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The Columbine High School Massacre and criminal justice system response: an exploratory case study

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Abstract

Framed in the situational criminological perspective, this case study examines the effect of the Columbine High School Massacre on a pretrial services unit. The massacre decreased intakes into the jail, increased the proportion of persons detained for violent crimes, and made bond commissioners less willing to facilitate the release of persons arrested for violent crimes. Pretrial release rates for domestic and other violence-related cases were not affected. Implications for situational criminological theory and criminal justice system policy are discussed.

Notes

1 In the wake of the Columbine Massacre, students across North America imitated the rampage. One week after the disaster in Littleton, a disgruntled ninth-grade dropout killed a student and wounded another at the W.R. Meyers High School in Taber, Alta., Canada. In Pennsylvania, 52 bomb scares were reported the week after Columbine. Additional bomb scares, weapon violations, accusations of threatening behavior, and discovery of plans to mimic the Columbine incident were reported in Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, and Washington DC.

2 For a discussion of prior research which similarly linked rational choice, lifestyle, and routine activities theories, see [Osgood et al. \(1996\)](#).

3 Domestic violence crimes in this study included false imprisonment (class three misdemeanor), harassment (class three misdemeanor), third degree assault (class one misdemeanor), violation of restraining order (class one misdemeanor), child abuse (ranges in seriousness from class three misdemeanor negligent child abuse to class two felony will cruelty/abuse to child resulting in death), and menacing (class three misdemeanor). Non-domestic violence crimes in this study included first degree assault (class three felony), second degree assault (class four felony), robbery (class four felony), vehicular homicide (class four felony), vehicular assault (class five felony), menacing with deadly weapon (class five felony), and harassment/stalking (class five felony).

4 Any county or city may establish a pretrial services program or bond commissioner unit pursuant to a plan formulated by a community advisory board created for such purpose and appointed by the chief district judge of the judicial district. Such program shall establish a procedure for the screening of persons who are detained due to an arrest for the alleged commission of a crime so that such information may be provided to the judge who is setting the amount of bail and type of bond. The program shall provide such information as will provide the court with the ability to make a more appropriate initial bond decision which is based upon facts relating to the defendant's risk of danger to the community, danger to recidivate, and risk of failure to appear for court ([Colorado Revised Statutes, 1998](#), p. 40).

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