As indicated in the previous chapter, at the time that he walked into the office of Standard Gravure in Louisville to open fire on his co-workers, workplace avenger Joseph Wesbecker was on long-term disability. Out of work, the middle-aged Kentuckian had plenty of time to follow events in the news. Wesbecker was particularly intrigued by Patrick Purdy’s January 1989 shooting rampage at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, which claimed the lives of five Southeast Asian children. Days after reading the news about Purdy’s massacre of students in Stockton, Wesbecker walked into a local gun store and paid $349 for an AK-47 very much like Purdy’s.

Just before massacring his co-workers, Wesbecker left behind, in the kitchen of his home, an issue of *Time* magazine whose cover story, “Armed in America,” described Patrick Purdy’s shooting spree at the Stockton elementary school. Wesbecker had folded back the pages so that a photograph of Purdy’s AK-47 was open and facing up. Wesbecker was every bit as angry as the drifter in Stockton, but his enemy was closer to home. Rather than pin all of his problems on Southeast Asians, Wesbecker blamed his bosses at Standard Gravure.

Patrick Purdy was a young man filled with resentment who went on a deadly rampage of his own. Although he told his half-brother that he would soon make the newspapers—and precisely 4 days later he would indeed become a headliner in the news—Purdy could not have known that his killing spree would help to inspire an act of mass murder in Louisville.

Not unlike the Kentuckian who imitated him, the 25-year-old Purdy was almost always alone, had no girlfriends, and seemed to dislike everyone. He was conspiratorial and paranoid in his thinking. In the end, he singled out a particular group—Southeast Asians—as being especially blameworthy.

For some 5 years, Purdy had drifted from place to place. Working as a laborer, a security guard, or a welder, he traveled to Connecticut, Nevada, Florida, Oregon, Tennessee, and Texas—to any state where his past might not come back to haunt him. Everywhere he went, Purdy challenged his bosses, and he simply couldn’t hold down a job for more than a few weeks at a time.

Along the way, Purdy repeatedly got into trouble with the law. In 1980, he was arrested in Los Angeles for soliciting a sex act from an undercover police officer. In 1982, he was arrested on charges of possession of hashish, and the next year he was convicted of possessing a dangerous weapon. A few months later, he was arrested on a charge of receiving
stolen property. In October 1984, he did a 30-day stint in county jail in Woodland, California, for being an accomplice to a robbery.

Three years passed, and Purdy’s behavior became increasingly outrageous. In 1987, he was arrested for indiscriminately firing a 9mm pistol in the El Dorado National Forest. On top of this, he was charged with resisting arrest for kicking a deputy sheriff and shattering a window of the patrol car with his feet. While being held in advance of trial, Purdy attempted to commit suicide by hanging himself in his jail cell and slicing open his wrist with his sharpest fingernail. But like everything else he tried, Purdy even failed at taking his own life.

By January 1989, life had become completely hopeless for Purdy. He despised almost everyone, but especially people in positions of authority and especially his “enemies,” the newcomers to America’s shores. Purdy had a special hatred for Southeast Asians. He often bragged about his father’s conquests in the Vietnam War, slaughtering all those “gooks.” Purdy fantasized about following in his dad’s army bootsteps, but it would have to remain a fantasy because Patrick was only 7 years old when the U.S. forces pulled out of the Vietnam conflict.

No problem—Purdy would fight his own war against Southeast Asians. He would try one more time to achieve something big, and this time, his mission would not fail.

For weeks, Purdy had been living in Room 104 of the El Rancho Motel on the edge of Stockton, California, a riverfront agricultural city located some 80 miles east of San Francisco. He needed to concentrate, to plot his final assault on those who were to blame for his miserable existence. “General Purdy” spent hour after hour, day after day, in his “war room,” manipulating the hundreds of toy soldiers, tanks, jeeps, and weapons that he had collected in order to simulate an attack and to develop an effective military strategy. There were toy soldiers everywhere: on the shelves, on the heating grates, even in the refrigerator.

