

# Jose Reyes: A Profile

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At age 12, Jose Reyes was the second youngest rampage school shooter (Andrew Golden was 11), and the youngest to take his own life. In seeking to understand what drove Reyes to shoot others and himself, the news coverage focused on bullying and media violence. These issues are relevant, but so are two others that received much less attention: psychological problems and family dysfunction. A consideration of all four factors sheds light on what drove this boy to such extreme acts.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DYSFUNCTION

According to Reyes's mother, Liliana Urtiz, Reyes was born with the umbilical cord around his neck,<sup>1</sup> had to be delivered with forceps, and nearly died at birth.<sup>2</sup> One report said he received oxygen and phototherapy,<sup>3</sup> but another said he didn't.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Urtiz stated that Reyes didn't speak until he was five and in school,<sup>5</sup> but elsewhere it was reported that he could speak individual words by age three and put words together (e.g., in prayers) by age four.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he could not engage in conversation until he was five. Not only was he late in developing language, but the primary language in the home was Spanish,<sup>7</sup> and at school he had to speak English, which presumably created a further challenge for him. Reyes had speech difficulties and in kindergarten was referred for speech therapy.<sup>8</sup> He also struggled academically; in sixth grade, he was doing first grade level work in math and second grade in reading.<sup>9</sup>

Besides his linguistic and academic challenges, Reyes had a variety of social and behavioral issues that led people to view him as being on the autism spectrum. On the positive side, he had social interest and particularly liked to be helpful. He also had a range of emotion, and by some accounts, was usually "sweet"<sup>10</sup> and always had a smile on his face.<sup>11</sup>

On the down side, however, he did not make friends easily and had trouble "reading" social situations. When kids laughed, he assumed they were laughing at him (even when they weren't) and became upset and angry. His communication difficulties limited his ability to interact with peers. He also had trouble with transitions from one activity to another, and did not respond well when corrected by teachers in front of his peers.

His Individual Education Plan (IEP) from 17 January 2013 noted the following: "Jose will become frustrated when things go too fast, change in schedule, or his daily routines. It is hard for him to accept a poor grade on assignments, and it can take him half an hour to an hour for him to calm down."<sup>12</sup>

In some cases, his lack of social skills resulted in his inadvertently being offensive to his peers:

### JOSE REYES

Date: **21 October 2013**  
School: **Sparks Middle School**  
Location: **Sparks, NV**  
Age: **12**  
Killed: **1**  
Wounded: **2**  
Outcome: **Suicide**  
Shooter population: **Secondary school**  
Psychological type: **Traumatized**  
Attack type: **Ambiguous**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at [schoolshooters.info](http://schoolshooters.info).

Jose does not always infer the other student's feelings and cuts their communication short because he wants to 'move on'. He needs social prompts to let the other student express their ideas and feelings ... Jose likes to answer questions and frequently gives his opinion when he feels the other student is giving the wrong answer. However, his comments can sometimes have the wrong tone.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, he often seemed to be "in his own world" and to engage in strange behavior. One teacher noted that Reyes was often "in his own thoughts" and had "a tendency to laugh, giggle, and make little noises to himself during class."<sup>14</sup> His parents and teachers completed rating scales on his behavior, noting the following: "frequently engages in behaviors that are considered strange or odd, and he generally seems disconnected from his surroundings ... Almost always seems out of touch with reality, acts confused, and says things that make no sense."<sup>15</sup> When asked questions, his answers often had nothing to do with the question or the material under discussion.

His emotions were highly unstable. A teacher observed that he "sometimes loses temper too easily, worries about things that can't be changed, is nervous, is fearful, seems lonely, is easily upset, is negative about things, is pessimistic ... often cries easily."<sup>16</sup>

## FAMILY DYSFUNCTION

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The information available about Reyes's family is sparse compared to the information about his social and academic challenges. Within the police report, however, there are a few glimpses of significant issues.

