

Police: Attack Planned in Detail

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LITTLETON, Colo., April 21 – After picking their way through classrooms littered with bombs, booby traps and murdered students, police investigators said today the two teenage killers who turned Columbine High School into a bloodbath may have meticulously planned and orchestrated the rampage – and friends may have known it was coming.

Fifteen people died in Tuesday's violence, including the suspects, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, making it the deadliest school shooting in American history. Police found 30 homemade bombs in and around the school in this Denver suburb. One, on a timer, went off late Tuesday, long after the shooting was over.

The fear of explosions and the complexity of the "very messy, very big crime scene," as one official put it, forced police to work painfully slowly, waiting until late in the day to remove the bodies.

The two suspects killed 12 students – eight boys, four girls – and one teacher, then apparently shot themselves in the head, police said. The bulk of the slaughter took place in the school library, where the killers, laughing, allowed some students to live and chose others to die.

Some students said the shooters appeared to aim at blacks and athletes. But police said they have no evidence specific groups were targeted.

The death toll could rise, as several of the 28 people wounded are in critical condition, said Steve Davis, a spokesman for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department. Initial estimates Tuesday night by police had put the number of dead as high as 25. Only after they scrutinized the building – room by room – did they realize the true number of victims.

Authorities said other people may have known of the plan to assault the school, noting that some material may have been pre-positioned. Jefferson County Sheriff John P. Stone said investigators had found foot-long pipe bombs, devices with timers attached to propane cylinders and smaller explosives about six to eight inches in length – all packed with nails. There were bombs inside the school as well as in cars in the parking lot, unsophisticated devices made from ingredients that could be purchased at hardware stores.

As they stormed into the school, the gunmen carried two sawed-off shotguns, a semiautomatic carbine and a pistol, according to a senior federal law enforcement official.

"This is not something done overnight. There was a lot of planning put into this," Stone said.

"I think there is evidence to suggest there were other people, at least aware of what was going on," said District Attorney David J. Thomas of the state First Judicial District.

Police on Tuesday had detained and questioned at least two students, believed to be friends of the gunmen. They were later released.

Authorities disclosed today that Klebold and Harris were arrested last January and placed on probation for breaking into an automobile. Harris had put instructions for building a bomb on his personal Web page. But friends of Klebold and Harris – the sons of middle-class professionals – said that, despite their dark interests, the youths showed little sign of being capable of an explosion of real violence.

The Klebold family issued a statement through a Denver law firm.

"We cannot begin to convey our overwhelming sense of sorrow for everyone affected by this tragedy," it said. "Our thoughts, prayers and heartfelt apologies go out to the victims, their families, friends, and the entire community."

Other unanswered questions swirled through Littleton. Many residents asked why the police handled the situation as they did – waiting to enter the school for hours even as some victims were bleeding to death. Police struggled to defend their initial response, insisting that any delays in pouring SWAT teams into the building stemmed from the utter chaos of the crime scene, the multiple jurisdictions that responded and the need to mobilize specialized units.

A "makeshift" SWAT team composed of early arriving officers penetrated the building within 20 minutes of the first panicked call to the county's 911 dispatch center. Regular SWAT teams did not enter the school building until approximately 1 p.m., an hour and a half after the shootings were first reported.

"We want to do it safely, we don't want SWAT officers shooting at SWAT officers," said Lakewood Police Sergeant George Hinkle.

There were questions too about whether the school's officials should have known that Klebold and Harris, members of a violence-obsessed white supremacist club called the Trenchcoat Mafia, were dangerous. Said parent John Abel, "There are a lot of questions that need to be answered. Would you let the Crips or the Bloods run loose in the school? No, so why was the Trenchcoat Mafia apparently allowed to exist?"

A family friend of Isaiah Shoels, a black student who was gunned down, said Shoels' sister went to school officials and told them that her brother was being racially harassed. The friend said the officials did nothing. Isaiah's father, Michael Shoels, told NBC News, "He had two strikes against him. He was black. And he was an athlete. That's not a reason to die."

The tragedy shocked not only this suburban community but the entire nation and much of the world.

President Clinton considered flying to Colorado. He said, "Parents should take this moment to ask what else they can do to shield our children from violent images and experiences that warp young perceptions and obscure the consequences of violence – to show our children by the power of our own example how to resolve conflicts peacefully."

Attorney General Janet Reno, who was on the way to Denver, said, "We've got to get guns out of the hands of young people. We've got to make sure they have the counseling, the support to help them come to grips with the anger of their life when it occurs."

As investigators moved through the school, hundreds of students from throughout the Denver area flocked to the site to lay wreaths, join arms, pray and leave achingly mournful notes of bereavement. Several churches held memorial services, and people of all ages formed long lines outside of blood banks, hoping to do what little they could to help the victims.

For the Littleton community the agony of the day was heightened by uncertainty. The names of the dead were not announced, and students, parents and school officials relied on rumor and witness accounts to find out who did not escape from the bloodbath.

"We don't even know who's dead yet, so we don't know about funerals," said Kendra Curry, a senior who survived the assault in a group of 60 students crammed into the choir room office.

Her boyfriend, Wade Frank, who saw two students shot outside the school, spoke in a monotone as he said that he doubted he would ever go back to Columbine High. He had only 19 more days of class before graduation. "It's kind of disappointing. There's just a mess over there that they have to get cleaned up," he said.

He and others struggled to come to terms with what happened. Parents said many of the teenagers were still numb.

"When they're describing it to me, they're almost like they're describing a movie they just got done watching," said Bill Curry, Kendra's father. "It's almost like it didn't happen, it's not real."

Columbine junior Crystal Woodman described the two gunmen almost joyfully gunning down victims in the library as she cowered beneath a desk and prayed to be spared.

"They'd shoot people and yell," said Woodman, who escaped from the library when the gunmen left momentarily to reload their weapons. "They were excited."

The community learned of individual acts of heroism as the nightmare unfolded. They talked of business teacher Dave Sanders, mortally shot, the students around him trying to stanch the bleeding with their shirts. They comforted him with pictures of his family from his wallet.

The most memorable moment may have been the rescue of a student, severely wounded, his arms mangled, hanging from the library window.

Identified by authorities only as "Rich," he held up a sign saying, "Help. I'm bleeding to death." Television footage showed him plummeting head first into the arms of SWAT team members who had edged up to the building.

"If he'd been in there much longer," said Hinkle, "he would have bled out."