

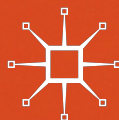


# How to Stop School Rampage Killing

Lessons  
from Averted  
Mass Shootings  
and Bombings



**Eric Madfis**



# How to Stop School Rampage Killing

*“How to Stop School Rampage Killing makes a major contribution to our understanding of how school violence schemes are developed and provides insight about core recurring themes in the planning of rampage violence across a range of cases. This book provides a rich source for anyone interested in how school violence in general and rampage school violence in particular unfolds. Dr. Madfis is masterful at telling the story through the words of his subjects while remaining analytical and never losing sight of the key issues facing schools.”*

—Stuart Henry, *Professor of Criminal Justice and Director of the School of Public Affairs at San Diego State University, USA*

*“On the subject of assessing and preventing acts of extreme violence in schools, this book sets the standard as the forefront of rigorous knowledge. In a topic that often abounds with hype and emotion, no other volume presents such a steadfastly researched, sober discussion of what effectively prevents and thwarts school rampages. This book is essential reading for anyone with the desire to understand evenhanded social scientific perspectives on the risks and prevention of school rampages.”*

—Glenn W. Muschert, *Professor of Sociology at Khalifa University of Science and Technology, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates*

*“How can you stop a student armed with firearms, explosives, and murderous intent—before he ever sets foot on campus? Madfis skillfully answers this question and more, based on his interviews with principals, teachers, counselors, and police officers who have successfully prevented nearly a dozen school shootings since Columbine.”*

—Adam Lankford, *Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama, USA*

*“This important book by Dr. Madfis provides an updated and in-depth perspective on school shootings and ways to prevent them.”*

—Atte Oksanen, *Professor of Social Psychology, Tampere University, Finland*

Eric Madfis

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Lessons from Averted Mass Shootings  
and Bombings

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*For Lucille Rose and Violet Ember—*

*You deserve to live in a world with safe and supportive schools and in a society that has the courage to tackle difficult issues and make real change.*

## Foreword by Jack Levin

In response to high-profile rampage school shootings, Professor Madfis offers a promising research-based alternative to the fear-based approach promoted by many politicians, media pundits, and misinformed professionals. In this groundbreaking work, he examines characteristics of school shootings and bombings that have somehow been averted. Professor Madfis asks, “What does it take to *prevent* a tragic school rampage?” Readers may be surprised to find little evidence for increasing security measures on school and college campuses. Instead, his answer shines a bright light on effective alternative practices that deserve to have a prominent place in the literature of public criminology.

Those who seek to reduce school rampages tend to focus on protecting potential victims—the locked doors and metal detectors, enlarged presence of resource officers, security cameras, student drills, harsh zero-tolerance policies, and guns for teachers. Some commentators have suggested assigning each student a hockey puck which they might aim at a menacing intruder. What is too often missing in this conventional analysis are the short- and long-term variables that come into play before a killer decides to plant a bomb or open fire—planning and

preparation, encouragement from peers, outsider status, failures in life, collection of weapons, internet behavior, and victimization at the hands of other students.

Efforts to prevent school violence need to begin when students are troubled and long before they become troublesome. There are many youngsters who are being chronically bullied and harassed by their schoolmates on a regular basis. These are the students who tend to remain socially isolated and unable to cope with the many frustrations they face every day in the classroom, in the cafeteria, and on the playground. After they graduate, such troubled young people have only the most depressing and angry memories of their years in school. They continue to suffer losses at home, in personal relationships, and at work; they are reduced to feeling worthless on the Internet, and they lack any significant places to turn for effective guidance and assistance. A few of them seek some semblance of personal justice by inflicting multiple casualties at home or in a public setting.

Once youngsters turn from troubled to troublesome, they are—for the first time, possibly able to locate individuals in their lives who are willing to intervene to lend a helping hand. Sadly, however, the motivation for intervention may arise not out of any sense of altruism but out of fear. The troublesome individual may now be regarded as a threat to the safety of the public, someone who is simply too dangerous to be ignored. Still, even the most threatening youngster may remain without a source of companionship or advice. Or, it may simply be too late to avert a tragedy.

