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# Nation's Pain Is Renewed, and Difficult Questions Are Asked Once More

By **WILLIAM GLABERSON**

On Friday, as Newtown, Conn., joined the list of places like Littleton, Colo., and Jonesboro, Ark., where schools became the scenes of stunning violence, the questions were familiar: Why does it happen? What can be done to stop it?

The questions have emerged after all of the mass killings in recent decades — at a Virginia college campus, a Colorado movie theater, a Wisconsin temple — but they took on an added sting when the victims included children.

The fact that the Newtown massacre, with 26 killed at the school, along with the gunman, was the second deadliest school shooting in the country's history — after the 32 people killed at Virginia Tech in 2007 — once again made this process of examination urgent national business as details emerged from Sandy Hook Elementary School.

This painful corner of modern American history does offer some answers: Many of the mass killers had histories of mental illness, with warning signs missed by the people who knew them and their sometimes clear signs of psychological deterioration left unaddressed by the country's mental health system.

The shootings almost always renew the debate about access to guns, and spur examination of security practices and missed warning signals in what were damaged lives.

Research on mass school killings shows that they are exceedingly rare. Amanda B. Nickerson, director of [a center](#) that studies school violence and abuse prevention at the University at Buffalo, said studies made clear that American schools were quite safe and that children were more likely to be killed outside of school.

But, she said, events like the Sandy Hook killings trigger fundamental fears. "When something like this happens," she said, "everybody says it's an epidemic, and that's just not true."

Dylan Klebold, 17, and Eric Harris, 18, may have earned singular infamy with the killing of

12 other students and a teacher from Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colo., in 1999, but there have been others who breached the safety of American schoolhouses over the decades.

In 1927, a school board official in Bath, Mich., [killed 44 people](#), including students and teachers, when he blew up the town's school.

Even before Columbine in the late 1990s, school shootings seemed to be a national scourge, with killings in places like Jonesboro, Ark., and Springfield, Ore. In 2006, a 32-year-old man shot 11 girls at an Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pa., killing 5 of them.

Often in a haze of illness, the schoolhouse gunmen are usually aware of the taboo they are breaking by targeting children, said Dewey G. Cornell, a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia and director of the [Virginia Youth Violence Project](#). "They know it's a tremendous statement that shocks people," Dr. Cornell said, "and that is a reflection of their tremendous pain and their drive to communicate that pain."

After 14-year-old Michael Carneal opened fire on a prayer group at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., in 1997, it came out that he had made no secret of his plans. "He told me, once or twice, that he thought it would be cool to walk — or run — down the halls shooting people," a friend from the school band testified later. Five Heath students were wounded; three were killed.

But some experts on school violence said Friday that it was not so much the character of the relatively rare schoolhouse gunman as it was the public perception of the shootings that transformed them into national and even international events. Dunblane, Scotland, is remembered for the day in 1996 when a 43-year-old man stormed a gym class of 5- and 6-year-olds, killing 16 children and a teacher.

Over the years there have been some indications of what warning signs to look for. The New York Times published [an analysis](#) in 2000 of what was known about 102 people who had committed 100 rampage killings at schools, job sites and public places like malls.

Most had left a road map of red flags, plotting their attacks and accumulating weapons. In the 100 rampage killings reviewed, 54 of the killers had talked explicitly of when and where they would act, and against whom. In 34 of the cases, worried friends or family members had desperately sought help in advance, only to be rebuffed by the police, school officials or mental health workers.

After the deaths in Sandy Hook on Friday, there was new talk of the need to be vigilant. But there has also been talk of the sober reality that it is hard to turn the ordinary places of life into fortresses.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, who is the director of the [National Center for Disaster Preparedness](#) at Columbia University and has worked on school violence issues, said there were steps that could be taken to try to limit school violence, like limiting entry, developing an explicit disaster plan that includes strategies to lock down schools and pursuing close ties with the local police.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “random acts of severe violence like this are not possible to entirely prevent.”