

EFFECTIVE METHODS OF GUN CONTROL BASED ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A MASS SHOOTER

SOPHIE M.

THE OXBOW SCHOOL



Because of the recent shooting in Parkland, Florida, I was inspired to explore the topic of mass shootings. And because of my interest in forensic and criminal psychology, I started my research by analyzing and studying the gunmen themselves. I covered psychotic, psychopathic, and traumatized shooters, but I feel there should be a classification of one personality type that has been largely overlooked by previous experts and the media: “the ‘accidental’ shooter.” This shooter is an individual who participates willingly in the planning and commission of the crime with a partner, but would not likely have initiated or carried it out on their own. This personality type is more vulnerable to making such decisions due to their psychological states and a perfect storm of circumstances.

I researched the psychological profiles of these shooters and considered possible solutions, such as gun control and media guidelines. Though the majority of my research was on the psychology and the effective methods for preventing mass shootings, I decided to focus on the victims. The media tends to sensationalize gunmen and the murder count, which inspires other homicidal individuals. The Columbine High School shooting is America’s most infamous mass shooting (though it didn’t have the largest murder count) and the media coverage has made it the most influential shooting in the country. My project showcases the victims of the largest mass shootings in America since the Columbine massacre. My goal is to give victims their much deserved spotlight and show the public the amount of victims in less than only five shootings, despite the fact that there have been *hundreds* of shootings in the U.S. since 1999. In 2018 alone there have already been 89 mass shootings.

My installation shows proper deference to the true cost of lives, without sensationalizing the murders or the gunmen themselves. Each individual’s name symbolizes that they were human beings, not just a number. My artwork illustrates the amount of casualties committed in such large numbers. I hope this inspires the viewer to question our government’s lack of initiative to prevent these events.

I was inspired by Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which gave the viewers the names of all 57,939 soldiers who died in a questionable war. I was also very inspired by the National Memorial for Peace and Justice that was founded by the Equal Justice Initiative in honor of lynching victims. This memorial also gave the names of each victim who were lynched and ignored due to racial inequality and bigotry in America. These memorials were used to commemorate victims who were wronged by their government and tragically killed. This work symbolizes victims who are killed with so much ease because of the lack of initiative our government has taken to prevent these frequent occurrences.

Sophie M.
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Effective Methods of Gun Control Based on the Psychology of a Mass Shooter

This paper will address the psychology of mass shooters, specifically juvenile mass shooters, and how that information can help us to look into more effective gun control methods. This paper will address evidence in arguments in favor of gun control.

What is our country's most significant recent controversy? Maybe our country's ongoing discussion surrounding the issues of climate change, police violence, or white privilege. For me, one issue overrides all: gun control. Since the Parkland school shooting in Florida, it seems all media are overflowing with arguments addressing why specific methods for gun control need to be employed or why those methods would be ineffective. However, how do we even begin to decide which regulations could be effective, when no defined profile of a "typical" school shooter has been agreed upon by experts.

On December 14th, 2012 Adam Lanza carried out one of the most horrific school shootings in history, killing twenty students (ages six-seven) and six teachers. I was eleven when I came home from school that day to see the now readily recognizable photograph of Carlee Soto on my mom's laptop. Only a few weeks ago did I look again for the photo to find out who she was. It was just as I had remembered it:



Carlee Soto on December 14th, 2012 after she has received the news that her Sister, teacher at Sandy Hook elementary school, Victoria Soto, was killed in the massacre.

From the terrible day at Sandy Hook Elementary School, gun control as a safety issue has become a true priority for me. At eleven years old, my friends thought I was overreacting; that it wasn't a serious epidemic to be concerned about. I was

horrified by the number of accidental deaths that occurred because of lack of gun safety measures, and even worse, the amount of murders that occurred because of the easy accessibility to guns. Due to the recent shooting in Parkland, Florida, I will use this state's gun laws as an example:

"You don't need a permit or license to buy a gun, nor do you have to register a firearm. You don't need a permit to conceal carry a rifle or shotgun, although you do need it to conceal carry a handgun. The state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services must issue a concealed weapons license to an applicant as long as the person meets a certain set of requirements, including being a US citizen, being the age of 21 or older, not having a felony conviction and demonstrates competence with a firearm. You can buy as many guns as you want at one time, because Florida doesn't regulate that either. Gun sellers don't have to get a state license to sell firearms. The state does require a three-day waiting period before you can buy a gun. And Florida does not regulate assault weapons, .50-caliber rifles and large capacity ammunition magazines." (Criss 1)

