

Massacre and Suicide

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Massacre refers to the indiscriminate slaughter of many people. This paper addresses the massacre of strangers - which is followed by suicide.

The first recorded massacre of strangers in the west was perpetrated by Ernst Wagner in 1909. He was born in Germany in 1874. He became a teacher but had lived a very unhappy early life and was suspicious of others. He twice attempted suicide. He married and had children. He killed his wife and four children, then went to a small nearby town where he shot 20 strangers (killing nine) and set fires. He had planned to suicide, but he was attacked by villagers with farm implements and swords. He was left for dead, he recovered but both his arms were badly damaged (he later needed one amputation) and he could not kill himself as he had planned.

Perhaps the second perpetrator was Norman List - born in Australia in 1893. He had travelled overseas and had joined and served in the British Army in WWI. At one point he had not seen family members for 14 years. Back in Australia he was an introverted hard worker who spent spare time reading. However, he had paranoid delusions, he thought people he had met overseas were controlling his mind while he slept, that people were telling lies about him and people always knew about him before he arrived anywhere. In 1924 he took a rifle to the Melbourne Botanic Gardens and shot four strangers dead and wounded another - then ran away. Nine days later his body was found in an outer suburb, he had killed himself by cutting his wrists.

From these two cases, we see that at least some perpetrators of massacre of strangers have thoughts that other people are persecuting them. We need to be clear - one can have a suspicious nature without being floridly “sick”. At the lowest level, the individual may be a suspicious/paranoid/prickly sort of a person. If that sort of thinking leads to problems in getting along with others and causes problems in the social and working life, it is possible that individual has a “paranoid personality disorder”.

At the other end of the spectrum, if the individual has paranoid delusions (believes things which are not true) – believes other people are controlling his mind while he is asleep, for example - there is a psychosis (madness) – a serious mental disorder, which will inevitably lead to problems relating to others and strongly impair social and work activities.

It is not always clear whether an individual has a paranoid personality disorder (suspiciousness) or a paranoid psychosis (delusions). Often a person will shift back and forwards between being suspicious and being convinced of the harmful intentions of others.

For the public, of course, the leading feature of the massacre of individuals unknown to the perpetrators is the murders. However, in quite a few cases, the killers end by killing themselves, or place themselves in a situation in which they will be killed by police – so, there is also interest to discover whether these events have anything to teach us about suicide.

Professor Paul Mullen is a world leader in this field. He interviewed five massacre perpetrators who had survived, although most had planned to die (Mullen, 2004). He concluded these massacres are a “particular form of suicide” (page 311). They are the pursuit of a personal agenda arising from the individual’s social situation and mental state (thoughts and feelings). Professor Mullen reports that these perpetrators 1) are socially isolated, 2) often have a history of being bullied at school, 3) rarely have successful working lives, 4) have obsessional traits (being rigid and wanting everything to be done correctly), 5) have a sense of importance/grandiosity, 6) have suspiciousness which may extend into paranoid delusions, and 7) many have an interest in firearms.

Professor Mullen explains that perpetrators do not fit into society, they become lonely and resentful and learn about other people who have performed the massacre of strangers. He states, “They began...with a decision is to commit suicide” (page 320). He states that most have suspiciousness of others and a few have active psychotic symptoms. The idea of ending their lives in a blaze of vengeance, power, and infamy appeals to these people.

Some individuals Professor Mullen did not have the opportunity to interview will be discussed, with a view to testing his characterization.

1991. Wade Frankum was a 33-year-old single taxi driver. He was born in Sydney and raised with a strict upbringing, with little affection or approval. He worked in unskilled jobs. He lived in a unit with a sister and her husband. He was described by neighbors as a quiet loner. Some stated he was friendly. He consulted a psychologist for depression for 5 months.

His father died when Frankum was 28 years, his mother killed herself with carbon monoxide when he was 32 years. He inherited \$30 000 but spent it on prostitutes over a short period.

