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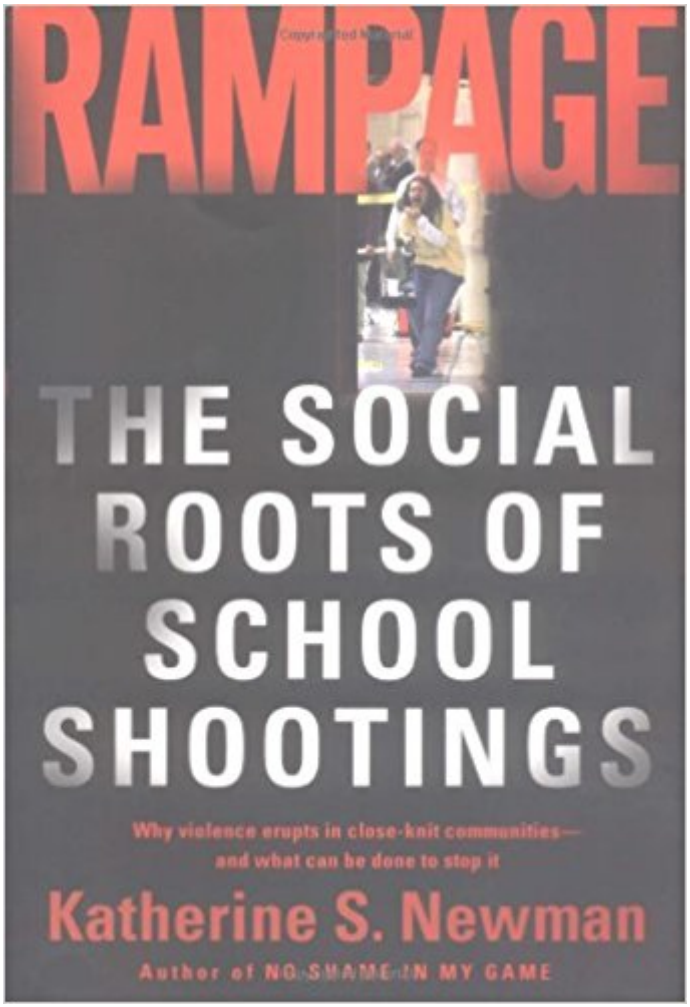
Rampage: The Social Roots Of School Shootings



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Synopsis

In the last decade, school shootings have decimated communities and terrified parents, teachers, and children in even the most "family friendly" American towns and suburbs. These tragedies appear to be the spontaneous acts of troubled, disconnected teens, but this important book argues that the roots of violence are deeply entwined in the communities themselves. Rampage challenges the "loner theory" of school violence, and shows why so many adults and students miss the warning signs that could prevent it.Drawing on more than 200 interviews with town residents, distinguished sociologist Katherine Newman and her co-authors take the reader inside two of the most notorious school shootings of the 1990s, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Paducah, Kentucky. In a powerful and original analysis, she demonstrates that the organizational structure of schools "loses" information about troubled kids, and the very closeness of these small rural towns restrained neighbors and friends from communicating what they knew about their problems. Her conclusions shed light on the ties that bind in small-town America.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Research like this is useful for anyone who wants to understand the Virginia Tech tragedy. School shooters such as Cho Seung-Hui are not born raging to kill. They are molded through abuse. Cho is a textbook example of the type of school shooter featured in these in-depth case studies - shy, socially awkward, and tormented by high school classmates.The social climates at the high schools attended by school shooters are typically vicious and hateful, with rampant sexual harassment of girls and women and antigay harassment of less dominant boys.At Columbine High School, the

most famous school shooting site studied in this book, jocks reigned supreme. The state wrestling champion, the leader of a clique of athlete bullies and the symbol of injustice for school shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, was allowed to park his $100,000 Hummer all day in a 15-minute parking space. The school indulged athletes' rampant sexual and racial bullying and physical abuse of others, including Harris and Kleboldand were given free license to abuse others. A coach did nothing when the athletes targeted a Jewish boy in gym class, singing songs about Hitler when he made a basket, pinning him to the ground and doing "body twisters" that left him bruised all over, and threatening to set him on fire.Many of the school shooters featured in this book endured antigay harassment that contributed to their rage. Barry Loukaitis, who killed a teacher and two students in Washington state, was taunted by school jocks as a "faggot." Luke Woodham in Mississippi, who killed two students and wounded seven others, was often called "gay" by classmates. Michael Carneal, who killed three fellow students and wounded five in Kentucky, was labeled as "gay" in the school newspaper.

Katherine Newman offers one of the more complete and well-contextualized analyses of school rampage shootings, but focuses almost exclusively on two instances, ignores college campus shootings, and seems to suffer from confirmation bias on the exclusively male perpetration of such events.The 1997 Heath (KY) High School and 1998 Westside (AR) Middle School shootings, on which the book is mostly based, offer fascinating and important insights into the role that small, tight-knit (and Christian) communities play in enabling the elements that contribute to rampage events. Newman also offers a valuable analysis of the often toxic adolescent social structure that is common to most school environments, with bullying and teasing as frequent a part of teen life as is bragging about getting even to prove one's status - which leads to both being typically ignored.But the narrowness of focus on a limited number and variety of school shooting events may allow too easy conclusions to obscure the complexity of forces, motives and goals that are found in the whole constellation of campus-based mass killings, let alone other public forms of what Johnathan Fast calls "ceremonial violence" (such as likely just occurred at Fort Hood, TX).For one, though firearms are by far the most common weapon used by school rampage killers, Newman limits her scope to gun-related events. As noted, she completely ignores college events.

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