

Santa Clarita Shooting Is Another Nightmare Made Real November 14, 2019, NYT

SANTA CLARITA, Calif. — Frantic parents texted with teenagers barricaded in classrooms. Others offered shelter to students fleeing their high school in this sleepy suburb north of Los Angeles on Thursday. It was the latest example of a wrenching sequence that has become a recurring nightmare for families in America.

This time it was a little after 7:30 a.m. when a young man opened fire at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, Calif., killing two students and wounding three others before turning the gun on himself, authorities said.

The 16-year-old suspect was said to be in grave condition after shooting himself in the head. Law enforcement officials said that he was a student at [Saugus High School](#), and that Thursday was his birthday. The students who died were a 16-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy; the other victims were identified as a 14-year-old girl, a 15-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy.

For Saugus students, the sound of gunfire came with the shock of recognition that the lockdown routine they had practiced would not be a drill. For parents, there was the terror that this time, their children might be the ones to die.

Kristine Almaraz, 50, said she was dropping off her younger son at Arroyo Seco Junior High when she saw police cars flying past on Bouquet Canyon Road.

“I thought, ‘I pray to God it’s not the high school,’” she said.

“Are you ok?” she texted her son, Maxximus, 16, who was at Saugus, sheltering in place in his first-period classroom.

“Yea,” he texted back “Don’t worry mama. You know I’m too smart to die.”

Jeremy Thompson first learned about the shooting when his younger son, a sophomore at Saugus, called him early on Thursday.

“Kids today, they never call, so you get this call, and you automatically wonder what it’s going to be,” Mr. Thompson said in an interview from a parent reunification center nearby.

The sophomore told his father that there had been shots fired at school and that he was walking away from the building toward his mother’s house. His older son, a senior, told him by text that he and his classmates had barricaded themselves in a classroom and covered up the windows. Mr. Thompson had been at the school the night before to see one of his sons performing in a theater production of “Shakespeare in Love.”

“And then I come here this morning and see a bunch of them huddled together in tears,” he said.

Mr. Thompson said that as the names of shooting sites around the country stack up — Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, Parkland — he had just wished Santa Clarita would not be added to the list.

“You just hope against hope that it’s not going to hit your school or your kids,” he said.

Jeff Turner, 58, had just dropped off his children and a friend at the school when he returned home to find his wife screaming in the driveway. They rushed back to the school. He said they found their daughter, Micah, 14, crying and upset. “She was saying, ‘I feel guilty that I didn’t stay and help the people who were shot,’” Mr. Turner said. “And that was the thing that made me break down in tears in that moment.”

Lucy Gulley, 47, lives up the street from the school and was getting ready to take her younger son, who is 11, to a junior high nearby when she saw children running.

At first, she told her son they were goofing around. But then she saw the panic on their faces.

She and her husband rushed several students into their home to call their parents.

“It’s very emotional,” she said. “You just automatically get into the state of mind where you put your child in that situation.”

It was another quiet morning on the campus at Saugus High School, tucked in a suburban Southern California neighborhood of ranch houses, when the gunman pulled a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol from his backpack and opened fire in the quad. Within 16 seconds, he shot five students — seemingly at random — and then himself, said Capt. Kent Wegener of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, who said he had watched a video of the shooting. There were no rounds of ammunition in the gun when it was recovered, he said. On Thursday afternoon, the Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff’s Station [said on Twitter](#) that all of the injured victims were in stable condition.

Little is known about a motive or the suspect, whom police declined to name because he is a minor. Medical staff had transferred him to a hospital before the police determined he was the suspect and not a victim.

Captain Wegener said the suspect’s girlfriend and mother were with detectives at the Santa Clarita Valley station. Officers also searched the suspect’s home, he said, which is less than two miles away from the school. On Thursday afternoon, clusters of officers holding long guns stood around a campus where murals read “California Distinguished School.”

The sound of the gunshots in the quad did not reach Kaitlin Holt’s classroom. Her choir students were listening to a recording of their own singing, which drowned out the popping.

But then several students rushed in, screaming. One of them, a freshman girl, had been shot, said Ms. Holt, 26.

