

Case Study: Fouad Lakhili - A Trajectory from Animal Cruelty to Mass Murder

Introduction: The Rotterdam Shootings as a Culmination of Warning Signs

On September 28, 2023, the city of Rotterdam was shaken by a spree shooting that defied the Netherlands' reputation as a nation where such acts of mass violence are exceptionally rare.¹ Over the course of approximately 90 minutes, Fouad Lakhili, a 32-year-old medical student at the prestigious Erasmus University Medical Center (Erasmus MC), executed a meticulously planned attack at two separate locations. He first targeted a residence on the Heiman Dullaertplein, murdering his 39-year-old neighbor, Marlous, and her 14-year-old daughter, Romy. He then set their home ablaze. From there, he proceeded to the Erasmus MC, where he entered a classroom and shot to death a 43-year-old general practitioner and university lecturer, Jurgen Damen. Lakhili also committed arson within the medical center, causing widespread panic before his eventual arrest by police.²

This report provides a forensic and psychological analysis of the perpetrator, Fouad Lakhili. The events of September 28, 2023, while horrific, are treated here not as the primary narrative, but as the tragic and foreseeable culmination of a years-long history of documented animal cruelty, profound psychological instability, and a series of systemic gaps that failed to prevent his escalation to homicide. The central thesis of this analysis is that Lakhili's case serves as a critical and devastating illustration of the well-established criminological and psychological link between the abuse of animals and subsequent violence against humans. His actions were not a sudden, inexplicable explosion of violence but the final, lethal phase of a developmental trajectory marked by clear and repeated behavioral red flags.⁵

Psychological Profile of a Killer in Training

The psychological portrait of Fouad Lakhlili that emerged before, during, and after his crimes is one of profound complexity, marked by a formal diagnosis of a developmental disorder, clear observations of psychotic behavior, and strong indicators of an underlying psychopathic personality structure. Understanding his violent trajectory requires moving beyond a single clinical label to examine the interplay of these factors, which together created a highly dangerous individual.

The Clinical Diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder and "Diminished Responsibility"

Following his arrest, Fouad Lakhlili was subjected to an extensive psychiatric evaluation at the Pieter Baan Centre, the Netherlands' leading forensic psychiatric observation clinic. The resulting report, which the presiding judge later described as "exceptionally lengthy," concluded that Lakhlili has a severe Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).⁹ This formal diagnosis became a cornerstone of the legal proceedings. Experts from the center testified that due to the combined pressures of his ASD, social difficulties, and depersonalization issues, Lakhlili found himself in a psychological trap, or "fuik," rendering him unable to make fully rational decisions.¹² This assessment led to the official conclusion that he possessed "diminished responsibility" for the murders, with his accountability estimated to be reduced to a level of 25 to 50 percent.⁹

This clinical finding heavily influenced the initial strategy of the Public Prosecution Service (OM). Aligning with the Pieter Baan Centre's report, the prosecution demanded a 30-year prison sentence to be followed by compulsory psychiatric treatment, known in the Dutch legal system as *terbeschikkingstelling* (TBS).¹⁴ The rationale was that his diagnosed disorder played a significant role in his actions and therefore required mandatory, long-term treatment to mitigate the risk of recidivism.¹⁵

Beyond the Diagnosis: Psychotic Behavior and Psychopathic Traits

While the ASD diagnosis provided a formal framework, it failed to fully encompass the breadth of Lakhlili's disturbing behavior, which had been documented for years. Long before the murders, prosecutors had explicitly warned Erasmus MC that he was exhibiting signs of "psychotic behavior".² This warning was not based on a clinical assessment but on alarming

reports from neighbors who had witnessed him lying half-naked on a pile of leaves in his garden, screaming and laughing maniacally.¹⁶ These episodes, coupled with a known alcohol addiction and depression, painted a picture of severe and active mental disturbance that went beyond the typical characteristics of ASD.⁴