"Gun buyers are seldom turned down because of mental illness. From 1998 to 2014, the FBI rejected 16,669 potential gun buyers because a background check found a mental health adjudication, about 1.4% of the roughly 1.2 million background checks that resulted in a denial." (Jansen 1)

Though I was disturbed by this from a young age, It seemed to take awhile for the rest of my generation to come around. I still find myself much more affected emotionally than most of my peers when more tragedies are reported. I seem to be more affected by the pain caused by these events for much longer periods of time. I cry every time I hear one of Emma Gonzalez's speeches. I argue with every Facebook user who would rather have unrestricted access to an AR-15¹ than deal with the slight inconvenience it might cause to them. I study the psychology of a mass shooter so I can better understand what laws and regulations would be most effective. I have not seen the same amount of motivation and passion towards this issue from my peers and that is baffling to me. For many people, it is easy to distance yourself enough from a tragedy so you aren't too affected by it. That doesn't seem to be an option for me.

I can usually keep my emotions in check when studying murderers, serial killers, and mass murderers, because when there is only a body count, it's not easy to view the victims dispassionately and not see them as they really are: real people with families, friends and loved ones who are also forever altered by their deaths. Immediately after the shooting at Sandy Hook, I didn't cry. I didn't cry when Stephen Paddock shot and killed 59 concert-goers in Las Vegas, Nevada. I didn't cry when first I heard of Nikolas Cruz's monstrous attack on 17 students, many he had never even met. However, once I began to learn about the individual victims or hear their families speak, I immediately became immersed in their tragic experience. Then as I learned more about the details of these shootings and why they were seemingly so easy to accomplish, I became more and more angry. I am disgusted by how little our government is willing to do because of the abnormal obsession our country seems to have with firearms.

When I decided to study the Columbine Massacre and the dyadic effect² between Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, I wasn't very deeply affected by the death count. The victims were anonymous to me, not 13 human beings with families who were destroyed by two homicidal teenagers and the loopholes in the Brady Bill. When I delved deeper about how the massacre was perpetrated, when I heard the eyewitness testimonies and how much it damaged the survivors, my emotions became much more difficult to control.

About two months ago I heard Emma Gonzalez break her silence. I broke down. I can't stop thinking *they were just kids*. So many lives were ruined or changed forever because a sadistic teenager had access to a weapon that has no other purpose than to kill dozens of human beings as quickly and as efficiently as possible - an AR-15. From that day on, I have cried almost every night thinking about the innocent children who are not only victims of mass murder, but also the victims of a government who is doing so little to protect them.

I can't help but question why our government isn't doing everything possible just to lessen the body count, and soon I start questioning their morals. If they continue to allow this to happen, then aren't they partially responsible, and maybe even as responsible as the gunmen themselves? One of the most painful things to watch is the normalization of these casualties. How often mass shootings appear in the media and the public's first response, "Oh no, there's been *another* one," often with an almost emotionless tone. Have we truly become numb to the

¹ The AR-15 is the semiautomatic version of the M16 series of assault rifles, designed by the designer Eugene Stoner, and it is most commonly used by the US armed forces.

² The behaviour shown by 2 interacting people that is different to interactions to other people.

topic? What can we do? How do we even begin to strategically regulate such weapons until we understand the type of person who commits these acts?

The Personality of a Mass Shooter

Unlike serial killers, at first glance, mass shooters seem to have no consistent profile. Plenty of mass shooters were not in touch with reality, such as Kip Kinkel, and many had antisocial personality disorder, such as Eric Harris and Andrew Golden. But many can't be considered *simply* schizophrenics or *just* psychopaths. There have been several that knew the difference between right and wrong, but still weren't in their right minds, such as Dylan Klebold. While most likely he was legally sane, Klebold displayed symptoms of schizotypal personality disorder (which is on the schizophrenia spectrum), avoidant personality disorder, dependent personality disorder, and borderline personality disorder. While some mass shooters are easily categorized, more often than not, people like Klebold are influenced by a perfect storm of situations that push them to commit acts that would otherwise seem out of character.