After drinking coffee in the Strathfield Plaza, he took a large knife from a bag and fatally stabbed a young women in the back. He left the knife in the body and took out a rifle and shot other café patrons and the owner. He went out into the mall and killed other people. He went to the carpark rooftop and held a woman hostage momentarily. When sirens were heard, Frankum apologized to the woman and shot himself in the head. (He shot 7 others and himself.)

Frankum’s unit contained some violent movies and one violent and one semi-violent novel. Many of the features listed by Professor Mullen apply. Frankum was isolated, did not enjoy a loving upbringing, was not vocationally trained, and he had an interest in and possessed weapons. His use of a large Bowie knife and a rifle indicate anger and attention to detail in preparation.

1996. Thomas Watt was born in Glasgow in 1952. His mother and father separated, and he was raised by his mother’s adoptive parents. He was raised in the belief that these people were his blood parents and his mother was his sister. He did well academically. He joined a

rifle club and the Boys Brigade as a teenager, and later became an assistant leader in the local Boy Scouts. He was described as quiet and well spoken, however, there was a darker side - later in life he was violent toward the man who raised him, and they ceased to communicate. He established a business selling bathroom fittings. He did not marry.

Thomas was dismissed from the Scouts organization as he was not a competent leader. However, over decades, his manner was taken (by many) to suggest he was a pedophile. For two decades he conducted his own boys' clubs. Complaints were made to police about his behavior, but he was never charged. He was very resentful about these complaints and other rumors and claimed they caused his business to fail.

One morning Thomas posted copies of his grievances against those who had criticized him to The Scotsman, the BBC, and the Queen. He drove to the Dunblane Primary School armed with four pistols. He started shooting children and teachers indiscriminately. He killed 16 students and one teacher and wounded 17 other students and teachers.

Thomas shared many of the features suggested by Professor Mullen (2004). His early developmental years were unsettled, in later life he was isolative insofar and he had no close friends but attempted to have the society of boys, he was not vocationally or socially successful, he was experienced in shooting and owned guns, and he was resentful of others. He pled his case to The Scotsman, the BBC and the Queen, suggesting grandiosity.

2007. Seung-Hui Cho was born in South Korea (1992) and went to the USA at 8 years. He became a US permanent resident. In childhood he was diagnosed with anxiety depression and selective mutism. He would not speak to relatives or embrace them. He was bullied at school and never removed his sunglasses. Various teachers found him angry and intimidating. He wrote in one school assignment that he wanted to "repeat Columbine". In 2005 he was compulsorily hospitalized because he was thought to be "an imminent danger to himself or others". He was discharged the next day.

In 2007 Cho (23 years) was attending the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. Early one morning he killed at least two people in a high-rise on campus dormitory with pistols which he legally owned. Then he went to a post office near the campus and mailed a DVD and other materials to NBC News. Next, he returned to the campus and shot dozens of people, killing 30. As police approached, he shot himself in the head.

The material sent to NBC news contained pictures of Cho posing with his pistols and a "manifesto" explaining the reasons for his actions. In his bedroom notes revealed his hatred for "rich kids" – on note read, "You forced me to do this". On many occasions Cho expressed his admiration for the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre.

The facts of this case fit the Mullen (2004) findings precisely. It is sobering to find the Columbine massacre was influential – indicating the importance of limiting the publicity and celebration of such events.

2007. Pekka-Eric Auvinen was born and raised in Tuusula, Finland, in 1989. He was attending the Jokela High School (Tuusula), expecting to graduate in months. Pekka-Eric was

shy, isolating and a long-term target of bullying. He is thought to have suffered anxiety and depression and was prescribed antidepressant medication.

Pekka-Eric's behavior became more assertive and threatening. He expressed interest in various extreme political movements and online, stated there would be deaths in "a white revolution". He uploaded videos about school shootings including the Columbine High School massacre and other violent events including the Waco siege and the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack. He made statements indicating that he would die soon. On the morning of the attack he posted "Jokela High School Massacre" which included pictures of him holding his weapons and the school.