A more incisive analysis came from forensic psychologist Josanne van Dongen, who, in her review of the case, identified "various antisocial and psychopathic traits" co-existing with the ASD diagnosis.⁹ She argued that his extensive history of animal abuse was a key indicator of "cold and unemotional traits" and that his "complete lack of remorse" during the trial was inconsistent with a standalone ASD diagnosis, as individuals with the disorder can often be highly sensitive.⁹ This distinction is forensically critical; psychopathic traits suggest a greater degree of awareness, calculation, and deliberate intent in one's actions.⁹ Academic research corroborates this view, establishing a strong link between animal cruelty and the callous-unemotional (CU) traits considered a developmental precursor to psychopathy.²¹

The official focus on Lakhili's Autism Spectrum Disorder may have created a "diagnostic overshadowing" effect, where the more predictive indicators of his violent potential—his calculated cruelty, manipulateness, and profound lack of empathy—were either subsumed or misinterpreted through the lens of a developmental disorder. While the ASD diagnosis was clinically valid, it struggled to account for behaviors that are hallmarks of psychopathy. His animal abuse was not random but targeted and involved a clear assertion of power.⁹ His interactions with various authorities were described in a post-incident report as "very calculating" and a form of "deliberate avoidance of care," suggesting a manipulative capacity far beyond simple social awkwardness.²⁰ The court, in its final verdict, appeared to recognize this discrepancy. By sentencing him to life imprisonment and rejecting the prosecution's request for TBS, the judges implicitly prioritized the evidence of his meticulous planning and deliberate execution over the mitigating factor of his diagnosis. The court's statement that he "acted in a planned and deliberate manner" and showed "no hesitation or doubt" underscored a legal judgment that his capacity for rational, goal-oriented violence outweighed the influence of his developmental disorder.²⁴

The Online Persona: Grandiosity and Persecution on 4chan

Lakhili's internal state was vividly externalized through his activity on the anonymous web forum 4chan. There, he cultivated a persona built on a dual foundation of grandiose self-perception and a deep-seated persecution complex. He described himself as a "genius" with superior intelligence who was fundamentally misunderstood by "normies" (a derogatory term for ordinary people), whom he dismissed as "stupid".⁴ This narcissistic self-inflation is a trait observed in some mass murderers who crave recognition and feel entitled to a status

they believe has been denied to them.²⁶

He used the platform to broadcast his grievances, posting the prosecutor's warning letter to Erasmus MC under the title "political prosecution of Asperger men".¹⁸ In these online tirades, he claimed his teachers were actively "sabotaging" him and that he was the victim of an unjust system.² He blamed a "coalburner," a racist and misogynistic slur, for having videotaped his abuse of a rabbit, thereby externalizing all responsibility for his conviction.¹⁹ This pattern of blame-shifting is a classic feature of antisocial personalities.

Crucially, his online presence was not merely self-pitying; it was saturated with violent ideation. When authorities confiscated his phone, they discovered a collection of images depicting people being stabbed to death, alongside Nazi and other far-right extremist symbolism.⁴ His online communications culminated in the unambiguous and chilling declaration: "Death to normal people".¹⁸ This digital footprint documents a clear and dangerous progression from perceived grievance to violent fantasy, a critical stage in the pathway to targeted violence where an individual begins to see murder as a viable solution to their problems.²⁷

A Pattern of Violence: The Animal Cruelty Dossier

Fouad Lakhili's history of animal cruelty was not a series of isolated incidents but a sustained, multi-year campaign of escalating violence. This pattern served as a practical and psychological rehearsal for his eventual crimes against humans, allowing him to normalize the act of inflicting suffering and death upon defenseless victims. The dossier of his abuse provides a clear and disturbing timeline of his development as a killer.

