



Continued,

12. **Consider the implications of interviewing juveniles.** What will be gained by this interview? What measure of innocence is lost by conducting this interview? Could the same information be obtained through an adult or official in charge of media relations? Can you corroborate the information being provided by the juvenile? Does the juvenile's parent/guardian approve of the interview? Would you want your own child to be interviewed after suffering a traumatic incident?(6)
13. **Be up-front with your audience about why certain information is being withheld for security reasons.**(7)
14. **Avoid reporting on a shooters motives and or mental state until an investigation has been completed,** especially when a situation is ongoing as this may exacerbate an already dangerous situation.(7)
15. **Give no information, on the condition of any victims or on the death toll, especially when a situation is ongoing** as this may exacerbate an already dangerous situation and never until this information can be completely vetted and corroborated for accuracy.(7)
16. **The reporting of false threats or "hoaxes" can lead to copycat threats, especially when a false threat causes the desired outcome of terror, delays and closings or general disarray in the school system.**(7)

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A Media Guide on the Reporting of School Tragedies

Brought to you by the Colorado School Safety Resource Center



The Copycat Effect on Suicides & School Shootings

Just as the media has become better informed about the "copycat suicide effect," so too must they become better informed about the "copycat school shooter effect." Coverage of suicides by the media has changed greatly over the past several decades. In a 1998 study, sometimes called the Viennese experience, researchers found that by changing the way in which the local media covered suicides in the local subway system, the number of suicides dropped 80%. This study found that those with suicidal tendencies could be negatively influenced by media coverage of suicides, the manner of suicide and the location of suicides. They found that by changing the way in which the mass-media reports on this act, and with the help of interventions and preventative steps, lives can be saved.(1)

The Relationship between Media Coverage and the Number of Threats

Similarly, copycat killers seem to thrive on media attention around particular incidents. For instance, in the four weeks following the Columbine High School attack, as many as 350 students were arrested in the United States after making a threat toward their school.(2) Another study noted a bimodal increase in the number of threats made after a particular incident that was proportionately related to the number of days or amount of media coverage surrounding the initial incident. (2)

Frontier MS and Columbine HS

From one incident alone, the Frontier Middle School incident in Moses Lake, WA, resulting in 3 deaths, we can trace a trail of violence in the media. This coverage influenced both the shooter's actions and that of copycat killers. The shooter claimed in his trial that he got the idea for the shooting from *Rage*, a novel by Stephen King about a school shooting. Additionally, the movie, *A Fistful of Dollars*, starring Clint Eastwood, influenced the shooter's dress and armament. He was also influenced by a music video from the band Pearl Jam in which the title character is portrayed as having committed suicide in front of his classmates. The Frontier incident can be directly tied to several copycat incidents including shootings, a home invasion, a suicide and an incident in Scotland that resulted in the deaths of 16 school-children.(3)

The Columbine shooters were similarly influenced by popular media attention surrounding Adolf Hitler's birthday and the anniversary dates of the Waco, TX incident and the Oklahoma City bombing incident. As many as 400 incidents in the months after Columbine were linked to the shooting, including the first school shooting Canada had seen in over 20 years, multiple shootings here in the United States, as well as incidents in Norway, Sweden, Bosnia and Germany.(3) The prevalence of Columbine related shootings continues even today, with numerous school shooters conducting research into this one incident prior to committing their own acts of violence.

Why do copycat killers copy?

This may be linked to human kind's adaptive psychology. We rely on other individuals' expertise and knowledge when learning how to solve problems or acquire new skills. How many of us have learned how to do something after watching others complete the same task, this is ingrained in us from childhood. Children and even adults prefer to copy others who do something well or who remain in the public eye longer, which represents a certain level of prestige.(4) Look no further than a child who will try to recreate a dangerous stunt seen on the Internet in an effort to garner attention or popularity.

On the following pages, you will find a few guidelines and tips gleaned from multiple sources:



Tips:

1. **The media must be aware of the power of their words.** Avoid using terms like "successful" attacks, "failed" attacks and "rampage." These terms may suggest to readers or viewers that there is something to be gained by being successful or that upon failing they should try again to perfect an attack.(3)
2. The media must do what they can to avoid the myth surrounding the "nice boy next door," the kid who just "snapped," and the "loner." **It should be understood that these shooters do not just snap**, that there was some level of planning that could have been stopped prior to an actual attack.(3)
3. **The media needs to stop glamorizing and sensationalizing crimes in general**, but especially those surrounding school shootings. By conducting 24 hour coverage of an incident and covering all of the details, we merely create models for others to follow or attempt to best. This may further serve to desensitize those who are at risk to commit an act of violence, allowing them to make the mental leap that their act can be completed and will be successful.(3)
4. The media should speak more to the pain and suffering caused by such incidents (without glorifying death or the shooter), they should also **focus on alternatives that were available to the shooter, i.e. mental health services, talking to a trusted adult** that may have brought the incident to a better, healthier end.(3)
5. **The media should avoid using ethnic, racial, religious and cultural stereotypes speaking about the shooter, his motives and victims.** This may serve to encourage like-minded individuals that they can complete their attack in the same manner or on the same type of target.(3)
6. **The media should include links to community resources for those thinking about conducting an attack or suicide** in all reports on this kind of violence.(3)
7. The media should take an introspective look at what they are doing to cause or encourage violence in our culture. **By reporting about the everyday good going on in their communities, they can decrease the negative effects of the "copycat effect."**(3)
8. Law enforcement should not provide information on the shooters actions before and during an incident, especially in cases that will go to trial, and those with insider knowledge should not be asked to provide this information. **Do not include descriptions of firearms, timelines, and methods of entry or actions within the school.**(5)
9. **Social media accounts and information contained in these accounts should not be published.** Those who have access to these accounts prior to them being removed by the police or media platform should honor law enforcements right to first removal as the content may further inspire copycat shooters.(5)
10. **The name of the killer and photos of the same should not be used in media updates**, as this only serves to give them the "glory" they desire. The release of such information should be held until trial or the release of any investigative report. This will serve to shelter those in the community who knew the shooter from aggressive media tactics, the family of the shooter and the investigative process from interference.(5)
11. **The media should refrain from interviewing survivors and loved ones in their most vulnerable moments.** This only serves to re-traumatize those who have just gone through a very emotionally charged time, as well as adding to the spectacle of the entire event.(5)

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Special points of interest:

Those with suicidal tendencies can be negatively affected by media coverage of suicides.(1)

Copycat killers seem to thrive on the media attention surrounding certain incidents, i.e. Moses Lake & Columbine. (3)

As many as 400 separate incidents can be directly tied to the Columbine High School incident.(3)

One study noted an increase in the number of threats after an incident was proportionally related to the number of days or amount of media coverage surrounding the initial incident (2)