Thanks to the code of silence existing in schools across the country as described by Professor Madfis, there are numerous youngsters whose preparations for violence are known but totally ignored by their peers. Madfis emphasizes the importance of having credible authority figures at school and at home to whom a student is willing to go with information about a likely catastrophe. He also recognizes that a school climate based on retribution and fear only encourages bystander apathy and supports

the persistence of a code of silence. This outstanding book provides the ingredients necessary for transforming this code of silence into a culture of caring and peace.

Boston, MA, USA

Jack Levin, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus and  
Co-Director of the Brudnick  
Center on Violence and Conflict  
at Northeastern University



## Foreword by Kristina Anderson

My awakening to the importance of school safety and violence prevention occurred on the college campus of Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. On a cold Monday morning, alarming bangs—gunfire—came into the hallway and classrooms of Norris Hall, the engineering building I sat in. Within seconds, a student, aiming two handguns, barged into my classroom. For the following eleven minutes, my emotions progressed from confusion, shock, to extreme fear and quiet panic. Thirty-two members of our community lost their lives that day; my classmates and I were severely injured, physically and psychologically impacted. Joining a small, and growing, group of mass shooting survivors who have channeled their tragic experiences into helping others, I formed a school safety nonprofit, The Koshka Foundation, to help communities prevent similar events, and also recover over the long-term.

I first met Dr. Eric Madfis, trying to understand the scope of school safety research and literature, as his work is uniquely focused on averted attacks. A significant amount of energy and time is focused on studying the intimate details of a rampage killing, or mass shooting, after a tragedy has already happened, and yet Dr. Madfis' research offers an

important proposition and incredible opportunity: we may be able to more efficiently glean information and better understandings from the attacks that were in the earlier planning and preparation stages.

Media coverage and government after-action reports are sources that often singularly focus on the final acts and terrible actions of attackers. I appreciate Dr. Madfis' discussion, in this text and in his other research, on the importance of the role of media portrayal in potentially glorifying the attackers themselves. Media coverage rarely includes accurate analysis of the preceding months, or even years, before an attack. A fuller background portrait of how school mass shooting plots progress or are stopped can significantly aid prevention efforts.

By adding to this missing knowledge of averted attacks, Madfis broadens our view of the possibility of overall prevention by providing us insight into effective interventions. Schools can reach out sooner to students before punitive measures are the only option, ask more insightful questions about their behaviors, and provide resources and assistance that seek to keep the student in school. The interviews that this text shares with the reader, words from principals and others who helped to intervene, are a human perspective we rarely see in contrast to graphic and re-traumatizing reports of mass killings. I hope the case studies serve as learning opportunities for us all to be reminded of our self-efficacy and community capacity to work together to prevent school violence. I am deeply grateful for Madfis' work and dedication, as one of the early pioneers in understanding and vocalizing the importance of learning from the near-misses, and for his continued research in mass shootings and school violence prevention.

As Madfis shows us through his discussion of the cultural impact of zero-tolerance policies and physical security measures, school policies are often questioned or scrutinized, especially in the wake of recent violence. In our experience, Virginia Tech endured numerous and long-lasting investigations and inquiries from families of victims, lawyers, the media, and many other entities. It is important to remember that rampage shootings are still very rare, and, on the daily level, maintaining safety within a school is a multi-layered and collaborative process. The tasks sometimes needed to help ensure an issue does not

escalate—managing a disruptive student or parent, responding to writing that has frightened a teacher, deciphering a social media post—all require thoughtful analysis, nuance, and a researched method and process.

Shortly after the Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting in 2013, the state of Virginia became the first to legislatively mandate, and fund, training for the creation of multi-disciplinary behavioral threat assessment and management teams within K-12 and colleges and universities. These teams (made up of members of counseling, law enforcement, student affairs, legal, and other areas) meet on a weekly basis, and address potentially concerning behavior by providing resources, outreach, and support before an individual may cause harm to themselves, or others. Madfis stresses the need for continued research in this area of violence prevention, as school districts across the nation use different risk assessment rubrics and instruments and are not always effectively training in threat management. While it may be tempting to rely heavily on one solution or surveillance technology, Madfis reminds us that assessing potentially violent behavior is an “imminently complicated issue.” We must always remember to consider how the actions we take to provide safety, with good intentions, also impact a student’s level of connection and perceived support from the school.

