

School Violence Case Study at Virginia Tech

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Abstract

On April 16, 2007, Seung Hui Cho, a livid and mentally ill student, shot to death 32 students and faculty of Virginia Tech, wounded many more people, and then killed himself. This incident has impacted college and university campuses nationwide in efforts to seek mentally disturbed students and help them, to have effective emergency teams, as well as having the best security policies implemented. Since this atrocity many arguments have begun to emerge about the right to bear arms on campus, keeping mental health treatment confidential and many other issues that could have changed the outcome of that fateful day. This report seeks to analyze Seung Hui Cho, his life, his mental health, the shootings at Virginia Tech, the staff and law enforcement's role, and the campus policies that have changed since. Learning from this tragedy is imperative, to know how to deal with conflict is essential, and understanding how to help a person like Seung Hui Cho could help save many lives in the future.

Campus Reports and Revisions

Tim Kaine, Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, immediately appointed a panel to review the events leading up to this tragedy; the handling of the incidents by public safety officials, emergency services providers, and the university; and the services subsequently provided to families, survivors, care-givers, and the community, (VA Tech Review Panel, 2007).

In the two years since the Review Panel's report was published, additional information has been placed in the public record, including Seung Hui Cho's case file from the Cook Counseling Center and a recent report from the Commonwealth's Inspector General concerning the Cook Counseling Center's handling of Cho's records. Briefings to the victims' families by police and Virginia Tech officials provided additional details of the events in light of the new information presented to the families, and other information they found in the April 16 archive, several family members requested that additions and corrections be made to the Report. Some families had personal knowledge of the events that were not previously shared. Some families requested new interpretations of certain findings or revisions to some of the Review Panel's recommendations in light of the new information. Virginia Tech officials also submitted comments requesting some corrections. Governor Kaine asked the victims' families and Virginia Tech to submit any corrections or additions they thought important by the end of August, 2009. The time was extended into September after discovery of Cho's missing Cook Counseling Center records. This Addendum responds to the comments and questions received from the families and Virginia Tech by correcting facts in the original report, including the timeline, and by adding additional information about the events leading to the incidents, the response to the incidents, and the aftermath of April 16. The Addendum also includes corrections to names and titles of people cited in the Report or the list of interviewees. The Addendum does not address

opinions or value judgments that were raised, but provides some additional background information that might help address the concerns raised, (VA Tech Review Panel, 2009).

Seung Hui Cho's Family Life

In 1984 Seung Hui Cho was born to a family living in a small two-room apartment in Seoul, South Korea. He is an inordinately shy, quiet child, but no problem to his family. He has serious health problems from 9 months to 3 years old, is frail, and after unpleasant medical procedures does not want to be touched. Cho's father worked as a bookstore owner, but did not make much money. The Cho family had a daughter several years older than their son. His father thus decided to move to the United States to give his children better education and opportunities. In 1992 Cho's family immigrates to Maryland when he is 8 years old. In 1993 The Cho family moves to Fairfax County, Virginia, when he is 9 years old. They work long hours in a dry-cleaning business. In 1997 Seung Hui is in the 6th grade and continues to be very withdrawn, teachers meet with his parents about this behavior. In the summer before he enters 7th grade, he begins receiving counseling at the Center for Multi-cultural Human Services to address his shy, introverted nature, which is diagnosed as "selective mutism." Parents try to socialize him more by encouraging extracurricular activities and friends, but he stays withdrawn, (VA Tech Review Panel, 2007).

During the 8th grade, suicidal and homicidal ideations are identified by Cho's middle school teachers in his writing. It is connected to the Columbine shootings this year, when he references Columbine in school writings. The school requests that his parents ask a counselor to intervene, which leads to a psychiatric evaluation at the Multicultural Center for Human Services. He is prescribed antidepressant medication. He responds well and is taken off the

medication approximately one year later. In the fall of 2000 Cho starts Westfield High School in Fairfax County as a sophomore, after attending another high school at Centreville for a year. After review by the “local screening committee,” he is enrolled in an Individual Educational Program (IEP) to deal with his shyness and lack of responsiveness in a classroom setting. Therapy continues with the Multicultural Center for Human Services through his junior year. He has no behavior problems, keeps his appointments, and makes no threats. He gets good grades and adjusts reasonably to the school environment. Both the guidance office in school and the therapist feel he was successful. In June 2003, Cho graduates high school with a 3.5 GPA in the Honors Program. He decides to attend Virginia Tech against the advice of his parents and counselors, who think that it is too large a school for him and that he will not receive adequate individual attention. He is given the name of a contact at the high school if he needs help in college, but never avails himself of it, (VA Tech Review Panel, 2007).

