

# Explainer: True Crime Community

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*This article series looks beyond ideology to reveal the online dynamics and ecosystems that accelerate youth radicalization by normalizing violence and rewarding cruelty and harm. Through short, practical explainers, this series seeks to equip caregivers, school officials, and other frontline practitioners with essential information on the complex and rapidly evolving online landscape that young people navigate today.*

On September 10, 2025, a 16-year-old student opened fire at a high school in Evergreen, Colorado, injuring two students.<sup>1</sup> The attacker was active in the True Crime Community (TCC), a subculture of online networks and forums dedicated to mass shooters and gore content (i.e., videos of extreme violence).<sup>2</sup> On TikTok, his profile photo was a modified image of the 2014 Isla Vista shooter. There, he also posted

a photo of the 2024 Abundant Life Christian School shooter, and in the comments, other TikTok users encouraged him to be a “hero” (i.e., carry out his own attack).<sup>3</sup> The Evergreen shooting followed a series of attacks in which the shooters had also been active in the TCC, including the 2024 Antioch High School shooting and the 2025 Annunciation Catholic Church School shooting. This explainer answers key questions

## Key Takeaways

- If you are concerned that someone you know may be involved in the TCC, reach out to a trusted community organization or leader for help (see the “Resources” section for information). In the case of an imminent threat of harm, call 911.
- Anyone can be involved in the TCC, regardless of their age, gender, race, or beliefs.
- The TCC is not ideological.
- Participation in the TCC fulfills unmet social or emotional needs. Treating the underlying problem is crucial for prevention. Early intervention with supportive resources is essential for assisting at-risk youth for whom removal from school or public embarrassment could be significant stress factors that may increase the threat.
- TCC content is easily found on mainstream social media platforms, and parental controls do not necessarily prevent access to this content. Caregivers and practitioners should maintain open dialogue with children about their online activity and monitor their communications in private chats.
- Caregivers and practitioners should watch for indicators of involvement with the TCC, including sudden or significant changes in behavior and other key warning signs (see the “What Caregivers and Practitioners Should Watch For” section). School administrators and counselors need training on online extremism so they can spot indicators of involvement in TCC-like spaces (e.g., language, symbolism, behavioral patterns).

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about the TCC, including what it is, why young people are drawn to it, how it is connected to other violent online subcultures, and implications for prevention and intervention.

## What is the True Crime Community?

**The TCC is an internet subculture characterized by fascination with high-profile mass killers, especially mass shooters and school shooters.**<sup>4</sup>

It is strongly influenced by the “Columbiners,” the online fandom dedicated to the perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. Members of the Columbiners have perpetrated a number of mass shootings, including the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.<sup>5</sup> TCC participants blur the line between expressing mere interest in mass shootings and glorifying them.<sup>6</sup> Although not all those interested in the TCC are likely to engage in or call for violence, the community normalizes mass violence and has inspired replication of past attacks.<sup>7</sup>

The TCC is not a formal group; rather, it is characterized by a few overlapping features:

- Interest in high-profile killers, especially the Columbine shooters, the 2015 Charleston church shooter, and the 2012 Sandy Hook shooter.<sup>8</sup>
- Cultural references, such as bands that past school shooters liked (e.g., the rock band KMFDM, which was featured on a shirt worn by one of the Columbine shooters).<sup>9</sup>
- Fandom activities (e.g., creating or commissioning shooting-related art, referencing past shooters’ names in notebooks or usernames, and developing one-sided (sometimes romantic) attachments to shooters).<sup>10</sup>

For example, the 2025 Antioch High School shooter shared posts about another TCC-linked attacker, used a photograph of the shooter as his profile picture, and wrote that individual’s name on the weapon he used in his own attack.<sup>11</sup> Separately, the 2025 Annunciation Catholic Church shooter journaled about how their

attack would make them part of a “family” that included the past attackers they revered.<sup>12</sup>

The TCC’s glorification of past attackers creates a self-reinforcing cycle.<sup>13</sup> Perpetrators pay tribute to past attackers and leave behind online content for the community to pore over. In this way, shooters can earn clout and fame in the very same forums they once frequented as fans. Their attacks may become new models that may inspire future attackers—sometimes within a relatively short time frame.<sup>14</sup>

Even though TCC is a small subculture, **its participants have played a large role in recent incidents of targeted violence.** From 2024 to 2025, the TCC was linked to at least seven school shootings and nine attempted shootings in the United States and to at least six international attacks and plots.<sup>15</sup>

## What drives individuals to the TCC?

The more extreme and violent subsets of the TCC often attract young people with unmet social or emotional needs, especially those experiencing social isolation, bullying, or mental health challenges.<sup>16</sup> Young people typically encounter TCC content or users on mainstream social media platforms (e.g., **Discord, Minecraft, Reddit, Roblox, TikTok, Tumblr, X**),<sup>17</sup> mental health or eating disorder interest communities, or less mainstream gore sites dedicated to sharing videos and images of extreme violence.<sup>18</sup> As illustrated in Figure 1, **the TCC appeals to users in two key ways: an emotional appeal (i.e., a sense of connectedness and status within a community) and an aesthetic appeal (i.e., involvement in something that feels edgy or cool).**

Figure 1. How the TCC appeals to users

## Vulnerable Youth with Unmet Needs



- Social Isolation
- Bullying and Harassment
- Mental Health Issues

**PUSH**

**PULL**

**PULL**

## Emotional Appeal

Sense of Community and Belonging



## Aesthetic Appeal

Feeling of Being Edgy or Cool



Source: CNA.

