

**NOTICE:** *The Classroom Avenger is a description of a hypothetical individual who has potential to be violent toward peers or others in a school setting. Like all profiles, it is a generalization and is both over- inclusive and under- inclusive: individuals who fit the description may or may not be dangerous while individuals who do not fit may nevertheless be dangerous. Any use of this composite for clinical, forensic and/or any other purpose(s) must be cautious and tempered with knowledge of the potential for both “false positive” and “false negative” errors.*

# THE CLASSROOM AVENGER\*

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In this article, the authors present a hypothetical behavioral composite of the “Classroom Avenger.” This is a depressed and suicidal, usually Caucasian, adolescent male from a rural, suburban or small community who perpetrates a non-traditional multi-victim homicide in a school or classroom setting. Unlike more conventional adolescent shooting incidents, the Classroom Avenger’s motive is personal vengeance and achievement of notoriety rather than being drug, inner city, or juvenile gang related. Classroom Avenger shootings are evolving over time in the direction of greater complexity and sophistication and a media based copycat or contagion effect is almost certainly present. Seasonality is also a factor with 13 of the 16 incidents studied occurring between December and May. The article includes a review of a series of recent Classroom Avenger style shooting incidents as well as the results of the psychological evaluation of an individual suspected of planning a school shooting spree that was thwarted by authorities.

## **The Classroom Avenger**

The following report is a preliminary analysis and discussion of a series of non-traditional shooting incidents which occurred in United States middle and high schools during the period of

1993 through 2001. These shooting incidents are regarded as non-traditional in that they did not appear to be related to juvenile gangs, the inner city, minority or ethnic status, turf warfare, drugs, or more conventional criminal activity such as armed robbery or extortion. Instead these shootings, most of which were multiple victim homicides, appear to be crimes of vengeance similar in many regards to episodes of workplace violence perpetrated by adult subjects described as “Workplace Avengers.” With adult Workplace Avengers, the short-term precipitant is discipline and/or termination/rejection by the employer; the primary motive is vengeance; and the action is a premeditated shooting spree with co-workers and supervisors as target victims (Depue, 1993). In the case of adolescent Classroom Avengers the short-term precipitant is discipline by parents or authorities and/or rejection, bullying or humiliation by peers or girlfriends; the central motive is also vengeance; and the action is a premeditated shooting spree with parents, fellow students and/or faculty/school administrators as target victims.

Initially there will be a review of 16 school/classroom shooting incidents that share a variety of common features and thus serve as data for the creation of the Classroom Avenger profile. Subsequently there will be a presentation in tabular form of categories of information and variables thought to be relevant to this issue. This will be followed by a narrative description of the Classroom Avenger with a focus on four primary areas: Demographic and Dispositional, Historic, Clinical, and Contextual (Borum, 1996). Lastly there will be an edited version of an actual psychological evaluation of a possible Classroom Avenger whose actions

were thwarted.

### **Incident Descriptions**

Below in chronological order are summaries of a series of, what for the purposes of this investigation are characterized as, Classroom Avenger style shooting incidents. Many of the cases have not yet been fully adjudicated so the actual guilt or innocence of the alleged perpetrators is still to be determined.

**January 18, 1993 - Grayson, KY:** Gary "Scott" Pennington, age 17, walked into English class at East Carter High School, shot and killed his teacher with a .38 caliber revolver and held the class hostage. He shot and killed a janitor who attempted to intervene and threatened to shoot another teacher. His motive was vengeance against the teacher and the weapon belonged to a family member. Scott was an honors student from a poor socioeconomic background and divorced parents. Prior to the incident he presented a book report on Stephen King's novel *Rage*, about a student who shoots his teacher in front of the class, and wrote in his journal "They don't give out awards for what I have planned."

**January 23, 1995 - Redlands, CA:** John Sirola, age 13, was reprimanded by the principal at Sacred Heart School, walked home, got his sawed-off shotgun, returned to school, shot and wounded the principal, then killed himself. His motive was vengeance and the weapon was acquired from home.

**October 12, 1995 - Blackville, SC:** Toby Sincino, age 16, shot and killed a teacher, another teacher died of a heart attack during the shooting and then Toby killed himself. The day before the shooting, Toby was suspended for making an obscene hand gesture and returned the next day searching for the principal.

**November 15, 1995 - Lynnville, TN:** Jamie Rouse, age 17, walked into Richland High School, shot and killed a teacher and a student and wounded another teacher. His motive was vengeance and the weapon, a hunting rifle, was given to him by his father for his birthday. The day before the shooting

he had been in a traffic accident with fellow students (not victims). The incident angered him. He told a friend of his plan prior to the shooting.

**February 2, 1996 - Moses Lake, WA:** Barry Loukaitais, age 14, entered his algebra class at Frontier Junior High School armed with a rifle, shot and killed two students and a teacher and wounded a third student. In addition to the rifle, he had two handguns. He was an honors student. Prior to the incident he told a friend it would be "pretty cool" to go on a killing spree like in the movie "Natural Born Killers," and he wrote a poem about murder for class.