Chronology of Abuse (2018–2023)

The first official record of Lakhili's violent behavior dates to 2018, when a report was filed against him for shooting at carp with a crossbow.¹⁸ This act is significant for its use of a weapon and its demonstration of a detached, predatory form of cruelty.

The year 2021 marked a severe escalation in both the frequency and brutality of his actions. He was reported for torturing his pet rabbit by repeatedly throwing it against a tree and kicking it.¹⁸ This hands-on, visceral violence against a domesticated animal is recognized in forensic psychology as a particularly grave red flag. During this period, he also allegedly shot

a pigeon with a crossbow and abused his dog.⁹ Concurrent with this active cruelty was a state of profound neglect; police searches of his home found it to be squalid, filled with filth and animal feces, indicating a complete disregard for the well-being of the animals in his care.⁴

Following his 2021 conviction, the pattern of abuse continued. His neighbor and future victim, Marlous, repeatedly expressed her fear of him to authorities, and the file on him grew with "more reports of animal cruelty".²⁰ He also admitted to abusing animals while under the influence of alcohol, a factor that likely lowered his already minimal inhibitions against violence.²⁸

The 2021 Rabbit Abuse Conviction: A Critical Nexus

The 2021 conviction for abusing his rabbit stands as a pivotal event in his trajectory toward mass murder. The act of cruelty was filmed by his neighbor, Marlous, who subsequently reported him to the police.¹⁶ This courageous act of bearing witness directly embroiled her in his legal troubles and, in his paranoid worldview, transformed her into a key antagonist. According to Dutch media reports, her role in his conviction was a primary motive for her murder.¹⁸ For this crime, Lakhili was sentenced to a mere 40-hour community service order.²⁹ The probation service overseeing his sentence noted that he was cooperative, a behavior that was later understood to be a calculated performance designed to evade more serious intervention and scrutiny.³⁰

The murder of Marlous and her daughter was not a random act of violence but a highly targeted act of retribution. By reporting his animal abuse, Marlous ceased to be just a neighbor; she became the tangible, immediate symbol of the societal and institutional forces that Lakhili believed were persecuting him. A direct causal chain can be drawn: Marlous's report led to his conviction; the conviction formed the basis of the prosecutor's warning letter to Erasmus MC; the warning letter triggered the university's decision to require a psychological evaluation; and that decision ignited his homicidal rage.⁴ In his distorted logic, Marlous was the first domino in the chain of events that led to the destruction of his ambitions. By murdering her, he was not merely silencing a personal antagonist; he was launching his assault on the entire system he felt had wronged him, an assault that would culminate in the murder of Jurgen Damen, the representative of the institution he hated most.

Table: Timeline of Fouad L.'s Animal Abuse and Escalating Behavior

The following table consolidates the known events of Lakhili's behavioral timeline, illustrating the clear, multi-year pattern of escalating violence and the corresponding institutional responses.

Date/Period	Act of Animal Cruelty / Disturbing Behavior	Victim(s)	Reporting / Institutional Action	Outcome / Significance
2018	Shooting at fish with a crossbow.	Carp	Formal warning for poaching issued.	First documented instance of weaponized animal cruelty. ¹⁸
2021	Brutally mistreating a rabbit (throwing against a tree, kicking).	Pet rabbit	Neighbor (Marlous) filmed and reported the abuse.	Convicted of animal cruelty; sentenced to 40 hours community service. ¹⁶ Establishes Marlous as a target.
2021	Allegedly shot a pigeon with a crossbow and abused his dog.	Pigeon, dog	Part of the broader pattern of reports against him.	Contributed to the prosecutor's file on his "worrying behavior". ⁹
2021–2023	House found to be filthy and full of animal feces.	Domestic animals	Discovered during police searches.	Demonstrates severe neglect co-occurring with active cruelty. ⁴
2021–2023	Neighbors report	N/A	Multiple reports to	Police attempts to

