

Case Study

Negligence vs. Diligence in the Oxford Michigan High School Shooting

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Incident Overview

On November 30, 2021, 15-year-old **Ethan Crumbley** opened fire at **Oxford High School** in Michigan, killing four students and injuring seven others, including a teacher. The shooting raised significant questions about the actions and decisions made by both the school officials and Crumbley's parents in the days and hours leading up to the attack.

Timeline of Key Events Leading to the Shooting

1. **November 26, 2021** – Crumbley's parents, **James and Jennifer Crumbley**, purchased a handgun as a gift for Ethan, despite knowing their son had troubling mental health issues. Ethan posted images of the gun on social media with captions such as "just got my new beauty today," suggesting his excitement over the weapon.
2. **November 29, 2021 (The day before the shooting)** – A teacher reported that Crumbley was searching for ammunition on his phone during class. School officials contacted his parents via email and phone, but the parents did not respond. Later, Jennifer Crumbley texted her son, jokingly saying, "LOL I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught."
3. **November 30, 2021 (Morning of the shooting)** – A teacher discovered a disturbing drawing on Ethan Crumbley's desk, which depicted a gun, a bullet, and the words "The thoughts won't stop. Help me" and "Blood everywhere." The school counselor, **Jennifer Currey**, and the dean of students, **Shawn Hopkins**, called Ethan's parents for an emergency meeting at the school.
 - o **The meeting**: During the meeting, the school staff expressed concerns about Ethan's drawings and behavior. However, the parents downplayed the seriousness of the situation, refusing to take Ethan home, and insisting he could remain in school for the day. The staff allowed him to stay, with the understanding that his parents would seek mental health counseling for him within 48 hours.
 - o **No backpack search**: Despite the concerning nature of Ethan's drawings and behavior, **neither school officials nor his parents searched his backpack**, which was later found to contain the handgun he would use in the attack.
4. **November 30, 2021 (Afternoon)** – After the meeting, Ethan returned to class. A few hours later, he went to the bathroom, retrieved the gun from his backpack, and began the shooting spree in the school's hallway. Four students—**Madisyn Baldwin, Tate Myre, Hana St. Juliana, and Justin Shilling**—were killed, and seven others were injured.

NEGLIGENCE FACTORS

The following actions, or lack thereof, contributed to the outcome of the shooting, demonstrating potential negligence by both the school and Ethan Crumbley's parents.

1. School Negligence

- **Failure to search the backpack**: Despite multiple warning signs—including the disturbing drawings and the report of Crumbley searching for ammunition online—neither school staff

nor his parents searched his backpack during the meeting. Had they done so, they would have discovered the handgun.

- The former dean of students at Oxford High School testified in a Michigan court Tuesday that he returned Ethan Crumbley's backpack to him on the morning of November 30, 2021, unknowingly providing him with the gun used later that day in the mass shooting.
 - The former dean, even made a joke related to the backpack's weight, he said Tuesday at the involuntary manslaughter trial of the shooter's mother, Jennifer Crumbley.
 - "I made a joke to Ms. Morgan about how easily she picked it up, and then (she) handed it to me and my arm dropped, so it was more of a joke of how strong she was compared to handing it off to me," he said.
 - The former dean testified that nobody searched the backpack because there was no reason to suspect any wrongdoing. (commentary from Noble: this missed opportunity led directly to deaths and injuries).
 - "It wasn't necessary or rise to the occasion that I do that, because I didn't have any reasonable suspicion that I do that," (commentary from Noble: there were numerous and blatantly clear red flags that would have led any reasonable person to be suspicious enough to search Ethan's backpack that day including his online search at school for ammunition reported to school staff the day before and his drawings depicting shooting and killing and a plea for help which is why the meeting was held).
 - The former dean then handed over the backpack to Ethan after school officials met with him and his parents to discuss disturbing drawings he had made on a math worksheet earlier that morning.
 - Ethan had hidden a firearm and ammo in his backpack that day, taken from the Crumbley household. Shortly after, he took his bag into the bathroom, pulled out the gun and opened fire, [killing four students and injuring seven others](#).
 - <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/us/jennifer-crumbley-trial-oxford-michigan-shooting/index.html>
- **Failure to document and respond to obvious red flags:** The documents show that neither the dean of students nor the counselor told the Crumbleys that their son was suicidal — only that they felt he had "moderate sadness" after the teen disclosed that he was sad about his grandparent dying, his dog dying and his close friend leaving the school. The counselor said school officials told the parents that their son needed to get into therapy soon to avoid him developing depression or becoming suicidal.
<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/oakland/2022/12/09/oxford-school-officials-contradict-damning-narrative-about-crumbleys/69693167007/>
 - **Allowing Crumbley to stay in school:** The school's decision to allow Crumbley to remain on campus after the meeting, rather than sending him home or involving law enforcement, was a critical misstep. Given the severity of the warning signs, immediate action to remove him from the premises should have been taken.
 - **Lack of follow-up on ammunition search:** The fact that a teacher reported Crumbley searching for ammunition online the day before the shooting was an early red flag. The

school informed his parents but took no further steps to investigate or take precautionary action, such as searching his belongings.

2. Parental Negligence

- **Ignoring the warning signs:** Ethan's parents dismissed the school's concerns about his disturbing drawings and behavior. Instead of acknowledging the clear warning signs that their son was struggling, they insisted he remain in school. Their refusal to take Ethan home demonstrated a lack of regard for the seriousness of the situation.
- **Failure to secure the firearm:** Ethan's parents had purchased the handgun for him just days before the shooting but failed to properly secure it. The gun was left accessible to Ethan, even though they were aware of his concerning behavior and mental health issues. This failure directly enabled him to carry out the shooting.
- **Inappropriate response to the ammunition search:** When the school alerted the Crumbleys that Ethan had been searching for ammunition online, Jennifer Crumbley dismissed it in a text message, jokingly telling her son to be more careful not to get caught. This response reflects a failure to take their son's actions seriously.