**February 19, 1997 - Bethel, AK:** Evan Ramsey, age 16, walked into the Bethel Regional High School lobby, chased students through the halls and then opened fire with a shotgun. He shot and killed the principal and a student and wounded two students. The motive was vengeance against the principal for disciplinary action and against the deceased student for picking on him. Prior to the incident he told friends of his plan and threatened to bring a gun to school.

**October 1, 1997 - Pearl, MS -** Luke Woodham, age 16, stabbed his mother to death at home then went to Pearl High School where he shot and killed two students (one of whom was his ex-girlfriend) and wounded seven other students with a .30-30 hunting rifle. Six other students, allegedly involved in a satanic cult with Luke, were charged with conspiracy to commit murder. The motive was vengeance against his ex-girlfriend for breaking up with him, and against fellow students for picking on him. He was an honors student from a middle class family and his parents were divorced. Prior to the incident he tortured and killed his dog by beating her with a club, stuffed her in a garbage bag, set her on fire, and threw her in a pond.

**December 1, 1997 - West Paducah, KY:** Michael Carneal, age 14, opened fire on a prayer meeting assembled in the hallway at Heath High School. He shot and killed three students and wounded five others with a .22 caliber semi-automatic pistol. The motive was vengeance and the pistol, two

rifles, two shotguns and ammunition were stolen from a neighbor's garage. He was a B student from an upper middle class family. Prior to the incident he warned friends to stay away from the prayer group and that "something big was going to happen." He talked about a scene in the movie "The Basketball Diaries" in which the lead character pulls a shotgun and opens fire on the class. Michael casually mentioned killing others and taking over the school.

**December 15, 1997 - Stamps, AR:** Joseph "Colt" Todd, age 14, concealed himself in a wooded area on school grounds, shot and wounded two students as they entered Stamps High School. The motive was vengeance against peers for picking on him. He used a .22 caliber rifle.

**March 24, 1998 - Jonesboro, AR:** Mitchell Johnson, age 13, and Andrew "Drew" Golden, age 11, pulled a fire alarm, concealed themselves in a wooded area near Westside Middle School, and opened fire on classmates and teachers as they exited the building. They shot and killed four students and a teacher and wounded nine students and a teacher. The motive was vengeance as one of the wounded students was an ex-girlfriend of Mitchell. All the victims were female. The boys had stolen four handguns and three rifles from Drew's grandfather and acquired a .38 caliber Derringer, .38 caliber snub-nose, and .357 magnum from Drew's father to use during the shooting. Prior to the incident, Mitchell talked about suicide, warned that "he had a lot of killing to do," pulled a knife on a student, and told a friend "Tomorrow you find out if you live or die."

**April 25, 1998 - Edinboro, PA:** Andrew Wurst, age 14, walked into an eighth grade dance at Parker Middle School, shot and killed one teacher, and wounded two students and a teacher with a .25 caliber handgun belonging to his father. He was a poor student, had a troubled home life and combative parents. Prior to the incident, Andrew told friends of his desire to kill people and commit suicide, and showed a friend a gun kept in a dresser drawer.

**May 21, 1998 - Springfield, OR:** Kipland "Kip"

Kinkel, age 15, shot and killed both his parents at home, drove to school and opened fire on students in the Thurston High School cafeteria with a .22 caliber semi-automatic rifle and two handguns. He shot and killed two students and wounded 23 others. The motive was vengeance toward other students for teasing him, toward his parents for confiscating his guns, and toward the school for expelling him. The day before the shooting, Kip was expelled for bringing a gun to school and arrested for possession of a stolen firearm. He comes from a middle class background. Both his parents were school teachers. He had a history of talking about killing people, bragging about torturing animals, building bombs, and setting off explosives. Prior to the incident, he gave a speech in class about how to build a pipe bomb and wrote in his diary that he had "plans to kill everybody."

**April 20, 1999 - Littleton, CO:** Eric Harris, age 18, and Dylan Klebold, age 17, opened fire on students and faculty at Columbine High School, targeting athletes and minorities. They killed 12 students and one teacher and then shot themselves. There were 23 other students injured in the shooting spree. Police found over 50 explosive devices in or around the school and suspect that other individuals may have been involved. The teenagers were members of a group of outcasts known as the "Trench Coat Mafia."

