

Book Reviews

Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings

**Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, David J. Harding,
Jal Mehta, and Wendy Roth**
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Reviewed by Ruth Grant Kalischuk

The stark cover of Katherine Newman and colleagues' *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, with the word "rampage" in bold red and a picture of a person in obvious distress, shockingly announces the serious subject of this timely and provocative book.

Responding to a congressional call from the National Academy of Sciences, Newman, a Harvard sociologist, and four doctoral students offer a new theory to explain the social roots of school rampage shootings, a new genre of violence that has attracted boys exclusively. Rampage shootings, unlike revenge killings, are defined "by the fact that they involve attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random.... These explosions are attacks on whole institutions — schools, pecking orders among youth, and communities as a whole. Shooters choose schools as the site for the rampage because they are the heart and soul of public life in small towns" (p. 15). The authors maintain that the roots of school shootings are deeply embedded within predominately rural communities. Small towns, known for strong ties that span generations, are often the spawning ground for school rampage shootings. Such violence exposes the vulnerable, dark side of ordinary life in smaller communities. School rampage shootings terrify us because they challenge our most cherished and firmly held beliefs about childhood, home, and safety in our local communities.

The authors depart from traditional explanations of this rare and complex phenomenon. This scholarly work is based on a study that involved 163 interviews with residents of two American communities devastated by school rampage shootings. The book is organized into three parts. Part 1 sets the stage in terms of understanding these violent explosions and the school shooters who engage in deadly activities. Through detailed vignettes, the reader is able to gain a sense of the central characters in the book; the authors leave little to the imagination in describing the deadly deeds. Further enriching the book, with clarity and precision, Newman and colleagues present a broad social perspective based on

input from a variety of important sources: the shooters, families, friends, students, teachers, administrators, lawyers, court officials, psychologists, media personnel, and congregational members. Stepping beyond current knowledge in the field, the authors clearly and succinctly articulate how popular explanations such as mental illness, family problems, bullying, gun availability, and living within a culture of violence fail to account for rampage shootings that leave individuals, families, and communities forever changed.

Part 2 provides the contextual backdrop integral to any understanding of school rampage shootings. The authors describe how the “dark side of organizations” (p. 79) (e.g., schools) inadvertently promote “structural secrecy” (p. 80), which subsequently allows school shootings to fall under the radar screen. Moreover, they expose the underbelly of social capital, commonly viewed as an asset, especially within rural communities. They describe how the narratives of rural people often obscure severe problems that are festering just below the surface. The authors also stress the importance of understanding the stranglehold of current adolescent culture, and hence the reasons why youths do not tell others about what they know in relation to planned violence.

Part 3 addresses the blame and forgiveness that invariably follow school shootings, as well as the many and varied difficulties that survivors encounter in picking up the pieces of their shattered lives. For example, the complex issue of ownership of the problem is discussed. Importantly, rejecting a purely psychological standpoint, the authors offer a five-factor theory to explain cases involving the adolescent social hierarchy specific to rampage shootings. It is worth noting that this theory is tested in relation to two data sets, one compiled by the Violence Prevention Division of the (US) National Center for Injury Prevention and the other by the US Secret Service and the US Department of Education.

This well-illustrated book contains photographs of the shooters, victims, parents, and extended family members; these are indeed a powerful addition. Further, an extensive set of figures and tables provides a wealth of critical and relevant information. For example, one table includes data relating to rampage school shootings from 1974 to 2002, both within the United States and abroad. In addition, an extensive appendix details methodological considerations, while a voluminous and comprehensive set of notes provides important background information.

The strength of a theory lies in its usefulness for increasing our collective understanding of a complex phenomenon. In this well-crafted book, the authors increase our understanding of school rampage shootings and subsequently offer prevention and intervention strategies that could significantly reduce the incidence of such tragedies. Sobering as the thought may be, Newman and colleagues remind us that “we are all

implicated” (p. 270) in that “we help to recreate a culture that embraces a narrow, often destructive definition of masculinity” (p. 270). Although they assert that it is impossible to predict rampage shootings, they emphasize the importance of a multifaceted approach, including policy options such as restricting the number of media personnel visiting schools in the aftermath of a rampage, educating educators about trauma, and instituting short- and long-term counselling for victims of such violence. They also discuss prevention strategies such as using School Resource Officers to assist with early disclosure and encouraging youths to report threats of violence to adults who can help. The authors underscore the importance of individuals, families, and communities working together to ameliorate this socially created and deadly form of violence.

Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings is a useful resource for a broad readership, including educators and administrators, health and human service professionals, researchers, students, and the general public. Stunningly evocative, it captures the intricacies of a difficult and highly complex subject.

The findings of this needed and insightful inquiry provide hope for a better future within society.

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