The Cho family works very hard in their dry cleaning business and often works long hours. It seems by all accounts that although obligated by their work, the family was involved in their son’s social and academic life. His parents met with school teachers and counselors to try and address his social shyness and eventually his homicidal/suicidal tendencies where he was prescribed medication; his parents were supportive of him and wanted their son to be healthy.

Indicators of Mental Instability

In Korea, Cho had a few friends that he would play with and who would come over to the house. He was extremely quiet but had a sweet nature. In Korea, quietness and calmness are desired attributes—characteristics equated with scholarliness; even so, his introverted personality was so extreme that his family was very concerned, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). The Cho’s took their

son to a therapist for fear of negative effects from his severe isolation and lack of talkativeness. The family started to realize that there may be a problem with their son, after unsuccessfully trying to help him socialize and his lack of any interaction with others. Cho would eventually see an art therapist that would allow him to create images or sculptures that would convey feelings and information instead of conversation. This therapy seemed to work and Cho even started making eye contact with the art therapist.

Cho also had a psychiatrist who participated in the first meeting with Cho and his family and periodically over the next few years. He was diagnosed as having severe “social anxiety disorder.” “It was painful to see,” recalled one of the psychiatrists involved with Cho’s case. The parents were told that many of Cho’s problems were rooted in acculturation challenges—not fitting in and difficulty with friends. Personnel at the center also noted in his chart that he had experienced medical problems and those medical tests as an infant and as a preschooler had caused emotional trauma. Records sent to Cho’s school at the time (following a release signed by his parents) and the tests administered by mental health professionals evaluated Cho to be a much younger person than his actual age, which indicated social immaturity, lack of verbal skills, but not retardation. His tested IQ was above average, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009).

Although his therapy seemed to be going well, he became more reclusive and withdrawn; however his behavior was good and did not get involved in fights. In April 1999, Columbine High School had a massacre perpetrated by two of its students, this drew Cho’s attention and he wrote about it in English class. His writings cited homicidal and suicidal intentions and even remarked about recreating a Columbine like shooting himself. His parents took him to see a psychiatrist. The doctor diagnosed Cho with “selective mutism” and “major depression: single episode.” He prescribed the antidepressant Paroxetine 20 mg, which Cho took from June 1999 to

July 2000. Cho did quite well on this regimen; he seemed to be in a good mood, looked brighter, and smiled more. The doctor stopped the medication because Cho improved and no longer needed the antidepressant, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). Although the drug did cure Cho of his mental illness, his actions were deemed good enough to take him off of medication; so he goes from feeling better to suddenly feeling worse after the medication is gone. He was picked on in school and this probably fueled his aggression towards others. High school classmates of Cho's claim he "got picked on every day at school." He was "an easy target and everyone aimed at him. And, of course, the more he withdrew, the more he was picked on." He was "the kid everyone bullied." Police are investigating possible connections between "the bullying and those he killed." As still another student put it: "There were people who were mean to him. They would push him down and laugh at him. He didn't speak English well. They made fun of him," (Brantlinger, 2007).

Timeline of the Shootings

At 5am Cho was awake and seen by one of his roommates that was up all night writing a paper; Cho was sitting at the computer then got dressed and ready to leave his room. At 7:15am Cho shot a male and female at the female's residence hall; at this point the incident is seen as isolated and the police were called to secure the perimeter and start the investigation. At 8am classes begin at Virginia Tech and at 8:25am the University officials meet to determine how best to inform the rest of the students and faculty population. At 9:01 am Cho stops by the University post office to mail the NBC studios in New York a package with pictures, video, and writing pertaining to his killing spree that had not yet occurred. "You had 100 billion chances and ways to avoid today. But you decided to spill my blood," Cho said on the video in the package. "You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have

blood on your hands that will never wash off." Included with the video clips was a 1,800-word diatribe in which he professed admiration for Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris; Cho carried out his rampage on the same week as the Columbine murders were committed in 1999. Forty-three still photos, 10 of which showed Cho holding handguns, were also included in the package sent to NBC, (Friedman, 2009).

At 9:26am students and faculty are told of the shooting at the residence hall and asked to report any suspicious activity. At 9:45am VA Tech police receive a call from Norris Hall (the campus engineering department) that there is a shooting. Police respond immediately, find the doors chained shut from the inside, they break in and follow the gunshots to the second floor of the building. Once they have reached the area, the gunshots stop, the police enter the room to find 30 people killed and the gunman who has killed himself, (Heron, Hsu, 2007). Cho's shooting spree in Norris Hall lasted about 11 minutes. He fired 174 rounds, and killed 30 people in Norris Hall plus himself, and wounded 17, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009).

