

Rampage Shootings, School Structures, and Community Organization

Alan Schoenfeld[†]

Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings. Katherine S. Newman* et al.: Basic Books, 2004. Pp. 399. \$27.50.

I. INTRODUCTION

When the United States was struck with a rash of rampage school shootings in 1998 and 1999—eleven shootings that left dozens of students and teachers dead—the educational and legal establishments were unable to offer a coherent explanation for what had happened or formulate a decisive response. Invariably, pundits and policymakers focused on the shooters and what had gone wrong with them: What personality defects, family situations, or miscreant music had led them to commit these heinous acts?¹ Political conservatives called for moral education and the return of prayer in school, and political liberals, most legal academics among them, worried that the shootings would lead to a militarization of schools and the rollback of students' free expression rights.²

[†] Yale Law School, J.D. expected 2006. University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education, M.Phil. 2003. Yale College, B.A. 2002. The author wishes to thank Dan Korobkin for helpful comments and editing.

* Professor of Sociology and International Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University.

1. See KATHERINE S. NEWMAN ET AL., *RAMPAGE: THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS* 20 (2004) (describing how coverage of school shootings in the “popular press tends to take the lens down to the pathologies of the individuals or pulls it all the way back to global laments about the way our society is changing, with worries about increasing rootlessness, family disintegration, or cultural decline as underlying narratives”); see also Francis X. Clines, *In a Bitter Culture War, an Ardent Call to Arms*, N.Y. TIMES, June 17, 1999, at A26 (describing how congressional debate following the Columbine shooting “essentially broke the complex issue of school shootings into two disparate areas for blame-saying: the entertainment industry’s purveying of melodramatized violence and easy access to guns”); Dave Cullen, *The Depressive and the Psychopath: At Last We Know Why the Columbine Killers Did It*, SLATE, Apr. 20, 2004, at <http://slate.msn.com/id/2099203/>. The vast majority of writing on school shootings conforms to this polarized spectrum, discussing either the individual shooters’ mental and emotional dysfunction, or the dysfunction of society at large. The school shooting communities themselves, no doubt in part due to journalists’ and scholars’ sensitivity to the communities’ fragile post-traumatic states, have largely escaped scrutiny.

2. Following the most famous of the school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit ruled that Columbine school personnel could regulate school-sponsored speech that discriminated based on viewpoint. See *Fleming v. Jefferson County Sch. Dist. R-1*, 298 F.3d 918 (10th Cir. 2002). Of the six articles in Westlaw’s “Journals and Law Reviews (JLR)” database that have “school shooting*” in their title, two deal with this issue. See Juliet Dee, *Basketball Diaries, Natural Born Killers, and School Shootings: Should There Be Limits on*

Princeton sociologist and urban studies professor Katherine S. Newman and four of her sociology doctoral students from Harvard have provided a much-needed corrective to this atomized analysis of the rampage shooting trend. Deploying the full theoretical arsenal of organizational sociology, Newman³ elaborates an analytical model that limns the social roots of school shootings and holds far more explanatory power than the facile psychological or cultural explanations proffered by politicians and educators. In addition, the author offers an astute diagnosis of the organizational ills that afflict schools and adumbrate the few warning signs that might enable school authorities to identify potential rampage shootings.

This Book Note proceeds as follows. I first describe the highly particular definition of rampage school shootings that Newman elaborates and her methodology. I then move on to a discussion of Newman's analysis of two communities that witnessed school shootings in the late 1990s. As it is from this qualitative analysis that Newman deduces her explanatory and predictive model of school shooters, I concentrate on some of the features she identifies in communities that mark Newman's research, and therefore her theory, as unique. I then discuss her model in Part IV. Finally, I critique Newman's proposed remedies, which comprise a weak response to her strong analytical framework and model.

II. DEFINITIONS, DATA SETS, AND METHODOLOGY

Though school shootings dominate the public discourse on violence in schools, they represent only a tiny fraction of the incidents of violence in the nation's schools. Newman's choice to address this one particular strain of the school violence virus imposed upon her an obligation to offer up both a definition and rationale for her research that would validate her undertaking in the eyes of professional educators and education policymakers. Newman frontally attacks the preliminary problem of defining rampage shootings specifically and discretely, not only in order to limit the size of her data set, but also to distinguish the shootings she studies from other sorts of school violence,