**April 28, 1999 - Taber, AB, Canada:** an unidentified 14 year-old student of W.R. Myers High School opened fire on students with a .22 caliber sawed-off hunting rifle. The boy hit two of the 400 students attending the Canadian school critically wounding one and killing the other. He was wearing a long, dark coat that had been altered to conceal his weapon and which may have been inspired by those worn in the Columbine incident. He had been fascinated by the Columbine shooting and a copycat syndrome appears evident. Classmates acquainted with the shooter labeled him as an "outcast who was teased by others." Not unlike the incidences in the States, the young, Caucasian male came from a rural community of a middle class background. In addition, he was an overachiever who actually became bored with the ease of his

course work and, because of this, he opted for a home-schooling program. Before the shooting, he displayed the weapon to other students and stated that “something big was going to happen.” The episode ended when the school principal challenged the gunman allowing the resource officer to tackle and disarm him.

**May 20, 1999 - Conyers, GA:** Anthony “T.J.” Solomon, age 15, armed with two guns, opened fire on students at Heritage High School. He wounded six students, then pointed the gun to his own head, but did not shoot himself. The incident occurred

one week after his girlfriend broke up with him. Fellow students reported that he “wanted to do this all year.”

**March 5, 2001 – Santee CA:** Charles Andy Williams, age 15, described by peers as “a scrawny guy...people called a geek, nerd, or dork,” shot and killed two students and wounded 13 others at Santana High School with a gun he brought from home. He repeatedly disclosed his intentions to initiate a shooting spree “...like Columbine,” to other students and an adult prior to the incident, but authorities were not notified.

Table 1

**Demographics of the Classroom Avenger**

Demographics	Characteristics	# of Total (18 Shooters 16 Incidents)	Percentage
Sex	Male	18	100 %
Race	Caucasian	17	94%
Age	Preadolescent/Teenage (11-18)	18	100 %
Socioeconomic class	Middle class/Blue collar	18	100 %
Geographic Region	South Northwest	8* 5	53 % 33 %
Season	December to May	13	82 %
Population Area	Rural (city < 50,000)	16	100 %

\* Seven of 15 Classroom Avenger attacks occurred within a 350-mile radius in five southern states, four of which were contiguous

Table 2

**Perpetrator Information**

Characteristic	# Yes	# No	# Unknown	Percentage
Explicit threats prior to incident?	18	0	0	100 %
Gun from home?	15	3	0	94 %
Precipitant discipline/ rejection, bullying	18	0	0	100%
Interest in military/ occult/ weaponry?	18	0	0	100 %
Social outcast?	18	0	0	100 %
Teased/ felt victimized?	18	0	0	100 %
Suicidal?	18	0	0	100 %
Documented hx of severe mental illness?	0	18	0	0 %
Documented hx of violence or police involvement?	2	18	0	11 %
Chronic anger?	18	0	0	100 %
Interests in violence? (TV, movies, music, etc.)	18	0	0	100 %

Table 3

**Victim Information**

Incident	Total Dead	Total Wounded	Student Victims	Teacher, Principal, Staff Victims	Parent Victims	Commit Suicide	Sex of Victim
Grayson KY	2	0	0	2	0	No	1F 1M
Redlands CA	1	1	0	1	0	Yes	1M
Blackville SC	3	0	0	2	0	Yes	2UK
Lynnville TN	2	1	1	2	0	No	3F
Moses Lake WA	3	1	3	1	0	No	2F 2M
Bethel AK	2	2	3	1	0	No	2M 2UK
Pearl MS	3	7	9 (1 ex-gf)	0	1 (ma)	No	3F 7UK
West Paducah KY	3	5	8	0	0	No	6F 1M 1UK
Stamps AR	0	2	2	0	0	No	1F 1M
Jonesboro AR	5	10	13 (1 ex-gf)	2	0	No	14F 1M
Edinboro PA	1	3	2	2	0	No	1M 3UK
Springfield OR	4	23	25	0	2 (ma+fa)	No	1F 3M 23UK
Littleton CO	15	23	35	1	0	Yes	4F 9M 23UK
Taber CAN	1	1	2	0	0	No	2M
Conyers GA	0	6	6	0	0	No	2F 4M
Santee CA	2	13	12	1	0	No	2M 4F 9UK
<b>TOTALS</b>	47	98	121	15	3	4	41F 30M 70UK 145 total