Our personal thresholds for what constitutes “dangerous behavior” or “threatening” varies based on culture, previous experiences, and many other factors. We do not want to overreact, and yet the fear of the *possibility* of a school rampage, felt heavily through graphic media coverage and other means, has allowed for the existence of unbalanced and punitive policies. Dr. Madfis’ research informs our misunderstandings about the reality of prevention—that multiple variables, decisions by various stakeholders, and proactive conversations helped attacks be stopped. Therefore, we must also be open to the understanding that it may be a counselor, a parent, or a teacher who plays a crucial role in either bringing information forward or intervening when someone is speaking about a violent attack or suicide. Madfis reminds us that each individual within the school is important for ensuring safety and helping to build a school climate that values mutual respect, empathy, and kindness.

As we look toward a future that continues to increase focus on positive school climates and safety, the hope is that we have more teachers, principals, school law enforcement, and parents working together to evaluate and implement policies that benefit the well-being of all students. While it is difficult to fully measure what we have averted, Madfis' gift to us, through this text, serves as an inspiration and guidebook that prevention is not only possible, it is a critical conversation for each school to address the issues that strict security practices fail to avert. To the individual reader, may you share the lessons learned throughout the following chapters directly with your communities, so this knowledge may be sustained. During our recovery in Virginia, the university motto of *Ut Prosim*, "That I May Serve," became an important marker of our strength and resilience. Thank you to those that dedicate their time to serving and educating our communities with the ultimate goal of peace, words will never adequately describe our gratitude.

Seattle, WA, USA

Kristina Anderson  
Virginia Tech Shooting Survivor,  
School Safety Advocate, and  
Executive Director of the Koshka  
Foundation for Safe Schools

## Preface

My interest in school rampage attacks and the reaction to them began back when I was still in high school. I directly experienced the changing school climate that arose in the wake of one of our nation's most publicized and feared mass shootings. The tragedy at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado occurred on April 20, 1999 which was during my junior year of high school. Afterwards, students, parents, and school staff were genuinely terrified that these types of massacres were going to start happening with great frequency in schools everywhere around the country (Gallup, 1999; Madfis, 2016). Certainly, there were numerous copycat attempts and attacks and the number of mass school shooting incidents did increase in the coming years (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Follman et al., 2019; Langman, 2018), but in many respects, the United States underwent a full-scale moral panic, where the subjective fervor and fear of school shootings went far beyond the objective reality or frequency of the problem. As a result, schools reacted with a series of "get tough" on crime disciplinary policies, mechanisms to secure and surveil the school and those in it, and a zealous desire to locate broad warning signs among potential school shooters. Part of this entailed propagating false stereotypes that cast

the Gothic subculture (and many other vaguely associated cultural phenomenon such as black trench coats or “alternative” music) as disproportionately if not exclusively made up of future school shooters (Griffiths, 2010; Merelli, 2018; Muzzatti, 2004; Ogle et al., 2003).

In this post-Columbine environment, I was a teenage punk rocker from Framingham, Massachusetts with brightly dyed spikey hair who wore steel-toed boots and spikes, patches, and metal studs on his jacket. I hung out with punks, goths, anti-racist skinheads, hardcore kids, metal heads, and other kids generally seen as misfits and outcasts. Roughly a year after the Columbine attack, during the Spring of 2000, I was in my senior year of high school. School officials were alerted to some graffiti that had been written on a stall in one of the boy’s bathrooms. The graffiti, we were told, stated something to the effect of “Columbine could happen here” on a particular date during the upcoming month. This fact was then widely circulated around the school community—and administrators, teachers, and parents all discussed what should be done. Ultimately, school officials decided to proceed with the school day as normal. However, the vast majority of students still chose not to attend school on that day. During my various classes throughout that day, I noticed that only about a quarter of my classmates were in attendance.