Purdy prepared himself for battle as well. Perceiving a conspiracy involving people in charge, he displayed symbols of anti-Americanism boldly and loudly. He had carved the words “freedom” and “victory” into the butt of his AK-47 military assault rifle. On the camouflage shirt that he wore over his military jacket, he wrote “PLO,” “Libya,” and “Death to the great Satin.” As reflected by the mistaken inscription for the name of the devil, spelling was never Purdy’s strong suit… but then, he didn’t seem to have any strong suit.

On Tuesday morning, January 17, Purdy donned his military flak jacket, picked up a handgun and his AK-47 semiautomatic assault rifle, and drove his 1977 Chevrolet station wagon a couple of miles to the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton—the same elementary school he had attended from kindergarten to third grade. But things recently had begun to seem different to him, and it wasn’t just having grown older. When he had lived there as a child, the neighborhood was white; now it was predominantly Asian.

Arriving at the Cleveland School just before noon, Purdy could see hundreds of young children—most of them refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Mexico. Purdy preferred the term “boat people” when he spoke disparagingly of Asian refugees. Despite the chill in the air, the children played joyfully at recess on the blacktop in front of the brown stucco building, unaware of the war that would soon be declared.
As a diversionary tactic, Purdy parked his car and then set it ablaze with a Molotov cocktail in a Budweiser bottle. Then, he eased through a gap in the fence surrounding the school building and walked onto the crowded school grounds, where he opened fire.

Over a period of several minutes, Purdy sprayed 60 rounds from his AK-47 at screaming children, firing in a sweeping motion across the blacktop. He showed no emotion; he just leaned back and calmly continued firing as automatically as his weapon. Purdy and his AK-47 were as one, and the romping, playful children, who had their whole lives ahead of them, seemed to him little more than objects, things, or targets.

Purdy didn't stop until he heard the sirens of approaching police cars. No one would take him alive. He removed the handgun from his belt. He had saved this gun for one purpose. Purdy died instantly from a single shot from the gun on which he had written the word “Victory.” Purdy’s “victory” toll was high. Five children, ages 6 through 9, all from Southeast Asia, were dead, and 29 more, in addition to one teacher, were wounded.

Purdy’s murderous rampage against innocent children was based, at least in part, on racial hatred. He had frequently made hostile racial comments to co-workers about the influx of Southeast Asians into the United States and had protested bitterly about the large number of Southeast Asian classmates in industrial arts courses he was taking at the local community college. He complained that the newcomers were taking all the jobs, and he resented having to compete with them. Just prior to his unconscionable murder spree, Purdy told another resident of the El Rancho Motel, “The damn Hindus and boat people own everything” (Green, 1989).

Purdy may have been delusional, but he was correct in noting that the demographics in his community had changed dramatically. In less than 8 years, the population of Southeast Asian refugees in Stockton had gone from fewer than 1,000 to more than 30,000. In his manner of blaming others for his failures, he prepared himself to fight back against the influx of “yellow people” in his own way.

But Purdy did not choose to attack some workplace that he felt was infested with immigrants, nor did he set his sights on a restaurant or shopping mall populated by newcomers. More to the point, why did Purdy choose this particular set of targets—children in a schoolyard—to carry out his mission?

Purdy did not feel the need to leave behind a note explaining his actions; thus, we can only speculate about his reason—if he had one—for targeting a schoolyard, of all places, in which to carry out his attack. He may have wanted to avenge the difficulties he had experienced with boyhood classmates at the Cleveland School almost 20 years earlier. Perhaps he was angry that the poor education he felt he had received there had left him ill-prepared for life; he had written, in private notes to himself, about how dumb he felt.

Or, if his design was to get back at society for his own misfortunes, he may have targeted its most cherished members, children. Perhaps Purdy’s thinking was more tactical in deciding that a schoolyard was a fairly confined and well-populated area in which he could easily gun down dozens of victims without risk of being overtaken. Certainly, he wasn’t about to pick on someone his own size or anyone equally armed. Whatever the contributing factors, Purdy definitely hated the newcomers from Vietnam and Cambodia who had taken over his old elementary school, if not the entire community. Most likely, he deliberately set his sights on a school that had a majority—more than 70%—Asian population.
Patrick Purdy was a rebel with a cause—actually, in his paranoia, he had plenty of them. Of course, Purdy’s victims were total strangers to him and were not responsible for his disappointing existence. To him, they may have seemed no different from the toy soldiers, the plastic “Viet Cong,” he had maneuvered back in Room 104 of the El Rancho Motel. Yet, at the same time, they were symbols of everything in his life that had gone wrong.

