

At least 33 dead in Virginia rampage

15 others wounded as panic grips Virginia Tech for 2½ hours

MSNBC and NBC News

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BLACKSBURG, Va. - Local, state and federal investigators scoured a university campus in Virginia for clues to what set off the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history after a gunman shot two people to death in a dormitory Monday morning before making his way to a classroom building where, silently and coolly, he killed 30 more people before turning his weapon on himself, authorities said.

At least 15 other people were wounded in the shootings, which took place over 2½ hours at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Some of them were injured as they leapt to safety from the windows of their classrooms.

The shootings, which came just four days before the eighth anniversary of the Columbine High School bloodbath, in which two students killed 13 people and themselves near Littleton, Colo., [created panic and confusion](#) at the university, which was already on edge after two weeks of bomb threats.

After the scope of the carnage was clear, [angry students and employees demanded to know why](#) the first e-mail warning from police and administrators did not go out to them for more than two hours, even though the killer of two people was at large. By then, the gunman had struck a second time.

Nearly 50 victims

In all, 33 people died Monday at Virginia Tech, including the gunman. The 15 who were wounded were treated for gunshot wounds or other injuries, authorities said. Their conditions were not reported.

Campus Police Chief Wendell Flinchum would not officially confirm that the two incidents were related, pending the results of the investigation, but he referred to only one gunman and said no other suspect was being sought. Numerous federal and local law enforcement officials told NBC News that the events were the work of a lone gunman.

Federal investigators told NBC News' Pete Williams that they believed the man was a Virginia Tech student in his early 20s. Their identification was delayed for several hours, they said, because the man's face was disfigured when he shot himself, he carried no ID and an initial check on his fingerprints came up empty.

The man's two guns, which were bought in Virginia and whose serial numbers had been obliterated, were to be examined at a laboratory of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Williams reported, citing federal law enforcement officials. That examination was also delayed because authorities had to drive the guns to the lab in the suburbs of Washington after high winds precluded them from using an airplane.

Early reports in the initial confusion said police had a suspect in custody, but Flinchum said later that the person was only being questioned for information because he knew one of the dormitory victims. Officers were interviewing him off-campus when reports of the second round of shooting came in, Flinchum said, and the man was not in custody.

Warnings came too late

Charles Steger, the university's president, and law enforcement authorities gave [this account of the day's events](#) in public statements and comments to NBC News:

The rampage began about 7:15 a.m. ET at West Ambler Johnston, a coeducational residence hall that houses 895 people. The gunman, armed with a 9-mm pistol and a .22-caliber handgun, killed a man and a woman there.

About 2½ hours later, police responded to a 911 call reporting that shots had been fired at Norris Hall, an engineering classroom building about a half-mile away on the opposite end of the 2,600-acre campus. They discovered that the front doors had been chained from the inside, apparently so victims could not escape and police could not enter.

Officers forced their way in and followed the sound of gunshots to the second floor, where they found the gunman, who had shot himself in the face. As they canvassed the building, they found dozens of gunshot victims. Eventually, they announced that 31, including the gunman, were dead in the classroom building.

"It's probably one of the worst things I've seen in my life," Flinchum said.

Shaken students said they believed many of the victims might have been spared if campus officials had taken more immediate

steps to secure the campus after the first shootings at the dormitory.

The first e-mail warning to students and employees did not go out to students, faculty and staff until 9:26 a.m., more than two hours after the shooting at the dormitory, according to the time stamps on copies obtained by NBC News. By then, the classroom shooting was under way. The message warned students to be cautious but did not warn them not to go to class.

"I really thought they should have canceled classes sooner," Sam Leake, a junior who lives in West Ambler Johnston, told the campus newspaper, The Collegiate Times. "If they had, maybe some of these deaths could have been prevented."

Steger said administrators and police initially believed the first shooting was an isolated incident and did not see a need to close the university. He said they believed the gunman had fled the campus.

"We can only make decisions based on the information you had on the time. You don't have hours to reflect on it," he said.

Silent gunman strikes without warning

As the first warning was just going out, a bloody scene was unfolding inside the engineering building. Police could not monitor what was going on because the building is not equipped with surveillance cameras, Flinchum said.

Trey Perkins, a sophomore, told MSNBC-TV's Chris Jansing in a telephone interview that [the gunman never said a word](#).

"He didn't say, 'Get down.' He didn't say anything. He just started shooting," Perkins said.

The gunman left that classroom and then tried to return, but students kept him out by bracing the door closed with their feet. "He started to try to come in again and started shooting through the door," Perkins said, but hit no one.

"I got on the ground and I was just thinking, like, there's no way I'm going to survive this," Perkins said. "All I could keep thinking of was my mom."

Derek O'Dell, a sophomore biology major, told MSNBC-TV's Alison Stewart that it was "very surreal."

"At first, I thought it was joke," said O'Dell, who was shot in an arm. "You don't really think of a gunman coming on campus and shooting people."

Until Monday, the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history was in Killeen, Texas, in 1991, when George Hennard plowed his pickup truck into a Luby's Cafeteria and shot 23 people to death, then himself.

The deadliest previous campus shooting in U.S. history took place in 1966 at the University of Texas, where Charles Whitman climbed to the 28th-floor observation deck of a clock tower and opened fire. He killed 16 people before he was gunned down by police.

All entrances to the campus were closed Monday, and Tuesday's classes were canceled. The university set up a meeting place for families to reunite with their children at the Inn at Virginia Tech. It also made counselors available and planned a convocation for Tuesday at the Cassell Coliseum basketball arena, which White House officials said President Bush was considering attending.

Bush said in a brief televised statement: "Schools should be places of sanctuary and safety and learning. When that sanctuary is violated, the impact is felt in every American classroom and every American community. Today, our nation grieves with those who have lost loved ones at Virginia Tech."

Campus, community left stunned

Virginia Gov. Timothy Kaine cut short a trade visit to Asia to return to the state and declared a state of emergency in Blacksburg to free up resources for the investigation.

"I have the greatest confidence that while it will be a very, very difficult time on that campus, the spirit will remain strong," Kaine said in a telephone interview with NBC affiliate WSLS-TV of Roanoke.

Students described a stunned campus and surrounding community after the shootings.

"It was like Columbine just flashed in my head," said Brent Noll, a student from Virginia Beach. "Police cars were just coming from all different directions at speeds like 70 miles per hour.

Noll told NBC affiliate WAVY-TV in Hampton Roads that he was only 70 yards away when two police cars raced up outside the engineering building. "They got out of the car and took their shotguns out and started firing," he said.

Noll said it was likely that he and many other Virginia Tech students knew some of the victims.

"We all know people in the engineering buildings. Engineering is one of the most popular majors here," he said. "Such a quiet town — nothing ever happens big here."

Students and faculty at Virginia Tech were already on edge before the shootings Monday. Police said that there had been bomb threats on campus over the past two weeks but that they had not determined a link to the shootings.

It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

In August, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus was closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and [fled to the Virginia Tech area](#). A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

By MSNBC.com's Alex Johnson with NBC's Pete Williams and MSNBC-TV's Chris Jansing and Alison Stewart.

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