

More Mass Shootings: What Can We Do?

The Wired Word for the Week of August 11, 2019

In the News

Three mass shootings of attendees at public events on July 28 (Gilroy, California), August 3 (El Paso, Texas) and August 4 (Dayton, Ohio) have resulted in the deaths of at least 34 innocent people, some of them children, the wounding of several other individuals, and the deaths of two of the gunmen and the arrest of the third.

Slayings such as these have occurred so often that many people are no longer shocked by such news. According to a count done by *TIME*, there have been eight mass shootings so far this year that fit this definition: a shooting in a public place in which at least three victims were killed.

TIME counts only those attacks that occur within the boundaries of this country. Thus the slaying of 51 worshippers in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March is not included. Also omitted are incidents where the gunman killed fewer than three, such as the attack at a Poway, California, synagogue in April in which a single victim was killed and three others were wounded. Further, *TIME*'s count does not include mass attacks where some other form of weapon -- such as a knife, bomb, vehicle or arson -- is used. An example of the latter is the four people killed by arson in Washington state last month in an act of domestic violence. Since there is no separate category reporting these attacks -- and since the definition of "mass attack" varies -- the non-firearms numbers are likely to be under-reported.

By *TIME*'s reckoning, the eight shootings that fit its definition left a total of 62 people dead and 65 wounded. The El Paso attack, with 22 killed and 24 wounded, had the most victims to date this year.

You may hear elsewhere of much higher numbers of mass shootings for this year. For example, the nonprofit Gun Violence Archive (GVA), which tracks every mass shooting in the country, says that as of August 5, there had been more mass slayings incidents -- 255 to date -- across the United States this year than there have been days in the year so far. The GVA defines a mass shooting as any incident in which at least four people were shot, excluding the shooter. However, their numbers are focused on gun violence and thus include not only random attacks on people not known to the shooter, but also armed robberies, home invasions, gang clashes, drug-related incidents, domestic violence and other crimes.

Nonetheless, even *TIME*'s count -- 8 attacks, 62 deaths and 65 wounded in the United States -- represent heartbreaking tragedies.

The United States is not alone in dealing with this phenomenon. A study by the nonprofit Crime Prevention Research Center notes that, while the United States has a bit over 4.25 percent of the world's population, it has approximately 2 percent of the public mass shooters. It is also reasonable to believe that the weapon favored by mass murderers may vary somewhat by culture: The Kyoto Anime mass murderer used gasoline to kill at least 34 people a few weeks ago (July 18). This was a high death toll, but some commentators have suggested that the news received little attention in the United States because it didn't involve guns.

As the nation struggles with the stark reality of mass murder, the *Los Angeles Times* published a summary of a study of mass shooters by Jillian Peterson, a psychologist and professor of

criminology at Hamline University, and James Densley, a sociologist and professor of criminal justice at Metropolitan State University. Together, they run the Violence Project, a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to reducing violence in society.

Peterson and Densley have spent two years studying the life histories of mass shooters in the United States who killed four or more people in a public space, going back to 1966, and they looked at every incident meeting that definition since 1999.

With a goal of finding "data-driven pathways for preventing such shootings," the two researchers interviewed incarcerated perpetrators and their families, shooting survivors and first responders. They read media and social media, manifestos, suicide notes, trial transcripts and medical records.

The researchers found four commonalities among the perpetrators:

1. The vast majority of mass shooters experienced early childhood trauma and exposure to violence, and the trauma was often a precursor to mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, thought disorders or suicidal tendencies.
2. Practically every mass shooter had reached an identifiable crisis point in the weeks or months before the shooting. They often had a specific grievance. Such crises were, in many cases, communicated to others through a marked change in behavior, an expression of suicidal thoughts or plans, or specific threats of violence.
3. Most of the shooters had studied the actions of other shooters and sought validation for their motives. Hence, mass shootings tend to come in clusters.
4. The shooters all had the means to carry out their plans. In 80 percent of school shootings, perpetrators got their weapons from family members. Workplace shooters tended to use handguns they legally owned. Other public shooters were more likely to acquire weapons illegally.