There may be one more important reason why Purdy chose, in January 1989, to target a school to carry out his murderous intentions—the copycat factor. Beginning in May 1988, there was a string of school shootings around the country, all of which were well-publicized nationally and all of which were carried out by adults, not students.

In September 1988, James Wilson of Greenwood, South Carolina, went on a shooting spree at a local elementary school. When the police searched his home, they discovered that Wilson had pinned to his wall a photo of his hero, clipped from the cover of People magazine. His hero was Laurie Dann, who had committed a similar crime at a school in Winnetka, Illinois, a few months earlier. Between May 1988 and February 1989, a dozen separate episodes of shootings occurred at schools around the nation, culminating in Patrick Purdy’s massacre of Southeast Asian children in Stockton. Just 2 weeks prior to Purdy’s rampage, while he was holed up in a cheap Stockton motel room, national TV talk shows devoted hourly episodes to discussions of the schoolyard shootings in Winnetka, Greenwood, and elsewhere.

Student Massacres

On October 1, 1997, 16-year-old Luke Woodham walked into a Pearl, Mississippi, high school just hours after having killed his mother. Pulling out a gun from under his trench coat, the chubby, bespectacled youngster immediately murdered two schoolmates and then sprayed bullets into a crowd of students, injuring seven more. His motive? To take over the school, kill all the students, and escape to Cuba.

In the aftermath of the Pearl, Mississippi, shooting spree, parents, teachers, and students around the country became extremely anxious about school safety. Their fears were more than confirmed by subsequent events. Exactly 2 months later, on December 1, 1997, 14-year-old Michael Carneal, a freshman at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, opened fire on an informal prayer circle held in the school’s lobby, killing three girls and wounding five other students. On March 24, 1998, two boys, 11-year-old Andrew Golden and 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson, pulled the fire alarm at their Jonesboro, Arkansas, middle school and then began shooting at students and teachers as they filed out of the building. When the gun smoke cleared, four students and a teacher were dead, and many more people were injured.

Months later, school massacres occurred twice more in the same week. On Tuesday, May 19, a Fayetteville, Tennessee, high school senior shot and killed a classmate over a romantic rivalry. Two days later, Kip Kinkel, a 15-year-old freshman from Springfield, Oregon, armed with a .22-caliber semiautomatic rifle, turned his high school cafeteria into a battlefield after having been suspended the day before for bringing a gun to
school. At Thurston High, Kinkel killed 2 students and wounded 22 more. Earlier, at home, he had killed his parents.

In the aftermath of the widely publicized string of school shootings, most children identified with the pain of the victims. They grieved for slain students whom they knew only through television reports, discussed their fears with parents and classmates, and prayed that history would not repeat itself in their own school.

More than a few students, however—those who, like Kip Kinkel, felt alienated and frustrated—apparently identified instead with the power of the perpetrators. Such feelings are the foundation for the copycat phenomenon. Some of these students may have fantasized about following in their “hero’s” footsteps, and a few may have acted on those fantasies. Not only was the new breed of youthful mass killers featured on the covers of most national publications, but there were even websites on the Internet that served as tributes to their bold “heroism” and “martyrdom.”

At the very least, the copycat phenomenon can determine the timing and form of a murderous attack. If a widely publicized killing occurs at a school, the publicity provides the idea to murder in the classroom rather than at a shopping mall or a law firm. If the publicized killers use firearms, then those who imitate are also likely to use guns rather than a knife, explosives, or a hammer. Finally, the copycat effect is short-lived, causing a number of similar attacks to be committed over a limited period.

For a few disturbed individuals, the publicity given to killers can provide a source of role models, even inspiring some of these individuals to attempt to realize their dreams of stardom and grandeur. There are fads among killers, just as there are fads among dress designers.

