



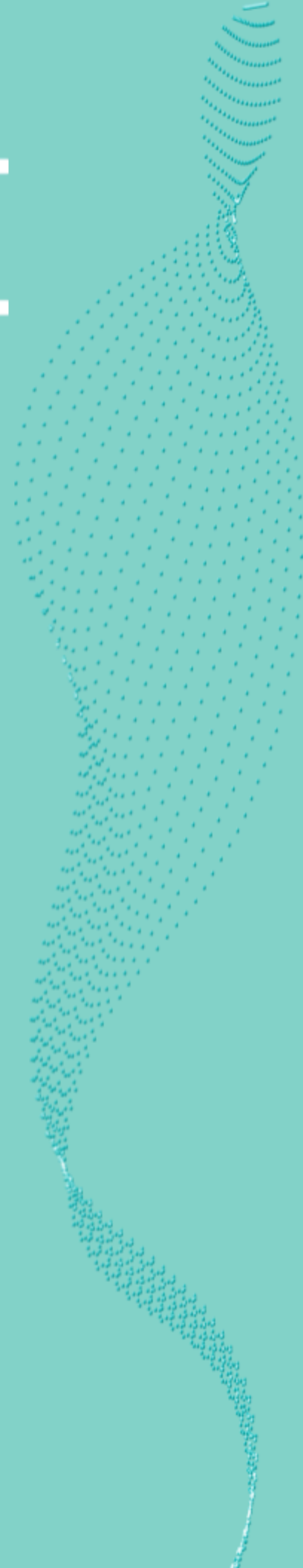
ICDE

Columbine, Anniversary Threats, and Nihilistic Violent Extremism

*A Reference Brief for Law Enforcement and
Violence Prevention Practitioners*

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Amy Cooter & Matthew Kriner



I. The Columbine Attack and Its Immediate Security Legacy

April 20th, 1999, fundamentally changed how the United States thinks about school safety. The mass attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado was certainly not the first school shooting. But its scale, its visibility, and its apparent indiscriminateness changed school risk assessments almost overnight. The idea that students themselves could pose such a catastrophic threat to their peers stemming from a calculated, sadistic planning of mass murder, rocked America to its core. Before this attack, many Americans believed it impossible that such an incident could occur at a relatively wealthy, predominantly white school.

The devastating violence caused schools across the country to quickly adopt security measures that had previously been rare in educational settings. Doors that had once remained unlocked were secured. Lockdown drills were introduced, often hastily and without clear guidance, but with the intent of reassuring communities that some form of preparation existed. In some districts, metal detectors, surveillance systems, and the presence of security personnel became commonplace. Today, we often take these measures for granted as the bare minimum needed to protect school children who have never known any other reality, underscoring the indelible securitized impact of this attack.

II. Cultural Impact and the Emergence of Perpetrator Glorification

The attack represented a clear watershed moment in our approach to youth violence. The plot and its perpetrators became the subject of numerous media investigations, researchers and threat analyses, with many people wanting to understand what could lead minors from

relatively affluent and supportive homes to commit such a heinous action. Stories about the school's social dynamics drove national anti-bullying initiatives and "zero tolerance" policies for such behavior. Despite these drastic changes, at least 315 attacks globally have displayed some connections to Columbine, and this number is only growing.

"Columbiners" and the True Crime Community

Self-described Columbiners identify with the shooters, often engaging in fantasies of personal, romantic relationships with one or both of them, and frequently reflect this identification through the images used for their profile pictures, blurbs in their social media profile bios, and other content.



Image 1. An anime-style depiction of the Columbine shooters in a user's profile picture.

Certain portions of the True Crime Community (TCC) also fetishize and amplify the Columbine attackers. This focus distinguishes the Columbiner segment of the TCC from other benign portions of the online ecosystem. These spaces obsess over macabre cases of interest that remain unsolved, that have unclear motives, or methods of violence that are somehow unique and spectacular. In contrast, the Columbine perpetrators have become martyrs, glamorized for their sadistic violence.

Perpetrator Emulation and International Reach

Columbiners who go beyond unhealthy fixation and glorification online seek to

emulate the perpetrators, some to the point of conducting their own attack.

Several shooting plots through the early 2000s entailed individuals who said they were part of the "Trench Coat Mafia," which was intended to reference the striking black coats worn by the perpetrators as they carried out their violence.

This homage has had an international reach, with at least ten attacks, mostly in Europe, explicitly referencing Columbine's perpetrators or tactics in some fashion; this demonstrates how Columbine has come to function as a symbolic lynchpin for mass shootings. The most notable of these international attacks was the 2018 attack in Crimea that killed 20 people and wounded 73, now frequently referred to as "Russian Columbine."



Image 2. The individual who bombed a school in Jakarta in November 2025 wearing a "KMFDM" hat referencing the Columbine shooters.

III. Nihilistic Violent Extremism (NVE): Definition and Uptake of TCC

NVE is a novel form of extremism that celebrates indiscriminate violence as a motive, means, and outcome. As a function of its indiscriminate violence, NVE incorporates elements of hateful ideologies no matter their views. Jihadist principles are welcome alongside seemingly contradictory white

supremacist propositions so long as the core sermon is that of violence for the purpose of disrupting society.

It is also increasingly the major driving force behind school shootings in Western countries. Key players in NVE networks radicalize and push youth fascinated with violent actors into becoming one themselves. In doing so, they hope to accelerate the collapse of Western society.



Image 3. Example of uptake by NVE networks of Solomon Henderson and Samantha Rupnow as school shooter martyrs.

