

# Lessons Learned from a Threat Assessment that Failed

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## The Incident

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## Sequence of Events

- Student made homicidal comment regarding staff
- Threat assessment conducted: low level risk
- Student committed attack—girl killed
- Her parents wanted answers and to prevent future attacks
- Agreement was negotiated

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## Sequence of Events

- Outside organization investigated
- Multiple reports produced
- Not blaming people for not preventing attack
  - This could happen to anyone
- Lessons learned
  - By studying failures we can learn how to do better

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## The School

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## Arapahoe High School

- Littleton School District
- 17 minutes from Columbine High School (1999)
- 18 minutes from Deer Creek Middle School (2010)
- 24 minutes from Century 16 in Aurora (2012)
- 54 minutes from Platte Canyon High School (2006)

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## Arapahoe High School

- Had threat assessment system in place
- “The threat assessment process used by AHS. . . is more formalized and structured than the approaches at the majority of public and non-public schools and school systems with whom we have worked.”

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## The Perpetrator

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## Karl Pierson

Age: 18



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## Background

- Bright, good grades
- Gifted and talented program: 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- Eagle Scout
- Cross-country runner
- Worked at McDonald's
- Captain: Extemporaneous Speech and Debate
- Military aspirations: West Point

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## Precipitating Events

- Spring, 2013: Speech and debate
  - “I woke up this morning and realized my penis had fallen off.”
  - Reported to Mr. Tracy Murphy (coach)
- August 21, 2013: Teacher reported to Murphy:
  - Pierson: “a verbal bully”
- Back to School Night: Pierson failed to show up for fundraiser
  - Didn’t call; said phone wasn’t working

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## Triggering Event: 9/3/13

- In meeting with Pierson and his mother, Murphy demoted Pierson
  - No longer captain, but still on team
- Pierson was “livid”; screamed at Murphy
- Murphy had “never had a kid look at him with the look of hatred that Karl did that day. It was ‘haunting’ how Karl looked at him.”
- In school parking lot with mother:
  - Guttural, animal cry
  - “I’m going to kill that guy!”

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## Reactions

- Teacher heard Karl's threat; reported it to administration
- Mother kept Pierson out of school for three days
  - He was not suspended
- Murphy considered resigning
  - "believed it would be safer for him and it would protect others Karl might hurt trying to get to him."
- Some staff thought Murphy was overreacting

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## Threat Assessment

- School psychologist spoke with
  - Tracy Murphy, but did not include him in threat assessment
  - Teacher who heard threat
  - An administrator who assisted with threat assessments
  - Counselor for background information

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## Assessment Findings

- History of school discipline:
  - Oppositional / Misconduct
- Difficulty controlling impulses or emotions
- Staff is fearful of the student (Murphy)
- Anger reactions are extreme or disproportionate to the situation
- Student currently reports or appears: angry
- School psychologist viewed him as narcissistic

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## Outcome: 9/9/13

- Assessment interview with parents and Pierson
  - Pierson: Denied homicidal intent
  - Apologetic, but not remorseful
  - Did not see need to apologize to Murphy
    - Viewed as genuine response, not simply saying what was expected; was still angry

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## Outcome: 9/9/13

- Pierson admitted having anger issues
  - Viewed positively that he waited until he was outside to make threat; showed some control
- Mother said Pierson had seen counselor on 9/6
- Counselor reportedly said Pierson was not a danger to self or other
- Pierson said to have no known access to weapons

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## Outcome: 9/9/13

- Threat assessment conclusion
  - Low level risk
- Referred to community mental health agency
  - Prescribed psychiatric medication
  - School psychologist asked mother for release of information forms to be signed
  - Pierson told not to attend practice for 2-3 weeks

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## Pierson's Response

- On September 10, 2013
  - Pierson showed up at debate team practice
  - Mr. Murphy told him he had to leave
  - Pierson left without incident
  - Disrespect for rules/authority

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## September 26, 2013

- Follow-up meeting with Pierson, parents, school counselor, administrator, and Murphy to decide if Pierson stayed on team
- Administration wanted him off the team
- Murphy feared this could trigger Pierson even more
- Pierson informed that Murphy wanted him on the team
  - But not practice with team

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## September 26, 2013

- Counselor offered to meet with Pierson
- Pierson was pleasant but did not apologize to Murphy
- Pierson perceived as insincere
- After this meeting:
  - Pierson did not participate in any competitions
  - Murphy had no further contact with him
    - This worried Murphy

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## What Was Not Known

- “Tuesday September 17, 2013, enter project saguntum, a 10 year subconscious project for me to exact revenge. . . I will shoot up my school Arapahoe high school, before the year is over. . . I am a psychopath with a superiority complex.”
- “Sunday, September 23, 2013, I am filled with hate, I love it. . . I feel like a bomb, ready to let the world feel and experience my hatred.”