The inability to easily profile a mass shooter makes the effort to prevent mass shootings that much more difficult. Minimal gun restrictions (more extensive background checks or raising the age limit) wouldn't do much to prevent school shootings. Many shooters bought their firearms legally (even in the case that they were being treated for mental illness); many passed background checks because their past criminal activity was not entered into federal databases; many of them took them from another family member; and some obtained theirs through what is known as the "Brady Bill loophole" in which "any person may sell a firearm to an unlicensed resident of the state where they reside, as long as they do not know or have reasonable cause to believe the person is prohibited from receiving or possessing firearms." Under federal law, private-party sellers are not required to perform background checks on buyers, whether at a gun show or other venue. They also are not required to record the sale or ask for identification. Because of this loophole, Eric Harris was able to get four firearms, one of which was a semi automatic rifle, at a gun show (while underage) in preparation for America's most notorious school shooting.

As Doctor Langman, author of *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters and School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators* expressed to me, "There's no simple solution to this problem. Tighter gun laws might have some impact, but my focus is on reducing access to firearms in people's homes. Most juvenile shooters get their guns from their family members who fail to properly secure their firearms." Many gun advocates say we should be focusing on mental health, not gun restriction, but that underestimates both the difficulty of predicting who is capable of mass killing or even effectively treating these types of people. Current opinion is that while the symptoms of personality disorders can be treated - such as the depression of a patient with borderline personality disorder - the underlying personality disorder is incurable. Psychopathy is considered incurable: "...the evidence base and provision of effective treatments, particularly in the community, for individuals with ASPD remain inadequate, and the belief amongst mental health professionals that the condition is untreatable remains widespread" (Association of Child Psychotherapists 1).

Probably the most common assumption behind a shooter's motives is that they are psychopathic. Psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder is definitely the simplest way to explain such disturbing behavior. A significant number of mass shooters have antisocial personality disorder which is considered incurable and largely goes untreated in most cases. Though talk therapy has been somewhat effective in treating antisocial personality disorder,

treatment rarely is initiated because: (1) psychopaths need to believe there is something wrong. Due to their lack of empathy, they have no problem with manipulating or hurting others, and because of their grandiose sense of self worth, why would they care enough to ask for help, and why would they think they need help? Because of this, it is extremely rare for them to begin therapy in reference to their mental state; (2) Psychopaths are known for their skills in manipulation. Psychopaths learn to imitate others around them, and are able to fool other individuals for years, and sometimes forever. Parents typically don't put a psychopathic child in therapy because the parent seldom sees a difference between their child and other children.

Probably the most classic example of psychopathic shooters would be Eric Harris, the criminal mind behind the Columbine massacre. Harris was a pretty obvious case of antisocial personality disorder, but he also had sadistic, narcissistic, and paranoid personality traits, making him far more dangerous than the average psychopath. As we see with Harris, many murderers have sadistic personalities, where they enjoy inflicting pain on others, as well as overpowering others. This is why so many cases of homicide involve sexual assault or torture. Harris may have told the world he committed mass murder as revenge for bullying, but this was simply his excuse for overpowering six-hundred students to prove himself as powerful and masculine, as well as his general desire to "destroy the world, make humanity suffer, and be a god." Harris's superiority complex can be as seen in the following passage from his journal:

"No one is worthy of shit unless I say they are. I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone be OFFICIALLY lower than me. I already know that I am higher than most anyone in the fucking welt [German for world] in terms of universal intelligence." (Eric Harris's Journal 2)

Harris isn't the only one. We see similar personality types in many other shooters, such as Andrew Golden, Robert Poulin, Brenda Spencer, Elliot Rodger, and Barry Loukaitis. I use Harris as the example because, unlike most school shooters, we have journals and multiple videos of evidence that tell us *exactly* what he was thinking.

Another personality type we see is the "psychotic shooter." These shooters most often lie on the schizophrenia spectrum and act out when they lose touch with reality. Schizophrenia is very treatable, and there is a lot we can do to help those suffering from it, however, they often don't open up to others about their paranoia or delusions. Why wouldn't they talk to others about their mental state if they were struggling? Typically, (1) they are afraid of being considered "crazy" or being ostracized for their abnormal thought process. Though shooters on the schizophrenia spectrum lose touch with reality, they are painfully aware that they are different from others. (2) Due to their paranoia, they tend to believe they are "self aware" compared to the rest of society. As Dylan Klebold said: "Fact: People are so unaware.... Well, ignorance is bliss I guess.... That would explain my depression."

