

October 4, 2006

## A Pattern in Rural School Shootings: Girls as Targets

*Monday's deadly shooting in Nickel Mines, Pa., was the fourth such incident in five weeks.*

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The Christian Science Monitor



NEAR LANCASTER: Amish men watch as members of the media gather to be led to the Nickel Mines Amish School in Nickel Mines, Pa., where a gunman opened fire on girls Monday. ANDY NELSON - STAFF

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NICKEL MINES, PA., AND BOSTON – The scene Monday at the buff-colored, one-room schoolhouse in the gentle heart of Amish country was wrenching, but also distressingly familiar.

One of four fatal school shootings to beset rural America in just over a month, the rampage that killed five young girls raises anew a host of old concerns – about campus security in countryside settings, access to guns by unstable individuals, and “copycat” violence advanced by media attention.

They are startling incidents against the backdrop of declining numbers of school fatalities. But this premeditated attack, like another one five days earlier in which a drifter corralled teenage girls, killing one, at the high school in Bailey, Colo., have an unusual and disturbing feature: girls as targets.

“The predominant pattern in school shootings of the past three decades is that girls are the victims,” says Katherine Newman, a Princeton University sociologist whose recent book examines the roots of “rampage” shootings in rural schools.

Dr. Newman has researched 21 school shootings since the 1970s. Though it’s impossible to know whether girls were randomly victimized in those cases, she says, “In every case in the US since the early 1970s we do note this pattern” of girls being the majority of victims.

The two cases are reminiscent of a 1989 shooting in Canada, when a jobless hospital worker killed 14 female engineering students at the University of Montreal, accusing them of stealing jobs from men, says Martin Schwartz, an Ohio University sociologist and an expert on violence against women. He sees such incidents as related to a culture of violence against women, “a mutation – something beyond.”

In Bailey, an armed drifter walked into Platte Canyon High School last Wednesday, ordering men out and sexually assaulting some of the six girls he held hostage, shooting one before killing himself. In this week’s tragedy in Pennsylvania’s bucolic Lancaster County, the gunman ordered boys and adults to leave, bound the 10 girls, and shot them, then himself.

### **Small Towns are No Safeguard**

Another similarity between the Pennsylvania and Colorado cases – as well as two other recent school shootings in Vermont and Wisconsin – is their rural settings. It is rare for mass school shootings to occur in cities, Newman says. Despite their safe image, rural communities can be an especially fertile breeding ground for revenge, she and others agree

“People think small towns are safer, but in a small community grievances can fester,” says Cheryl Meyer, a professor of psychology at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, who has researched similarities of school shootings in rural and small towns. “It’s so often about revenge. Even if something happened 20 years ago, it doesn’t mean it is gone. People talk about it and everybody remembers. It just trails after you.”

Such a motive may have factored into Monday’s shootings in the tiny hamlet of Nickel Mines, Pa., police say.

Flanked by corn fields and a few white oaks, the Amish schoolhouse could have been lifted out of the 19th century. With no guards, chain-link fence, or “drug-free zone” signs – or even a telephone – it seemed a world apart.

The gunman, Charles Carl Roberts, lived just down the road with his family in a double-wide trailer. He hauled milk from Amish farms at night, usually before the next day’s milking began about 4 a.m. A co-worker says he might never have met the farmers he serviced. Then, he would take his children to school.

On Monday, however, he left suicide notes for his family, then drove his pickup truck to a school he no doubt passed many times on late-night milk routes. He brought to the school a semi-automatic pistol, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, a 12-gauge shotgun, and a rifle – along with restraints, lumber to block the doors, and a change of clothing.

In a scene that seemed to echo the Bailey shooting, the gunman ordered boys and school aides out, then bound 10 girls ages 6 to 13. He called his wife on his cell phone.

Police arrived after a teacher ran for help to a nearby farm. They called him on his cell phone, but no answer. Then the gunman opened fire, and police stormed the barricaded building, breaking through windows.