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## What Was Not Known

- “Monday, September 30, 2013, Besides constantly being pissed off, I doubt the medication is working. . . The serotonin is a joke, it makes my bowels upset, doesn't effusively make me happy, and I hate taking them. It is important to note I rarely take my meds for this reason.”

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## What Was Not Known

- “Thursday, October 3, 2013, Since day 1 my job has been to conspire to shoot up the school. Every semester, I had a class I despised, and it was on the list. Now I have the means to achieve this diabolical end, and I am excited.”
- “Monday, October 15, 2013, I had an interesting idea today. In first hour, I thought about shooting up the asylum or whatever the fuck it was that my mother took me for that psych evaluation. Let the records show I lied through my teeth through the test.”
- “Friday, December 13, 2013, today is going to be fun.”

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- “The plan:
- 5th hours starts at 1214. I would want to strike 15 minutes into the hours, everyone is settled in.
- 1230: Initial strike on [---]. Enter through the trophy hallway, waltz into [-----] Shootup [---], toss a Molotov cocktail, reload.
- 1235: Assault [-----]
- 1240: Assault [-----]
- 1245: Assault [-----]
- 1250: Assault on [-----]”

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## December 13, 2013

- Shot and killed girl
- Searched for Murphy, who escaped
- Threw Molotov cocktail
- Killed himself
- Had list of room numbers written on his arm

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## Where Did the Assessment Fall Short?

What more could have been done?

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## Failures

- Training staff and students
- Communication internally and externally
- Did not do comprehensive investigation
- Did not monitor the situation after the threat assessment was completed

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## Training

- Not enough staff trained in threat assessment
  - Principal: never trained
  - Assistant principal involved in Pierson's threat assessment: never trained
- Insufficient training
  - Not in-depth enough
  - Not frequent enough

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## Training

- Processes: not streamlined, too cumbersome
- Staff not trained in warning signs
- Students
  - Not educated regarding warning signs
  - Not educated regarding Safe2Tell

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## Communication Failures

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## What Was Not Done

- School psychologist did not speak with
  - Pierson's teachers
  - Pierson's classmates
  - School resource officer
- Administration did not inform teachers and other staff of threat assessment
  - Would have been more likely to report subsequent issues

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## FERPA and Arapahoe H.S.

- “The AHS administration will not tell the teachers anything about student discipline, as it is a violation of the student’s privacy rights.”
- “FERPA was misinterpreted, leading the school staff to believe that they would be more liable if they had shared information about KP’s concerning behaviors than if they had not.”

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## Internal Communication

- Tracy Murphy:
- “I was working in isolation in the fall of 2013 when all of this was happening. And it appears that Vicki Lombardi was having problems with Karl Pierson and that Dan Swomley had had some previous problems and Michelle Crookham had some issues. None of us knew this.”

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## Internal Communication

- LPS Security Director did not have access to contact logs for students
  - Did not know of Pierson's threat or threat assessment
  - Only medium and high level risk cases sent to district
- Online system: Infinite Campus
  - "Only AHS administrators and counselors could see the report; teachers and the SRO did not have access to conduct information in Infinite Campus."

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## External Communication

- "Safe2Tell is a state-wide hotline for students, teachers, and others to report violent or troubling events."
- "It appeared from the case file that no student or staff at AHS ever reported any concern about the aggressor before the incident."

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## Failure to Investigate

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## Pierson's Recent Past

- “Not one AHS teacher, administrator or staff person had a complete record of KP’s history of concerning behaviors.”
- Argumentative and disrespectful to Mr. Murphy
- Spring, 2013: suspended for saying “fuck” out loud and “fuck you” to a peer;
- Spring, 2013: Pierson: “all the teachers are out to fucking get me”
- Summer: phone call: told girl’s father he was going to kill her
  - He then spoke with Karl’s mother and SRO at daughter’s school

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## Pierson's Recent Past

- Karl was frequently obnoxious, condescending, and insulting to peers in class
- On paperwork for suspension in March, 2013:
  - Referred to “two peers with the combined IQ of a cantelope”
- Claire Davis told parents Karl was acting like a jerk and heckling classmates
- Karl talked about the Nazis, had swastika on desktop, talked about hating African Americans
- Karl complained of being picked on, but he was the bully

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## Information Gathering

- No one searched Pierson, his locker, backpack, car, bedroom, computer, cell phone, social media, etc.
- Facebook: photo of him with AR-15 style rifle
- Facebook: December 6, 2013
  - “Natural Born Killers” listed as a favorite movie
- YouTube: December 11, 2013: posted link to song by Suicidal Tendencies and wrote, “It’s a suicidal type of day.”
- YouTube: December 13, 2013: posted link to KMFDM song, “WWIII”
  - First line: “I declare war on the world”