Why would a person who believed they knew better than the rest of society try to get help? The delusion makes them believe *the rest of society needs help*. Sometimes in extreme examples, they have delusions of grandeur. For example, Seung Hui Cho, Virginia Tech shooter, believed he was a great leader, like Moses, and frequently compared himself to Jesus Christ:

"Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people — my Brothers, Sisters, and Children — that you fuck. Like Moses, I

spread the sea and lead my people — the Weak, the Defenseless, and the Innocent Children of all ages that you fucked and will always try to fuck — to eternal freedom.”

This is obviously a person who is delusional; someone who believed mass murder would result in eternal freedom.

But of course, not every shooter’s mental state can be their reason for committing mass murder. Yes, it can make them more vulnerable to have disturbing motivations, but sometimes we can’t just diagnose a shooter as psychotic or psychopathic and point to that as the reason for homicide. There are some shooters who would have never participated, solely based on their personality. In hindsight, it is clear that some act out after encountering a perfect storm of circumstance. This type I would term the “accidental shooter.”

Though Dylan Klebold, of Columbine infamy, in hindsight is considered psychotic, he displayed mental stability to the outside world. That is because Klebold most likely suffered from schizotypal personality disorder which is a mild disorder on the schizophrenia spectrum. There is no evidence that he experienced hallucinations or heard voices, and most likely was very aware of right and wrong, unlike most psychotic school shooters. Klebold is widely described as having been a loving and gentle person, but his delusions developed slowly as his relationship developed with Eric Harris. Harris’s superiority complex influenced Klebold but Klebold started to *actually believe* he was a god. Klebold also never expressed homicidal thoughts until he was deep in a friendship with Harris. Due to a high likelihood that he had dependent personality disorder, he took on the personality of his dominant friend, Harris. His delusions allowed him to completely immerse himself in Harris’s identity. Klebold’s lack of confidence in his own identity made him vulnerable to a toxic personality like Harris. Though there are several other aspects to Klebold’s mental state and personal circumstances that explain Klebold’s motives and act as contributing factors to his participation in the Columbine shooting, I believe, with complete confidence, that Klebold would not have committed mass murder if he had never met Eric Harris.

Klebold’s situation is a perfect example of the “accidental shooter.” A second example of this phenomenon is Mitchell Johnson, who committed a mass shooting with Andrew, “Drew,” Golden in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Mitchell was traumatized from sexual, verbal, and physical abuse. He was extremely depressed but not considered a danger to himself or others. There is no real motive for the attack, but based on speculation, psychologists assume that the mixture of his frustration with school, girls, suicidal thoughts, weak masculinity, and PTSD made him both vengeful and desperate. He felt a need to prove to himself his own masculinity while also getting revenge on society for his problems. When Drew, a classic example of a psychopath, approached him with the idea, Mitchell found it hard to resist. I doubt that Mitchell would have committed the shooting on his own if it weren’t for Drew. Though they both participated willingly, the amount of fired shots between the two boys describes their level of interest in sadistic activities and their level of empathy: Drew fired 25 rounds, killing 3 and wounding 7, while Mitchell fired 5 rounds, killing 1 and wounding 3. The number of shots fired in the Columbine massacre also serve to support this theory. Eric Harris fired 121 rounds, killing 8 and wounding 13. Klebold fired 67 rounds, killing 5 and wounding 10. Surprisingly, Neither Mitchell Johnson or Drew Golden committed suicide after the attack and Mitchell, today, can’t explain why he did it. He broke down crying in court while Drew sat there blankly.

As you can see, prior to the shootings, neither Klebold nor Mitchell appeared to be in any way dangerous. They both confessed to suicidal thoughts, but didn’t express those outwardly

prior to their attacks. Klebold wrote about his thoughts in his journal while Mitchell told the jury during his trial. Even Klebold's mother believed for months after Columbine that her son could not have participated willingly. She theorized that he was drugged or in some sort of cult. When she viewed The Basement Tapes (created by the boys when they discussed their beliefs on motives for the attack), she was horrified by how he acted and spoke about others. She said Klebold acted as a completely different person than the person she knew, and doesn't a mother know her child better than anyone?

