

## TWO ESSAYS ON *RAMPAGE*

### Rejoining *Rampage*

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Among forms of violent behavior that have appeared on the mass media radar screen in the last decade, school shootings are one of the most troubling and least understood. For brief periods following school shootings, the United States seemed to stop in its tracks and consider the cultural meaning of these events, while media and politicians offered interpretations. The morning after the Columbine shootings, *The New York Times* published an editorial that began: "Once again a routine school day was interrupted by blasts of gunfire. . . ." Later, the editors commented, "meanwhile it's not too early to begin drawing lessons" (*New York Times* 1999). Similarly, politicians were quick to capitalize on a windfall as they commented on the shootings. In a press conference less than four hours after the shootings, President Clinton said, "We don't know yet all the hows and whys of this tragedy. Perhaps we may never fully understand it. St. Paul reminds us that we all see things in this life through a glass darkly, that we only partially understand what is happening" (Savidge et al. 1999).

In contrast to the attention such shootings attracted from mass media and politicians, social scientists were notably absent from the immediate discussion, perhaps due to the necessity of clearing research agendas with ethics boards, and the fact that rigorous research is very time consuming. Still, given that the most noteworthy string of school shootings happened in the previous decade, social scientists have been slow in producing research on this phenomenon. *Rampage* joins a handful of scholarly works that attempt to unravel the complexities of Columbine type events. Given its quality and groundbreaking nature, this book stands out as a foundational sociological work examining the phenomenon of rampage school shootings.

*Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, by **Katherine S. Newman**, with **Cybele Fox, David Harding, Jal Mehta**, and **Wendy Roth**. New York: Basic Books, 2004. 399 pp. \$27.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-465-05103-0. \$17.50 paper. ISBN: 0-465-05104-9.

By the time the Columbine shootings occurred, there was already a string of place names synonymous with school shootings, including Paducah, Kentucky, and Jonesboro, Arkansas. *Rampage* has three major thrusts: First, the presentation of in-depth case studies of the Paducah and Jonesboro shootings, and second, an analysis of the sociological causes behind rampage school shootings. Finally, *Rampage* discusses the aftermath of school shootings by examining what happens to the community in the wake of an event of this type. In a large part, *Rampage* is a further elaboration of studies by Katherine Newman and others reported in *Deadly Lessons: Understanding Lethal School Violence* (Moore et al. 2003). *Deadly Lessons* is the result of a request by the U.S. Congress that the National Research Council (NRC) conduct a study of the causes of school violence, with specific reference to the infamous school shootings. Newman's involvement in the NRC study reaped significant results that could not be limited to her two chapters in *Deadly Lessons*.

Scholars of school shootings come up against the mindset such as that of our colleague who specifically stated that there are no lessons to be learned by studying these atypical events (Kleck 1999). This reviewer respectfully disagrees, and *Rampage* is a strong indication that social scientists have much to learn by studying school shootings, not only for the advancement of sociological knowledge, but also to clarify the puzzling

nature of the specific cases, as well as the phenomenon in general. In fact, Newman and her research assistants deserve to be commended for the bold nature of their research. Many social scientists, not to mention the general public, undoubtedly wondered about the cultural meaning and social causes of such events; however few have been bold enough to attempt a scholarly treatment of the why and how behind these events. While many instructors in higher education stress the fundamental importance of asking powerful questions, few seem to put that prescription into action. There is no more fundamental scholarly role than taking a puzzling phenomenon and attempting to clarify it. Despite pessimism on the part of some colleagues, Newman has produced a well written and elucidating treatment of the subject that is accessible to the general public, yet scholarly in its approach.

*Rampage* first reports the case studies of the Paducah and Jonesboro school shootings, beginning with detailed descriptions of what happened. In the Paducah case, ninth grader Michael Carneal opened fire in a high school hallway, targeting members of an Evangelical prayer group. After shooting into the crowd, he begged others to kill him. In the Jonesboro case, eighth grader Mitchell Johnson and sixth grader Andrew Golden pulled a fire alarm at their middle school, and then shot at students and teachers as they exited the building in what they thought to be a fire drill.