Mental Health Providers

In July 1997, the Cho's took their son to the Center for Multicultural Human Services (CMHS), a mental health services facility that offers mental health treatment and psychological evaluations and testing to low-income, English-limited immigrant and refugee individuals. They told the specialists of their concern about Cho's social isolation and unwillingness to discuss his thoughts or feelings, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). This is where Cho saw an art therapist as well as a psychiatrist on and off over the next few years; He was diagnosed as having severe social anxiety disorder.

About two years later following the school shootings at Columbine high school, he saw another doctor experienced in child psychiatry. The doctor diagnosed Cho with selective mutism and major depression: single episode. He prescribed the antidepressant Paroxetine 20 mg, which Cho took from June 1999 to July 2000, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). His exemplary behavior and subtle personality changes were positive and deemed good enough that he could be removed from the medication.

In college he did well academically, although still not social; in his junior year he started to send a girl messages via the internet. She was intimidated by him and fearful, she contacted the police and Cho was warned not to have contact with the girl anymore. He sent a message to one of his roommates saying that he might as well kill himself. The roommate was rightfully concerned and contacted the police. Police officers returned around 7:00 p.m. that same day to interview Cho again in his dorm room. The roommate was not present, but they spoke to Cho's roommate out of his presence. The officers took Cho to VTPD for assessment, and a pre-screen evaluation was conducted there at 8:15 p.m. by a licensed clinical social worker. The social worker indicated Cho was mentally ill, was an imminent danger to self or others, and was not willing to be treated voluntarily. She recommended involuntary hospitalization and indicated that the CSB could assist with treatment, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). Cho had to go before a judge in a mental health hearing, in order to do this he was evaluated by an independent psychologist. The evaluator completed the evaluation form certifying his findings that Cho is mentally ill; that he does not present an imminent danger to himself or others, or is not substantially unable to care for himself, as a result of mental illness; and that he does not require involuntary hospitalization. The judge made the ruling that Cho be treated on an outpatient basis

with counseling and no medications were prescribed, and no primary diagnosis was made. Cho was allowed back to school but he had to keep his appointments with an out-patient counselor.

Faculty Identify Conflict Issues

It is important to note that although some behaviors can lead to conflict between students and faculty or other students, they may not necessarily be disruptive. Cultural differences, the need for additional time or attention for a specific reason or problem, situational frustration or stress, and disagreements or differences of opinion may often manifest themselves within the classroom setting, (Harrell & Hollins, 2009). This is the situation that Nikki Giovanni encountered in her English class that Cho was in. He was different and often wore glasses, a hat and even a scarf to obscure his face; he did participate in her class and she had a hard time communicating with him. Giovanni wrote her supervisor about the student and asked that he be moved, Cho made it known that he did not want to be moved to Giovanni's surprise. Dr. Giovanni began noticing that fewer students were attending class, which had never been a problem for her before. She asked a student what was going on and he said, "It's the boy...everyone's afraid of him." That was when she learned that Cho also had been using his cell phone to take pictures of students without permission. Dr. Roy was Giovanni's supervisor and the head of the English department who had instructed Cho in a class of her own. Dr. Roy e-mailed Cho and asked him to contact her for a meeting. He responded with an angry, two-page letter in which he harshly criticized Dr. Giovanni and her teaching, saying she would cancel class and would not really instruct, but just have students read what they wrote and discuss the writings, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). Cho was given the name of a clinical psychologist that was trustworthy and a friend of Dr. Roy's; he made an appointment by telephone and sought help occasionally.

Cho encountered problems in another English class that semester, Technical Writing, taught by Carl Bean. The professor told the panel that Cho was always very quiet, always wore his cap pulled down, and spoke extremely softly. Bean opined that “this was his power.” By speaking so softly, he manipulated people into feeling sorry for him and his fellow students would allow him to get credit for group projects without having worked on them. Bean noted that Cho derived satisfaction from learning “how to play the game—do as little as he needed to do to get by.” This profile of Cho stands in contrast to the profile of a pitiable, emotionally disabled young man, but it may in fact represent a true picture of the other side of Cho—the one that murdered 32 people. After some trouble choosing a proper subject for an assignment, the professor explained to Cho that his work was not satisfactory and that his topic was not acceptable. He recommended that Cho drop the class and that he would recommend that a late drop be permitted. Cho never said a word, just stared at him. Then, without invitation, Cho followed Bean to his office. The professor offered for him to sit down, but Cho refused and proceeded to argue loudly that he did not want to drop the class. Bean was surprised because he had never heard Cho speak like that before nor engage in that type of conduct. He asked Cho to leave his office and return when he had better control of himself. Cho left and subsequently sent an e-mail advising that he had dropped the course, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009).