The copycat phenomenon tends to occur when a murder receives much media attention. Twenty years ago, a child might have been inspired by his friends down the block. Now, thanks to the pervasiveness of television, he or she is just as likely to follow the lead of teenagers in Pearl or Springfield. Like their adult counterparts, teenage killers can be inspired by other real-life killers, but they also may be inspired by fictional portrayals in films and video games. Kip Kinkel had been fascinated with the popular movie version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In the small town of Moses Lake, Washington, 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis shot to death two students and a teacher after reading Stephen King’s story about a school massacre (written under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman) and watching the film *Natural Born Killers*.

In June 1998, after a seemingly relentless string of school shooting episodes, summer vacation mercifully arrived. Over a 2-month summer vacation, would the contagion effect dissipate? When school opened in the fall, parents were scared. In fact, a 1998 poll conducted by the Shell Oil Company found that three quarters of parents surveyed were very anxious about school shootings and violence, topping the list of school-related concerns, well ahead of worries about peer pressure, declining academic standards, the poor quality of teaching, and limited availability of educational equipment and supplies. For parents, an old adage applied: Safety first.

Despite parental concerns arising from the previous year’s bloodshed, the 1998–1999 school year was relatively uneventful—that is, until April 20, 1999, when a school shooting of such immense proportions occurred that public thinking and debate about student safety and security were altered radically, perhaps permanently. After months of
planning and preparation, 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold armed themselves with guns and explosives and headed off to Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, to celebrate Adolf Hitler’s birthday in a manner befitting their hero. By the time their assault ended with self-inflicted fatal gunshots, a dozen students and one teacher lay dead. The police later found an entry in Harris’s diary, in which he discussed the pair’s plans to blow up Columbine High, then hijack a plane and fly it into the New York City skyline!

In understanding the horrific actions of schoolyard snipers, it is important to examine their relations with peers. At Columbine, Harris and Klebold generally were seen as geeks or nerds from the point of view of many of the large student cliques—the jocks, the punks, and so on. Though excluded from mainstream student culture, they banded together and bonded with several of their fellow outcasts in what they came to call the “Trench Coat Mafia.” The image they attempted to create was clearly one of power and dominance—the “goth” incivility, the forces of darkness, the preoccupation with Hitler, the celebration of evil and villainy. Harris and Klebold desperately wanted to feel important; and in the preparations they made to murder their classmates, the two shooters got their wish. For more than a year, they plotted and planned, colluded and conspired to put one over on their schoolmates, teachers, and parents. They amassed an arsenal of weapons, strategized about logistics, and made final preparations—yet, until it was too late, not a single adult got wind of what Harris and Klebold intended to do.

Harris, the leader, likely enjoyed the respect and admiration of Klebold, who in turn probably felt uplifted by the praise he received from his revered buddy. In their relationship, the two boys got from one another what was otherwise missing from their lives: They felt special, they gained a sense of belonging, and they were united against the world. As Harris remarked, as he and his friend made last-minute preparations to commit mass murder, “This is just a two man war against everything else” (O’Driscoll, 1999).

When the scourge of school shootings emerged, some criminologists speculated that it was just the next phase of the youth violence epidemic. What had started in the inner city, according to this view, had spread to middle America. The issue of lethal violence inside schools struck a nerve with the public. Unlike crack and gang violence, which had infested primarily minority neighborhoods in the urban core, school shootings occurred in suburbs and rural communities that had been largely immune from the urban bloodshed.
Indeed, seeming invulnerability to the problems of urban areas may help explain why such extraordinary murders occurred where they did. The residents of towns such as West Paducah, Springfield, Littleton, and Pearl felt impervious to crime, violence, and poverty—what they regarded as big-city problems. As a result, they never prepared for the possibility that teenagers in their town might become so alienated and marginalized as to go on a shooting spree at school to get even with teachers and classmates. Whereas urban schools initiated programs and policies in the area of conflict resolution, peer mediation, and counseling, small-town and suburban schools tended to rest on their laurels.

The copycat effect on the string of murders can be seen in the similarity of personal characteristics of killers. Most of the perpetrators of school violence in the late 1990s were white boys in small-town schools. If the first killers had been black youngsters from inner-city schools, it is likely that many of the later school massacres would have been committed by other black, inner-city youth.