First, his parents' marriage was unstable. When his father (Horacio) bought a restaurant, the family's financial situation improved. The restaurant, however, added significantly to his stress level. This led to Horacio becoming more difficult to deal with.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Horacio reportedly yelled at Reyes when he helped out in the restaurant.<sup>18</sup> Reyes himself talked to a teacher about how hard his father was on him at the restaurant.<sup>19</sup> A relative said that after owning the restaurant for a while, Horacio "became a different person. He looked down on his family."<sup>20</sup>

A relative reported that Reyes's father had been violent toward his mother, Liliana.<sup>21</sup> This apparently was corroborated in a school report from 2007 that noted, "Mother indicates that child has witnessed violence."<sup>22</sup> During her interviews by police, however, Liliana avoided answering questions about domestic violence, so details are lacking.<sup>23</sup> The only specific report is that relatives heard that Horacio put a gun to Liliana's head during an argument.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not Reyes witnessed this incident is unknown.

Not only was Horacio said to be violent toward Liliana; he reportedly had an affair with a waitress named Erica from his restaurant. Liliana caught her husband cheating, resulting in a separation.<sup>25</sup> Horacio reportedly moved in with Erica, and for

a while broke off contact with his children.<sup>26</sup> Liliana wanted to file for divorce and a friend was helping with the process.<sup>27</sup> During this period, Liliana apparently feared for her life because Horacio had a gun; she even considered reporting this to the police.<sup>28</sup> At some point, however, they reconciled, and Horacio moved back in with his family.

How much Reyes knew about his parents' marital problems is unknown, but his father's leaving and returning were significant changes, particularly for a boy who had difficulty handling even small changes in routine. Also, at one point he mentioned to a teacher "that his mom was in trouble with his dad."<sup>29</sup>

Horacio not only yelled at Reyes, but on one occasion (30 January 2012) hit him "two or three times,"<sup>30</sup> giving him a black eye that lasted for several days. This incident was so severe that Horacio was arrested and charged with child abuse.<sup>31</sup> In addition, a cousin who worked in the restaurant said that Horacio slapped Reyes whenever he did something wrong.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Reyes not only witnessed his father's violence against his mother, but was also the direct victim of his father's violence.

## PEER HARASSMENT

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The police report thoroughly addresses the issue of peer harassment, including interviews with many of Reyes's peers as well as his teachers (for an overview, see "Sparks Middle School Shooting: Report Highlights"<sup>33</sup>). His relationships with peers were mixed. Because of his difficulties, some kids reportedly took him under their wing and looked out for him. On the other hand, he was also teased for his disabilities. Reyes was extremely sensitive and reacted badly to it. Also, as noted above, there were times when he assumed kids were making fun of him when they were not. There were no reports of physical assaults, fights, or Reyes being beaten up.

Reyes was reportedly teased about his speech difficulties. Also, once a peer knocked a drink out of his hand; some of the liquid spilled on his pants and a peer said it looked like he urinated on himself. He took this very much to heart. He also reported that he was called gay, though the police report noted no corroborating evidence of this.

Reyes left two letters about his attack. In the letter to his parents, he explicitly stated that the attack had nothing to do with bullying.<sup>34</sup> He seemed to take responsibility for his actions, noting that there were "some bad things in the past cause of me."<sup>35</sup> What he meant by this is a mystery. Perhaps he blamed himself for his parents' marital problems. He also presented an intensely negative view of himself, writing that "now I'm just a monster," and "I'm just an idiot."<sup>36</sup>

His other letter is addressed to the students and teachers. In this letter, he said that the attack was revenge against students and teachers for all their mistreatment of him. He blamed both his peers and school staff for "ruining my life."<sup>37</sup> Though he had reason to be angry at some of his peers, his allegation that teachers ruined his life is surprising; the evidence from

the police report indicates that they went out of their way to be supportive of him and to accommodate his needs as well as possible.

## EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

There are several aspects to the issue of external influences. First, Reyes played a lot of violent video games. Of the 69 games in his home, 47 were first-person shooter games.<sup>38</sup> Reyes also sought out online videos of the song “Pumped Up Kicks,” which is about a child shooting other children with his father’s gun (which is what Reyes did).<sup>39</sup> He also did online searches for “bullying,” “murder,” “revenge,” “school shooting,” “top 10 evil children,” “what if Nazi[s] won ww2,” the shooting at Thurston High School by Kip Kinkel, as well as the video game *Super Columbine Massacre*.<sup>40</sup> He found photographs of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, armed, in the cafeteria of Columbine High School; music videos that included scenes of the attack at Columbine; and a photograph of school shooter T.J. Lane.<sup>41</sup> If Reyes was looking for role models for violence, he had plenty to choose from, including both fictional characters from video games as well as actual school shooters.