Law Enforcement and Campus Security

Universities with campus police departments have additional responsibilities. They are required to maintain a publicly available log that lists all crimes. The log must give the time, date, and location of each offense, as well as the disposition of each case. Under Virginia law,

campus police departments must also ensure that basic information about crimes is open to the public. This includes the name and address of those arrested for felony crimes against people or property and misdemeanor crimes involving assault, battery, or moral turpitude, (VA Tech Addendum, 2009). However since Cho had no previous offenses, there was nothing in his file to report. Campus security was first made aware of Cho's strange behavior by a report from a female student reporting on a stalker leaving messages on her message board online. A formal request was made to Cho to leave the female student alone, whereupon he sent his male roommate a message expressing his depression saying that he should just kill himself now. The police on campus was called again by Cho's concerned roommate and he was taken into custody and later evaluated and held overnight at a psychiatric institution.

The campus police were later called in response to the shooting at 7:15 am on April 16; they were also working in conjunction with local authorities on the double homicide case.

University Administration

The university's administration was not truly involved before the shooting or in the planning of his counseling; only through the English department's Dr. Roy did Cho ever find help. In regards to the aftermath of the shooting, the university administration did assemble about one hour after the double homicide at the residence hall; they did decide to release the information of the incident and ask for any suspicious activity to be reported. The admin staff also called the university police as well as local police to help with the so-thought isolated incident of the double murder. The administration acted quickly to inform the other students of what had occurred but possibly more could have been done to prevent the coming danger. School should have been closed and the perimeter secure immediately in an effort to apprehend the

shooting suspect. No amount of money, technology, and human resources can guarantee members of a university community that they will never fall victim to a crime. At the same time, colleges and universities are by their very nature open-access environments where people move between and among buildings and outdoor spaces in a manner akin to the free flow and exchange of ideas, discussion, and debate, (Rasmussen et al 2008).

Changes in State and Local Law

A year after the shooting, Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., introduced legislation that would amend the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which determines how much of a student's mental health records can be disclosed by a university. Webb argued that the Virginia Tech massacre may have been prevented had the policy been more clear on when information about a mentally ill student can be shared by a university, (Friedman, 2009). The dilemma for policymakers on the federal and state levels is how to craft policies and legislation that seek to safeguard the privacy of all members of the campus community while simultaneously avoiding compromising their treatment. This must also be done without creating undue risk to the rest of the campus or wider community. A thorny question relating to K-12 records was raised by the Virginia Tech Review Panel report, which expressed hope that the issue would be more publicly and widely discussed: 18 should records indicating that a student has had psychological problems at the K-12 level be required to be submitted post-admission but prior to enrollment at a college/university? They would need to be kept strictly confidential and with restricted access unless an institution judges the student to be a potential threat to him/ herself or others. Another issue is whether college administrators coping with a troubled and potentially dangerous student should be

permitted to go to the student's parent(s) and secondary school(s), inform the parent(s) of the student's behavior, and request all available information from K-12 administrators about that student's psychiatric history, (McBain, 2008). Just two weeks after the shootings, Virginia Gov. Timothy Kaine signed an executive order that required anyone court-ordered to receive mental health treatment be added to a state database of people prohibited from buying guns, (Friedman, 2009). Many other recommendations were made in accordance to state mental health records and legal documents to be made available in a timely fashion.

Other organizations on a state and local level have banded together to have their voices heard about the stance they feel just. Students for Gun Free Schools (SGFS) reject the gun lobby's proposed solution of allowing concealed handguns on America's campuses. Bringing firearms onto university grounds is a reactive measure which would only create a higher risk environment for students and faculty. To make our campuses safer, we must focus on preventing future shootings. If we are serious about prevention, we should start with the following measures to ensure the safety of students and faculty on our campuses: 1) Recognize the warning signs; 2) Treat those who need treatment; 3) Enhance campus security; 4) Improve screening of gun purchasers; 5) Limit firepower available to shooters, and; 6) Protect universities' right to set policies regarding firearms on campus, (SGFS, 2008).