Based on their findings, Peterson and Densley conclude that the following steps could help prevent future shooting:

Deprive potential shooters of the means to carry out their plans. This can include more visible security measures at public gatherings, and better control of weapons through age restrictions, permit-to-purchase licensing, universal background checks, safe storage campaigns and red-flag laws (measures that help control firearm access for vulnerable individuals or people in crisis).

Regarding security measures at public gatherings, we note that the perpetrator at the Gilroy site cut through a fence to get past the event's security, but that patrolling police officers on the scene shot the gunman in less than a minute after he opened fire, limiting his victims to three dead and 15 wounded. That's still a significant number, but it would likely have been higher without the presence and quick response of the officers.

Make it more difficult for potential perpetrators to find validation for their planned actions. Media can make efforts to deny perpetrators publicity. As a society, we can change how we consume, produce, and distribute violent content on media and social media.

As a society, be more proactive regarding people in crisis. Most mass public shooters are suicidal, and their crises are often well known to others before the shooting occurs. People who sense something is wrong may fear overreaction, but schools, churches and employers can initiate conversations about mental health and establish systems for identifying individuals in crisis and report concerns.

Get good help for those who undergo traumas in early life. We can also decrease the stigma around mental illness, so sufferers do not hesitate to seek help.

See the full *Los Angeles Times* article in links list below.

In addition to the above, others maintain that allowing people to defend themselves and others might limit the number of deaths when preventive measures fail. Many of the mass shootings in the United States occur in places where it is illegal to have a firearm, which means that those who obey the law and who are not a threat to others are left at the mercy of those who are willing to disobey such laws in order to commit murder.

TWW team member Malia Miller has a son, Micah, who is a travel nurse and is currently contracted by a hospital in Dayton. He worked on Monday in the trauma ICU where two of the victims from that shooting were in rough shape. Micah said the head surgeon, who had been a medic in Afghanistan, commented that what they dealt with in the aftermath of Dayton's shooting rivaled his experiences in the military. The difference is that he expected this situation in a military zone as opposed to a city in a country that is supposed to be at peace.

More on this story can be found at these links:

We Have Studied Every Mass Shooting Since 1966. Here's What We've Learned About the Shooters. *Los Angeles Times*

62 People Have Been Killed in Mass Shootings in 2019 Alone. *TIME*

37 Years of Mass Shootings in the U.S. in One Chart. *TIME*

The Violence Project

Kyoto Animation Arson Killings Didn't Get Much Attention ... *USA Today*

Applying the News Story

No doubt, with these sorts of attacks occurring so often, most Americans are no longer as shocked by them as they once were, and some perhaps have even resigned themselves to expect that these incidents will continue to occur frequently in the United States.

The preventive measures Peterson and Densley have suggested are not easy to implement and likely never could be in any kind of way comprehensive enough to head off every attacker. In addition, some may disproportionately restrict civil liberties, are a form of "prior restraint" (punishing people because they *might* commit a crime), and are vulnerable to abuse.

Still, the research is a place to start, and this lesson gives us an opportunity to think about it and how churches can be involved.

The Big Questions

1. Name one thing that struck you about the research of Peterson and Densley. Why did it strike you?

2. To use the findings of the study to identify in advance people who may become mass shooters requires a some aspects of profiling. What are the benefits of such an approach? What are the problems with it? How might we navigate such difficulties?
3. If efforts to prevent future mass shootings look extremely difficult and costly to implement, does that mean we as a society should not undertake them?
4. What role might your church take to help people deal with childhood trauma? What role might your church take to help prevent childhood trauma?
5. According to the *TIME* count, 62 people have been killed in mass attacks this year to date. In the context of how many people die each year from medical errors, vehicle accidents, or one jetliner crash, that number seems small. What makes that number different from those other death causes? In what sense is it not the number of fatalities but the nature of the crime that demands action?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (No context needed.)