### **Classroom Avenger Profile**

The following hypothetical portrayal is of an individual who may have a well above average potential to behave in a lethally violent manner toward peers and/or parental/authority figures in a classroom or school setting. As a descriptive composite it is not based on any type of statistical or actuarial model of prediction. Instead, it is both subjective and impressionistic and it is partially informed by a limited number of cases and an equally limited amount of fragmentary data and unconfirmed anecdotal accounts derived from official police reports and the popular media. The construction of this profile was based, to an even greater extent, on a review of relevant literature about prediction of violence, risk factors associated with violence, and the personality characteristics of violent offenders (Borum, 1996; DeBecker, 1997; Grisso & Tomkins, 1996; Hare, 1996; Monahan, 1981; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Monahan & Steadman, 1996; Stoff, Breiling & Maser, 1997). Aside from the psychological case study contained in the final portion of this paper, no alleged perpetrators of Classroom Avenger type incidents were seen or personally interviewed. Many of those individuals identified earlier who are not already deceased are facing pending criminal charges and are thus unavailable to be evaluated at this time. Assertions made in this profile should be regarded as probability statements of undetermined validity and they should be interpreted with caution. Any attempt to utilize this behavioral profile in a clinical or forensic setting should be cautious and tempered with a clear understanding of the potential for both "false positive" and "false negative" errors of prediction. Adolescents who do not in any way remotely resemble the Classroom Avenger profile may, nonetheless, be potentially violent in a school setting while the opposite is also certainly true. Like the adult workplace avenger the murderous actions of the Classroom Avengers are almost always their first act of extreme or lethal violence. The common first and second rank predictors (Dietz, 1982) such as past history of homicide or forcible rape are not present, making the already daunting task of forecasting future violence in these scenarios all the more difficult.

### ***Demographic and Dispositional Factors***

The Classroom Avenger is a physically healthy Caucasian male high school or middle school student between the ages of 11 and 18 with an average age of 16. Socioeconomic background is typically in the blue collar to middle class range and he is more likely than not to reside in a rural area or suburban area with a population under 50 thousand (see Table 1). (Seven of the 16 Classroom Avenger attacks described previously occurred within a 350-mile radius in five southern states, four of which are contiguous).

Family background and relationships, which may appear superficially normal, are often quite dysfunctional. Divorce, separation and/or frequent episodes of intense friction between parents, and parents and child, is the norm and parents are at risk for becoming the Classroom Avenger's first victims (see Table 3). Explicit or covert anger and hostility are the prevailing emotions in the family, accompanied by parent-child power struggles and battles over control. Fathers tend to be absent or minimally involved in parenting. Whether or not explicit physical or sexual abuse of the children occurs in these families is unknown. Discipline, however, is overly harsh and applied inconsistently. One or more of the Classroom Avengers first-degree relatives may be mentally ill, personality disordered, or a substance abuser. Many of these young men are familiar and even proficient in the use of firearms, their families invariably own guns and the weapon used in the shooting spree almost always comes from home (see Table 2).

Physical appearance is generally unremarkable though military attire may be a preferred mode of dress and they may be small in stature and physically unimposing. Tattoos, body piercing, and exotic hairstyles are probably not present. Based on looks and outward appearances, many adults view the Classroom Avenger as perfectly normal. These individuals, however, have a negative body image and view themselves as physically unattractive. Peers often share this opinion and they are frequently perceived by other teenagers as "geeks" or "nerds."

### ***Historical Factors***

As infants and young children these indi-

viduals do not in any way appear to be severely handicapped, disabled, or mentally impaired. However, they are often regarded as colicky or temperamental and achievement of developmental milestones such as crawling, walking, talking in complete sentences, and toilet training is somewhat delayed. There is an early history of problems with bonding or social attachments and they are perceived as unaffectionate, standoffish, aloof and overly fearful of strangers. Early indications of antisocial tendencies such as excessive lying and deceit, bed wetting, fire setting and animal abuse may also be present. If there are siblings, relationships between them are fractious beyond the typical parameters of sibling rivalry. They do not play well with other children and temper tantrums, when they occur, are particularly fierce.

Most adults regard these children as normal since their readily observable behavior is usually not extreme. However, perceptive teachers and other childcare personnel may notice subtle signs that they are somehow odd or negatively different from their peers.

As they reach adolescence they still do not show evidence of blatant mental disorders such as schizophrenia, autism, severe mood disorders or attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity. Academic performance is usually within normal limits and may even be well above average, though it shows a decline in the weeks or months preceding their violent outburst. Though covert vandalism and cunning forms of dishonesty and excessive secretiveness are common features, they do not have extensive histories of delinquency or criminality and prior significant police involvement is rare. They were not regarded by their schools as troublemakers.

Classroom Avengers are immature, introverted and socially inadequate loners who lack empathy and rarely have close friends. They often prefer the company of younger children, and, even when it is no longer age appropriate, they continue to play soldiers and G.I. Joe. If they do belong to a group, it is typically composed of other outsiders whose common bond is: a) that they too have been rejected by or alienated from mainstream teenagers and/or b) they share a common interest in some rigid, highly

eccentric and nihilistic worldview or philosophy. This belief system, which may be socio-political, militaristic, religious, or occult, provides them with a sense of validation, social support and superiority over their more conventional peers. They are intolerant of others and bored by the normal adolescent pastimes such as individual and team sports, band or glee club, and they avoid pro-social activities such as membership in special interest or church groups. School peers who do successfully participate, excel, and/or achieve positive attention as a result of involvement in these types of socially sanctioned endeavors are envied and resented, and they may end up becoming primary targets. Other teen preoccupations such as cars, dating, proms, mainstream popular music, magazines and movies and videos disinterest them. However, they may be fascinated by guns, bomb making, covert action, assassinations, and media portrayals of real or fictional violence. They are well acquainted with the "Jolly Roger Cookbook" and similar publications available on the Internet. They inappropriately seek attention by bragging to others about their interest in violence and cruelty in order to shock and impress.