Political observers capitalized on the differences in public response to youth homicide in cities versus elsewhere as a clear indication of racism. Most Americans seemed apathetic when, to an increasing extent, black kids were shooting each other, but once murder spread to the mostly white hinterlands, demands for action were heard loud and clear. Although this allegation is likely valid, there was another major change in the pattern of school violence that cried out for media and public attention—the emergence of mass murder.

During the period when the string of school massacres occurred, the total number of school homicides actually was falling, roughly in parallel to the decline in youth killings generally. Though homicides arising from a conflict between one victim and one perpetrator are newsworthy at the local level, these episodes rarely make national news, whether or not the participants are black, white, or Latino. The events of the 1997–1998 school year got everyone’s attention, all the way to the White House, which established a Presidential Advisory Committee in the wake of an episode in President Bill Clinton’s home state of Arkansas. As the body counts grew larger, murder grabbed the attention of the nation.

Mass murder at school by disgruntled pupils was a scary new wrinkle in the problem of school violence. A decade earlier, schoolyards were the targets of unbalanced adults looking to attack society where it hurt the most. School snipers were likely not to be teenagers but instead middle-aged adults such as Laurie Dann, the 36-year-old resident of Glencoe, Illinois, who went on a rampage with a .22-caliber handgun in a Winnetka elementary school in May 1988. Actually, there were 12 different school shootings by adults between 1988 and early 1989, the last of which was Patrick Purdy’s January assault on the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California.

It is not an incidental fact that the more recent spate of shootings involving student perpetrators also occurred at schools rather than at some other location. Notwithstanding research findings suggesting that most schools do not experience serious forms of violence, the school day itself can present certain issues and risks. Not only do children congregate in large numbers while at school, thereby creating occasions for conflict, but the school setting also can sometimes breed feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, fear, hostility, rejection, and boredom. For some vengeful or alienated children, school can represent an ideal place, both logistically and symbolically, for getting even or settling a score.
The episode in Littleton, Colorado, more than one decade ago, was so powerfully and deeply ingrained in the nation's collective psyche that “doing a Columbine” became a widely known code for threatening the safety and security of a school. After Columbine, schools around the nation went on red alert. Many heightened security—employing metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and even armed guards—to try to protect the school setting from the latest threat. Some schools went as far as to institute “Columbine drills” to prepare faculty and students to respond appropriately should a student open fire in a hallway or classroom. Several legislators around the country even proposed a concealed weapons law for teachers, suggesting that arming the faculty would serve as a deterrent; none of the proposals gathered much political support. Administrators also responded with tough “zero tolerance” policies against weapons or even menacing words, putting students on notice that guns, knives, or threats of violence would not be tolerated.

None of these quick fixes appears to have significantly reduced the risk of schoolyard mass murder, but many of them remain in force today. A number of administrators responded at another level by attempting to deal with the fundamental core issues such as bullying and the climate of fear that pervades many schools around the country. Their efforts have recently led most states—at least 41—to enact anti-bullying statutes.

On to College

Forty-one-year-old Robert Flores, Jr., a student in the nursing program at the University of Arizona, was struggling in his coursework and facing academic withdrawal. But before that could happen, he chose a different route for ending his career pursuit—murder and suicide. On October 28, 2002, he set out to execute the nursing faculty whom he apparently blamed for his academic failures. First, he hunted down one of his instructors in her second-floor office, shooting her point blank at her desk. Next, he moved to a fourth-floor classroom and fatally shot two more of his professors as a classroom of about 20 students looked on in horror and disbelief. Having accomplished his objective for the day, even though it was probably not as fulfilling as the unattainable one that brought him to the university, he ordered the students out of the classroom and then took his own life.