	"psychotic behavior" (screaming, laughing maniacally).		police.	engage were met with avoidance (L. would not open the door). ²
Jan 2023	Mental health specialist raises concerns about his impending graduation.	N/A	Concerns relayed to authorities, including the prosecution.	Triggers consultations between agencies. ²⁰
Mar 2023	Prosecutor formally warns Erasmus MC about his behavior and conviction.	N/A	Official letter sent to the university's examination board.	The direct catalyst for the university's action and L.'s subsequent rage. ⁴
Mar 2023	Erasmus MC requires L. to undergo a psychological assessment for his diploma.	N/A	Decision made by the examination board.	L. perceives this as the final act of "sabotage," triggering his meticulous planning for murder. ²

The Path of Escalation: Institutional Awareness and Systemic Gaps

The period between early 2023 and the September shootings was critical. It was during these months that institutional awareness of the threat posed by Fouad Lakhili crystallized, yet a combination of his own manipulative behavior and fragmentation within the public safety and

healthcare systems allowed him to proceed with his deadly plan.

The Prosecutor's Warning: A Clear and Unheeded Alarm

In early 2023, the Public Prosecution Service took the significant step of sending a detailed and explicit warning email to the examination board at Erasmus MC. The letter was a comprehensive summary of the risks Lakhili presented. It outlined his 2021 conviction for animal cruelty, the numerous reports of his "worrying" and "psychotic" behavior, his documented alcohol addiction, and the deeply disturbing discovery of violent, far-right, and Nazi-related imagery on his confiscated phone.⁴ The prosecutor did not mince words, concluding the letter with the pointed and unambiguous statement: "I assume this will influence your decision as to whether he is eligible for the basic medical diploma".¹⁶ This communication represented a formal, high-level alarm bell being rung by the justice system to the academic institution responsible for his professional future.

The university's leadership heeded the warning. Stefan Sleijfer, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Erasmus MC, confirmed that the examination committee took the prosecutor's concerns "very seriously".¹⁶ Despite Lakhili having successfully completed all the necessary academic credits to graduate, the committee made the decision to place his diploma on hold. He was informed that he would not be certified as a doctor until he first underwent a mandatory psychological examination to assess his fitness to practice medicine.²

The Trigger: A Safeguard Perceived as Persecution

For a personality like Lakhili's, steeped in grandiosity and a persecution complex, this reasonable institutional safeguard was interpreted as the ultimate act of betrayal and sabotage. He viewed the requirement of a psychological assessment not as a procedural step but as the final confirmation of a conspiracy against him, a sign that the university would never grant him the diploma he felt he had earned.²⁴ This decision became the definitive trigger for his turn from violent fantasy to operational planning.

The timeline is stark and revealing. Immediately after being informed of the required assessment in March 2023, he began to meticulously prepare for his revenge. He purchased multiple firearms, including the 9mm Glock 19 he would later use, along with aiming devices. He renewed his enrollment at the university, a strategic move to ensure his access pass to the buildings remained active. He practiced aiming his weapons and developed his plan, which he

later referred to as "the operation".¹⁵ His fantasies of violence, which he had described as "fun," now solidified into a concrete, multi-stage plot. His planning was so detailed that on the morning of September 28, he checked the official schedule of lecturer Jurgen Damen to confirm his target would be present in the classroom he intended to attack.²⁴

"Under the Radar": Findings of the Reflection Report

A post-incident "Reflection Report" commissioned by the mayor of Rotterdam provided a sobering analysis of how Lakhili was able to proceed with his plans despite being on the radar of multiple agencies. The report concluded that he was a "very calculating" individual.²⁰ When confronted by professionals from social services, probation, or mental health agencies, he would present a facade of cooperation and self-reflection, only to then engage in what the report termed "deliberate avoidance of care".²⁰ This manipulative strategy was highly effective at deflecting more forceful interventions.

