Parents of Michigan high school shooter charged with manslaughter

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The parents of 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley, the school shooter who killed four students and injured seven others on Tuesday in Oxford, Michigan, were charged on Friday with four counts each of involuntary manslaughter.

Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald announced the charges against James and Jennifer Crumbley during a noon press conference, saying, "While the shooter was the one who entered the high school and pulled the trigger, there were other individuals who contributed to the events."

The prosecutor acknowledged that charges against the parents were unusual, saying: "I want to be really clear that these charges are intended to hold individuals who contributed to this tragedy accountable and also send a message that gun owners have a responsibility. When they fail to uphold that responsibility, there are serious and criminal consequences."

Later in the day, Oakland County law enforcement released a "be on the lookout" alert for the Crumbleys, who had not turned themselves in for a scheduled video arraignment with the 52nd District Court in Rochester Hills. As of Friday night a task force of US Marshals, FBI personnel and the Oakland County Sheriff's Office's Fugitive Apprehension Team were on a manhunt to locate and arrest them.

The lawyers representing the teen and his parents, Shannon Smith and Mariell Lehman, issued a statement which claimed, "The Crumbleys left town on the night of the tragic shooting for their own safety." The statement further said: "On Thursday night we contacted the Oakland County prosecutor to discuss this matter and to advise her that James and Jennifer Crumbley would be turning themselves in to be arraigned. Instead of communicating with us, the prosecutor held a press conference to announce charges."

The lawyers said the parents are returning to the area to be arraigned: "They are not fleeing from law enforcement despite recent comments in media reports." CNN reported Friday that the couple was being tracked by police via their cell phones until they had been shut off. Police had also registered an ATM withdrawal by the couple for $4,000.

The Oakland County Undersheriff Michael McCabe admitted that he had been unaware of what the charges were against the Crumbleys or when they were being announced by the county prosecutor. According to Fox 2, McCabe said that if the Sheriff's Office had "a better timeline, they would have had a better surveillance plan in place for the Crumbleys."

Nonetheless, Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard made clear the aggressive posture of law enforcement toward the parents who remain considered, as of this writing, as fugitives. Bouchard said, "If they think they're going to not come with their attorney, but going to run, we're going to remedy that." Bouchard continued: "The action of fleeing and ignoring their attorney certainly adds weight to the charges. They cannot run from their part in this tragedy."

According to police, Ethan Crumbley emerged from a bathroom at approximately 12:51 p.m. Tuesday and began shooting students in the hallway with a 9mm Sig Sauer at point blank range. He fired more than 30 rounds and had 12 more left before he was apprehended by law enforcement at about 12:56 p.m. He killed three students in the shooting spree, Tate Myre, 16, Hana St. Juliana, 14, and Madisyn Baldwin, 17. Justin Shilling, 17, died from his wounds one day later. The wounded included three male and three female students and one female teacher.

The shooter was charged with 24 counts, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism causing death.

In charging Crumbley's parents, Prosecutor McDonald outlined some key details about the lead up to the mass shooting at Oxford High School. She said that the father, James Crumbley, purchased the gun used in the shooting

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from Acme Shooting Goods in Oxford just four days prior on Friday, November 26. An Acme store employee confirmed that Ethan was present with his father at the time of the purchase.

• On that same day, Ethan posted photos of the semi-automatic weapon on social media with the description, “Just got my new beauty today,” with a heart emoji and then, “Any questions I will answer.” On Saturday, Jennifer Crumbley posted on social media, “Mom and son day testing out his new Christmas present.”

• On November 29, a teacher observed Ethan Crumbley searching for ammunition on his cell phone in class. This incident was reported to the parents by school personnel, but no response was received from the parents.

• Jennifer Crumbley then exchanged text messages with her son about this incident, one of which said, “LOL [laughing out loud]. I’m not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught.”

• The next morning, the day of the shootings, a teacher found a note on Ethan Crumbley’s desk that she photographed. It contained a drawing of a semi-automatic handgun with the words: “The thoughts won’t stop. Help me.” Another part of the note contained a drawing of a bullet with the words, “Blood everywhere.” Between the handgun and the bullet was a drawing of a person who appeared to be shot twice and bleeding. At the bottom of the worksheet, “My life is useless” and “The world is dead” appeared.

• The parents were called to the school for a meeting Tuesday morning at which James and Jennifer Crumbley were shown the drawing. The parents were told by school employees that they were required to get their son into counseling within 48 hours.

• Prosecutor McDonald then said the parents “failed to ask their son if he had his gun with him or where his gun was located and failed to search his backpack for the presence of the gun. James and Jennifer Crumbley resisted the idea of their son leaving the school at that time. Instead, James and Jennifer Crumbley left the high school without him. He was returned to the class.”

• She reported that, when the news of the active shooter at Oxford High School had been made public, Jennifer texted to her son at 1:22 p.m., “Ethan don’t do it.” At 1:37 p.m. James Crumbley called 911 and reported a gun was missing from his house and that his son may be the shooter.

During the press conference, when the prosecutor was asked how it was that Crumbley was sent back to class by school staff, she said, “I’m not going to give you a political answer. I’m not going to cover for anybody. … Of course, he shouldn’t have gone back to that classroom. Of course, he shouldn’t have. And I don’t have, um, ill feelings or negative feelings about anyone.”

When she was asked if there would be charges brought against school officials, she would not rule it out, saying only, “The investigation is ongoing.”

School districts across Michigan remained closed Friday due to what law enforcement has called “a tidal wave of copy threats” of violence that is “completely off the charts.” The number of threats is so high that the FBI is assisting local police in investigating them.

According to Michigan School Closings, there were 150 school districts and charter and parochial schools closed due to threats. WXYZ-TV published a list of closures which reached a total of 86 public, private and charter schools in Metro Detroit on Friday. On the west side of Michigan, Watervliet Public Schools, Ionia Public Schools, Chippewa Hills School District and Fruitport Community Schools closed Friday “out of an abundance of caution,” connected to the events in Oxford.

Responding to the threats, Sheriff Bouchard said at a news conference, “It is ridiculous that you’re inflaming the fears and passion of parents and teachers and the community in the midst of a real tragedy.” Prosecutor McDonald has said her office will charge offenders with a false threat of terrorism, a felony that carries a prison sentence of 20 years. Bouchard said, “If you are making threats, we’re going to find you.” In one instance, a 12-year-old said he was going to “shoot it up” when he exited a school bus.

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