Why did I go to school that day? Just like everyone else, I had read about the incident at Columbine High School and heard various pundits proclaim that the shooters had been the victims of bullying who had mainly targeted those people who had victimized them. As I saw it, I had nothing to fear for I had never bullied any of my peers. In retrospect, I confess that this wasn’t really the best rationale for feeling secure, as I know now that, while rampage school shooters may often target certain people, they also frequently seek to attack symbolic targets and/or merely go for volume in pursuit of killing as many random people as possible (Lankford, 2016; Madfis, 2017).

After my last class of the school day, I started walking to my locker with one of my good friends at the time. He was a skate punk who looked and dressed not unlike I did at the time. He was not the best student—or even the least truant student—but he was a genuinely nice kid with a good sense of humor. He was certainly not a violent person

and he had no history of such behavior either in or out of school. As he and I walked down the hallway toward our lockers to pack up for the day, my friend turned to me and said the following: “Boy, today sure was disappointing!”

Unfortunately, he made this comment as we turned around a corner, and at that same exact moment, one of the Vice Principals (the one most infamous in the school for being tough with student discipline) turned this corner from the other direction and overheard his comment. He was then sent immediately to her office and subsequently given a lengthy out-of-school suspension. As a result of this incident, he was made to feel wholly unwelcome at the school and passively if not actively discouraged from coming back. He ultimately did then drop out of high school, never to return. That weird day when nearly everyone stayed home was his last day of high school.

Did he write the graffiti on the bathroom wall? I am certain that he did not. Did he mean by his comment that he thought the day was disappointing because there weren’t enough people there on that day for him to kill? Of course not. Was he perhaps making a dark sarcastic comment about the disappointing lack of excitement on a day that so many people had hyped up and expressed fear about? Maybe—and, to be perfectly honest, that was how I took his meaning at the time. We were cynical teenagers who thought we were just talking to one another. But it is equally plausible that he was just expressing annoyance at a complete waste of a school day in which we had to sit through classes where teachers couldn’t teach anything as a result of the unusually high number of absences. Regardless of the many ways that one could interpret that comment, the school administration decided to interpret his comment as a threat which needed to be harshly punished.

As this book will discuss, this was during the height of a new era of zero tolerance in school disciplinary policy, where strict punishments are uniformly applied to everyone, regardless of individual intentions, contexts, or circumstances. In the wake of Columbine, the United States experienced a serious panic and overreaction in schools over the fear of horrifying yet rare instances of school shootings. This ultimately resulted in a dramatic expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline and in the adoption of extreme penalties and increased justice system

involvement for what would previously have been perceived as minor infractions. This experience with my friend in high school helped to spark my initial interest in school shootings—and particularly the significance of understanding more reasonable, measured, and effective ways to respond to and prevent the genuine risks of mass shootings, bombings, and other rampage attacks in American schools. It is my hope that today, through rigorous empirical research like that of mine and many others, we can start to implement the types of policies and procedures which have proven to effectively thwart these potentially tragic incidents—without unduly harsh discipline, without stereotyping kids who happen to look different, and without sacrificing students’ rights or positive pedagogical environments in the process. School rampage killings are profoundly disturbing and destabilizing events, rare though they may be. We must resist the impulse to view these tragedies as part of “the new normal” for society (Edwards, 2018; Graham, 2018) and instead acknowledge the fact that far more can be done to prevent and stop these attacks and to lessen their deadly impact. This book will provide numerous recommendations about just how this could be done, as it is a far more achievable goal than many believe it to be. That said, much work needs to be done to transform sound evidence-based policy into real change on the ground, and it will take far more advocacy and activism from the public and far more political will from lawmakers to accomplish what should be an obvious common goal of all Americans—no more rampage killings in our schools.