### *Clinical Features*

IQ is in the average to above average range. Memory, attention, concentration, concept formation and other cognitive functions are well within normal limits, and there is no evidence of mental retardation, severe learning disability, or organically based brain disorder. Hallucinations, frank delusional beliefs, characteristic thought disorder, and other first rank signs and symptoms of psychosis or major mental illness are absent. Their cognitive style is rigid, inflexible and characterized by all or nothing thinking to an extent even beyond what is typical of most normal adolescents. Mood is significantly depressed, but this is not readily apparent to others since they do not openly complain of a subjective sense of sadness, display crying spells, or evidence vegetative signs such as insomnia, weight loss, or lack of energy. Instead, the depression is manifested through a sullen, angry irritability, seclusiveness and the "action equivalents" of depression such as: temper outburst,



destruction of property, vandalism, stubbornness, oppositionality, derogation of others, and excessive risk taking. Verbalizations such as “My life sucks” are as close as they come to acknowledging depression. The appearance of “action equivalents” tends to increase in frequency and intensity in the period of time prior to the shooting incident.

While not psychotically paranoid, these individuals are hypersensitive to criticism, anticipate rejection and are generally suspicious and distrustful of the motives of others. Blame for their own personal failures and setbacks is projected onto others and they are disinclined to accept responsibility for their own behavior and shortcomings. They prefer to think of themselves as victims of the unfairness and malevolent intent of others. They are relatively insightful youngsters who are easily frustrated and lack adequate coping skills for dealing with intense emotional states such as anger, anxiety, or embarrassment. Higher functioning and socially facile peers see them as weird, awkward, bumbling and laughably inept; thus, they may become the subject of teasing and ridicule which ultimately promotes retaliation. Self-esteem is unstable and vacillates between feelings of worthlessness and self-reproach, and narcissistic self-aggrandizement and superiority. Sexual identity confusion is beyond that found in psychologically normal adolescents and there may be a history of deviant sexual practices.

The primary motive of the Classroom Avenger’s attack is vengeance, while a secondary motive is achievement of notoriety. They fantasize about revenge and retaliatory triumphs over their adversaries and a series of protracted mental and behavioral rehearsals of their acts of violence begin well in advance of the actual attack. In their fantasies they select victims and witnesses, the time, location, means and course of action. They surveil target locations, preselect shooting sites and test fire weapons and explosive devices. They are planning an act of predatory aggression that is selective, calculating and premeditated. These acts contain elements of sophistication and creativity that are totally absent from the purely impulsive acts of suddenly erupting rage and loss of control typical of affective aggression (Meloy, 1988). All three elements of the Menninger Triad (Men-

ninger, 1938) are present: they wish to die (suicide), they wish to kill (homicide), and they wish to be killed (victim precipitated homicide or “suicide by cop”). The psychiatric diagnoses of a prototype Classroom Avenger are:

Axis I: # 311 Atypical Depression

Axis II: # 301.9 Mixed Personality Disorder with paranoid, antisocial and narcissistic features

These individuals resist participation in mental health treatment and they are able to “finesse” their way through mental health evaluations by denying symptoms. They are particularly adept at concealing their violence potential from mental health professionals who are not forensically trained. In over half the cases reviewed in this study, the subject had recent contact with a mental health professional prior to the shooting incident. These mental health clinicians did not perceive imminent risk for violence or invoke a “duty to warn.”

### *Contextual Variables*

Within two weeks to 24 hours prior to the shooting rampage, the Classroom Avenger has been exposed to multiple psycho-social stressors, precipitants or triggering events. These precipitants, which may be either real or imagined, involve losses or rejections, receipt of censure or discipline, and/or experiences of frustration or humiliation which are experienced in close proximity to one another. Specific triggering events include: parental reprimand or discipline; reprimand or discipline imposed by school authorities; an incident of public ridicule; treatment perceived as unfair or demeaning; loss of a real or imagined relationship particularly with a female love object; hostile rejection or taunting, teasing, or bullying by peers.

Another short-term precipitant can be a highly publicized Classroom Avenger style incident, particularly one in close geographic proximity, of which the individual is aware. Adolescents seem particularly prone to a mimic, contagion, or “copy-cat” response after exposure to high profile, novel, and innovative criminal or self-destructive activities (Phillips, 1987). Certain fictional accounts of violence as portrayed in books, TV, music or film can have a similar effect (National Television Violence Study, 1994 - 1995). These real or fictionalized incidents of violence influence the Classroom Aven-

ger by way of a modeling effect that creates disinhibition and, in a sense, gives the individual permission to proceed with his plans.

