

# Reading the Signs: When Will We Ever Learn?

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Philosophers and researchers have long argued that acts of cruelty to animals committed in childhood and adolescence are often dangerous warning signs, predictors of potential future interpersonal violence. Occasionally a spectacular case crystallizes this concept – which we at the National Link Coalition call The Link between animal abuse and human violence – and brings it to the forefront of public as well as professional attention.

Such a case appears to be emerging in Parkland, Fla., where the 19-year-old expelled student accused of gunning down 17 people on Valentine’s Day at his former high school reportedly had a history of bragging about killing animals, and was also abusive to his girlfriend.

Law enforcement officials said that Nikolas Cruz, 19, posted highly disturbing material on social media before the shooting rampage. Multiple news media reported that an Instagram account that appeared to belong to Cruz included a disturbing bloodied corpse of a dead frog as well as photos of guns and rounds considered to be his arsenal. Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel said Cruz had posted troubling photos and videos on social media. “We saw a pic where he took a chameleon and he splattered the chameleon,” Israel said. “Things like this, that’s not normal behavior.”

The etiology of interpersonal violence is always complex, and this case is no exception. Preliminary media reports also indicate that Cruz had a history of being bullied, had experienced the deaths of both parents, was aggressive, and had undergone mental health treatment. It is far too simplistic to say that “animal abuse always leads to human violence,” but the evidence is quite clear that animal cruelty – especially repeated, remorseless, boastful incidents -- must be recognized as a significant warning sign to be taken seriously.

While the immediate media attention is focused on what the FBI knew about his alleged desire to be a “professional school shooter,” what school authorities knew and did about disturbing reports that they perceived as threats, and how a youth with a history of such alarming behavior over the years was able to legally purchase an AR-15 assault rifle, the allegations of animal abuse were also beginning to emerge.

As of this writing, what we believe is known is as follows: After the adoptive parents of Cruz and his brother died, another family took the two boys in. That family has said they saw signs of depression after the mother died in November, 2017 but nothing indicating this potential level of violence. The family said they were aware that he had had disciplinary problems at his former school and that there were some indications that he had been bullied.

The FBI had been alerted last September when someone named Nikolas Cruz posted to a Mississippi bail bondsman’s YouTube video a warning saying, “I’m going to be a professional school shooter.” The FBI could not determine if this was the same person as the teen accused in the school rampage.

Concerned school officials also emailed faculty to be on the alert for his behavior and to not allow him on campus with a backpack. He was expelled from the school in his junior year for disciplinary reasons including outbursts in the classroom and having ammunition in his backpack, according to school authorities. One student said that Cruz had been expelled after a fight with his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend, and that Cruz had been abusive to his girlfriend. Students said he had an obsession with weapons, always had guns and knives with him and predicted that if anyone would ever shoot up the school, it would be him.

Another student said that Cruz had said that he had been kicked out of two private schools, had been held back twice, and wanted to join the military. After being expelled from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School he was reportedly re-enrolled at a school for at-risk youths where he was said to be working on his GED.

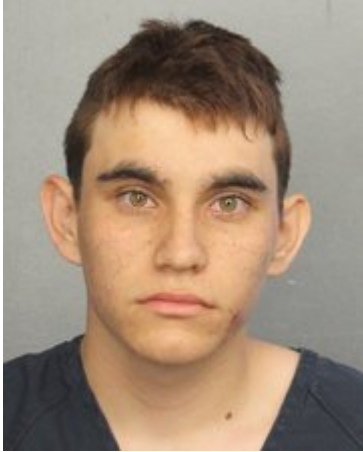
The [New York Times](#) reported that Cruz had been obsessed with a girl at the school to the point of stalking her. "In the hours after the shooting, people who knew Mr. Cruz described him as a 'troubled kid' who enjoyed showing off his firearms, bragging about killing animals, and whose mother would resort to calling the police to have them come to their home to try to talk some sense into him," the [Times](#) reported. Cruz reportedly stayed to himself and had few friends "but struck fear in some students with erratic behavior and an affinity for violence."

The mother of a student told the *Times* that she learned from her daughter's friends that Cruz "was known as always be mentally ill and would kill animals."

The [South Florida Sun Sentinel](#) reported that another student said Cruz had talked about shooting lizards, squirrels and frogs. Former neighbors said they had seen him shooting at a neighbor's chickens, poking at a rabbit hole with a stick and setting his family's dog on another neighbor's piglets.

"Like we did not expect this!" said John Thompson, Deputy Executive Director/COO of the National Sheriffs' Association and a member of the National Link Coalition's Steering Committee. "It is my understanding he was also on a watch list but I guess no one was watching! Law enforcement better wake up and realize this LINK is real and a VERY powerful tool for them!"

"We missed the signs," Broward Mayor Beam Furr, a former teacher himself, told the [Miami Herald](#). "We should have seen some of the signs."



mug shot from Broward County SO



social media photo