Prior to the campus massacre, Flores had typed a 22-page letter of explanation, titled “Greetings from the Dead,” and mailed it to the local newspaper. In this portion of the letter, his view of the responsible parties—the pompous and uncaring faculty—is crystal clear. Although he denied feeling vengeful, his characterization of the faculty, not to mention his subsequent actions directed against them, suggests otherwise:

To the sociologist, it wasn’t the Maryland sniper. I have been thinking about this for a while. To the psychiatrist, it’s not about unresolved childhood issues. It is not about anger because I don’t feel anything right now. To Ellen Goodman, it is not about gun control. I have had guns for a long time and it was my trade in the military. I do not have gun magazines. A waiting period or owner registration would not have stopped me. I have a concealed carry
permit but I have never brought a gun to the University (until now). I was a boy scout. I cross the street at the crosswalk. It is not about revenge as I have always thought that revenge was a waste of time and energy. I guess what it is about is that it is a reckoning. A settling of accounts. The University is filled with too many people who are filled with hubris. They feel untouchable. Students are not given respect nor regard. It is unfortunate that the only force that seems to get any attention from the University is economic force.

Whereas the 1990s brought focus to conduct and disciplinary issues confronting secondary schools, a radically different form of campus violence has commanded our attention in recent years—specifically, shooting rampages at colleges and universities, highlighted by massacres at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University less than 10 months apart. Although incidents at middle schools, high schools, and institutions of higher education all fall under the umbrella of “school shootings,” there are, in fact, several characteristics of mass shootings at college campuses that make them unique.

The most striking and important distinction surrounds issues that motivate campus shooters and their younger counterparts. Shootings at high schools are often precipitated when students feel bullied or persecuted by their classmates and/or teachers (Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). However, the perpetrators of multiple shootings at colleges and universities are often graduate or professional students—older individuals who turn to violence in response to what they perceive to be unbearable pressure to succeed or the unacceptable reality of failure (Fox & Burstein, 2010).

Unlike undergraduates, students in graduate and professional programs often lack balance in their personal lives, narrowly focusing on academic work and training to the exclusion of other interests and other people in their lives. Students who had been at the top of their class in high school and college may come to find themselves struggling to get by with just passing grades. No longer supported financially by parents, they experience great pressure to juggle assistantship activities or outside employment with coursework and thesis research, with little time for attending to social networks. At some point, their entire lifestyle and sense of worth may revolve around academic achievement. Moreover, their personal investment in reaching a successful outcome can be viewed as a virtual life-or-death matter. Compounding the problem is the fact that faculty mentors, the gatekeepers to success, may be insensitive to the pressures placed upon their students. At the extreme, some faculty may even maintain an oppressive relationship with graduate students, perhaps perpetuating a power imbalance they themselves suffered in graduate school. Regrettably, not all faculty members are sensitive to the enormous and often unrestrained power they have over students.

Foreign students experience additional pressures because the academic visas allowing them to remain in this country are often dependent upon their continued student status or full-time employment. Also the stress factor related to the need to succeed, if not excel, is frequently intensified for foreign graduate students from certain cultures where failure is seen as shame on the entire family.

By the fall of 1991, after having failed in repeated efforts to have a perceived injustice reversed, Chinese-born Gang Lu knew that his best and last resort was a firearm. For this 28-year-old grad student, things had changed dramatically. In the course of a few years,
he went from being widely considered a rising star in his program to an object of shame and pity.

In 1985, Gang Lu had been chosen for a coveted doctoral fellowship in physics at the University of Iowa. But achievement never came easy for Gang Lu, as he had toiled hard in school throughout his life, painstakingly preparing for national science tests given by the Chinese government to identify the academic elite. Unfortunately for Gang Lu, within a year after entering the program at the University of Iowa, a brighter doctoral prospect arrived in the department who was also from his homeland of China—a younger, handsome, charismatic rival for whom everything—not just academics—came easily.

It didn’t take long for Linhua Shan, the new arrival, to eclipse Gang Lu in his pursuit of excellence. For Gang Lu, the final straw came when Shan was nominated by the department for outstanding doctoral dissertation. Unable to think objectively, Gang Lu couldn’t accept that Shan’s thesis was brilliant, while his own was just competent and workmanlike—nothing that would turn the scientific community on its ear.