Speech Which Triggers Copycat Violence?, 77 DENV. U. L. REV. 713 (2000); Katie Hammett, *School Shootings, Ceramic Tiles, and Hazelwood: The Continuing Lessons of the Columbine Tragedy*, 55 ALA. L. REV. 393 (2004). The other four deal with tort liability for video games that might inspire violent behavior, see Scott Whittier, *School Shootings: Are Video Game Manufacturers Doomed to Tort Liability?*, 17 ENT. & SPORTS LAW. 11 (2000), schools' sovereign immunity in liability suits stemming from school shootings, see Tracey B. Harding, *Fatal School Shootings, Liability, and Sovereign Immunity: Where Should the Line Be Drawn?*, 30 J.L. & EDUC. 162 (2001), and the appropriateness of transferring juvenile defendants to adult criminal courts, see Lynn A. Foster, Note, *School Shootings and the Over-Reliance upon Age in Choosing Criminal or Juvenile Court*, 24 VT. L. REV. 537 (2000); Daniel E. Traver, Comment, *The Wrong Answer to a Serious Problem: A Story of School Shootings, Politics, and Automatic Transfer*, 31 LOY. U. CHI. L.J. 281 (2000).

3. For the sake of clarity, I will refer only to Katherine S. Newman whenever I refer to the author(s) of the book.

particularly the somewhat less spectacular episodes of gun violence in urban schools. As she defines them, rampage shootings must

- take place on a school-related public stage before an audience;
- involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot simply for their symbolic significance or at random; and
- involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the school.⁴

This highly refined definition limits her data set to twenty-five incidents of school violence between 1974 and 2001. It also neatly shifts the focus of discussion from the individual shooter and the damage he wrought to the communities at large and the symbolic role played by the shooting in exposing and reconfiguring the social networks that predominate there. The emphasis Newman places on this latter concern is evident as she refines her definition of school shootings. The shootings, she contends, are

defined by the fact that they involve attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random. The shooters have a specific target to begin with, but they let loose with a fusillade that hits others, and it is not unusual for the perpetrator to be unaware of who has been shot until long after the fact. These explosions are attacks on whole institutions—schools, teenage pecking orders, or communities. Shooters choose schools as the site for a rampage because they are the heart and soul of public life in small towns.⁵

Here is where Newman's acumen as a sociologist⁶ comes into play and performs a vital function: Rather than succumbing to the facile explanations for school shootings that posit that a student "just snapped" and shot up a school for the sake of exorcising some violent demon, Newman places the school at the center of her inquiry and offers a number of plausible theories about the symbolic functions of school-based violence.

In addition to assessing the social factors that motivate school shooters and the community-level causes and effects of the rampages, Newman "invoke[s] a sociological perspective to understand why no one knew that these youths were having serious problems."⁷ Newman plumbs the literature of the burgeoning field of organizational theory to diagnose the features of the culture and social structure of American public schools that

lead[] to information loss, which in turn obscures the pain and anger inside some students—emotions that, in rare cases, boil over into rampage shootings. The question is not how *individuals* could have missed the warning signs, but rather how the organization of public schools prevents them from recognizing and processing the information correctly.⁸

This is perhaps the most astute and innovative section of the book. Newman

4. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 50.

5. *Id.* at 115.

6. Newman was actually trained as an anthropologist, but she is a professor of sociology at Princeton.

7. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 79.

8. *Id.*

assiduously details the connections between organizational features of schools and the hallmark cultural attributes of their surrounding communities, providing a model not only of organizational, educational, and cultural sociology, but also of the frequently neglected nexus formed by these three strands of the discipline.

The strength of Newman's analysis derives largely from her comprehensive study methodology, which develops an explanatory model for school shootings on the basis of a qualitative, in-depth analysis of two rampage school shootings: the 1997 shooting at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, in which fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal shot into a school prayer group, and the 1998 shooting at Westside Middle School near Jonesboro, Arkansas, by eleven-year-old Andrew Golden and thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson. Newman conducted scores of interviews with the shooters, their families, school authorities, and community members to develop a nuanced understanding of the community dynamics before and after the shootings, as well as the manner in which the community's schools functioned as arbiters of youth culture and development.⁹ Based on these observations, she develops a model to explain and perhaps predict rampage school shootings, which she then tests against the entire data set of shootings encompassed by the definition discussed above.