As bizarre as this may seem, another possible external influence was an anti-bullying film shown at his school (which, by the way, included scenes of the attack at Columbine). In the film, a bullied student shoots a student. The student then “talks about wishing he could go back in time to change things in the past and his actions are reversed moving backward from the point of the shooting.”<sup>42</sup> The idea of going back into the past and changing one’s life is noteworthy because of what Reyes wrote in his letter to his parents.

As mentioned above, Reyes wrote, “Some bad things happened in the past cause of me.” He also wrote, however, “When I die I will go back into the past and fix everything so it can be a great past. And the shooting of Sparks Middle School never should have happen” (his writing is corrected a bit for readability).<sup>43</sup> Reyes had some cognitive deficits and often appeared to be in his own world, out of touch with reality. After seeing the video, perhaps he believed he could shoot people and then go backward in time and undo both the attack and whatever “bad things” he believed he was guilty of in the past. In this way, the attack would never have happened and “I can be a smart and a better kid so I can be the better son in our family.”<sup>44</sup>

## THE ATTACK

Reyes stole one of his father’s guns and took it to school. Before the school day started, he shot two students he knew and a teacher he didn’t know. The students survived; the teacher did not. I classify his attack as ambiguous, because it isn’t clear if he targeted the students or not. There were reports that at least one of them had teased him. This boy, however, stated that he

didn’t think Reyes targeted him. In his words, Reyes was “spacing,” “not all there,” and “didn’t know what he was doing.”<sup>45</sup>



Reyes’s actions appear to have been a result of multiple factors, including his linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional issues, the violence and marital problems in the family (and possible self-blame for these problems), peer harassment and his extreme sensitivity and inability to navigate his social environment, and the possible impact of role models for violence. In addition, he may have believed that he could go back in time and change reality.

A couple of other things are worth noting. First, his attack was on Monday, 21 October. The previous Friday, his family had moved to a new home.<sup>46</sup> The new home was apparently in a different school district, which raised the possibility that Reyes would need to change schools.<sup>47</sup> His mother reported that he didn’t want to go to a new school.<sup>48</sup> For a boy with difficulty handling change, the move might have caused significant anxiety for him.

Also, his mother reported that a friend of Reyes’s had been shot and killed during elementary school (possibly fourth or fifth grade).<sup>49</sup> This reportedly made him sad. The fact that he shot his own peers after having lost a friend to a gunshot seems potentially important, though there is no evidence of any connection between these incidents.

Another interesting factor is that like many school shooters, Reyes aspired to join the military (as well as to be a police officer).<sup>50</sup> He had a collection of 27 military magazines and some military clothes and helmets.<sup>51</sup> Other shooters struggled with their identities and may have been drawn to the military in an effort to establish a sense of masculinity. Whether this was true for Reyes is not clear. A peer had taunted him, however, about not having enough muscle to participate in physical education.<sup>52</sup> During the incident in which his father abused him, Horacio told Reyes, “You don’t have to be a crybaby.”<sup>53</sup> In addition, teachers reported that Reyes cried easily. It would not be surprising if he felt unmanly and aspired to manhood through his interest in law enforcement and the military.

I classify Reyes as a traumatized shooter, based on having been hit multiple times by his father, yelled at and demeaned by his father, and having witnessed domestic violence against his mother. Like other traumatized shooters, he not only was mistreated at home, but also at school. Also, like a majority of traumatized shooters, he had an older male relative who misused firearms; in his case, his father reportedly pointed a gun at his mother.

Several other school shooters had profound social impairments, such as Seung Hui Cho, Adam Lanza, and Elliot Rodger. Though as children they all exhibited features suggesting an autism-spectrum diagnosis, by adulthood they appeared to have either schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder. It is possible that had he lived, Reyes would have followed this same course. Even as a child, both his parents and teachers viewed

him as engaging in odd behavior, being in his own world, and even being out of touch with reality.

