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The causes of school violence are complex and varied. Forensic psychologists who study criminal behavior believe school killers are very different from other violent youth, such as gang members or drug dealers. For whatever reason, they feel powerless and begin obsessing over killing or injuring others. They may make direct threats concerning those they feel are taunting or intimidating them. They often express these thoughts and plans to fellow students. In general, other students tend to ignore the comments or simply look the other way.

Behavioral problems can be linked to a difficult personality, which lead to problems of interacting with others, impulsiveness, and being unable to conform. These children may not blend into school activities and become ignored and rebellious. Some become depressed and take medication that can produce serious behavioral side effects. Broken family relationships can also be a major factor.

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Harshly treated children are more likely to behave violently later in life. Being bullied or teased by others can often lead a troubled youth to violent revenge or retribution. Learning violent behavior can come from a dysfunctional or abnormal home life, perhaps involving domestic abuse or parents who do not respond well to authority figures such as the police. From this type of home environment, youth learn to react to authority such as teachers or school officials with aggression. Some believe learned violent behavior also comes from repeated exposure to violence in the media such as music lyrics, Hollywood movies, television programs, video games, and 24-hour news stations broadcasting violent or graphic scenes. These kids, it is believed, have trouble distinguishing between reality and fantasy.