Legal Consequences

1. **Criminal Charges Against the Parents:** James and Jennifer Crumbley were charged with **involuntary manslaughter** for their role in enabling the shooting. Prosecutors argued that their gross negligence in failing to secure the firearm and ignoring the warning signs made them partly responsible for the deaths of the students. This is one of the rare instances where the parents of a school shooter have been criminally charged in connection with the crime.
2. **Civil Lawsuits Against the School:** Families of the victims filed **wrongful death lawsuits** against the school district and its officials. The lawsuits argue that the school was negligent in its handling of the situation by not removing Crumbley from the school, failing to search his backpack, and not involving law enforcement when the warning signs were clear.
 - Plaintiffs claim that had the school taken more immediate action, the tragedy could have been prevented.

Negligence Principles at Play

- **Duty of Care:** Both the school and the parents had a duty to protect other students from foreseeable harm. In this case, the harm was foreseeable, as Crumbley exhibited multiple warning signs leading up to the shooting.
- **Breach of Duty:** The failure to act on the warning signs, search his backpack, or remove him from school constitutes a breach of this duty.
- **Causation:** The school's and parents' negligence directly contributed to the conditions that allowed Crumbley to carry out the shooting. Had any of these parties taken proper action, the attack could likely have been prevented.

Negligence conclusion

The Oxford High School shooting illustrates how negligence can have tragic and devastating consequences. The school's failure to take more decisive action in light of clear warning signs and

the parents' reckless disregard for their son's behavior and access to a firearm are prime examples of negligence. This case has led to criminal charges, civil lawsuits, and ongoing debates about accountability in preventing school shootings.

DILIGENCE FACTORS

Diligent Actions the School Could Have Taken:

1. **Search the Backpack During the Meeting:**
 - **What should have been done:** Given the discovery of Ethan's disturbing drawing (depicting a gun, a bullet, and pleas for help), it was crucial for school staff to search his backpack during the emergency meeting with his parents. A search would likely have revealed the handgun, preventing the shooting.
 - **Rationale:** The seriousness of the drawing and Crumbley's previous online behavior (searching for ammunition) provided clear, urgent reasons to suspect he might be carrying a weapon.
2. **Involving Law Enforcement:**
 - **What should have been done:** School officials should have involved law enforcement immediately when Ethan's drawings were discovered. This would have escalated the situation and led to a more thorough investigation of his mental state and potential threat.
 - **Rationale:** Police involvement could have prevented the incident by either confiscating the weapon or taking Crumbley into custody for further evaluation.
3. **Sending Crumbley Home or Suspending Him:**
 - **What should have been done:** Rather than allowing Ethan to stay in school after the emergency meeting, school officials should have sent him home, suspended him, or placed him under supervision until a full assessment was made.
 - **Rationale:** Given the alarming nature of the situation, this would have removed him from the environment where he could carry out harm. This step would have also given time for mental health intervention or further investigation.
4. **Immediate Mental Health Intervention:**
 - **What should have been done:** The school could have immediately initiated a mental health crisis intervention, involving counselors and possibly medical professionals to assess Ethan's mental state.
 - **Rationale:** The disturbing nature of Ethan's behavior and the content of his drawing indicated a potential mental health crisis that needed urgent attention.
5. **Heightened Security Measures:**
 - **What should have been done:** With clear signs of a potential threat, the school could have increased security measures, including monitoring Ethan or restricting access to certain areas (e.g., locker searches, bathroom checks).
 - **Rationale:** Heightened vigilance around Crumbley's movements in the hours following the meeting could have alerted staff to the impending attack.

Diligent Actions Ethan Crumbley's Parents Could Have Taken:

1. **Taking Ethan Home After the Meeting:**

- **What should have been done:** After being presented with evidence of their son's disturbing drawing and behavior, the Crumbleys should have taken Ethan home immediately to ensure his safety and that of others.
 - **Rationale:** Removing Ethan from school would have removed the immediate opportunity for the shooting and allowed for further mental health evaluation.
2. **Securing the Firearm:**
- **What should have been done:** Ethan's parents should have secured the handgun they had purchased for him just days earlier, especially given the mental health concerns surrounding their son.
 - **Rationale:** Proper firearm storage is essential, particularly when a minor with evident emotional and mental struggles is involved. Preventing Ethan from accessing the gun could have directly averted the attack.
3. **Responding Seriously to the Ammunition Search:**
- **What should have been done:** When alerted by the school that Ethan had been searching for ammunition, his parents should have taken the matter seriously rather than dismissing it with a joking text. They should have discussed the incident with Ethan and reported it to the school to express concern.
 - **Rationale:** Ignoring such a warning sign trivialized the threat and allowed Ethan to continue down a dangerous path unchecked.
4. **Seeking Mental Health Care Sooner:**
- **What should have been done:** Ethan's parents should have arranged for immediate mental health intervention after the November 29th ammunition search incident or sooner, considering his troubling behaviors.
 - **Rationale:** Timely mental health support could have addressed the underlying issues that contributed to Ethan's violent behavior, potentially preventing the tragedy.

Conclusion:

In this case, a combination of **negligence** by school officials and Ethan Crumbley's parents contributed to the tragic outcome. To have acted **diligently**, these key measures—searching the backpack, involving law enforcement, removing Ethan from school, securing the firearm, and addressing mental health concerns—should have been implemented to prevent the shooting. By failing to take these actions, both parties breached their duty of care, leading to criminal charges against the parents and civil lawsuits against the school.