Prolific journal or letter writing, which may be on a computer, in which details of the impending crime are spelled out, or homemade videotapes, often precede these kinds of crimes and can be highly predictive of an imminent attack. Writings and drawings convey a sense of despair, violence and alienation. **Verbal or written expressions of intent to kill and/or commit suicide or do something highly dramatic within the very near future, when made in this context and in the presence of the other primary variables of this profile, are highly predictive of an imminent attack. They should prompt appropriate intervention including law enforcement involvement.** In that regard, these verbalizations are a differentiating identifier or hallmark of the Classroom Avenger. They frequently come in the form of threats, assertions of intent, boasts or warnings. Differentiating identifier statements

include: "Tomorrow is the big day - something really big is going to happen;" or "Stay away from the cafeteria tomorrow morning because that's when I'm going to pull a Columbine;" "Soon I'm going to get her and I plan to kill the others, too." Some of these pre-incident verbalizations are highly specific and may identify the targets, location and time of the attack; "Mr. Jones will die this afternoon when he comes in the library." Statements indicating true intent to harm are usually easy to distinguish from the joking remarks of high functioning students who say, for example, "If I don't get a date, I'll die," or "If he doesn't give me an A on my paper I'll shoot him."

No single predictor variable considered in this profile can forecast the occurrence of a school or classroom shooting event. In the absence of contradictory information it is tentatively assumed that the effect of these variables is additive - the more Classroom Avenger characteristics, traits, or indicators an individual has, the greater the probability that he may act violently in this fashion.

Table 4

**Exclusionary Criteria: *Characteristics NOT associated with Classroom Avengers***

<p>Female          Resides in large city          Minority Status          Openly homosexual or bisexual          Membership and active participation in the following activities:              Mainstream religious groups/churches              Student government              Drama, chorus, dance, other performing arts              Boy scouts/eagle scouts              ROTC              Individual and team sports          Prosocial hobbies and interests          Attends private school          Humorous - “class clown”          Outgoing, friendly          Well liked by teachers, “teacher’s pet”          Close relationships with teachers or other adults in authority          Has steady girlfriend          Popular among peers - student leader          Prosocial leader          Recipient of academic or public service awards          Acceptance to military academy          Recipient of scholarships</p>	<p>Positive and close relationships with siblings          Positive and close relationships with parents          Volunteerism          School spirit          Pacifist          Support for gun control          Specific career aspirations          Enthusiasm about present and future          No guns in home          No interest in violence          Drug/alcohol abuse          Body piercing/tattoos          Physical handicap          Mental retardation          Severe learning disability          Severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder          Consistently poor academic performance          Severe and evident conduct disorder          Well-documented history of extensive criminal/delinquent behavior          Chronic truancy          Recurrent extreme belligerence towards teachers and school authorities          Frequent physical fights</p>
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Table 5

**Inclusionary Criteria: *Characteristics Associated with Classroom Avengers***

<p>Male  Caucasian  Middle Class  Average age 16  Rural or small community residence in south or northwest  Physically healthy  Dysfunctional family (superficially normal)  Family anger and power struggles  Poor parent and sibling relationships  Loner/social outcast  Member of alienated group  Attends public school  Family history of mental illness, personality disorders or substance abuse  Guns in the home, proficiency with firearms  Appearance of normality to adults  Negative self-image and unstable self-esteem  “Geeks” or “nerds” who are rejected by mainstream students  Diminutive, physically unimposing  No physical handicaps, disabilities, mental retardation or severe mental illness  As infants - colicky, temperamental, delayed milestones  Problems with attachment and bonding  Average to above average IQ  No history of serious school/conduct problems  Covert vandalism and dishonesty</p>	<p>Distrustful and secretive with adults in authority  Immature and socially inadequate, rejected, teased and bullied by peers  No participation in prosocial groups or “normal” pastimes - narrow interests  Narcissistic attitude of superiority  Projects blame  Sensitive to criticism  Interest in real and fictional violence in the media  Atypical depression with action equivalents  Mixed personality disorder with paranoid, antisocial, and narcissistic features  Motive vengeance and achievement of power/status  Violent fantasies  Premeditation/planning/surveillance of targets  Target female and high functioning students  Stalking of females  Menninger Triad (suicidal, homicidal, suicide by cop)  Recent multiple psychosocial stressors including rejection, discipline, humiliation  Copycat influence  Inappropriate communications of intent, journal writing about violence and alienation  Recent decline in attendance and performance in school and recent change in appearance  Lack of empathy, intolerant of others  Brag about violence and cruelty</p>
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## **Forensic Psychological Evaluation**

This final section contains a redacted version of a psychological evaluation recently conducted by Drs. McGee and DeBernardo of an individual displaying multiple features of a Classroom Avenger. Fortunately, in this case any violence this individual might have perpetrated in his school was thwarted by school authorities and law enforcement intervention.

