

SSID

Fact Sheet

The Events and Lessons of Columbine

On April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, entered their school and embarked on a shooting rampage that left 13 dead and 23 injured. The Columbine shootings shocked the Nation and prompted communities to begin seriously addressing the issue of school violence. The following pages examine the events that defined this fateful day and offer measures that can be implemented within schools to possibly prevent future critical incidents.

The Columbine Incident as Reported by the Governor's Columbine Review Commission

- Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris spent months devising a plan to kill as many Columbine High School teachers and students as possible. They chose April 20, 1999, to set this plan in motion.
- They armed themselves with dozens of explosive devices, seven knives, two illegal sawed-off shotguns, a 9mm semi-auto assault pistol, and a substantial supply of ammunition.
- Two 20-pound propane bombs were placed in the school cafeteria prior to the attack. Klebold and Harris' original plan was to detonate these bombs and wait outside to shoot survivors as they fled the school. If these bombs had exploded as planned, as many as 500 students and teachers may have perished.
- When the bombs failed to detonate, Klebold and Harris entered the school at 11:17 A.M. and began firing at students as they fled the cafeteria, wounding five and deliberately executing one. Prior to this, Klebold and Harris had already killed one student and seriously wounded another.
- A teacher, Dave Sanders, was seriously wounded by a shotgun blast and bled to death before medical assistance arrived three hours later.
- At approximately 11:23 A.M., 9-1-1 was called, and the janitor notified the school resource officer, who responded to the scene and exchanged gunfire with Harris.
- Within minutes of the initial attack, six law enforcement officers arrived on the scene, three of whom exchanged gunfire with the perpetrators.
- Fifteen minutes into the attack, Klebold and Harris entered the school library where 60 students and teachers had sought refuge. Within seven and a half minutes, they had killed 10 students, several by deliberate execution.
- After firing at police from the library windows, they returned to the cafeteria and attempted to explode the propane bombs by gunfire to no avail.
- After exploding several pipe bombs and an incendiary device that activated the fire alarm and sprinkler system, they returned to the library and again began firing at police.

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- Forty-seven minutes after the rampage began, Klebold and Harris committed suicide.
- Over 1,000 officers and emergency medical personnel responded to the scene.
- The first law enforcement entry into the school was made at 12:06 P.M. Search efforts were hindered due to the officers' lack of knowledge of the school's layout and communication difficulties caused by the activation of fire alarms.
- Of the many law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical agencies responding, nearly all of their radios had different bandwidths, making interagency communications nearly impossible. Radio communications from inside the school were further hampered by the amount of concrete and steel within the building.
- Response teams, unaware of the shooters' deaths, took several hours to secure the school before allowing emergency medical personnel to enter.
- Due to the size of the crime scene, positive identification of many of the dead and official notification to their families were delayed more than twenty-four hours.
- The scene was secured and evacuations completed at approximately 3:40 P.M.
- No victims died who were alive when they reached a hospital.
- If all of the more than 90 bombs used in the attack had detonated as planned, the death toll could have been as high as 1,000.

Recommendations of the Governor's Columbine Review Commission

Crisis events, actual or threatened, are a reality. It is essential that such threats be appropriately evaluated and that the appropriate response be defined before an incident takes place. Prior to the tragic incident described above, Columbine High School had no crisis plan in place. The following findings and recommendations of the Governor's Columbine Review Commission were put forth in the hope that schools and emergency responders could better plan for, and possibly prevent, future critical incidents:

- Law enforcement policy and training should emphasize that the highest priority of law enforcement officers responding to a crisis is to stop any ongoing assault.
- Law enforcement command personnel should be trained for large-scale emergencies and to take command at the beginning of a crisis by establishing an incident command system.
- Law enforcement agencies should coordinate their communication system with other agencies that are likely to respond in an emergency. In large school buildings where radio transmissions are difficult, repeaters should be installed to facilitate communication.
- The State of Colorado should continue the development of a single, statewide trunked communications system that all agencies can access.
- Appropriate officials in every county should prepare and keep current a major critical emergency response plan.
- Regular planning sessions should be held with representatives from federal, county, and municipal law enforcement, fire and rescue, and school administrators.
- Every school should develop an emergency crisis plan tailored to meet their particular safety

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concerns.

- Every school should schedule at least one crisis drill per year and include police and rescue personnel.
- Police, fire, and rescue agencies, as well as hospitals and victim support agencies, should be prepared to cope with intense media attention in the event of a major incident. Each major response agency should have a designated public information officer of command rank.
- School Resource Officers should be trained in rapid deployment tactics in case of a school emergency.
- School officials should work to change the “code of silence” so that students will report students who make threats of violence. Each school district should establish a mechanism through which students can anonymously report statements or conduct that worries them.
- Harris and Klebold were both students who had been bullied by classmates and had bullied others. All schools should adopt one or more of the bullying prevention programs that have been proven effective.
- A threat assessment team, responsible for evaluating threats of violence, should be established at every high school and middle school.
- Jefferson County authorities had prior indications that the Harris and Klebold were dangerous, but a failure to share this information allowed these students to “cloak their deadly intentions from law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and school teachers and officials.” All agencies that possess specific information regarding threatening behavior or other delinquent acts of a juvenile should share that information with other agencies that deal with the juvenile.
- The Commission did not recommend universal installation of metal detectors and video surveillance cameras as they have not yet proven to be a cost effective deterrent to major school violence.
- SWAT teams should include one or more members who possess emergency medical training to reduce the time interval between a SWAT team’s arrival and the primary treatment of injured victims.
- In acknowledgement of the human anguish created by a major incident of school violence, the procedures for victim identification should be relaxed to accommodate the immediate emotional need of victims and their families. A victim advocate should be included at the command center so that accurate information can be provided more directly to the families.
- Because suicide is an observable phenomenon, in the aftermath of incidents like Columbine, programs should be developed and implemented to enable teachers and administrators to discuss the subject of suicide with students before an incident occurs and not exclusively afterwards.

For more information on crisis planning and preparedness, visit the School Violence Resource Center website at www.svrc.net or contact us at 1-800-635-6310.