III. SOCIAL FEATURES OF COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS

Newman undertakes an extensive qualitative analysis of the Heath and Westside school communities as a means of describing the social contexts that are prone to give rise to school shootings. Her model of school shooters emerges indirectly from this discussion, as the key social characteristics of the communities find their corollary personality traits in her model.¹⁰ Before

9. In the book, Newman does not indicate why she chose these two schools, nor does she explain why she chose not to focus on Columbine, by far the most famous of the school shootings. In an e-mail, she explained that she chose not to concentrate on Columbine in part because there are still many active lawsuits emerging from that rampage, which made affected parties unwilling or unable to discuss the incident. Her choice of Heath and Westside was dictated in part by the mandates of her funding grant and in part by her own scholarly concerns:

[T]his book began as part of a National Academy of Sciences project which was, in turn, mandated by the 1999 extension of the Missing, Runaway and Exploited Children's Act. One section of that legislation called for a set of community studies which was the responsibility of the Dep[artmen]t of Education (which in turn sent the project to the NAS). The resources available permitted only about 6 case studies in total. When the entire research group at NAS (of which I was a part) looked at the cases that had taken place, we decided to try for some level of regional dispersion. So one group took Edinboro, Pennsylvania; one took the last school shooting in Chicago; one worked on a 1992 (?) case in New York. I really wanted to focus on some of the southern cases because I had done no fieldwork in the south and knew that there was a public view (before Columbine) that a "southern culture of violence" was involved. That's how I came to select Heath, Kentucky and Westside, Arkansas.

E-mail from Katherine S. Newman to author (Aug. 31, 2004, 15:32:57 EST) (on file with author).

10. For example, her discussion of these communities' pervasive culture of masculinity is meant to

moving on to a discussion of Newman's explanatory and predictive model of school shootings, then, it is important to understand the elements of school shooting communities and schools that are manifest in Newman's model. Though this review of her analytical innovations is far from exhaustive, it highlights three areas of discussion that are essential to understanding the model discussed in Part IV.

A. *Culture of Masculinity*

All of the shooters in Newman's data set are male, and many if not most of their victims are female. Based on this simple demographic fact, one could intuit that gender dynamics play a strong role in explaining school shootings. Newman's research corroborates this intuition by describing the manifold ways in which masculinity and threats of effeminization motivate school shooters. Most of the shooters she studies were teased in gender-specific terms—called “faggot” or “pussy”—and several exhibited evidence of an overzealous interest in stereotypically male behavior or pastimes. Many of the boys were recently rejected by girls who often became the target of their rampages.

Given the paucity of alternative versions of masculinity in small Bible Belt towns, young men whose masculinity is questioned or threatened resort to the most conventional of masculine scripts. Embracing sociologist Erving Goffman's interpretation of “social interaction as a series of pressured performances, each with a specific meaning intended for a special audience,”¹¹ Newman comprehends school shootings as demonstrations of the shooters' “anger with an entire social system that had rejected them.”¹² The shootings provide “a way for the boys to redefine their identities and assert their masculinity on the community's most public stage.”¹³ In the rare shootings where the boys seem to have chosen their victims through some deliberation, they often targeted those peers who functioned as the arbiters of the school's social status system and, in particular, the school's embraced codes of masculinity. For example, the shooters at Columbine seem to have targeted a number of athletes and “preps,” who were generally believed to be the most desirable boys in school.¹⁴

provide a context for readers to understand the “violent cultural scripts” prong of her model.

11. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 130.

12. *Id.* at 152.

13. *Id.* at 127.

14. See Marc Obmascik, *Healing Begins: Colorado, World Mourn Deaths at Columbine High*, DENVER POST, Apr. 22, 1999, at A1 (“Witnesses said the two laughing gunmen specifically targeted prep athletes and a black youth. Several students recalled earlier tension between the gunmen and athletes.”).

B. *School System Dysfunction*

Schools are often described as pathological organisms, afflicted by a vast array of maladies that prevent them from performing their intended functions.¹⁵ A good deal of this diagnosis is attributable to American incertitude about what schools are actually meant to do. This incertitude, in turn, renders schools unwieldy and woefully inept institutions whose various parts almost always work at the cross-purposes. For example, while the desire to ensure the continuity of students' behavior management might motivate school personnel to share a student's file with his future teachers, the desire to provide students with a "clean slate" at the beginning of each year leads to school policies that prevent such sharing because "[a]ssuming a student will do poorly or cause trouble in the classroom because of how he or she has done in other schools or with other teachers unfairly handicaps the student before class even begins."¹⁶

