

Mass Shootings: What Role Do Guns Play?

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We dance around in a ring and suppose, But the Secret sits in the middle and knows. Robert Frost

Robert Frost's poem highlights the seemingly inexplicable nature of life and reality. Yet, when we face public crises, such as mass shootings, we should use research and evidence to help us make informed decisions, which in turn impacts public policy. We don't need to just dance around arguments and suppose.

Certainly, after every school or mass shooting, many pundits and politicians wring their hands at the challenge of understanding such violence and simply call for "thoughts and prayers." Other leaders "suppose" motivations but actions are rarely taken. More children, teachers, coaches, and loved ones die as we fail to address the core problem related to all mass shootings—individuals are shot by guns. It is not a secret lurking out of reach of understanding.

Yes, we often ignore the issue of firearms and suppose other factors relating to gun violence, bolstering arguments with anecdotal examples. Indeed, many of these factors are extremely important to our broader understanding of mass shootings.

We can suppose that mental health issues are the cause of mass shootings.

The logic of this argument is that "a person must be mentally ill or they wouldn't commit such a horrific act. If only we could track such individuals, we could prevent the violence." We can point to examples such as the Virginia Tech

shooter to bolster the argument. He was clearly troubled. Yet, the reality is more complex. Some mentally ill individuals may present a danger to others and indeed, some mass shooters are disturbed. As such, it is imperative that we increase both the availability of and access to mental health services, including within our school systems. Further, we should work to destigmatize mental illness in the United States (US) so that more individuals seek help. Nonetheless, as noted by Swanson, McGinty, Fazel, and Mays (2014):

Media accounts of mass shootings by disturbed individuals galvanize public attention and reinforce popular belief that mental illness often results in violence. Epidemiologic studies show that the large majority of people with serious mental illnesses are never violent. However, mental illness is strongly associated with increased risk of suicide, which accounts for over half of US firearms-related fatalities.

Individuals living with mental illness are less likely to be violent than someone without a mental illness. Sadly, they also are more likely to be victims of violence.

Regardless, there is no evidence that the US is a run-away hotbed of mental illness. Indeed, according to Kessler et al. (2009) and the World Mental Health Surveys, mental disorders are common and comparable across nations. There appears to be little correlation between mental illness and mass shooting rates.

As such, mental illness alone cannot explain the disproportionate amount of gun violence or shootings in the US.

We can suppose that bullying is the cause of mass shootings.

The world would be a better place if we all loved each other and treated each other with respect and valued fundamental human rights. The Newtown shooter is often cited as a young man who was bullied and felt an outcast. However, the reality is far more complex. Most mass shooters tend to be white males and not

those individuals most marginalized in the US. Sadly, those people most bullied are the least powerful among us. Nonetheless, what a young white male mass shooter may experience is relative deprivation—they compare their lives to those around them and manifest increased prejudice and rage. These young men may have been told they have privilege yet everywhere they look in their lives, they see privilege denied. So, as a culture, we do need to work toward decreasing structural barriers to education and opportunity as well as economic parity for all individuals in the US. We also need to address issues of masculinity and power (discussed below).

Regardless, bullying cannot be a predominant factor in gun violence, as disparities in respect, privilege, or opportunity exist around the globe. Bullying is not unique to the US and the US, with all of its opportunities, far outshines other nations in relation to mass shootings.

We can suppose the role of masculinity, power, and guns in relation to mass shootings.

Almost all mass shooters are male and we live in a culture where male dominance is often tied to aggression as well as guns. Media, whether television, films, or games are awash in male characters who are marked as successful based on their ability to assert themselves with physical strength and weaponry. Traditionally, the “hero” shoots his way out of a hostage filled high-rise, military vessel, plane, or train. Why wouldn’t someone want to be that “hero”? Obviously, reality is complex, as most men do not engage in mass shootings or even domestic violence. Nonetheless, it is possible that young men who are feeling disenfranchised may try to reassert their masculinity and power—from an otherwise perceived powerless life—through shooting up a school, a concert, or other venue, emulating what they see through media. As such, it is imperative that we teach young men that their humanity and power are not tied to weapons

and aggression but rather their ability to learn, grow, and make powerful contributions within their families and communities.

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Regardless, patriarchy and the association between masculinity, power, and violence are hardly unique to the US. Yet, the extreme frequency of mass shootings is distinctly a US identifier.

We can suppose that violent video games and media are the cause of mass shootings.

Violent video games and other media have been linked to increased aggression in children and teens. As noted by Anderson et al. (2010):

The evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.

Moreover, such games can lead to increased dehumanization of the victims—real life becomes an extension of the game for some players. Certainly, video game use was cited as a cause related to the Columbine killers. Yet, the reality is again more complex. Many of the effects of video games and media may be short term and obviously mitigated by a host of other factors (e.g., parental involvement, other interests, etc.). Parents should monitor their children's video game use and exposure to violent media as well as keep lines of discussion open with their children and teens.

Regardless, the US is not the only consumer of violent video games or media. Yet, we outpace these other nations with respect to mass shooting.

We can suppose that racism, anti-LGBT, and other hateful attitudes are the underlying cause of mass shootings.

As a nation, it is true that hate continues to run deep. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2017) continues to track hate in the US and increasing levels of extremism, particularly related to White Supremacy. Certainly, the Charleston church and Pulse Nightclub shootings have been cited as evidence for the role of hate in mass shootings. Yet, what causes the hate to burn so deep that it leads to mass murder? There are many who feel prejudice or hate and do not engage in mass violence or even hate crimes. What is clear is that much work needs to be done in the US to address issues of hate and extremism but also the very real short- and long-term effects of racism, sexism, bias against LGBT individuals, anti-immigrant bias, etc. Moreover, we must teach our children the lessons of not just “tolerance” but respect and value for the diversity of humanity.

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Regardless, prejudice and discrimination against the “other” exist around the globe, as does organized hate or extremism. Yet, it is in the US where such hatred translates into mass shootings.

There is little argument: As a culture, we need to work towards greater equality and respect for others, a decrease in cultural glorification of violence, and increase availability/access to mental health services. Psychology in terms of practice, research, advocacy, and education has a lot to offer in all of these endeavors. However, none of these factors correlate with mass shootings when we extend our analysis to other countries around the globe. Although significant issues, if we only address these challenges, we will continue to be shaken by instances of gun violence in our communities.

The “secret” that is often lost among the “supposes” is the role of guns.

The key feature that separates the US from other nations around the globe is the availability and access to guns, particularly highly destructive semi-automatic weapons of war. According to the McCarthy, Beckett, and Glenza (2017), the US,

which constitutes less than 5% of the world's population, makes up between 35-50% of the world's gun ownership with 88 guns per every 100 individuals. Just the mere presence of a gun—otherwise known as the “weapons effect (see Bushman, 2013)—makes it more likely that someone will be a victim of gun violence. In the hands of someone who is influenced by any of the other factors described above, we have a recipe for tragedy.

Until the US deals with the role of guns in mass shootings and establishes common sense restrictions, we will continue to be plagued by mass shootings, as well as other forms of gun violence. Thoughts and prayer will not end the violence impacting people wherever we gather for fun, support, or learning. It is time for our political officials to focus on the evidence—mass shootings occur and guns make these atrocities all too easy and frequent.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-fight-against-hate/201802/mass-shootings-what-role-do-guns-play>