"If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it. My worst fears have come to pass. I keep thinking about his crazy rage and his intent to die. He lied to us and his friends. He was so far removed from feeling. I keep trying to understand how that sweet, beloved child got there." (Klebold 133)

"He and Eric were preposterous, posturing, giving a performance for each other and their invisible audience. I had never seen that expression of sneering superiority on Dylan's face. My mouth gaped open when I heard the language they were using-abominable, hate-filled, racist, derogatory words, words never spoken or heard in our home." (Klebold 134)

Most shooters show some signs of being a danger to themselves and others, especially in hindsight, but very little to suggest mass murder. Many don't take the signs seriously because in some cases the shooter may often say abnormal things (seen often with schizophrenics) or don't seem naturally aggressive. Even when they are noticed and raise suspicion amongst family and friends, the shooter can usually convince everyone that there is nothing to worry about.

It is incredibly difficult to predict mass murder, but even more so when our community isn't aware of the warning signs we *do* know. Too many of us assume it is easy to recognize mental illness or a rage-filled personality. They expect school shooters to be bullied or loners, when in reality this is largely a myth. Unfortunately, the truth is that nothing is as simple as the myth that all shooters were bullied severely and wanted revenge. Being bullied isn't a warning sign of a school shooter, the "walk-up-not-out" technique would make little difference considering most shooters were not outcasts and had large groups of friends:

"The media has often described school shooters as "loners." Harris and Klebold, for example, were called loners. As I have explained, however, the reports that they were socially isolated were highly inaccurate. Michael Carneal was said to be a loner, but he had friends. He was not a loner. Neither was Andrew Golden, Andrew Wurst, or Kip Kinkel. A close inspection reveals no connection between loners and school shooters." (Langman 92)

Much of our community also believes these are spontaneous acts of aggression, that the shooter just "snapped." In most psychotic shooters, spontaneous shootings seem conceivable, but the sad truth is that almost every single shooter I have researched planned the attack for some time. There is evidence of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's plans to bomb their high school from a year before the attack. Adam Lanza used violent video games as simulator for his own attack, as Steven Kazmierczak did. Seung-Hui Cho had bought his weapons five weeks before the attack and had been attending a shooting range frequently. According to a former FBI agent and ABC

consultant, "This was no spur-of-the-moment crime. He's been thinking about this for several months prior to the shooting" (Wikipedia 4.2.1). If they are able to hide their own symptoms of anger, aggression, and mental illness, they can get away with planning mass shootings without arousing too much suspicion.

These situations, in which we try to recognize red flags, aren't simple or obvious. We need much time and study to look into the long, complicated mission of treating such complex personalities, and encouraging the public to ask for help. Learning to treat psychopathy and see the warning signs is a challenging task, and we can not continue to ask our citizens to sacrifice their lives to astronomical gun profits while we sort this out. Of course we want to stop the killing as soon as possible and there is one very obvious way to do so and do so quickly. We need to control the weapons. Controlling the weapons and/or the ammunition could at least limit the damage while we learn to predict or treat dangerous mental instability.

The Firearms

As Dr. Langman explained to me, most juvenile, and some adult, shooters get their firearms from their own homes. Adam Lanza's mother was an avid gun activist, who raised her son with target practice and training. Robert Poulin was also trained to use firearms and grew up with them in the home. Drew Golden's father and grandfather raised him the same way. Kip Kinkel paid a friend to sell him a handgun he had stolen from his father. Clearly the issue is safeguarding firearms so they aren't handled by mentally unstable individuals. Sweden is a very good model for safe gun laws. In Sweden, gun storage in a safe is required by law. The safe must also conform to set regulations, (they must withstand ten to twenty minutes of forced entry at a minimum). If one stores a large number of guns or is a gun trader, alarms are required. Police also have the authority to come and visit a gun owner to check the storage facilities, but are required to give prior notice (one to two weeks). This keeps family members from accessing a parent's firearms when it is not appropriate.

Another good safety strategy can be seen in "smart gun" technology. The "smart gun" is a gun that can only be fired with the owner's fingerprint. This would also keep an intruder from using your own self defense weapon against you or another family member.

Despite the responsible attempts of many gun owners to safely secure their firearms, there are still almost unlimited opportunities for these shooters to buy their their weapons of choice. Eric Harris may have purchased his through a gun show, underage and without a background check, but there are also shooters such as Seung-Hui Cho, who passed two different background checks when purchasing his firearms at age twenty-three, and Nikolas Cruz, who bought at least ten guns after passing a background check at age eighteen. And allowing eighteen year old Cruz purchase an AR-15 military style semi-automatic rifle may be his "right" as an adult in America, but clearly we should restrict who owns the most popular weapon of school shootings: the AR-15.