When other TCC users like their posts or send them invitations to private chats or forums, isolated young people may feel a sense of belonging and validation. In these spaces, the community reframes experiences such as being bullied to encourage users to identify with past shooters (who may have also had those experiences) and to normalize feelings that violence is a justifiable, logical, or appropriate response to those shared experiences.<sup>19</sup> For young people who feel marginalized, the TCC is an outlet for “expressing sadness and suicidality, exploring violent fantasies, and inhabiting their desired public persona.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the 2025 Antioch High School shooter wrote in his journal about his intense feelings of self-hatred related to his personal appearance and race, conflict with his family, and suicidal ideation.<sup>21</sup> During his involvement in the TCC and other violent online spaces, his insecurities and violent fantasies became a justification for mass violence, shaped by the examples of previous attackers and the clout they achieved.<sup>22</sup>

Participating in the TCC also gives teenagers an opportunity to challenge social norms by engaging with deviant or taboo individuals or content.<sup>23</sup> Like other fandoms, the TCC engages in admiring activities;

for example, the fans doodle names, make fan edits, form inside jokes, create memes, use fandom-associated hashtags, and assign significance to certain numbers, symbols, and emojis.<sup>24</sup> Unlike other fandoms, the subjects of the TCC are mass shooters and their acts of mass violence. The transgressive nature of the TCC offers its participants a sense of exclusivity and defiance (e.g., “I know something you don’t” or “I’m willing to do what others won’t”). The fandom’s emphasis on aesthetics enhances that appeal because its obscure symbols and imagery are often fully understood only by those inside the community.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the dark subject matter, TCC content may be deceptively cute. For example, the creators of “Cutecore” content often use soft pinks and baby blues to mask violent elements in photos, such as blood and self-harm blades, and they use cute stickers to cover self-harm wounds.<sup>26</sup> **Replication of this aesthetic can be a warning sign of participation in the TCC.** In one case, a minor involved in the TCC who later died by suicide had drawn cartoon-style images of the Columbine shooters and asked their mom for the same t-shirt that one of the Columbine shooters wore during their attack.<sup>27</sup>

## Links to other subcultures

In recent years, the lines have become increasingly blurred between mass killer fandoms (including TCC) and even more violent online subcultures, including the following:

- **Terrorgram** is an online ecosystem of Telegram channels and other sites that promote white supremacy and neo-Naziism and that glorify and encourage political violence and terrorism.<sup>28</sup> The 2025 Antioch High School shooter, who was also active in TCC, plagiarized large sections of his manifesto from Terrorgram publications.<sup>29</sup>
- **Saints Culture** is an element of the white supremacist and neo-fascist online culture that venerates past perpetrators of extremist violence as saints or martyrs.<sup>30</sup> Saints Culture is common within Terrorgram channels, where users may encounter “Saints Calendars” celebrating attacker birthdays and attack dates as well as scoreboards tallying the number of people killed in the attack.<sup>31</sup> Although it is similar to TCC in its glorification of mass violence and promotion of a false sense of personal connection to past attackers, it is distinguished by its focus on ideologically motivated attacks.
- **The Com** is a set of online networks that engages in sextortion of minors and encourages members and victims to engage in animal abuse, sexual abuse, self-harm, suicide, and mass shootings.<sup>32</sup> There is some overlap between The Com and TCC: both focus on extreme violence, and participation in TCC or other mass killer fandoms often precedes involvement in The Com.<sup>33</sup>
- **Gore sites** are websites that host videos of extreme violence, including real-life killings, torture, sexual assault, and mass shootings. At least three TCC-linked school shooters who perpetrated attacks in 2024 and 2025 in the US had accounts on the same gore website.<sup>34</sup>

## What caregivers and practitioners should watch for

Caregivers and practitioners should be aware of potential warning signs for involvement in the TCC. The following are common online and offline warning signs.

### Online warning signs:

- Repeatedly researching or discussing past shootings or shooters
- Directing humor or praise at mass casualty events
- Sharing or saving photos or videos of past shootings or shooters
- Spending an excessive amount of time online (especially in isolation)
- Participating in fringe, unmoderated, or invite-only online spaces

### Offline warning signs:

- Sudden or significant changes in behavior, including self-harm or suicidality
- Mood changes
- Expressions of hopelessness, low self-esteem, or hatred of humanity
- Deteriorating mental health
- Fascination with violence

Exhibiting one or more of these indicators does not necessarily mean that a person is involved in the TCC or is planning an act of violence; however, it does suggest a need for closer attention and supportive intervention to address potential underlying issues.<sup>35</sup>

## Resources

If you are worried about someone who might harm themselves or others, connect the person with mental health resources. **If there is an immediate life-threatening emergency, call 911.**

- Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force: <https://www.icactaskforce.org/internetsafety>
- The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction: <https://virtual-addiction.com/>
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: <https://988lifeline.org/>
- The National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Helpline: [www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)
- The Victim Connect Resource Center: <https://victimconnect.org>
- FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center: <https://complaint.ic3.gov/>
- FBI Field Offices: <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices>
- Resources for caregivers, policy-makers, educators, and mental health providers: <https://perilresearch.com/resources/>
- Guide to characteristics and behaviors related to nihilistic violent extremism: <https://www.isdglobal.org/publication/spotting-the-signs-recognizing-and-responding-to-subcultures-of-nihilistic-violence/>

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