

On Hit Lists, Anger Finds an Outlet

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Girls don't brush their hair and come to school looking like they just rolled out of bed. I made a hit list. I actually did. There are 3 people on it that I want dead. All three of them know Kevin, all three of them are girls, and 2 of them go to my school. Only one of them actually kind of knows me. One of them I've never come in contact with ever. And one of them is pretty much the ugliest person I've ever seen in my life. If I ever had a kid that ugly, I would have killed it at birth. All

By SUSAN SAULNY
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CHICAGO



Joshua Lott for The New York Times

SOUNDING THE ALERT Don Schlomann, a superintendent in the Belvidere, Ill. district, where officials found a hit list in a locker at a middle school and thwarted any possible plan by the student.

TWO teenagers in Jonesboro, Ark., were overheard at a party last month bragging about a "hit list" and their plans to take a gun to school and use it on their enemies.

The plans circulated through the high school and made their way to the sheriff. The boys, 16 and 17, were arrested two weeks ago and charged with making "terroristic threats" and possessing a stolen pistol.

No hit list was found, but in other cases at schools across the country, hit lists have fallen out of lockers, been scrawled on bathroom walls and have made the rounds like hot gossip among teenagers in Web videos and on blogs.

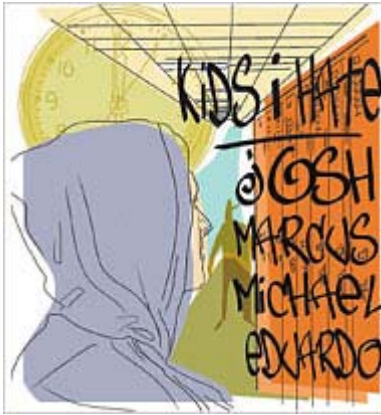
For reasons that are largely unclear to the authorities, the lists have gained toxic traction with a sub-set of students even as rates of school violence have dropped significantly since the early 1990s. Education and law enforcement officials say it is hard to know in any given case whether students write the lists as an actual blueprint for deadly action or to simply attract attention, amuse themselves, act out bravado or bully other students.

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“I wish I knew what was going on at this particular moment,” said Charles P. Ewing, a professor of law and psychology at the State University of New York at Buffalo and the author of “Kids Who Kill.” “It’s like a fad. Something sets it off. One student does it. Other students do it. It becomes something that’s popular to do.”

Around the time of the Arkansas incident, school officials in Berlin, Mass., found a “kill list” and a “protect list” written by a sixth-grade boy. And in Belvidere, Ill., a small town northwest of Chicago near Wisconsin, school officials

said tragedy was averted when they found a hit list in a locker before its plan could be put into action.

Some students say the lists are simply about stress release and the convergence of their generation’s penchants for catharsis and publicity.

“If you’re going to release stress, you might as well do it by writing a list and talking about it rather than going out to hurt someone,” said Rachel Tingley, 17, a high school junior from Chicago. “I know people who have problems with anger who do things like lists. They haven’t been serious.”

Another Chicago student, Nicholas Andrews, 15, called the problem of lists “self-inflicted.”

“I think people should keep the lists private,” he said. But as a generation, he added, “we put our stuff out there.”

On MySpace three weeks ago, one student told anyone who cared to read, “I made a hit list.” The student added, “It was so fun to write their names down saying I want them dead.” Readers took turns guessing the names on the list.

The lists are typically long and often include gradations in the level of hate expressed, such as “to kill,” “to hurt” or “to knock out cold.” Sometimes the lists include the names of the students to be protected should schoolwide mayhem erupt.

There are no national statistics on how many hit or kill lists are found in schools each year. But one federal education official who monitors such threats described them as “in vogue,” particularly on schoolhouse walls in recent months.

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“I’ve seen where kids see it as a badge of honor to be on a list,” said the official, William Modzeleski, a deputy secretary in the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools in Washington. “There is sort of a nonchalance about it.” In other words, if students do not end up on a hate list, they must not be worth thinking about.

As these cases have become more common, the Education Department has repeated its official stance on the subject: zero tolerance. Mr. Modzeleski pointed out that the writing of hit lists was a violation of the law. “Schools and law enforcement have made it clear that threats will be taken seriously,” he said. “But for whatever reason, kids ignore the lesson.”

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Schools are instructed to make sure the writer of a hit list is disciplined, he said. Protocol calls for each threat to be investigated and an assessment made of the risk of violence. Depending on the severity of the risk, several things could happen. The student could receive counseling, be suspended or be arrested, or the discipline could include some combination of the three. And schools might be evacuated, depending on the threat’s severity.

Officials also noted that there was not a strong correlation between the threats and actual violence. Most students who have killed other students did not prepare and distribute hit lists in advance, the officials said.

Still, similar clues have been found in journals and personal communications, as was the case in 2005 in Minnesota, where a student who had posted a grisly story online about a fictional school massacre killed his grandfather and the grandfather’s companion at home, then killed five students, a security guard, a teacher and himself at Red Lake High School.

David Wolfe, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, said of the lists: “If you ask kids, they just say it’s just entertaining, it’s nothing. We’ve made a lot of inroads in educating youth, but they’re still attracted to violence and power.”

Some students’ online chatter on livejournal.com reflected that thought. When asked if he had ever been on a hit list, one student told a friend, “Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised.” He added that the list must not have been a good one, since he was still alive.

Why would a student joke about death? Mr. Modzeleski of the Education Department offered an explanation. “Kids see it merely as a prank,” he said. “They think, ‘Yeah, I’m on a list, and Johnny produced it, but he’s just letting his anger out and it will never happen.’”

But it has happened, most dramatically in April 1999, when two students at [Columbine High School](#) near Littleton, Colo., killed 13 people before taking their own lives. In that case, the killers had documented their plans in a journal for a year.

With those killings in mind, school administrators across the country take each threat seriously, officials said, routinely evacuating buildings when threats arise — at great cost to the school day, parents and the emotional well-being of other students.

In fact, the police evacuated Columbine High School this month after a bomb threat, the latest of several taunts since the 1999 killings.

“I do not think kids realize the serious nature of it,” said Sol Rappaport, a clinical psychologist who performs violence risk assessments for schools in Libertyville, Ill. “When I questioned the ones who had done it, they said, ‘I was mad, but just because I hate them doesn’t mean I’m going to do it.’ ”

There have always been bullies and schoolyard threats. But today, the taunts, particularly the electronic variety, come with longer life spans and broader circulation and, therefore, more power.

“The threat is easier to expose, track and monitor,” said Ronald D. Stephens, the executive director of the National School Safety Center. “By the same token, the threat can become more vicious and provocative every time it is viewed. Challenges or threats that are communicated in written form have a tendency to escalate.”

Joelle Taylor, director of a safe-schools project in Rome, N.Y., said she was disturbed by Web sites that encouraged students to list people they disliked. Ms. Taylor said that she was in favor of emotional outlets for children but that the “hit list” format was wrongheaded.

“Generally speaking, it’s clearly a manifestation of bullying,” she said. But, thought about another way, she added, “I think having a hit list is a lot better than just walking in and shooting.”

One reason some officials may agree with Ms. Taylor is that students often post their lists in public places or talk about them, and that conversation sometimes makes it to the ears of adults who intervene, as happened in Jonesboro. At that point, they can thwart an attack or simply give a troubled child the attention he or she needs.

Many schools have adopted what experts advocate: a zero tolerance policy toward hit lists and any other threats. "Being harsh would help put an end to it," said Dr. Ewing, the SUNY professor. "Other than that, I don't know how to put an end to it."

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