The AR-15 and the military M16 which is a bit older version and the design originally intended for military use and several other similar military style semi-automatic rifles are used in some of America's most notorious shootings. For example, either the AR-15 or the M16 was used in the Aurora, CO. movie theatre shooting in 2012, the Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, CT, 2012, the San Bernardino, CA attack in 2015, the Las Vegas, NV concert shooting in 2017, the Sutherland Springs, TX church shooting in 2017, and the Parkland, FL school shooting that happened this past February.

Inspiration and Influence



From left to right: Article of Seung Hui-Cho in one of several photographs he took of myself with his weapons, Vester L. Flanagan during massacre on live Television, description of Navy Yard shooting in Washington D.C. and the firearm used (“Newtown’ weapon”) James Holmes being compared to the Joker from the Dark Knight films, Adam Lanza being compared to the Devil, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold description of weapons used and clothing choices for massacre (“Trench Coat Killers”).

There is obviously a pattern here that describes an “inspirational” aspect to these attacks. It makes sense why shooters with this specific firearm would be copied, considering the larger the body count and the sensational media coverage they receive. While school shootings have been occurring since the ‘40’s, (most notably Charles Whitman’s attack at the University of Texas in 1966) and some far before that, they weren’t often very successful. It was not at all common to kill more than 3 people in a shooting. That is why Columbine was such a big media story. Columbine was the first time our country had to worry about sending children to school, because we realized how many could be killed by other students in these incidents. Sadly, almost every school shooting, and many mass shootings in general, can be traced back to Columbine. Even the most notorious shooters I have discussed here that attacked after 1999, had researched

the massacre, been inspired by it, or even considered Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as “role models.” For example, Adam Lanza:

“The 20-year-old who killed 20 children and six others at Sandy Hook Elementary School had ‘an obsession with mass murders, in particular the April 1999 shootings at Columbine,’ according to the state of Connecticut’s final report on the massacre. On his computer, authorities found ‘Several video clips pertaining to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold,’ and ‘hundreds of documents, images, [and] videos pertaining to the Columbine H.S. massacre including what appears to be a complete copy of the investigation,’ according to an appendix to the state’s report. Like the Columbine shooters, he committed suicide.” (Pierre 1)

And Seung Hui Cho:

“A Virginia Tech student opened fire on campus, killing 32 people and then himself. Before the massacre, he sent rambling videos and writings to the media in which he referenced the Columbine shooters by their first names. In addition, a subsequent investigation by the state of Virginia found that as early as eighth grade – shortly after Columbine – he would express ‘suicidal and homicidal ideations’ and write about the Colorado massacre. In one instance, he wrote a paper in English class that said he wanted to repeat the Columbine attack, according to the state’s report.” (1)

“Woodward, a former director of the division of criminal justice for the state of Colorado who went to work at the center after Columbine, sees numerous similarities between the rampage at Virginia Tech and the high school killings carried out by Harris and Klebold in 1999. Among the similarities he pointed out: There were warning signs before the carnage, especially in violent writings, tapes and writings were left behind that discussed and tried to explain the killers’ actions, and the April dates of the killings were just days apart.” (Nicholson, 1)

“In the video he mailed to NBC during a gap in Monday’s fatal shootings of 32 people at Virginia Tech, Cho, 23, referred to “martyrs like Eric and Dylan” in a disjointed attempt to explain his motives for killing the others and himself.” (Associated Press, 1)

Shooters typically have dreams of surpassing the body count, as Eric Harris wanted to surpass the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. There is a bizarre respect found with shooters in reference to body count, as seen with Vester L. Flanagan who shot and killed Alison Parker and Adam Ward on live television. He doesn’t qualify as a mass shooter for the low murder count, but he had an obvious respect for school shooters as seen in his manifesto: “Also, I was influenced by Seung-Hui Cho. That’s my boy right there. He got NEARLY double the amount that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold got...just sayin’” (Langman 6).