NVE is not synonymous with TCC, but, today, it so thoroughly overlaps with it and actively draws from it that it is hard to make the distinction. Columbiner and NVE indicator overlap suggests greater risk in a given subject, but determining precisely when or even if TCC-NVE engagement may translate to offline violence remains incredibly challenging.

IV. Columbine's Role in NVE Spaces: Signals and Indicators

How Columbine Is Referenced in NVE

The Columbine perpetrators maintain a central role in NVE spaces alongside other mass violence perpetrators who have successfully committed carnage—most often, mass shootings. Sometimes the specifics of Columbine are explicitly discussed or otherwise conveyed in these spaces, including through playing or sharing video play-throughs of games that allow the player to recreate the shooting and take the role of its perpetrators.

Sometimes the references are more subtle, intended to escape parental or law enforcement attention while clearly signaling they understand required cultural scripts to other NVE participants.

These indicators include stylized visual representations, including anime-style or AI-recreated depictions of the shooters, items made to mirror the shooters' clothing, or even specific timestamps associated with the attack.

Status-Seeking and Anniversary Significance

These referential elements as well as parallel signals of familiarity with other mass violence actors and their attacks performatively establish participants within the broader NVE community. Signaling a comfort and fascination with violence is one way participants pursue status alongside other actions intended to garner increasing clout within these groups. Anniversaries of key perpetrators and their attacks also receive outsized attention as part of this effort to reference and emulate past violence.

V. Anniversary-Linked Plots: Documented Threat Patterns

Scope of Disrupted Plots

For example, the first anniversary of Solomon Henderson's attack occurred earlier this year and passed with much lower national prominence than the Columbine anniversary will likely garner. Officials in the area confirmed to ICDE that they had been involved in investigating four separate plots connected to this anniversary date. Yet none of those plots left a verified public footprint. Only one of these incidents received meaningful media coverage, and that coverage included no references to the planned date of the attack. Each had devastating potential.

This lack of publicity is a good thing. It prevents even these failed plots from feeding further into earlier attacks' mystique and fandom. But it does mean that researchers and prevention practitioners alike have less than full clarity on the scope of plots that seek to copy Columbine or other attacks on their anniversary dates.

U.S. Secret Service Data

Some researchers have noted that very few additional attacks have occurred on April 20th or the immediately surrounding days, but their datasets include only completed shootings, not plots that were foiled due to law enforcement or other intervention. According to a 2021 U.S. Secret Service assessment of school shooters, 15 out of 37 averted plots with a designated start date were planned for April. Nine of these were tied specifically to the anniversary of the Columbine shooting, while another referenced both Columbine and another terror attack—the Oklahoma City Bombing whose anniversary is April 19th. When roughly 40% of these disrupted attacks fixated on Columbine, this correspondence cannot be ignored.



Image 4. The Oklahoma City bombing memorial.

VI. Operational Considerations: Timing, Logistics, and Threat Assessment

The relationship between symbolic dates and actual attacks is further complicated by logistics and other practicalities. Some

perpetrators reference specific dates but carry them out differently than originally conceived. In contrast to cases where some past attacks have been accelerated due to some precipitating event or perceived closing window of opportunity, several individuals associated with NVE have delayed their plots in order to acquire additional resources, build confidence, or refine their plans.

Practical considerations also shape timing decisions. Perpetrators seeking to maximize harm may adjust their plans to align with school schedules or events, meaning that an attack associated with April 20 could occur on a nearby weekday if the anniversary falls on a weekend, or be timed to coincide with assemblies or other idiosyncratic school events even if this means a loss in precise date correspondence. Even if a specific date passes without incident, in other words, the underlying threat may still exist.

ICDE has reviewed multiple cases where subjects have failed to attain or receive their Columbine-specific firearms (9mm handgun and a sawed-off shotgun). This forced them to either adjust their date or abandon their plans altogether. In other cases, subjects may present as credible threats but direct investigation offline reveals no access to firearms at all. All of these dynamics greatly complicate the ability to make strong analytic and investigatory judgements in what is often a narrow window of opportunity to intervene.

VII. Resource and Capacity Challenges for Practitioners

NVE has only amplified the profile of Columbine and other mass attacks since the 2021 Secret Service report was produced, indicating a strong risk of resource saturation that poses challenges for intervention and prevention alike. Anniversaries' heightened symbolic significance can generate increased volumes of concerning content, tips, and

investigative leads. For under-resourced agencies, distinguishing credible threats from background noise becomes more difficult precisely when attention is most needed.

The fact that many potential plots are disrupted or never come to fruition does not mean we can ignore the violent potential of these dates. Rather, this disruption reflects the effectiveness of increasingly strained law enforcement. The concern remains that similar plots may nonetheless evade detection, with potentially deadly consequences. Training and insights on contemporary trends in the TCC-NVE ecosystem are needed to help maintain that effectiveness.

VIII. Guidance for Prevention Practitioners

ICDE treats the April 20th anniversary as a reliable indicator of advanced risk in a given subject, both for online only investigations and ongoing case management. The date is not significant because it reliably produces attacks, but rather because it reliably produces signals of interest, of alignment, and in some cases, of intent. It is one strong datapoint in a holistic assessment that can provide practitioners with an understanding of a subject's threat potential.

Regarding the date as operationally insignificant because few attacks have ultimately occurred on it is shortsighted.. This is especially true in novel spaces like NVE where symbolism, performativity, and aspiration are deeply intertwined. Ignoring the importance of anniversaries also risks overlooking the work state and local law enforcement is asked to do with diminishing resources to discern credible threats from online chatter. Ultimately, anniversary-related content should be understood as part of a wider pattern of behavior that can potentially escalate to catastrophic violence.



Institute for Countering Digital
Extremism

info@counteringextremism.org