Many Bible readers consider this a promise of God. But it seems to hinge on training children in the right way.

Elsewhere in Proverbs this is described as the way of "wisdom," stating that this starts with "the fear of the Lord" (this is not meant to be "fear" as in being afraid of punishment, but "fear" as in standing in awe of the immensity and goodness of God). Martin Luther begins his explanation of most of the Ten Commandments with the phrase "we should fear and love God so that ...," while he explains the first commandment as meaning "we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

So, a right attitude toward God and a recognition of his love and intentions for us is the foundation. Upon these is then built knowledge of God and, as Paul says in his letter to the Galatian Christians (Galatians 5:23), gentleness and self-control. This is an overwhelming task for parents -- who also fail often -- but one in which God promises to help.

Questions: What is "the right way" in which children should be trained? How is that training accomplished? What forces in childhood, over which parents may have little or no control, may work against that "right way" training. What do children learn from neglect? What do they learn from abuse? What do they learn from bullying? How can we counter such effects when the trauma has already happened?

John 12:5-6

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ([Judas] said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) (For context, read 12:1-8.)

In the scene where Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, Judas asks why the perfume hadn't been sold and the money given to the poor. In narrating that incident, the gospel writer John inserts the parenthetical comment that Judas only asked the question because he was the carrier of the disciples' common purse and stole from it.

Looking for what mass murderers have in common as a way to prevent future killings brings up the idea of profiling, which is a difficult practice to employ and offers no promise of useful results. One problem is that sometimes, it is only *after* an individual does a terrible act that we can look at the person and say, "Oh yes, he showed those tendencies." But the trick is doing it beforehand.

This biblical text is a case in point. After Judas' betrayal of Jesus, the author of the Gospel of John was able to say "Aha! Judas wasn't really concerned about Mary wasting money by washing the feet of Jesus with that expensive perfume, he was stealing money from the common purse. We should have known." But they didn't know. They didn't guess ahead of time. And possibly at that moment, Judas' question was sincere and not prompted by a desire to personally profit.

Questions: How can we use profiling in a positive way that does not wrongly label some troubled individual? Discuss how the rate of false positives (incorrectly labeling someone as a future mass murderer) and false negatives (incorrectly *missing* that someone is a future mass murderer) come into play. What can we learn from after-the-fact studies that can help us head off future problems from others? What are the dangers inherent in what seems to be a scientific prophecy about what a person is likely to do?

Matthew 16:24

... If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (For context, read 16:24-27.)

Jesus made this statement to tell his disciples that following him was not going to be easy, but his implication was that they should do it nonetheless.

It shouldn't surprise us that what Jesus asks us to do is hard, because that's right in line with other things he said -- like these from his Sermon on the Mount:

- Love your enemy. Hard to do!
- Turn the other cheek. Hard to do!
- Be pure in heart. Hard to do!
- Rejoice and be glad when people revile you. Hard to do!
- Don't lust. Hard to do!
- Go the second mile. Hard to do!
- Forgive others their trespasses. Hard to do!
- Don't worry about tomorrow. Hard to do!
- Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Hard to do!
- Be doers of his words and not just hearers. Hard to do!

Questions: What in your opinion is the hardest thing to be done with regard to this current crisis? When should the difficulty of accomplishing something excuse us from doing it? What would happen to Christianity if we took that attitude regarding making disciples for Jesus Christ, which is another hard endeavor?

John 11:39

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." (For context, read 11:38-44.)

This is from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and we notice that as in several other cases of Jesus' miracles, he requires some effort on the part of others. In this case, it is the removal of the stone sealing Lazarus' burial cave.

It is no stretch to say that in life, most things that we are able to make better include some effort on our part.

Questions: What is wrong with looking at the mass shootings and saying "There's nothing we can do to stop these"? What "stones" might we tackle? Who should be responsible for trying to change the factors that cause some people to become mass killers? What can ordinary individuals do?