School shootings aren’t just about shooting ex-girlfriends or bullies, they are the attacks that represent the shooter’s hatred of “the world.” Bullied kids aren’t the ones committing these attacks. The majority of shooters are kids who have an intense need to victimize themselves and blame their issues on society at large because they can’t understand why their life is so “terrible.” These are kids who have an unhealthy interest in violence, experience extreme anger issues, and

weak masculinity. They hold grudges against the world for their problems. They question why they are “cursed” or why “God hates me”. Dylan Klebold once expressed extreme distress after losing a few items and takes that to mean that God is “fucking me over”:

“My life is still fucked, in case you care... maybe,... (not?) I have just lost 45\$ and before that I lost my zippo and knife (I did get those back) Why the fuck is he being such an ASSHOLE??? (god I guess, whoever is the being which controls shit). He’s fucking me over big time and it pisses me off.” (Klebold, 3)

Out of anger, desperation, suicidal and homicidal thoughts, and a constant fear of not being accepted, even if in reality the shooters are accepted, they choose to punish humanity for their disappointing and unsatisfactory existence.

Why do many shooters commit the shooting in a school setting? For most juvenile shooters, they choose this location because the school itself represents the “injustice” of their lives; a place where they experienced the most “unfair” events of their lives, The very location and population that seemed to prove many of their paranoid thoughts as “fact,” and where they can prove to their chosen audience their masculinity, their superiority, and their anger. They gun down the students that represent what they want or can’t have. The bullied school shooter is largely a myth and can be easily disproven by analyzing the victims. Shooters don’t shoot their “bullies.” Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold created a “hit-list” of individuals they wanted to see die in the Columbine massacre. Not one of those individuals was injured or killed during the rampage. Nikolas Cruz explained his motive was because he was bullied, but he largely murdered freshman students, students whom he had never met. Juvenile shooters don’t see the world as a kind and accepting place just because they have friends and emotional support. In fact most of them do have that kind of support. They see the world the way they do because of their disturbed but, often legally sane, mental state.

What We Need to do

Is there anything we can do to stop school shootings from happening in the United States? With our cultural obsession with firearms, I assume there are few laws we could pass without a public outcry. And when considering laws short of outlawing types of guns or gun confiscation, we know anything can help, but won’t be enough to stop mass shootings.

We also need to look at the myths behind the safety of firearms and, more specifically, what the National Rifle Association uses to defend firearms, such as: (1) “a good guy with a gun will always beat a bad guy with a gun.” If this were the case, our country wouldn’t have incredibly high rates of gun homicide rates considering we have about one-hundred-and-one firearms for every one-hundred people. If this was true, imagine how unbelievably safe we would be compared to every other first-world country! If only it were that simple. But the reality is that many studies show that the risk of gun related suicides and homicides are increased greatly when there is a gun in the household:

“a gun in the home increases the risk for homicide victimization for others in society. This increased risk may be due to someone in the family shooting others (for example, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting) or the gun being stolen and used by criminals. Obtaining a firearm not only endangers those living in the home but also imposes substantial costs on the community.” (CBS News, 1)

The facts show that rarely does a good guy with a gun successfully intervene when there is a bad guy with a gun. In fact it is more likely for a good guy *without* a gun to successfully intervene than a good guy with a gun. (2) “More guns means more safety”: You are actually more likely to hurt yourself by accident when there is a gun in the household. (3) “Gun laws don’t work because criminals don’t follow the law.” The correct way to phrase this is that criminals don’t obey *weak* laws. Serious gun control has worked in every other first world country by lowering gun-death rates. Good examples of countries with successful gun control include Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Australia, and Austria. (4) “Gun control violates the Second Amendment.” The Supreme Court emphasizes that the second amendment is not an *absolute* right. “Like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited.” (Chemerinsky, 2) As the Second Amendment states: “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.” This basically means that the Supreme Court of the United States has ruled that the right belongs to individuals, while also ruling that the right is not unlimited and does not prohibit all regulation of either firearms or similar devices. The government can regulate who owns a gun, what kind of guns they can own, and where they need to be located. Even banning semi-automatic assault weapons and large capacity magazines wouldn’t be violating the Second Amendment. So in reality, the Second Amendment is not in anyway at stake. Just innocent lives.

The NRA has very little evidence to support their claims against gun control at this point, besides denial of evidence and statistics. Still the NRA continue to point a finger at everyone else and accuse them of doing something wrong. The NRA has blamed school security, the FBI, the media, and our healthcare system, but continue to agree that it is unnecessary to restrict gun ownership in any way.

