



RED FLAGS, WARNING SIGNS AND INDICATORS

By Roger Depue, Ph.D.

Experts who evaluate possible indicators that an individual is at risk of harming himself or others know to seek out many sources for clues, certain red flags that merit attention. **A single warning sign by itself usually does not warrant overt action by a threat assessment specialist.** It should, however, attract the attention of an assessor who has been sensitized to look for other possible warning signs. If additional warning signs are present then more fact-finding is warranted to determine if there is a likelihood of danger.

Some warning signs carry more weight than others. For instance, a fascination with, and possession of, firearms are more significant than being a loner, because possession of firearms gives one the capacity to carry out an attack. But if a person simply possesses firearms and has no other warning signs, it is unlikely that he represents a significant risk of danger.

When a cluster of indicators is present then the risk becomes more serious. Thus, a person who possesses firearms, is a loner, shows an interest in past shooting situations, writes stories about homicide and suicide, exhibits aberrant behavior, has talked about retribution against others, and has a history of mental illness and refuses counseling would obviously be considered a significant risk of becoming dangerous to himself or others. A school threat assessment team upon learning about such a list of warning signs would be in a position to take immediate action including:

- Talking to the student and developing a treatment plan with conditions for remaining in school
- Calling the parents or other guardians
- Requesting permission to receive medical and educational records
- Checking with law enforcement to ascertain whether there have been any interactions with police
- Talking with roommates and faculty
- Suspending the student until the student has been treated and doctors indicate the student is not a safety risk

Following are some warning signs (indicators and red flags) associated with school shootings in the United States. Schools, places of employment, and other entities that are creating a threat assessment capability may want to be aware of these red flags:



Violent Fantasy Content

Writings (Stories, essays, compositions),
Drawings (Artwork depicting violence),
Reading and viewing materials (Preference for books, magazines, television, video tapes and discs, movies, music, websites, and chat rooms with violent themes and degrading subject matter), and role playing acts of violence and degradation.



Anger Problems

Difficulty controlling anger, loss of temper, impulsivity, making threats



Fascination with Weapons and Accoutrements

Especially those designed and most often used to kill people (such as machine guns, semiautomatic pistols, snub nose revolvers, stilettos, bayonets, daggers, brass knuckles, special ammunition and explosives)



Boasting and Practicing of Fighting and Combat Proficiency

Military and sharpshooter training, martial arts, use of garrotes, and knife fighting



Loner

Isolated and socially withdrawn, misfit, prefers own company to the company of others



Suicidal Ideation

Depressed and expresses hopelessness and despair
Reveals suicidal preparatory behavior



Homicidal Ideation

Expresses contempt for other(s)
Makes comments and/or gestures indicating violent aggression



Stalking

Follows, harasses, surveils, attempts to contact regardless of the victim's expressed annoyance and demands to cease and desist



Non-compliance and Disciplinary Problems

Refusal to abide by written and/or verbal rules



Imitation of Other Murderers

Appearance, dress, grooming, possessions like those of violent shooters in past episodes (e.g. long black trench coats)



Interest in Previous Shooting Situations

Drawn toward media, books, entertainment, conversations dealing with past murders



Victim/Martyr Self-Concept

Fantasy that some day he will represent the oppressed and wreak vengeance on the oppressors



Strangeness and Aberrant Behavior

Actions and words that cause people around him to become fearful and suspicious



Paranoia

Belief that he is being singled out for unfair treatment and/or abuse; feeling persecuted



Violence and Cruelty

A history of using violence to solve problems (fighting, hitting, etc.), abusing animals or weaker individuals



Inappropriate Affect

Enjoying cruel behavior and/or being able to view cruelty without being disturbed



Acting Out

Expressing disproportionate anger or humor in situations not warranting it, attacking surrogate targets



Police Contact

A history of contact with police for anger, stalking, disorderly conduct;
Past temporary restraining orders (or similar court orders),
A jail/prison record for aggressive crimes



Mental Health History Related to Dangerousness

A history of referral or commitments to mental health facilities for aggressive/destructive behavior



Expressionless Face/Anhedonia

An inability to express and/or experience joy and pleasure



Unusual Interest in Police, Military, Terrorist Activities and Materials

Vehicles resembling police cars, military vehicles, surveillance equipment, handcuffs, weapons, clothing (camouflage, ski masks, etc.)



Use of Alcohol/Drugs

Alcohol/drugs are used to reduce inhibitions so that aggressive behaviors are more easily expressed