Newman refers to this commitment to students' privacy and the desire not to prejudice teachers against them from year to year as an essential element of "structural secrecy," a condition characterized by an "organization's division of labor, hierarchy, and specialization [which] tend to fragment information, because knowledge about goals and tasks is segregated."¹⁷ Because of schools' deep uncertainty about their obligation and capacity to handle emotionally disturbed students, no one is quite certain what to do with the "health records, academic progress records, disciplinary histories, an understanding of their relationship with peers, and sometimes detailed information about their home lives"¹⁸ to which different school personnel are singularly privy. This well-intentioned division of labor led, in many instances where a school shooting occurred, to a situation in which "there was sufficient evidence that they [the shooters] needed more help and guidance, but because no individual had the whole picture about any of these boys, no one recognized the depth or seriousness of their problems."¹⁹

C. *The Dark Underside of Social Capital*

News reports issuing from the school shooting communities invariably depict what appear to be tightly knit, faithful, family-oriented communities, and

15. For two classic formulations of this idea, see generally DAVID ROGERS, 110 LIVINGSTON STREET: POLITICS AND BUREAUCRACY IN THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS (1968) and JONATHAN KOZOL, SAVAGE INEQUALITIES (1992).

16. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 87. See generally ROBERT ROSENTHAL & LENORE JACOBSON, PYGMALION IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHER EXPECTATION AND PUPILS' INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT (1968) (discussing the power of self-fulfilling prophecies in the academic classroom and explaining the ways in which teachers subtly and unconsciously encourage the student performance they expected to see based on previous information about the students).

17. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 82.

18. *Id.* at 81.

19. *Id.* at 109.

these reports are not fraudulent. Rather, the communities in which school shootings have occurred tend to be high in what political scientist Robert Putnam has termed “social capital,” the “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”²⁰ Cutting through the cant that pervades much of the discourse emerging from Putnam’s work, Newman refuses to accept the presence of social capital in these communities as mere correlation and thoughtfully exposes the dark underbelly of the tightly knit communities so vaunted by Putnam and his “social capital” acolytes.

While Newman importantly notes that the Heath and Westside communities have their share of problems, like high rates of single parenthoods and a fair share of bullying and social exclusion, she also establishes that they “represent a communal vision that seems to be disappearing from other parts of America.”²¹ When the rare problem arises at school or in the community, problem solvers almost uniformly propose “*more* adolescent social control, *more* enforcement of family values in our communities, *more* social capital.”²² Newman convincingly argues, however, that school shooting communities are usually sufficiently endowed with these resources, and upping the regimen of them is not the right way to respond to tragedy. Rather, believing in the high social capital narrative about their communities “made it more difficult for residents to see and respond to problems that were festering just below the surface.”²³ In the same way that the organizationally deviant structures of schools obscured well-formulated determinations about certain students’ need for intervention, the high social capital of communities hamstrung the free flow of information and established nearly insurmountable obstacles of social propriety and maintenance of community reputation.

IV. NEWMAN’S MODEL

Based in large part on the findings detailed above, Newman offers a five-part model of necessary but not sufficient conditions for rampage school shootings, noting that her “approach is useful because although it is parsimonious, it combines elements at the individual, community, and national levels, providing a more realistic understanding of how each one contributes to these explosions of rage.”²⁴ The five factors are these: the shooter’s perception of himself as marginal in the social worlds that matter to him, psychosocial problems that “magnify the impact of marginality,”²⁵ the availability of cultural

20. ROBERT PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* 19 (2000).

21. NEWMAN, *supra* note 1, at 124-25.

22. *Id.* at 125.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 229.

25. *Id.*

scripts that proffer violence as a potential resolution to the shooter's dilemmas, the "failure of surveillance systems that are intended to identify troubled teens before their problems become extreme,"²⁶ and gun availability.

There is nothing new in Newman's model, since each of the factors she identifies has been observed by other scholars and commentators. Rather, the novelty of her approach is her insistence that each of these factors is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a school shooting. Adopting this analytical position demands that Newman place a significant amount of emphasis on the organizational structures and conditions under which all of these factors converge and eventuate in a rampage shooting, which is precisely what she does in the book's most lucid moments.

Newman's focus on communities also has its shortcomings, however. First, the focus on social structures and not on individuals obscures important distinctions that ought to be made between individual school shooters, and fails to explain how school shooters, all similarly besieged and beleaguered in the ways Newman describes, choose between the alternative pathways available to them: suicide or a rampage shooting, or both, or neither. Not all the boys subject to this nexus of factors resort to school shootings. We are alerted to the possibility that such contributing factors might lead to a school shooting but are given no sense of the individual differences or processes of decision-making that arbitrate the fateful choice whether to undertake a rampage.