In a perfect world, we would adapt the same laws as Japan: requiring citizens to go through series or classes, tests, background checks, and mental health evaluations, in order to obtain a firearm. Citizens are only allowed to buy shotguns and air rifles. In Sweden, to be a gun owner requires a license, and this is tightly controlled by regulations. Most licenses for gun ownership are for hunters, as wildlife hunting is very popular in Sweden. As in Australia, all six Australian states agreed to enact the same sweeping gun laws banning semi-automatic rifles and shotguns - weapons that can kill many people quickly. Unlike in the US, self-protection is not accepted as a justifiable reason to own a gun.

But I know our country isn’t likely to enact very strict gun laws considering how desperate our gun death situation has become with no significant change in laws are being considered by our government. Besides banning all semi-automatic firearms, let’s consider what would be the most effective restrictions that might be able to pass. (1) We need detailed and universal background checks. This must include psychological evaluations, performed by a licensed psychiatrist who can determine if the individual is in any way a danger to himself or others. Past criminal activity and mental illness would prohibit a person from being able to purchase a firearm. (2) Age restrictions need to be raised. I personally don’t understand why an eighteen year old can’t buy a beer or rent a car, but can legally buy a weapon designed with one purpose - to take human life. Federal law prohibits licensed firearms dealers from selling a shotgun or rifle to anyone under eighteen, or handguns to anyone under twenty-one. Still, some states choose to impose lower minimum age limits than the federal limits. For instance, in Vermont, it’s legal to sell a handgun or rifle to sixteen-year-olds. Other states choose to raise the age limit. California has just recently raised the age limit to twenty-one for all firearms in

response to the Parkland school shooting. School shooters ages (so far) range from eleven to sixty-four, raising age limits would make it more difficult for anyone under 21 (at least) to use their firearms in a dangerous way. And it seems to be common sense to place more trust in an adult than an adolescent with a gun. (3) Proper training. We need to restrict firearms the same way we restrict motor vehicle usage: require attendance of classes involving gun safety, testing, training that involves students only being able to use a firearm in the presence of a teacher until the student is a well educated, safe gun owner. Once properly trained and licensed, the individual may purchase a gun but then must register and insure the weapon. (4) Proper storage of firearms. Gun safes should be required in all homes that are in possession of a firearm, and only the owner and adult(s) of the house would have access to it. All firearms must be in the safe when they are not being used. This would keep children from hurting themselves or others, whether that is accidental or purposefully. (5) Firearms shouldn't be allowed on public property, such as schools, workplaces, stores, or restaurants. The concealed carry law should not apply to firearms in public places.

Other important measures could include limiting the amount of media coverage. Since a significant goal of these shooters is infamy, I often cringe when I see shooters names all over the media. It is the media's job to report these incidents, but we can avoid giving the names of the shooters, showing photographs of them, and focusing on their lives. The campaign DON'T NAME THEM was developed by the ALERRT™ Center at Texas State University that encourages the media and others not to sensationalize the shooters, but to focus the spotlight on the victims. When media sensationalizes the shooters, another individual at risk for violent behaviour is more likely to be influenced by the shooter.

There is so much we can do. We need to confront this issue head on realize that this is a problem that must be fixed and will continue to repeat until we do. We can no longer sit back while innocent men, women, and children are murdered in such large numbers.

Conclusion

If gun control is in reality quite simple, then why does our government refuse to act? The NRA has been donating to politicians for years in exchange for inaction on gun regulation. The NRA is also largely to blame for many citizens' belief in their disproven claims and arguments.

The solutions to school shootings aren't as complicated as they are made out to be. Controlling the guns is much easier than predicting mass shootings, based on the mental health of our fellow citizens. Clearly both need to be addressed, but gun control needs to take place first in order to lower the significant body count that rises each year. How can we adequately focus on mental health while these shootings continue?

With the significant number of mass shootings and the weak anti-gun-control arguments, gun control is no longer only a political issue. Gun control is not about confiscating all firearms, it is about making sure these weapons don't get into the wrong hands. An individual can still be pro-gun and pro-gun-control. However, if an individual continues to fight gun control to "save" their firearms, but not innocent children, if the individual chooses easy access to guns over human lives, that is not simply a political stance but a moral one. question. These massacres are happening all around us and to thousands of innocent people. We have no choice. I want to save innocent lives, not ignore them.

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