Gang Lu’s disappointment was only part of the problem. Failure to win the D.C. Spiestersbach dissertation prize would deny him a significant advantage in seeking a tenure-track post in the tight job market. He felt his work had been judged unfairly by the department chair and other professors who had the power to nominate the prize winner. From Gang Lu’s perspective, they would have to pay for destroying his chances, ruining his life, and bringing shame upon him.

After several attempts to appeal the decision up through the university’s administrative hierarchy, Gang Lu saw only one way to even the score. He appointed himself judge, jury, and executioner.

On November 1, 1991, after months of anguish and detailed planning, Lu launched his all-out assault. He knew that his adversaries would be gathered at a regular Friday afternoon physics department seminar held in Room 309 of Van Allen Hall. Shortly after 3:30, Lu removed from his briefcase his doomsday device, a .38-caliber revolver that he had purchased in July during the early stages of his planning. Without saying a word—he didn’t need to, as everyone was already painfully aware of his grudge—Lu started blasting away. He killed Professors Christoph Goertz and Robert Alan Smith, both members of his dissertation committee, and shot Linhua Shan, his “successful” rival for the prize.

Lu then traveled down the hall and killed the department chair, Dwight Nicholson. Next, he went across campus to “discuss” matters with T. Anne Cleary, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, with whom he had filed an appeal. Lu let his gun do the talking, killing Cleary and wounding her receptionist, who was little more than an impediment along his murder route. Lu then returned to the physics department to finish off Shan, who had briefly survived his injuries. Having done what he came to do, he had only one final element to his plan—suicide.

Lu had worked out every detail of his rampage, and he was chillingly methodical in his implementation. In 12 short minutes of terror on campus, he got his revenge, having killed five members of the university community and wounded one more.

It is difficult for many people outside the academic world to appreciate the concepts of academic life and academic death. The phrases “publish or perish” and “curriculum
vitae” both reflect the virtual life-and-death significance of academic achievement and failure. Gang Lu understood this and felt that his career was doomed before it had begun.

Shooting for Infamy

The copycat effect is not so much about the nature of a crime but the extent to which it is covered, the way in which it is portrayed, and the context in which it is described. All of these factors were seen in the extreme—and not for the best—in the aftermath of the April 16, 2007, mass shooting at Virginia Tech in which 23-year-old Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 and wounded 17 others at the normally quiet and serene campus in Blacksburg. The media approach to the crime was unrestrained and ubiquitous, increasing the potential for others to follow in the gunman’s bloody footsteps.

The shooting spree started in the early morning hours. By 7:15 a.m., the campus police had received a 911 call concerning a double homicide at Ambler Johnston Hall—an incident that the authorities were quick to regard as a domestic dispute turned fatal. By this theory, the campus was no longer in danger and no further steps were needed to protect the campus community. Of course, what the campus officials did not realize at the time was that the killer was still alive and had taken a break from what would be a much more devastating rampage—a break to make a planned and important errand at the post office.

Just as the campus was settling into the normal weekday routine, gunfire erupted suddenly and ferociously at Norris Hall, which was home to the School of Engineering and also contained numerous classrooms. In a manner typical of deliberate mass murderers, Cho had entered the building, chain-locked the main entrance to secure it from intruders, and even placed a sign warning of an explosion should anyone tamper with the make-shift barricade. Over the next several minutes, Cho executed 25 students and five faculty members who were misfortunate enough to stand in his path of destruction.

Equipped with their mobile satellite trucks, the news media quickly blanketed the Blacksburg campus. The coverage on the cable channels was nonstop. As the reported
death count rose, so did the intensity level of those whose job it was to relay the news to the millions of Americans who were glued to their television sets.

When the carnage reached 20 dead, reporters proclaimed this a new record for school shootings—a breaking development embellished by streaming and screaming alerts on the screen. The Virginia Tech shooting had indeed eclipsed Charles Whitman’s infamous 1966 tower-top shooting at the University of Texas, a murderous mark of distinction that had survived for more than four decades despite the bloody episodes at Columbine High School and elsewhere. The TV anchors, talk-show hosts, and various talking heads all seemed to be quite impressed, if not obsessed, with the enormity of the Virginia Tech carnage.

