

## Uncontrolled Weapons and Mass Violence in America

America is suffering from an epidemic of mass shootings, and no one has found a satisfactory explanation – much less a solution – for this terrible affliction. Until the horrific Sandy Hill Elementary school massacre, it was easy to forget how many times this has happened in the last few years. But now America is beginning to see how often these senseless killings occur, and how strongly connected they are to problems of disturbed individuals with super powerful weapons. The mass murder at a movie theater in Colorado in July of 2012 was a terrible reminder of how easy it is to kill with modern weapons, but it was not the only incident. Another mass shooting occurred at a manufacturing plant in Minnesota in September of 2012, and the violence showed how little defense citizens have against mentally disturbed individuals with unrestricted access to advanced weaponry. And then the unthinkable happened. The mass shooting at a Connecticut elementary school in December killed 29 people, including 20 innocent children. This “Sandy Hook Elementary” killing showed once and for all America’s vulnerability to madmen with high powered weapons. These killings are the only the latest events in an epidemic of gun violence which has been unfolding over the last thirty years. The truth is that America will not see an end to this violence until the people of this country agree to restrict the most dangerous guns and to take control of the most dangerous people abusing these guns.

Since 1982, there have been at least 62 mass shootings across the country. Twenty-five of these mass shootings have occurred since 2006, and seven of them took place in 2012 (Alioto). The pace of the violence is increasing for two reasons: first of all, copycat psychotics look at

media coverage of the violence and imagine themselves heroes who can kill and die with suicidal fame on television. The new weapons make this fantasy possible. Most of these killings were committed with powerful weapons better suited to combat than to hunting or self-protection.

These guns are awesomely powerful, and altogether too easy to obtain. Of the 143 super high power repeating weapons possessed by the killers, more than three quarters were obtained legally. The weapons included dozens of assault weapons and semi-automatic handguns with high-capacity magazines. Killer Jeffrey Weise used a .40-caliber Glock to slaughter students in Red Lake, Minnesota, in 2005; so too did James Holmes, along with an AR-15 assault rifle, when he blasted away at his victims in a Colorado movie theater in 2012. Worst of all, Adam Lanza wielded a .223 Bushmaster semi-automatic assault rifle as he massacred 20 school children and nine adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown Connecticut (“Weapons, Legislation, and Violence in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America”).

Again and again, the same kinds of disturbed individuals are wielding the same overly powerful weaponry to spread terror in our streets, our businesses, and our schools. This happens partly because the media broadcasts these killings to the world (making the killers famous), but also because American lawmakers refuse to demand the basic licensing of guns and the control of high powered combat weapons designed for 21st century war (Weapons, Legislation, and Violence”).

In the wake of the massacres this year at a Colorado movie theater, a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, researchers have set out to track mass shootings in the United States over the last 25 years. Here are their results.

The shootings – 74 in all – usually occur in public places. More than half of the cases involved school or workplace shootings. The other 31 cases took place in locations including shopping malls, restaurants, and religious and government buildings (Grier 34). The killers want to be seen.

The killers tend to be similar: young, white, and male. Forty-four of the killers were white males. Only one of them was a woman. The average age of the killers was thirty-five, though the youngest among them was only eleven (35). Of course, all of the killers were mentally disturbed, but it's worth mentioning that the majority of the killers were known to be mentally disturbed (36).

To distinguish these killers and these places from the wide variety of violent events requires that we define a "mass shooting." As a preliminary step in this direction, this paper uses the following criteria – taken from Harold Grier's authoritative book – are used to identify mass shootings:

1. The shooter kills at least four people. An FBI crime classification report identifies an individual as a mass murderer—versus a spree killer or a serial killer—if he kills four or more people in a single incident (not including himself), typically in a single location (Grier 77).
2. The killings are carried out by a lone shooter or a small group of shooters (77).
3. The shootings occur in a public place (77).
4. The shootings are "senseless." Crimes primarily related to gang activity or armed robbery are not included (77).

Researchers found that the rate of mass shootings has increased in recent years – at a time when America has been flooded with millions of additional firearms and many new laws making it easier than ever to carry them in public places, including bars, parks, and schools (101).

America has always been heavily armed relative to other societies, and our arsenal keeps growing. In 1995 there were an estimated 200 million guns in private hands. Today, there are around 300 million – about a 50 percent jump. The US population, now over 314 million, grew by about 20 percent in that period. At this rate, there will be a gun for every man, woman, and child before the decade ends (Anderson 121).

In the wake of these killings, many people have argued that the way to bring an end to this violence is to arm more people capable of protecting and defending the public in the event of attacks. This is the position taken by the National Rifle Association (243). Shouldn't Americans be able to defend themselves with their own guns? In the fierce debate that always follows the latest mass shooting, it's an argument you hear frequently from gun rights promoters: "If only more people were armed, there would be a better chance of stopping these terrible events." Sounds good – but what are the odds that, say, a moviegoer with a pack of Twizzlers in one pocket and a Glock handgun in the other would be mentally prepared, properly positioned, and skilled enough to take out a body-armored assailant in a smoke-and panic-filled theater? The truth is that guns put the advantage with offense, not the defense, and the crazy man who shoots first is far likelier to win than the responsible citizen who uses a gun to defend himself or others (267).

Let's look at some real-life examples. Back in 1982, a man opened fire at a welding shop in Miami, killing eight and wounding three others before fleeing on a bicycle. A civilian who worked nearby pursued the assailant in a car, shooting and killing him a few blocks away. Florida authorities concluded that the vigilante had used force justifiably, and guessed that he may have prevented additional killings. Who knows? But even if we were to count that case as a successful armed intervention by a civilian, it would account for just 1.6 percent of the mass shootings in the last 30 years (Alioto).