Campus Safety Procedures at Virginia Tech

Two faculties from the Virginia Tech University started to study the threat assessment of their school and though a federal grant was able to create a process for threat assessment. The final demonstration project design consisted of four elements (1) a mental health assessment consisting of a survey of students and employees regarding post-trauma symptoms, (2) the

creation of multi-disciplinary threat assessment task force, (3) the creation of case management functions for employees and students, and (4) the dissemination of demonstration project results, (Randazzo & Plummer, 2009). Debate was generated about whether Virginia Tech should have one threat assessment team that would handle all cases regarding at-risk behavior—whether in students, faculty, or staff—or should have two teams, one to handle student cases and another to handle employee cases. Virginia Tech opted to establish one team to handle all cases, whether they involve students, faculty, staff, or visitors.

VT now offers students and faculty immediate news about an emergency situation through posts and texts to cell phones. At the time of the shooting phones with internet capabilities were not so common, however now technology have proven to be a vital part in keeping students and faculty connected and informed. VT also installed camera systems with new technology capabilities as well as speaker systems campus wide to send out sirens and alert messages as soon as possible.

Campus Safety Procedures at Other Campuses

On the campuses of Utah's universities, students now have the right to carry concealed weapons into classrooms, and some seem to feel safer because of that misguided policy, (Brantlinger, 2007). Many believe that the answer is not fighting guns with more guns, however if someone is going to get a gun (even illegally) than people should protect themselves. Officials at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, St. Norbert College and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College said they have taken a hard look at their campus safety measures since Virginia Tech, pushing for new initiatives to quiet any questions of "Could that happen here?" Each campus deals with safety a bit differently. UW-Green Bay, for example, has armed police

officers on campus. St. Norbert and NWTTC rely on private security and students to keep their campuses safe. The college has installed security cameras at each of its sites, including Sturgeon Bay and Marinette, implemented electronic door access that requires key cards and added distress buttons around campus where students can get help, (Boyd, 2009). Many schools have hire patrols for campuses to run 24 hours a day. Another safety precaution is the use and installation of sirens and speakers that could be used in an instant to alert students of an emergency and give directions as well. “The way to treat [the threat of campus violence] is the same way one treats something like fire safety,” says Bridgewater State College psychology professor Elizabeth Englander, one of the report’s four authors. “You let people know you are thinking about it and that you know how to react.” Communication is key and, in an age when students get the bulk of their campus information online, the Internet must play a vital role in a college’s security communications. “This generation is apt to go first to the website,” Englander says. “It’s an important avenue,” (Franzosa, 2009).

Personal Observations

One lesson learned from this situation is that professors should absolutely take problem students to a higher authority and follow up. Cho was reported by some of his professors for strange and conflicting behavior but nothing was really done. The head of the English department was left to fight all the fires set by other professors and it was not possible to appease Cho; furthermore he needed counseling from a professional and Dr. Roy could not provide the help Cho needed. Professors should also note that students often write what they feel or make plans in writing, this is what Cho did and it was not taken seriously by all, even his evaluator in the mental hearing said he was not a danger to himself or others. If this information was made available to the evaluators, maybe the evaluator would have come to a different consensus and

had Cho hospitalized and found immediately counseling help. Another lesson to be learned is that as educators we need to make information available to health care providers and counselors. Professors and students should take from this event that nothing is seemingly too small not to report, if the students who were scared out of by Giovanni's class by Cho reported that, things might have turned out differently. The main lesson to be learned is that avoiding conflict is not the best option. Many teachers and students avoided Cho because of his strange actions and lack of social ability; this should have triggered more of a response from psychologist and flagged him for assessment immediately. Now, schools have a better assessment program in place to deal with these students accordingly. Avoiding conflict does not lend itself to sorting itself out in all situations; conflict is often needed to find wherein the problem lies.

Conclusion

The atrocity that occurred on the Virginia Tech campus was the most frightening thing that has occurred on a college campus in memory. However, we now know it may have been prevented in the light of Cho's personality and previous mental health instability. Cho had several altercations with his professors and they were well-known in the English department, students that knew him were scared of him and often started avoiding class. Cho was very intelligent and did well in school but not socially. If more effort was put into his anti-social behavioral problems and he was consistently treated for his selective mutism, Cho may have been more socially adjusted. Instead he was strangely quiet except for his angry emails and arguments with professors, his professors did not understand how to deal with Cho. Through more thorough threat assessments campus wide and teacher crisis training programs, instructors will better know how to deal with conflict from difficult students and possibly avert another disaster. The Virginia Tech shootings has a perpetrator, a young student that was mocked, made

fun of, and socially tortured through school; the blame is not solitary but collective. Cho was let down by his family, teachers, roommates, and very few friends; he sought help on his own but fell into despair. This type of conflict should be studied comprehensively so that the most can be gained from this experience and not allowed to happen again.

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