Within hours, as the death toll climbed higher and higher, there was more “breaking news.” With more than 30 victims dead at two locations on Virginia Tech’s campus, the record for the largest mass shooting of any type and at any venue—previously held by George Hennard for his 1991 massacre at the Luby’s Restaurant in Killeen, Texas—had been shattered. For the remainder of the day and evening, viewers were told repeatedly that this had been the biggest, the bloodiest, the absolute worst, the most devastating, or whatever other superlatives came to mind.

Notwithstanding the cruel absurdity of treating human suffering as any sort of achievement worthy of measuring in such terms, there is little positive that can be derived by keeping or highlighting such records. But there is one significant negative: Records are made to be broken.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of Americans who watched the news and listened to the videotaped sounds of semiautomatic gunfire would have identified with the pain and suffering of the victims, their families, and the entire campus community. However, a few would instead have identified with the power of the perpetrator.

Some Americans share and perhaps empathize with the frustration and alienation felt by the Virginia Tech shooter, even going so far as to view him as a hero. Imagine a narrative in which the campus shooter is revered as someone with the guts to take matters—and guns—into his own hands and strike back at some perceived injustice. An intense focus on records invites challengers to mimic and even outperform their role models.

In the weeks following the Virginia Tech massacre, there was no one—fortunately—who even came close to challenging Cho’s top ranking in the mass murder list, but many were encouraged to fantasize at least about mimicking the man whose acts they perceived as bold and heroic. Dozens of threats were reported on college campuses around the country. Of course, part of this rise in threatening behavior may not just suggest a copycat effect but may reflect greater nervousness among college officials to treat any threatening words or gestures as a genuine sign of trouble.

Cho’s position in mass murder lore is more than just his record victim count. His side trip to the post office was for the purpose of sending a package to NBC—and a message to America—about his grievances. It didn’t take long before executives at the network, upon receiving a videotape from Cho, decided to air the tape rather than just hand it over to the authorities. Apparently, it was too good of a ratings opportunity to pass. Thanks to NBC, and the countless media outlets that followed suit, Cho’s place in history was sealed.
Overstating the Copycat Effect

In his book, School Shootings: What Every Parent and Educator Needs to Know to Protect Our Children, Joseph A. Lieberman discusses several cult-hero icons who appear to have influenced Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho. Of course, Cho’s admiration for the two Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, was clearly reflected in both his writings and recordings. But Lieberman also suggests some fascinating, yet questionable, connections between Cho and Kimveer Gill, a 25-year-old who opened fire at Dawson College in Montreal in September 2006, killing 1 and wounding 19 before taking his own life.

In explaining Cho’s actions, Lieberman emphasizes the similarity between Cho’s widely disseminated photographs and videos and those that Gill recorded prior to his deadly assault at Dawson College. Both Cho and Gill are shown brandishing weapons and pointing their guns straight at the camera lens. However, in the YouTube era, where young adults routinely upload video clips of themselves, is it that unusual for two young campus shooters both to chronicle their violent potential in this way? And how unique would it be for someone posing with guns for the camera to aim a weapon menacingly at the lens? Cho may not have been influenced by Gill in any way; both shooters may have been coincidently motivated by the same desire to document their murderous plans.

Attempts to prove the copycat effect through anecdotal evidence can be difficult. Many fine scholars have been misled, for example, by a widely repeated tale about the 1996 school shooting by 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis and the influence of the novel Rage, published two decades earlier by Stephen King using the pseudonym Richard Bachman. In King’s story, a high school student takes his algebra class hostage at gunpoint after killing two teachers. Loukaitis, who owned the book and had read it several times, similarly barged into his math class dressed in a long trench coat and armed with two pistols and a high-powered rifle. After killing a teacher and two students, Loukaitis said sardonically, “This sure beats algebra, doesn’t it?”—a line reportedly lifted straight from Rage.

This often-repeated illustration of copycatting is quite intriguing, but also not exactly accurate. Although Loukaitis did make the remark, no such line appears in King’s book. The closest is when King’s assailant makes the wisecrack, “This sure beats panty raids.” As rumors and legends often develop, the curious connection was first reported in a national news story published in the New York Times. Since that time, many others have told the tale of “sure beats algebra” without checking the actual text of Rage.