### ***Identifying Information***

Name: Norman

Date of Birth: 2/13/83

Age: 15 years

Date Evaluated: 1998

Referral Source: County Court and Police Dept.

Techniques: Medical record review, clinical interviews, Millon Adolescent Personality

Inventory (Millon, 1982), police report

Reason for Referral: Evaluate dangerousness to self and others

### ***Relevant History***

Norman is a 15 year-old, Caucasian male who recently attended the eighth grade at Very Rural Middle School. He was adopted at age four and currently lives with his adoptive parents and a younger brother in Very Rural County, Southern State. His 21 year-old biological brother resides in a psychiatric treatment center due to chronic mental illness. Norman has a history of privation, neglect, physical and sexual abuse prior to age four as well as prenatal drug and alcohol exposure. He may have had a mild variant of fetal alcohol syndrome as his biological mother died of complications of alcoholism and his biological father was also heavily involved in substance abuse. The adoptive family appears unremarkable but some information they have provided about Norman and his behavior at home appears to contain significant contradictions.

Norman was admitted by order of the court following an arrest for carrying a gun onto school property. According to the police report, the principal of Very Rural Middle School was advised by anonymous rumor that Norman had a handgun in

his locker. The principal searched Norman's locker and found an unloaded 9 mm automatic handgun and a floral bouquet in a shopping bag. Norman was interviewed by police and revealed that he had a fully loaded magazine for the handgun in his homeroom desk. Norman claimed that the gun and ammunition belonged to his father and reported that he brought the gun to school to give to his friend, Palmer. Palmer informed police that Norman had shown him the gun earlier that morning. Palmer was frightened by this and he expressed concern to police that Norman may have been planning on injuring him because Palmer was now dating Norman's ex-girlfriend, Lauren. Palmer and Lauren both reported to police that Norman had told them in the recent past that he planned on getting a gun and shooting himself because he was distraught about the relationship between Palmer and Lauren. Palmer also claimed that Norman had told him that he was planning on shooting someone with "six letters in their name." Based on this information, police speculate that Norman planned a murder-suicide involving himself and one or both of the two other teenagers. The bouquet of flowers is viewed as a prop in a ritualized murder-suicide scenario. Norman was expelled from school for one year, arrested and spent a night in police custody prior to this evaluation.

Upon admission, Norman was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Personality Disorder NOS (with antisocial and narcissistic features) and continued on Serzone, an antidepressant, which was originally prescribed to him as an outpatient. According to his parents, Norman has been increasingly depressed, isolative, and uncommunicative for the past six months.

This is Norman's first psychiatric hospitalization. For the past year and a half, he had been attending an outpatient after-school program that included counseling and medication management. According to his parents, therapy was originally initiated because Norman was engaging in bizarre, and potentially harmful autoerotic activity. Norman was evaluated at an outpatient child guidance

clinic in 1997 to rule out learning disabilities and cognitive deficits because his parents were concerned about his difficulties communicating. The results of that assessment suggest that Norman does not have a learning disability and has an average IQ. Norman's difficulty communicating was apparently not due to a cognitive deficit but rather attributed to anxiety or difficulty effectively dealing with emotionally charged situations.

Norman is an average student and he has a history of shoplifting, stealing, lying, and anger control problems. He has no formal legal history prior to the recent charge and no documented history of substance use. According to school records, he has been in several minor altercations with peers (shoving, pushing) in the past few years but has never been suspended.

### *Interview*

Norman presents as a casually, though appropriately dressed, short, pudgy and otherwise unremarkable looking young man with short brown hair and glasses. His manner was defensive and guarded while mood was sullen. He denied and minimized past behavior and his answers to specific inquiries regarding the events that led to his arrest appeared well rehearsed and implausible. He was oriented to person, place, and time. He was somewhat inarticulate and speech was minimal and lacked spontaneity. His recent and remote memory appeared intact. However, he seemed to purposely withhold some information about his recent activities. Concentration and attention were mildly impaired. Although a formal intellectual assessment was not conducted, based on vocabulary and general fund of knowledge his intelligence level appeared to be in the average range. This estimate is consistent with previous cognitive testing results (Wechsler Full Scale IQ = 104, Verbal IQ = 98, Performance IQ = 111). His thought processes were logical and relevant with no evidence of psychosis; hallucinations and delusions were absent. His judgment, insight, and impulse control are poor by history and he denied suicidal or homicidal ideation, intent, or plan. Despite the serious circumstances of his incarceration, he presented himself as

rather calm and indifferent. Mood was not noticeably depressed and he said he felt "okay."