The facts of the attacks themselves are more or less clear; what are more difficult to ferret out are the proximate causes behind these events. Newman supervised the work of two teams of researchers for the NRC's study of school shootings, one for Paducah (Harding, Mehta, and Newman 2003) and the other for Jonesboro (Fox, Roth, and Newman 2003). *Rampage* expands these two case studies, which are the best analyses of the social circumstances surrounding these two school shootings. The research teams found that in both cases, the perpetrators had demonstrated a combination of attributes that served as contributing causes for the attacks: social marginalization, mental illnesses and/or family problems, failing to attract significant attention from authority figures, and the availability of guns. Some of the statements about the proximate causes of the

school shootings are new and sociologically interesting, such as the description of how adolescent social dynamics might prevent those who receive forewarning of the attacks from reporting that knowledge to authority figures. Newman weaves examples from the case studies into her discussion of these causes. Examples of the two cases alternate throughout the text, which at times becomes confusing. In sum, however, the first thrust of *Rampage* is particularly strong sociological work, and the author has made a significant contribution to the literature.

In addressing causes of rampage school shootings, the author takes a particularly bold step, extending her work to the phenomenon in general. Two sources of data cover the social causes of school shootings: the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's School-Associated Violent Deaths database, and the U.S. Secret Service's *Safe School Initiative Report* (reported in Vossekuil et al. 2002). Newman compiled a data set drawing from both of these sources, supplemented by mass media accounts, and ultimately produced a data set relevant specifically for the analysis of rampage school shootings.

Analysis of the data concerning rampage school shootings determined there are five categories of causes necessary for the shootings to occur: (1) many of the shooters are socially marginalized, and are often bullied and teased; (2) many of the shooters exhibit personal traits that make them more vulnerable than other youth, including mental illness, suicidal tendencies, and problematic family situations; (3) the shooters draw on cultural scripts that might make violence attractive, including the need to find a masculine way of dealing with social circumstances and the desire to achieve infamy; (4) while the shooters might exhibit some personal or social troubles, they do not tend to be severe enough to worry authority figures that the shooters might be at risk of serious violent outbursts; (5) the shooters have access to guns.

*Rampage* contains the single best assessment of the causes behind rampage school shootings; however, the research is not without some shortcomings. The methodological underpinnings of the study are solid, while some facets of its conceptualization lack depth. For example, Newman focuses solely

on rampage school shootings, arguing that the school shootings in which the shooter does not target specific victims are akin to adult "postal" shootings. Rampage shootings are poorly defined, and the concept bears a problematic connection to "postal" shootings in general, in that the mechanics of the attacks differ significantly. While the author does note the problematic nature of this comparison (p. 58), this ambiguity is inappropriately glossed over, given that the research focuses specifically on rampage school shootings.

Similarly, the data set Newman compiles and analyzes to address the causes of rampage school shootings may rely too heavily on information garnered from mass media sources. The veracity of these media accounts is questionable, and the reliance on details reported by the mass media may lead to factual errors. For example, the author reported that the Columbine incident was a "four-hour shooting spree" (p. 238). In fact, the shooting lasted approximately 47 minutes (Columbine Review Commission 2001:iv), while the news media continued to cover Columbine for four hours as if it were a live shooting or hostage situation. In addition, the author fails to reference several sociological studies and numerous popular books written about Columbine and other school shootings. Since Columbine is perhaps the quintessential rampage school shooting, this elision seems noteworthy.

Finally, *Rampage* examines the aftermath of the shootings and how to prevent future events of this type. Newman describes what happened in Paducah and Jonesboro, what became of the shooters, the post-traumatic stress experienced by students, faculty, and staff at the schools, and the disruption in normal life experienced by many members of the community. There are few other academic treatments of what happens after school shootings. While social scientists might intuitively understand that the trauma brought on by a school shooting might not simply dissipate in a timely manner, this research is among the first scholarly discussions of the issue. Perhaps the weakest part of this otherwise solid sociological work is the discussion of prevention strategies that might be employed to avert future school shootings.

Readers will appreciate the social commentary in the well written *Rampage*. The topic of school shootings generates intense public interest, and Newman has produced an accessible book, suitable for the generally educated consumer, and those with scholarly interest. For its rigorous scholarship, *Rampage* stands out as a seminal work in the sociology of school shootings. Because of the public interest in the subject, this book will be widely read, and would serve as an excellent supplementary work for university courses in juvenile delinquency and youth violence.

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