Five of the girls died at the scene or at hospitals. At press time, officials said five remained in critical condition.

Law-enforcement officials, working to unearth Roberts's motive, said Tuesday that sexual assault seemed the most likely one. In a suicide note, they said, Roberts recalled an incident 20 years ago when he, a pre-teen at the time, molested younger children. The note indicated he had been haunted by dreams about molesting young girls, police said.

"I don't think it was an attack on the Amish community, but a target of opportunity," Col. Jeffrey Miller, commissioner of the Pennsylvania State Police, said Monday. "It was almost impenetrable," he said of the barricaded school. "His goal was to be in there for an extended period of time. He was hunkering down for a hostage-related siege."

### **'Copycat' Concerns**

The apparent similarities between the Bailey and Nickel Mines shootings – and their close proximity in time – raise experts' concerns about "copycat" attacks.

News media bear some responsibility for this phenomenon, says James Fox, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. This is especially the case when attackers' personalities and grudges are exposed to high-profile public analysis – as when two teenage attackers in the Columbine attack were featured on the cover of a news magazine, he says.

"We've seen with school shootings and postal shootings that the shooters can become role models for others," Dr. Fox says. "While most sympathize with the victims, others empathize with the shooters. It's the publicity they get that turns the shooter into a celebrity that spawns more of them."

Some see in the latest school shootings echoes of the 1980s, when there was a spate of carefully planned attacks on students by adults from outside the schools.

Between 1988 to 1989, there were nine premeditated attacks by adults targeting schoolchildren, says Fox. In those cases, however, there was no pattern of girls being targets – a new wrinkle. To him, that year stands out for its "contagion of adults who got even with society by killing its most beloved members – schoolchildren."

While national crime statistics show a steady drop in the murder rate, including violent school fatalities, there seems to be fewer incidents but "more spectacular stuff going on," Dr. Schwartz says. "Splashy violence is what's going up, even though crime as a whole going down. The only thing not going down is fear engendered by these types of high-profile events."

## A Community Banding Together



CRIME SCENE: An Amish man stands near Nickel Mines Amish School in Nickel Mines, Pa., where five young girls were killed by a gunman Monday. ANDY NELSON – STAFF

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In Nickel Mines, the news media showed up almost as promptly as police – within minutes jamming the narrow streets and nearby fields with satellite trucks, television crews, and crane-high lights.

For grieving Amish families, driving past the crime scene late into the night or talking quietly in small groups nearby, the fierce media glare came as a shock to a community that resolutely avoids the spotlight.

“I was irate when I first heard about the school, then the hurt started,” says an Amish fireman, who helped maintain a security perimeter around the school late Monday night. He says local firemen and policemen had expected a crush of news media, because of the intense public interest in school shootings. But, he adds, “We never expected to have to deal with it here.”

“It’s unbelievable. We never expected that anything like this would happen,” says Ruth, a Mennonite neighbor who wanted to give only her first name.

“I don’t understand it, but it’s not from God,” says Fannie Beiler, another Mennonite. “He wants us to love one another.”

There are scores of such schools in the quiet farming communities around Lancaster County, a center for the Old Order Amish in the United States. An estimated 28,000 Amish live in the area – of about 200,000 nationwide.

Amish families live simply – no cars, electricity, cell phones, or iPods – and grieve quietly. A keystone of their faith is pacifism. When a young Amish boy in the next town of Bart was killed on his way to help a neighbor with the milking by a hit-and-run driver two weeks ago, there was no talk of lawsuits. Nor did Amish families join their “English” neighbors in calling for a new sign cautioning drivers to slow down.

In Bart, Paula Flinn set up a hand-painted sign on her front lawn for their Amish neighbors, who drove past the house in closed, black buggies at a rate of 50 an hour, some late into the night, after the shooting. Her sign reads: “Our prayers and thoughts are with you.”

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