Norman claimed that he brought the gun to school because someone had asked him to. He denied knowledge of the reason anyone wanted the gun and stated unconvincingly that he "didn't ask." When confronted on this issue, Norman replied, "I didn't know at the time, but I've recently heard from other people that this guy wanted the gun to shoot a teacher or maybe his parents." Norman stated that he "wasn't thinking" and the act of bringing the gun to school was "stupid and dangerous," but these statements did not appear sincere. Norman admitted that he was angry with Palmer because Palmer told the principal about the gun and was lying about him and spreading rumors. Norman denied anger toward his ex-girlfriend who he described as his "best friend." He reported that he did not intend to hurt her. When confronted about his friend's remarks about his recent suicidal ideation, he denied ever feeling suicidal yet described an anti-suicide pact that he and his ex-girlfriend made a few weeks ago. The police reported that Norman, Palmer, and Lauren were friends of two Very Rural Middle School teenagers who committed suicide within the past 12 months. Norman was angry that he was unable to talk to Palmer, his ex-girlfriend or the principal due to restriction placed on him by the court. According to the police, Norman is immature, socially isolative, fascinated with the military, and still plays with soldiers and GI Joe despite his age.

Norman denied a history of fights, anger problems, family conflict or problems with depression. He presented himself as free of worry and attributed the recent incident to him acting "stupid." He denied plans to harm anyone and appeared to disregard the seriousness of this act. Although Norman was aware of the recent incidents of school shootings in other areas of the country, he claimed to be only vaguely aware of them through the media.

While confined, Norman wrote letters expressing his love for his ex-girlfriend and intense anger toward Palmer.

### *Test Results*

Personality test results appear valid. Adoles-

cents with similar personality test profiles tend to be overly dependent, self-critical and display an intense fear of separation from those who provide support. When significant relationships become insecure and unreliable, these teenagers experience increased moodiness, periods of futility and dejection, episodes of anxiety and occasional impulsive and angry outbursts. While usually submissive and cooperative, the profile suggests that Norman has recently become unpredictable, irritable, and pessimistic and feels mistreated. Notable is an inability to modulate emotions, an over anxiousness about minor matters, increasing conflict over his emotional dependency, and growing dissatisfaction with his physical appearance and achievements. Feeling unattractive, adolescents with this profile may compensate either by assuming a false posture of masculine toughness or withdrawing and becoming a social isolate. An inability to regulate emotional controls, the feeling of being misunderstood and an erratic moodiness all contribute to a growing state of tension and depression.

### ***Summary and Conclusions***

Based on Norman's current mental status, clinical presentation, psychological test results and past history, he can be considered a very high risk for continued inappropriate and threatening behavior which may include carrying weapons. He is a moderate to high risk for suicide or homicide escalating to very high with provocation. These risk assessments are based on a four-point scale (low, moderate, high, very high). Although Norman denies suicidal or homicidal ideation, the accuracy of his verbal reports are highly questionable and contradictory, and compelling evidence exists which suggests that he may be a high suicide risk. Norman did not accept responsibility for his actions, provided multiple and differing accounts of why he brought the gun to school, and displayed no motivation to change. His prognosis is poor.

It should be noted that Norman shares characteristics with teenagers who have acted out violently both at school and at home. Although he does not express animosity toward his parents, they should be considered to be potential targets for his violent acting out.

Norman displays the following risk factors for premeditated violence:

Dispositional. He is a small, awkward, and socially immature 15 year-old, Caucasian male loner who has both antisocial and narcissistic personality traits including: lack of empathy, self-centeredness, disregard for societal norms, lying, and manipulative and asocial behavior.

Historical. He has a history of physical and sexual abuse, possible fetal alcohol syndrome, prenatal drug exposure, a biological pedigree for substance abuse, mental illness and personality disorder, depressed mood, poor self-esteem, poor coping and communication skills, shoplifting, lying, stealing, anger problems, poor response to prior psychiatric treatment and a biological brother with major mental illness.

Clinical. IQ and cognitive functioning is within normal limits and psychotic signs are absent. DSM-IV psychiatric diagnoses assigned are:

Axis I: 311 Depressive Disorder NOS

Axis II: 301.9 Personality Disorder NOS with narcissistic and antisocial features

Contextual. He recently has been discussing suicide, and has been emotionally distraught over a recent rejection and the relationship between his ex-girlfriend and another boy. He was acquainted with peers who committed suicide and he is familiar with recent high profile school shooting incidents.

### **Conclusion**

The behavioral-psychological description of the Classroom Avenger contained in this paper is a first step effort to describe possible identifying characteristics and behaviors of individuals at high risk for engaging in premeditated, high lethality, and vengeance motivated violent criminal acts in a school setting. It is not intended to be a definitive portrait and as additional relevant data becomes available, significant alterations in the profile are certain to be made. The extent to which the Classroom Avenger has any predictive validity is at this point undetermined. Crucially

important data sources such as those derived from interviews of perpetrators, their family members, teachers, etc.; interviews with eye witnesses; results of scientific, forensic, and ballistic tests; and crime scene photos and analysis, etc., are not currently available and thus remain to be

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