Second, in part because it fails to account for any differences between frustrated suburban teenage boys, the model lacks any predictive capacity. As Newman emphasizes,

*it's the boys for whom a range of unfortunate circumstances come together—those who are socially marginal, are psychologically vulnerable, are fixated on cultural scripts that fuse violence with masculinity, live in areas where firearms are readily available, and attend schools that cannot identify this constellation—who constitute the likely universe of school shooters.*²⁷

Let us put aside the fact that the last factor—that the boy attends a school that cannot identify the constellation of contributing factors—almost admits to the incapacity of the model to predict who might be a potential school shooter and seemingly removes any obligation of the school to be on the lookout or intervene. More importantly, nearly all the evidence Newman marshals only takes on real relevance or salience in hindsight. Drawing our attention to a constellation of factors, rather than any individual factors, runs the risk of any given observer abrogating her oversight or intervention responsibility: Since she cannot control the whole situation, she cannot effectively control any of it.

26. *Id.* at 230.

27. *Id.*

V. REMEDIES

The advantages of Newman's approach should be obvious: Shifting the focus from the shooters and their families to the communities at large and the pathologies that obstruct the normal functioning of their communication systems provides a corrective to the provincial mindset that pervades most discussion of school shootings. But there are shortcomings as well, and they are most evident in the book's weak and somewhat inept policy recommendation section.

Newman's recommendations unsurprisingly fall flattest when they attempt to remedy the inexorable features of youth culture. For example, she recommends that "[w]herever it is possible, we should reduce harassment and demonstrate to students that their sense of security matters to us."²⁸ After plodding through such a detailed and sophisticated analysis of social dynamics, Newman should be able to offer up something more than this indisputable axiom.

Yet when she does offer policy proposals at an adequate level of specificity, she tends to undercut them with other opposing, or at least inconsistent, recommendations. For example, she recommends that "academic, counseling and disciplinary records should be maintained across the bureaucratic boundaries that separate different grades and different schools in the same district"²⁹ in order to ensure the free flow of important information about students' mental health. Yet she also recommends that such records "should remain the province of guidance counselors and administrators, to be revealed to teachers only when a current spate of misbehavior causes concern and raises the need for additional vigilance."³⁰ This recommendation is doubly misguided. First, given Newman's elaboration of a "constellation" theory of school violence, it seems clear that particular acts of misbehavior only "raise the need for additional vigilance" when viewed in the context of other factors that seem to suggest a propensity for violence. Second, maintaining records as the unique province of guidance counselors and administrators only places an additional obstacle in the path of the vital information the flow of which Newman seems to hope to facilitate with the recommendation above.

Some of Newman's more astute recommendations are unlikely to find an audience, however. Given the cultural conservatism and resistance to outsider intervention that Newman found characterized communities like Heath and Westside, it is somewhat surprising that she would suggest that such schools recruit "young or 'hip' teachers . . . to give these boys another model of

28. *Id.* at 293.

29. *Id.* at 279.

30. *Id.* at 279.

adulthood, another kind of grown-up to bond with.”³¹ While this recommendation is an intelligent and natural outgrowth of Newman’s discussion of the impoverished understanding of masculinity that pervades school shooting communities, it sounds, at best, like the hopeful musings of an ivory tower intellectual speaking to some distant relatives in a red state.

VI. CONCLUSION

Policy recommendations that target the psychological and familial deficiencies perceived to have precipitated rampage shootings, while sometimes ineffective, usually amount to focused and prudent interventions. Newman’s recommendations, formulated in response to a vastly more social interpretation of the roots of schools shootings, are bound to be far less neat and particular. It is the political right that often formulates policy responses that span far, wide, and deep, attributing events like school shootings to the moral demise of America and proposing prayer in school or values education as appropriate remedies for the violence. While Newman bucks this trend and proposes a reasonable progressive-left policy response, she fails to elevate it above the platitudes that often characterize policy formulated in response to macro-focused, sociological studies like this one.

The weakness of her proposed remedies notwithstanding, Newman has produced a necessary corrective to the literature on school violence, evading the Scylla of blaming individual pathology and the Charybdis of blaming nebulous destructive social forces. Though her study focuses only on a minuscule sliver of the universe of school violence, its novel focus on schools and their communities provides a promising model for future investigations into other strains of the same virus.

31. *Id.* at 283.