Attempts by armed civilians to stop shooting rampages are rare, and successful attempts are even rarer. There were two school shootings in the late 1990s, in Mississippi and Pennsylvania, in which bystanders with guns ultimately subdued the teen perpetrators, but in both cases it was after the shooting had stopped (Alioto).

Other cases led to tragic results. In 2005, as a rampage unfolded inside a shopping mall in Tacoma, Washington, a civilian named Brendan McKown confronted the assailant with a

licensed handgun he was carrying. The assailant pumped several bullets into McKown and wounded six people before eventually surrendering to police after a hostage standoff. In Tyler, Texas, that same year, a civilian named Mark Wilson fired his licensed handgun at a man on a rampage at the county courthouse. Wilson – who was a firearms instructor – was shot dead by the body-armored assailant, who wielded an AK-47 (Alioto).

Appeals to heroism on this subject by gun-rights supporters happen all the time. But these appeals usually contain misleading information. Gun rights die-hards frequently credit the end of a rampage in 2002 at the Appalachian School of Law in Virginia to armed "students" who intervened—while failing to disclose that those students were also current and former law enforcement officers, and that the killer, according to police investigators, was out of bullets by the time they got to him. It's one of several cases commonly cited as examples of ordinary folks with guns stopping massacres that do not stand up to scrutiny. But the folks who stopped the shooter were *not* ordinary – they were licensed police officers with authorized weapons (Alioto).

How do law enforcement authorities view armed civilians getting involved? One week after the slaughter at the Dark Knight screening in July, the city of Houston released a new Department of Homeland Security-funded video instructing the public on how to react to such events. The law enforcement production advises running away or otherwise hiding, and suggests fighting back only as a last resort. It makes no mention of civilians using firearms. Law enforcement officials are the first to say that civilians should not be allowed to obtain particularly lethal weaponry, such as the AR-15 assault rifle and ultra-high-capacity, drum-style magazine used by Holmes to mow down people in the Colorado theater ( "Weapons, Legislation, and Violence" ).

In short, there is no evidence indicating that arming Americans further will help prevent mass shootings or reduce the violence of those shootings. Dr. Stephen Baumgarten, a leading expert on emergency medicine and gun violence at the University of California at Davis,

identified and analyzed 62 of these shootings, and one striking pattern in the data was this: in not a single case was the killing stopped by a civilian using a gun. In some of the most recent rampages in which armed civilians attempted to intervene, those civilians not only failed to stop the shooter but were gravely wounded or killed. Armed civilians attempting to intervene are actually more likely to increase the bloodshed, says Dr. Baumgarten, "given that civilian shooters are less likely to hit their targets than the police are in these circumstances." A chaotic scene in August 2012 at the Empire State Building put this starkly into perspective when New York City police officers trained in counterterrorism confronted a gunman and wounded nine innocent bystanders in the process of shooting the killer.

Despite the danger, a number of recent laws have rolled back gun restrictions throughout the country. In the past four years, across 37 states, the NRA and its political allies have pushed through 99 laws making guns easier to own, carry, and conceal from the government. Among the more striking measures: Eight states now allow firearms in bars. Missourians can carry a gun while intoxicated and even fire it if "acting in self-defense." In Kansas, permit holders can carry concealed weapons inside K-12 schools, and Louisiana allows them in houses of worship. Virginia not only repealed a law requiring handgun vendors to submit sales records, but the state also ordered the destruction of all such previous records. Wisconsin's concealed-carry law went into effect just nine months before the Sikh temple shooting in suburban Milwaukee this August. During that time, the state issued 122,506 weapons permits, according to data from Wisconsin's Department of Justice. The new law authorizes guns on college campuses, as well as in bars, state parks, and some government buildings ( "Weapons, Legislation, and Violence" ).

Unregulated access to weapons by mentally ill individuals is a crucial consideration for explaining mass violence. A major New York University investigation in 2013 examined 100 shooting rampages and found that at least half of the killers showed signs of serious mental health problems. The majority of mass shootings are murder-suicides: In 62 cases analyzed, 36

of the shooters killed themselves. Others may have committed "suicide by cop" – putting themselves in shootouts they were certain to lose. 7 died in police shootouts ( Larson 177).

Mental illness among the killers is no surprise, and it ranges from paranoid schizophrenia to suicidal depression. But while some states have improved their sharing of mental health records with federal authorities, millions of records reportedly are still missing from the FBI's database for criminal background checks. Dr. Baumgarten of the University of California argues that "Mass shootings need to be looked at as a public health emergency so that policy makers can better focus on controlling the epidemic of violence. It would be no different than if there were an outbreak of Ebola virus – we'd be assembling the nation's foremost experts to stop it."

But real progress will require political action by concerned citizens. For decades, gun rights promoters have framed measures aimed at public safety – background checks, waiting periods for purchases, tracking of firearms, limits on super-powerful repeating weapons — as attacks on constitutional freedom. They've used the gun issue so successfully as a political weapon that politicians hardly dare to touch it. Many politicians – kissing up to thoughtless gun advocates – have gone to new extremes to push uncontrolled gun rights. In the meantime, senseless gun violence continues – in the malls, the businesses, the schools, and the churches where Americans congregate ( *Life After Newtown: Guns and Violence in America* ).

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution says: "A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." That 200 year old language is difficult for modern Americans to understand. But anyone who reads the Amendment carefully will understand that that the law protects militias (the National Guard, as we now call it), not madmen. We have the right to control madmen and their super powerful weapons. What we need is the will to do so.

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