The report also identified significant systemic fragmentation as a key enabling factor. Because there were often long periods between his reported offenses, and because different agencies—including the police, the housing association, mental health services (GGZ), and the probation service—did not always consult with one another or share information in a timely, integrated manner, his overall pattern of escalating behavior remained "under the radar".²⁰ No single entity possessed the complete, terrifying picture of his pathology. Furthermore, the report concluded that at no point were there sufficient legal grounds for compulsory treatment or involuntary commitment. Because he never presented as an

acute danger during his few assessments and consistently feigned a willingness to accept voluntary help, the legal threshold for overriding his autonomy could not be met.²⁰

Lakhili's case tragically exposes the inherent vulnerability of a fragmented public safety and healthcare apparatus when confronted by an intelligent, calculating, and manipulative offender. He skillfully exploited the seams between agencies, presenting a different, less threatening version of himself to each. To the probation service, he was cooperative; to the district social work team, he was polite; to the police, he was simply avoidant.² This chameleon-like behavior prevented the assembly of a holistic threat profile that might have justified a more aggressive, coordinated intervention. The system is largely designed to respond to either acute, undeniable crises or clear criminal thresholds. Lakhili operated in the perilous grey area between them. He was not deemed "mad" enough for involuntary commitment nor, until the day of the murders, "bad" enough for long-term incarceration. His intelligence, which allowed him to pass his medical exams, was weaponized to defeat a system that relies on a degree of transparency from the individuals it seeks to assess.⁹ This case

underscores the urgent need for integrated threat assessment models capable of connecting disparate, "low-level" signals from multiple sources to identify a high-risk individual on an escalating path to violence.

Analysis: Connecting Animal Abuse to Human Homicide

The evidence presented in the case of Fouad Lakhilili provides a definitive and chilling case study on the predictive power of animal cruelty. By applying established criminological and psychological frameworks, it becomes clear that his abuse of animals was not an ancillary character flaw but a direct and legible precursor to his murders of human beings.

The "Graduation Hypothesis" in Practice

For decades, criminological research has explored the "Graduation Hypothesis," which posits that individuals who commit acts of violence against animals are at a significantly higher risk of "graduating" to interpersonal violence against humans.⁶ The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has long recognized a history of animal cruelty as one of the most consistent traits found in the developmental backgrounds of serial rapists and murderers.⁵ Lakhilili's life is a textbook illustration of this hypothesis in action. His violent career began with powerless animal victims—fish, rabbits, pigeons, and dogs—allowing him to develop and normalize his capacity for cruelty.⁹ This behavior then escalated directly to human targets whom he had identified as the sources of his grievances. His choice of weaponry also shows a clear progression, from crossbows used against animals to a high-capacity, semi-automatic pistol used against people.² His actions confirm what extensive research has shown: animal abuse is rarely an isolated pathology but is instead part of a broader constellation of antisocial and violent behaviors.³⁵

Cruelty as a Diagnostic Marker for Psychopathy

Beyond its predictive value, animal cruelty is a powerful diagnostic marker. It is listed as a criterion for conduct disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

(DSM) and is strongly associated with the callous-unemotional (CU) traits that are central to the construct of psychopathy.⁵ Psychopathy is characterized by a profound lack of empathy, an inability to feel remorse, and a willingness to use manipulation and violence to achieve one's goals. Lakhlili's specific acts of cruelty—brutally kicking a defenseless rabbit, shooting animals with a crossbow—are potent demonstrations of these traits. They reveal a desire to inflict suffering and exert total control over a living being.

The analysis of forensic psychologist Josanne van Dongen is particularly salient here. She correctly identified that this pattern of behavior points toward "cold and unemotional traits" that cannot be adequately explained by his ASD diagnosis alone.⁹ The nature of his cruelty is telling. The act of shooting animals from a distance suggests a detached, predatory mindset, while the hands-on violence of kicking and throwing a rabbit indicates a more personal, rage-fueled sadism. Both are powerful indicators of a dangerous personality, and their presence should have been interpreted as the most severe of warnings.