Over the last few decades, school rampage attacks have taken multiple lives and caused widespread fear throughout the United States. During this same period, however, dozens of potential incidents have also been averted wherein student plots to kill multiple peers and faculty members came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted. This book investigates how such successes occurred, utilizing data gleaned from in-depth interviews conducted with 32 school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) who were directly involved in assessing and preventing what many perceived to be potential rampages at eleven public middle and high schools across the Northeastern United States. A multi-tiered method was employed to examine the process by which threats of



rampage violence are assessed by school and police officials as well as how previous school rampage plots have been averted. Interview data about the eleven averted incidents were triangulated via news media reporting and legal documentation (such as court transcripts, arrest reports, and legal briefs) in order to verify concordance with and inconsistencies among the interviewees' accounts of their threat assessments and crime prevention practices.

The resultant data provide insight into the institutional cultures and practices that were involved in determining the magnitude of school rampage risks and ultimately enabling various potential attacks to be foiled. In addition, the findings also serve as a means through which to better understand contemporary perspectives on the fear, risk assessment, and criminalization of American youth. The way in which school authorities have reacted to the school rampage phenomenon reveals a great deal about our current justice mindset, which often views the identification, surveillance, and management of potentially dangerous individuals as the best approach to what is understood as the inevitability of crime. Subsequently, this research reveals the significant shortcomings and sometimes harmful consequences of contemporary risk assessment, violence prevention, and punishment practices prominent in American schools. By examining averted incidents, this work addresses problematic gaps in school violence scholarship and reveals both practical implications for the assessment and prevention of school violence and significant theoretical insight regarding the causes and consequences of enhanced school discipline and security.

Broadly, this book explores perceptions of and reactions to threats of rampage school violence. In Chapter 1, readers will be introduced to the phenomenon of school rampage killing, the literature on the causes and reactions to prior incidents of school violence, and the field of violence risk assessment. This chapter will also situate the American reaction to school rampage in the broader social context of contemporary school disciplinary and security practices and will provide theoretical background for explaining recent developments through insights from the sociology of risk, actuarial justice, and neoliberal penalty. The second chapter illustrates how school and police officials engage in violence risk assessment by examining the forms of evidence present when claims

are made that a school rampage threat has been averted. After categorizing the forms of risk assessment that have been utilized, chapter three addresses the extent to which and under what circumstances officials express confidence in their use of risk assessment. The fourth chapter covers the manner in which student threats of rampage violence have come to the attention of parents, police, and school authorities in order to be averted and considers the extent to which students have actually broken through a code of silence which discourages them from informing on their peers. In addition, as many contemporary school violence prevention practices (such as enhanced discipline and increased security and surveillance) were not found to play a decisive role in preventing these incidents, alternative approaches from restorative justice are suggested to improve school climates, and accordingly, to increase positive bystander behavior on the part of students. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings as a whole along with the policy and theoretical implications that may be drawn from them, provides a review of emerging policies and scholarship on new ways to prevent rampage killing, and suggests areas for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a methodological appendix and addresses the research design of the project as well as the benefits and potential limitations of the study's methods.

Tacoma, WA, USA

Eric Madfis

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## About the Author

**Eric Madfis, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Washington Tacoma, where his research focuses on the causes and prevention of school violence, hate crime, and mass murder. As a nationally recognized expert on mass/school shootings, he has spoken to audiences across the country and around the world about his research, including at the United States Congressional Briefing on School Safety and Violence Prevention and to the Washington State Legislature's House Education Committee. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Northeastern University in Boston, where he was a Research Associate at the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict. His work has been published in *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, *Critical Criminology*, *Homicide Studies*, *The Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *The Journal of Hate Studies*, *The Journal of Psychology*, *Men and Masculinities*, *Social Justice*, *The Social Science Journal*, *Sociological Focus*, *Violence and Gender*, *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice*, and in numerous edited volumes. He served as co-editor (along with Dr. Adam Lankford) of the February 2018 special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* on "Media Coverage of Mass Killers." Dr. Madfis has been interviewed by and/or has had his research featured on *ABC News*,

*The BBC, MSNBC, NBC, NPR, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, The Boston Globe, The Los Angeles Times, Money Magazine, The New York Times, Newsweek, Politico, The Seattle Times, Slate, Time, Vice, The Washington Post, and many other local, national, and international outlets. In 2018, he won UW Tacoma's Distinguished Research Award.*