

How Columbine Spawned Dozens of Copycats

An obsession with the 1999 school shooting still fuels violent plots and attacks.

MARK FOLLMAN AND BECCA ANDREWS

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On April 20, 1999, two teenage boys fatally shot 13 people and injured 24 others at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. A *Mother Jones* investigation shows that the nation's deadliest high school shooting has inspired at least 74 plots or attacks across 30 states. To gauge just how deep the problem goes, we examined scores of news reports and public documents and interviewed multiple law enforcement officials.

The data we have compiled reveals some disturbing patterns. In at least 14 cases, the Columbine copycats aimed to attack on the anniversary of the original massacre. Individuals in 13 cases indicated that their goal was to outdo the Columbine body count. In at least 10 cases, the suspects and attackers referred to the pair who struck in 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as heroes, idols, martyrs, or God. And at least three plotters made pilgrimages to Columbine High School from other states.



How the media inspires copycat mass shooters—and six ways it could stop doing so

As one longtime security specialist explains in our investigation into a growing national effort to stop mass shooters before they strike, “It’s a cult following unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.”

Mother Jones is not publishing our research on Columbine copycats beyond the numbers and analysis below. Though much of the case-level details we’ve collected are publicly available, we have chosen not to make them easily accessible in one place, where they might potentially be used by would-be copycats searching for inspiration or information. For more of our reporting on the copycat problem stemming from Columbine and other high-profile attacks, read the main investigation [here](#).

The Columbine Effect

KNOWN COPYCAT CASES

74

53

PLOTS OR THREATS THWARTED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT

21

ATTACKS

THE OVERALL TOLL

89
KILLED

126
WOUNDED

9

SHOOTER SUICIDES

95%

OF THE PLOTTERS WERE MALE. ONLY 4 CASES INVOLVED WOMEN ACTING ALONE—NONE RESULTED IN ATTACKS.

THEIR AVERAGE AGE WAS

17

13

CASES INVOLVED PLOTTERS WHO HOPED TO SURPASS THE CARNAGE OF THE COLUMBINE SHOOTING. PLOTTERS IN AT LEAST 10 CASES CITED THE COLUMBINE SHOOTERS AS HEROES, IDOLS, MARTYRS, OR GOD.

3

PLOTTERS MADE PILGRIMAGES TO COLUMBINE WHILE PLANNING ATTACKS. 2 OF THEM LATER LAUNCHED ATTACKS. THE THIRD PLOT WAS THWARTED.

4 OUT OF 5 WERE WHITE (IN CASES IN WHICH RACE OR ETHNICITY WAS KNOWN).



53%
OF THE CASES INVOLVED GUNS.

18%
INVOLVED BOMBS OR EXPLOSIVES.

14%
INVOLVED KNIVES.

14

ATTACKS WERE PLANNED FOR AN ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLUMBINE ATTACK. 12 OF THESE PLOTS WERE THWARTED. 2 WERE ULTIMATELY CARRIED OUT ON DIFFERENT DATES.