
NATION

'It could be you': Mass shooters often warn people before they kill. What you can do to stop them

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Key Points

- Before killing 21 people, a Texas gunman shared an Instagram photo where he showcased his two semi-automatic rifles.
 - Leakage is a phenomenon the Federal Bureau of Investigation has known about since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999.
 - Experts said many Americans need to take these warning signs more seriously, while also avoiding profiling groups of people.
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The warning signs invariably crop up online, in YouTube videos, Facebook posts and online forums. Someone, more often than not a young man, brags about his ability or desire to kill. Then does just that months, weeks, days or hours later.

That's what happened again in the weeks and days before an 18-year-old gunman killed 19 children and two teachers, and wounded 17 people, at a Texas elementary school: in an Instagram photo where he showcased his two semi-automatic rifles and in the menacing words he wrote on his Instagram and TikTok profiles.

It's called "leakage," and it's a phenomenon the Federal Bureau of Investigation has known about since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. Young people, frequently young men, are often excited and want to tell someone about what they're about to do, said Reid Meloy, a board-certified forensic psychologist who consults for the FBI, and on criminal and civil cases in the U.S. and Europe.

"They need to tell somebody, there's an anticipation, there's an excitement," Meloy said. "They have a secret, but they must tell somebody (and) make sure they have left behind a legacy token."

The shooter who killed 17 people with his attack at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, posted on YouTube roughly six months prior to the massacre: "I'm going to be a professional school shooter."

And the shooter who killed 10 people at a Buffalo, New York, supermarket in May had multiple posts online in a chat app and on an online forum about body armor and guns.

Experts said many Americans need to take these warning signs more seriously, while also avoiding profiling groups of people. Sadly, many experts said, warning signs like leakage are too often identified only in retrospect. That means that before a mass killing, they often go ignored or dismissed by members of the community who may pick up on it.

People urged to call with concerns

In 60% to 90% of targeted attacks, Meloy said that leakage of an attacker's intent occurs ahead of time. It can look like a message on Twitter, it can be a visual on Instagram or TikTok, it could be a video or story, or can come verbally. But if people see something and communicate it to their local law enforcement ahead of time, they may be able to prevent an attack.

A major reason incidents aren't reported is because "people see this material and they decide on their own that it is not serious or that they don't want to get the person in trouble so they don't report it," Meloy said.

Over the last 40 years, now-retired FBI agent and profiler Mary Ellen O'Toole has kept tabs on the behaviors humans use to not recognize others' problematic behavior. She's found that people tend to normalize, rationalize, misinterpret or simply ignore behaviors.

Threat assessment isn't yet at the point where it's possible to look at someone and say that a person is a threat or will act out violently.

It may never be at that point, O'Toole said, adding that by identifying warning behaviors, people can prevent violence.

"This is the only violent crime I am aware of consistently anymore where these crimes are forecasted now through the use of the internet," she said.

Experts said there are programs for people to report safety concerns – and urged them to call their concerns in. Several were created in the aftermath of mass school shootings.

“People have to understand that it could be you,” said Jason Williams, associate professor of justice studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey. “You could be on the receiving end of this violence.”

A warning in advance: Texas school gunman warned of attack with online messages before rampage

Mislabeling mental illness

One of the biggest barriers to ensuring people identify and report warning signs of a potential shooting attack is efforts by community leaders and the media to call shooters "deranged," "evil" or "monsters" and to focus on mental health as the problem, said O'Toole.

She worked on the Columbine High School shooting, identifying "leakage," and wrote the FBI's seminal report on threat assessment on school shooters. At the time, in 1999, the group could only find 18 school shootings to examine.

"We want to give it (the shooting) one of these mystical explanations, as opposed to saying that there are some people out there that are hateful and that are very dangerous," O'Toole said.

But "when we do that, and this is critical, we walk away from the warning signs," she added.

Leaders in Texas have already talked about mental illness as the driving force behind such shootings, she said, but doing so "is as misleading to the American public as any other piece of misinformation."

Most people who do have a mental health issue don't pose any more of a danger to the general public than the average law-abiding person, O'Toole said. Rather, it's about focusing on the problematic behaviors themselves that can be telltale signs.

Williams said some of the Texas shooter's friends must have seen his Facebook posts.

"Part of our culture as well turns a blind eye to this," he said. "It's the reason why we haven't had any gun reforms. Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers, and hopefully it won't happen again. But it seems to continue to happen."

More: 'Wrong decision': Police should have confronted Texas school gunman sooner, official says

A new safety system after Columbine

After the Columbine shooting in 1999 left 12 students and a coach dead, officials in Colorado set up a program for people to report school safety concerns.

The Safe2Tell program offers students, parents, teachers and others a place to call anonymously to report concerns. Information is shared with law enforcement, school officials and public safety agencies. It began in 2004 as a nonprofit program but is now under the Colorado Attorney General's office.

"Lives have been saved. Lives have been improved because of Safe2Tell," Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser said. "The concern that motivated this program is people didn't always know where they could go."

There are now similar programs in other states. Weiser said there's little doubt it helps to have a place for people to turn to report concerns.

"But the real proof in the pudding is when we're able to tell a school, for example, we know someone is bringing drugs into school and selling drugs or we know that someone is thinking about taking her own life and you need to engage with this person to help find help for them," said Weaver. "Or someone has a gun of some kind that they're bringing to school. We need to take appropriate measures."

"And those are not hypotheticals," he said.

For the 2018-2019 school year there were 20,000 reports via an app or the hotline. Many reports were concerns about possible suicide attempts.

"The number one threat we get year and year out is the threat that someone is going to take their own life," said Weiser, adding that the number one cause of death in Colorado between people 12 and 24 years of age is suicide. "We take that very seriously."

Weiser said programs like Safe2Tell shouldn't be the only tool.

"Ideally you create a culture in school where you've got trusted adults who you can talk to, where you've got kids you can talk to," he said. "It should be part of an overall strategy for school safety, both from preventing against, obviously school shootings, and also the concerns that can arise out of mental health."

Experts warn against profiling

It's hard to pinpoint any single action or warning that might trigger someone to commit a mass shooting, experts said.

“With these individuals, it's hard to predict or know when and even why they do it,” said Williams at Montclair State University.

Still, Williams said, early warning systems, which he said can be complex, should be in place. And those systems need to be careful to protect people's civil liberties, he said.

For example, Williams pointed to the “see something, say something” campaigns after the 9/11 attacks and how research showed many Arab Americans were unfairly profiled.

“In many cases, they were not a threat. They were not a harm,” Williams said. “We can't really establish some type of early warning system without it being infected with these disparities.”

Some politicians and others have been quick to note the alleged shooters in recent attacks had mental illnesses, said Williams, which he called “scapegoating mental health.”

“We have to be very careful about how innocent people may be targeted,” he said. “Politicians are already articulating that, ‘Oh, this kid was mentally ill, and so forth.’ But the vast majority of mentally ill people, they don't go around shooting people or committing violence. In fact, they're more likely to have violence committed against them.”

Meloy said it's important to focus on "discrete behavior" rather than whether an individual is a member of a group that's different from your own.

"If we do that, then we're just responding to our own prejudices, perhaps our own racism, by labeling a threat based on the virtue of them belonging to a group," Meloy said.