His sense of reality seemed impaired in two instances. First, he apparently believed that he could go back in time and undo his actions. Second, he seemed to think that his attack would cause his school to cease to exist. He wrote, "This school will now come to an end," and drew a picture of a tombstone with the words "Sparks Middle School, 1965–2013."<sup>54</sup> Though these examples could be seen as delusional thinking, they are perhaps best viewed as a result of his being only twelve years old and somewhat limited in his understanding. Though Reyes might have ended up either schizophrenic or schizotypal (the two subtypes of psychotic school shooters), there is insufficient evidence for him to be put in this category.

One final comment is necessary. Whereas Cho, Lanza, and Rodger all had significant social deficits, they were all reasonably bright. In contrast, Reyes had both social and cognitive limitations. These made him a target for teasing, and also meant that he had little in the way of intellectual or emotional resources for dealing with situations that other kids were better equipped to handle. It wasn't his limitations that caused the shooting, however, nor being teased, nor domestic violence, or any one factor. As with all school shooters, many factors and stresses contributed to Reyes's decision to use violence.

## NOTES

- 1 "Reyes Police Report," p. 1,195. Available at [schoolshooters.info](http://schoolshooters.info).
- 2 "Reyes Police Report," p. 513.
- 3 "Reyes Police Report," p. 394.
- 4 "Reyes Police Report," p. 1,195.
- 5 "Reyes Police Report," p. 513.
- 6 "Reyes Police Report," p. 1,195.
- 7 "Reyes Police Report," p. 678.
- 8 "Reyes Police Report," p. 1,196.
- 9 "Reyes Police Report," p. 512.
- 10 "Reyes Police Report," p. 512.
- 11 "Reyes Police Report," p. 229.
- 12 "Reyes Police Report," p. 393.
- 13 "Reyes Police Report," p. 393.
- 14 "Reyes Police Report," p. 394.
- 15 "Reyes Police Report," p. 397.

- 16 "Reyes Police Report," p. 395.
- 17 "Reyes Police Report," p. 390.
- 18 "Reyes Police Report," p. 390.
- 19 "Reyes Police Report," p. 368.
- 20 "Reyes Police Report," p. 389.
- 21 "Reyes Police Report," p. 388.
- 22 "Reyes Police Report," p. 396.
- 23 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 630 and 781.
- 24 "Reyes Police Report," p. 388.
- 25 "Reyes Police Report," p. 391.
- 26 "Reyes Police Report," p. 388.
- 27 "Reyes Police Report," p. 389.
- 28 "Reyes Police Report," p. 389.
- 29 "Reyes Police Report," p. 513.
- 30 Daniel Miller, "Father of 12-Year-Old Sparks Middle School Shooter Admits to Hitting His Son and Giving Him a Black Eye," *Daily Mirror*, 8 November 2013.
- 31 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 676; 815; 1167; 1,297.
- 32 "Reyes Police Report," p. 388.
- 33 "Sparks Middle School Shooting: Report Highlights," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 19 May 2014.
- 34 "Reyes Police Report," p. 108.
- 35 "Reyes Police Report," p. 108.
- 36 "Reyes Police Report," p. 108.
- 37 "Reyes Police Report," p. 109.
- 38 "Report Highlights."
- 39 "Report Highlights."
- 40 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 942-44.
- 41 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 1,172-73.
- 42 "Reyes Police Report," p. 1,181.
- 43 "Reyes Police Report," p. 108.
- 44 "Reyes Police Report," p. 108.
- 45 "Reyes Police Report," p. 344.
- 46 "Reyes Police Report," p. 30.
- 47 "Reyes Police Report," p. 357.
- 48 "Reyes Police Report," p. 730.
- 49 "Reyes Police Report," p. 700.
- 50 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 716; 769.
- 51 "Reyes Police Report," pp. 1,171; 770.
- 52 "Reyes Police Report," p. 349.
- 53 Miller, "Father of 12-Year-Old."
- 54 "Reyes Police Report," p. 109.