The rookie teacher, who started in January, quickly wheeled a grand piano in front of the door and ushered dozens of her students into an office, locking the door behind them.

The students sat on Ms. Holt's floor with the lights off. They were afraid, they were crying, but they also knew how to keep safe, she said. They knew to muffle their sobbing. They knew to keep their phones silent and dark. One quietly called the police. Another grabbed a fire extinguisher — just in case the gunman made it inside.

Ms. Holt also knew what to do. After barricading the door, she grabbed a gunshot wound kit that she keeps in her classroom and wrapped the wounds of the freshman girl who had been shot in the torso and shoulder, she said. The girl survived.

Students and teachers had gone through a lockdown drill in the spring, Ms. Holt said. But even after the gunshot wound training, the lockdown drill, the school shootings on the news, Ms. Holt still held out hope that she and her students would not face one themselves.

"I really, truly did not believe that this was going to happen to me, which was really ignorant," Ms. Holt said. "Every time this happens, in every interview, they always say that, and I still really thought it wasn't going to happen."

California has some of the toughest gun laws in the nation and has long restricted the maximum capacity of detachable magazines for semiautomatic firearms — such as the one the police described the gunman as using — to 10 rounds. It is also illegal for minors in most cases to possess handguns in the state.

Mass shootings have occurred across the country with increasing frequency in recent years. In California, among the recent shootings, a man with an assault-style rifle opened fire at a garlic festival in July, killing three people. Last year, a man killed 12 people at the Borderline Bar, a country music venue, in Thousand Oaks. And in 2015, a heavily armed man and woman killed 14 people at a social services center in San Bernardino.

Upon arrival within two minutes, Santa Clarita deputies recognized that it was an active shooter situation, and conducted a rapid deployment onto the school premises. When they reached the quad area, they discovered six persons who were suffering for guns — from gunshot students — excuse me, gunshot wounds. These were all students of the high school. All the students were triaged, and transported to a local hospital. The suspect was later identified as one of the victims who was found in the quad. He is identified as a 16-year-old male, whose birthday is today. The weapon that he used was recovered at the scene. It's a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol, which had no more rounds in it — had no more bullets in it. Detectives have reviewed the video at the scene, which clearly shows the subject in the quad withdraw a handgun from his backpack, shoot and wound five people and then shoot himself in the head. I regret to say that at 9:23 this morning, one of the female victims, age 16, passed away. Her parents are at the hospital. There is another female victim, age 14. Another female victim age, 15, and two male victims, each 14 years of age.

A 16-year-old male student was in custody and being treated at a hospital after a shooting at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, Calif., the authorities said. Credit Credit...David Walter Banks for The New York Times

Sheriff Alex Villanueva of Los Angeles County said investigators would be examining social media in hopes of determining a motive. He called it his worst nightmare as a sheriff, but noted that it did not compare to what the parents were going through. Such shootings, he said, were a "sad reality of modern life."

Kahilan Skiba, 16, said she was outside the band room when she realized she was hearing gunshots over the din of high schoolers practicing their instruments.

Kahilan picked up her clarinet and music stand and rushed back into the room.

"Someone's shooting a gun in the quad," she told her teacher.

She said roughly 40 students packed into a practice room and another 35 or so sheltered in the teacher's office.

"Everyone was crying and holding each other," she said. They texted their families.

When, about a half an hour later, they were allowed out, Kahilan said she saw a girl being carried out of the choir room on a stretcher.

In the quad, there were bags and belongings strewn everywhere.

"It was the most eerie thing," she said.

Brian Skiba, Kahilan's father, said his younger son told him he heard screaming when he was dropping him off at school. So Mr. Skiba ran up to the entrance. By then there were police officers locking the campus down. He heard from his children by phone but he waited at the school for more than two hours before he could see them.

"Now, there's relief mixed with anger," he said. "My kids have to live with this."

Jill Cowan reported from Santa Clarita and Amy Harmon and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs from New York. Reporting was contributed by Arit John in Santa Clarita, Calif., and Jacey Fortin, Matt Stevens, Heather Tal Murphy, Dana Goldstein, Vanessa Swales, Richard A. Oppel Jr., and Patrick J. Lyons in New York. Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

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