The Nexus of Grievance and Pathology

The Rotterdam shootings were the product of a fatal intersection between Lakhlili's violent underlying pathology and his acute, perceived grievances. His pre-existing capacity for cruelty, which had been developed and rehearsed on animal victims, was finally unleashed upon human targets when he felt his future and his grandiose self-image were being irrevocably destroyed. The victims were not chosen at random; they were symbols. Marlous and her daughter Romy represented the start of his legal troubles and the public humiliation of his conviction. Jurgen Damen was the embodiment of the academic institution that had, in his mind, rejected and invalidated him. The court's finding that he acted in a meticulously planned and deliberate manner confirms that this was not an impulsive act of rage but a calculated campaign of revenge.²⁴ It was a campaign executed by a man who had, for years, demonstrated through his actions against animals that he was both willing and able to kill.

Aftermath: The Human Cost and Social Impact

The culmination of Fouad Lakhlili's escalating pathology was the violent spree he carried out on the afternoon of September 28, 2023. At approximately 14:10 CEST, he arrived at the residence of his neighbors on Heiman Dullaertplein. There, he shot and killed 39-year-old Marlous and fatally wounded her 14-year-old daughter, Romy, who died of her injuries later that day. Before leaving, he set their home on fire.² He then traveled to the nearby Erasmus

MC, entered a classroom in the education center, and murdered 43-year-old lecturer and GP Jurgen Damen.² He proceeded to set another fire within the hospital, an act that caused mass panic and forced the chaotic evacuation of patients and staff, some in wheelchairs and hospital beds.² At approximately 15:30, wearing a bulletproof vest and still armed, he was taken into custody by a heavily armed police unit underneath the hospital's helipad.²

The shootings sent a profound shockwave across the city and the nation. Rotterdam's mayor, Ahmed Aboutaleb, described the events as a "pitch-black day" for the city.² In the aftermath, Erasmus MC canceled classes, and memorials with flowers and messages were established at both the hospital and the victims' home.² The incident, being a rare mass shooting in the Netherlands, has inevitably sparked a difficult public and political debate concerning the adequacy of the nation's mental healthcare system, the responsibilities of educational institutions in monitoring and acting upon signs of dangerousness in their students, and the critical need for more effective communication and data-sharing protocols between different state agencies to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.¹² On February 21, 2025, Fouad Lakhili was convicted on charges of murder, arson, and weapons possession and sentenced to life in prison.²

Conclusion: A Preventable Tragedy

This analysis has demonstrated that Fouad Lakhili's path from medical student to mass murderer was not hidden but was, in fact, marked by numerous, legible, and escalating warning signs. His extensive history of animal cruelty, characterized by both predatory detachment and sadistic rage, stood as the most potent behavioral indicator of his capacity for lethal violence. When this established propensity for cruelty was combined with his diagnosed psychological disorders, observed psychotic behavior, paranoid and grandiose ideations, and explicit online expressions of violent hate, it created the profile of an exceptionally dangerous individual.

The case of Fouad Lakhili is a tragic and powerful testament to the principle that animal abuse is not a minor offense or an isolated character flaw, but a critical public safety issue and a definitive red flag for future violence against humans. While the official "Reflection Report" concluded that the tragedy was likely unavoidable given the existing legal constraints on compulsory intervention, the case nonetheless exposes severe vulnerabilities in how society and its institutions assess and manage individuals who are simultaneously intelligent, manipulative, and violent. The systemic failure to connect the dots—between his cruelty to animals, his disturbing public behavior, his private online threats, and his escalating grievances—allowed a killer to finalize his psychological and practical training and execute his meticulously planned revenge. This case must serve as a catalyst for reform, demanding

stronger inter-agency communication, more integrated threat assessment frameworks, and a fundamental recognition that those who torture and kill animals pose a profound and predictable threat to the entire community.

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