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## Information Gathering

- No one knew about journal on his computer
- Downloaded “Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters”
- Downloaded “Confessions of a Sociopath” by M.E. Thomas
- Had “Columbine: A True Crime Story” by Jeffrey Kass, borrowed from library

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## Information Gathering

- Did not investigate his experience with firearms
  - Boy Scout: certificates in marksmanship with pistols, rifles, shotguns
  - NRA qualification certificates
  - RAMS (Rifle Archery Muzzle–Loading Shotgun) ID badge

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## Failure in Ongoing Monitoring

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## Monitoring

- No follow up with private therapist or psychiatrist
  - Mother never signed releases for school
  - School could not confirm his services
- No ongoing check-ins with Pierson or parents
- No checking in with teachers or staff
- No checking in with peers

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## Increased Imminence

- Gave peer digital copy of *Anarchist Cookbook*
- Showed Sandy Hook photos to peers
  - Thought they were funny
- October, 2013: Staff saw him looking at guns online in cafeteria with peers
- December 8, 2013: bought shotgun legally
- Showed peers photos of his shotgun and machete
- At least 12 students knew Pierson had a gun
- Showed his date shotgun in trunk of car

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## December 11, 2013

- Pierson locked out of Vicki Lombardi's Spanish class
- He pounded on the door and yelled; heard four classes away
- Let in, held up the middle fingers of both hands and said "Fuck you!" to the class.
- Teacher: "Are you serious?" "Serious as a heart attack."
- Lombardi asked him to leave, called administration
- Afraid: "I've never had a student yell at me like that ever."
- Pierson: "This is not my fault."
- Sent home, but not suspended

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## December 11, 2013

- Student reaction to Pierson's outburst:
- He is "honestly scary. Like he's going to hurt us. I'm a little nervous. He obviously has the potential to be a threat if little stuff like that makes him crazy."
- Days before attack: "I should bring guns in and shoot the place up."

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## December 12, 2013

- Told peers and teacher he had a shotgun and named it Kurt Cobain.
- Said to peer: "Don't make me show you Kurt Cobain"
  - Teacher warned him about possibly being suspended for making a threat
  - Did not inform administration or threat assessment team

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## Perceptions of Pierson

- Normal
- Relaxed with a quirky sense of humor
- Nice and smart
- Happy, funny, and sweet
- Happy go lucky kid
- Such a good kid

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## Perceptions of Pierson

- “Karl did have anger problems.”
- “Karl did have a short temper.”
- “Karl was quick to anger.”
- “Karl could be verbally aggressive.”
- “Karl had anger issues.”
- Pierson: “I become a monster when I’m mad.”

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## Student Concerns

- “The type of person who could bring a gun to school”
- Peer described Pierson as an aggressive, outspoken, impulsive, self-serving narcissist.
  - Pierson had problems with teachers because he did not like authority.
  - Pierson threatened to burn down a classmate’s church because she is Catholic.
  - Pierson would often ‘blow a gasket.’

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## Student Concerns

- Peer heard Pierson say, “I’m going to kill Mr. Murphy; he is now on my list.”
  - Heard Pierson call it “the hit list.
- Another peer heard Pierson said he should kill Murphy
- Yet another peer heard Pierson said he should kill Murphy for kicking him off the team; he “had it in” for Murphy
- No students reported what they heard

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## Impression Management

- Pierson competed in national speech and debate tournament
  - What was he really good at?
  - Being persuasive and convincing
- After the attack peer wrote:
  - “I will say this over and over again, you were not a monster. You made a bad decision but that does not make you a bad person. You were one of the funniest, sweetest, most caring guys I have had the pleasure to meet.”
- Pierson was callous, cruel, sadistic, bigoted, and explosive
  - Yet, he could charm people

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## Impression Management

- Mother:
  - Defended Karl
  - Karl would not intentionally hurt anyone
  - Did not intentionally shoot Claire Davis
- Sister:
  - Karl was kind, compassionate, and a good brother
- Contemplated murdering mother and sister

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## Final Thoughts: Mr. Murphy

- “I was fumbling in the dark. I didn't know what to do, and I tried my best. . . I think maybe some bad decisions were made, bad judgment calls, and I'm sorry. Would it have stopped somebody like Karl Pierson? Hindsight—you read the excerpts of his diary. . . when I read that, it took my breath away. I don't know that we could have done anything to have stopped Karl Pierson, but we could have maybe tried harder.”

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## For More Information

- Schoolshooters.info
  - Multiple official reports
  - 12 depositions
  - Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office documents
  - “Karl Pierson: ‘A Psychopath with a Superiority Complex’”

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