wounded. Less than two years ago, in September 2003, another school shooting took place in Minnesota when two students were shot and killed at Rocori High School in the central part of the state.

At first glance, Monday’s events in Red Lake, Minnesota, appear to bear a resemblance to other school shootings, in that the young gunman was described by his classmates as a “weird” loner, and that circumstances led him to “snap” and “lose it” unexpectedly.

Jeff Weise had been reportedly placed in the school’s Homebound program, following a violation of school policy that authorities have not revealed. Students in this program received tutoring at home from a visiting teacher.

While authorities are still examining the incident for a possible motive, several students said that Weise held right-wing beliefs. Jeff Weise posted messages on a neo-Nazi web site under the screen names “Todesengel”—German for “angel of death”—and “NativeNazi.”

In an April 2004 posting, he wrote that authorities had questioned him about his alleged plans to “shoot up

the school on 4/20, Hitler's birthday." One student told reporters, "He's anti-social." She said Weise was viewed as "weird" by other students and described how "in pictures he draws, his people have little hats with Nazi signs on them."

It is one of the more disturbing aspects of the school shooting phenomenon that a number of the perpetrators—such as the gunmen at Columbine—have displayed a fascination with fascist and racist ideology.

While it is impossible at this point to identify an immediate motive for Monday's violent outburst, Jeff Weise clearly faced a difficult personal situation. He was living with his grandfather because his father had committed suicide four years ago and his mother lives in a nursing home, having suffered brain injuries in a car accident. Weise's relatives told reporters that he was teased a lot in school, and that they thought "he snapped."

The incident has shaken residents of the Red Lake Indian Reservation. About 5,000 people live on the reservation, almost all of them Indians of the Ojibwa tribe, commonly called Chippewa. Nearly 39 percent of families there live below the poverty line. According to 2000 US Census figures, more than four in ten remained unemployed throughout in the 1990s.

Because the reservation is so remote, the tribe has not been able to reap much profit from its casino operations, which have brought considerable revenue to other Minnesota tribes. The earnings from its Seven Clans Casinos in Red Lake, Warroad and Third River Falls have not been substantial.

As in other states, local and state governments have pushed the development of casino gambling as one of the only economic opportunities for the Native American population, reaping profits for individual casino owners and select sections of the Indian population, while doing little to advance the economic conditions of the majority of tribe members.

At Red Lake High School, the scene of Monday's deadly incident, four fifths of the school's 300 students are poor enough to meet eligibility for reduced-price lunches. The school scored second-lowest of all Minnesota high schools last year on tests for 11th-grade math and third-lowest for 10th-grade reading, according to the state Department of Education. Red Lake High also failed last year to meet federal standards for reading or math.

The Red Lake shootings took place in one of the poorest regions of the country. But similar incidents have taken place in urban areas, prosperous middle-class communities—affecting virtually all layers of society in different regions of the country. The fact that these incidents continue to occur indicates that they are an expression of profound social tensions.

In predictable fashion, however, the authorities and media have approached the Red Lake High School shootings with no effort to probe the social meaning of such tragic events, treating it as the case of a disturbed and alienated individual, with little reference to contemporary American society as a whole that has become increasingly dysfunctional and brutal.



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