Pekka-Eric went to the Jokela High School shortly before lunch armed with a semi-automatic pistol and killed four students in the ground-floor hallway and toilets. He saw the school nurse running away, chased her, and shot her dead. Using the public address system, the Head Teacher advised students to barricade themselves in their rooms – this probably saved many lives as Pekka-Eric was limited to wandering the corridors shouting threats. After more than one hour, the police arrived, the gunman, having killed eight people and wounding one, went into a toilet and shot himself in the head.

Pekka-Eric was socially isolated and the target of bullying, he suffered anxiety and depression, owned guns and was interested in radical politics and previous massacres. These features are in accordance with those described by Professor Mullen (2004).

2009. Jiverly Antares Wong was of ethnic Chinese stock, born in Vietnam in 1967. He came to the USA with his parents. He was convicted of the misdemeanor of fraud but naturalized at 22 years. The following year he purchased a pistol. He married and divorced an ethnic Chinese woman, they had not children.

Jiverly lived and worked for 7 years as a delivery man for a catering company. He moved to New York and found work in a factory, which closed in 2008 (he was 40 years). People who had known Jiverly reported occasional aggressive statements including "America sucks" and talk about assassinating President Obama. He attended English classes at an American Civic Association center for 3 months, ceasing without explanation.

Less than a month later, he returned to that center wearing a bullet proof vest and blocked the backdoor of the building with a car registered to his father. He entered the front door armed with two semiautomatic pistols and started shooting. In three minutes, he killed 13 people and critically wounded four. Hearing an alarm, he shot himself in the head.

Some days later a package arrived at a New York television company – posted on the day of the massacre – containing a two-page letter from Jiverly, photos of him holding his guns, his gun permit and driver's license. The letter demonstrated he had been psychotic – he claimed "secret police" had placed chemicals in his house, made him lose his job, had entered his room at night on 13 occasions in one year, stolen \$20 from his wallet, shot him in the neck with an "electric gun" and harassed him while he was driving.

Many of the features described by Professor Mullen were present. His social and vocational lives were unrewarding. He was resentful and owned guns. Importantly, his letter to the television company displays paranoid psychosis.

2017. Stephen Paddock was born in Iowa (1953) and grew up in Los Angeles. His father (Ben) was a bank robber and went to jail with Stephen was 7 years. Ben never contributed to family life and he had very little with the children on his release from jail. Growing up as the child of essentially, a single mother is believed to have led Stephen to value self-reliance and pursue acquisition of wealth. At 24 years he completed a degree in business administration.

Paddock worked for the U.S. Postal Service, the Inland Revenue Service and private companies as an internal auditor. He simultaneously commenced a very successful real-estate business. He was a very enthusiastic and successful gambler.

Paddock married and divorced twice, then formed a long-term relationship with a woman from the Philippines. He has been described as speaking little and keeping a low profile. He was intelligent, methodical, obsessed with cleanliness and used algorithms when gambling. He complained of anxiety and depression and one doctor described him as “showing little emotion”. He owned almost a hundred guns of all types and two small planes.

The massacre was meticulously planned. Two weeks before the event, Paddock sent his girlfriend to the Philippines and sent her \$100 000 to buy a house. He was drinking heavily at this time. He went to a rifle range for target practice. The people he would kill would be at a music festival on the Las Vegas Strip. Six days before the massacre he booked two rooms in a hotel with a clear view of that area and brought in bags containing 23 rifles, a pistol and a large amount of ammunition. He fired hundreds of rounds into the crowd over a 10 minute period - killing 58 people and wounding 869 – and killed himself with a shot to the head.

Stephen Paddock shared many of the characteristics listed by Professor Mullen (2004). While there is no history of having been bullied, he received little affection from his father. While he was successful in his work role he was socially reserved, obsessional about cleanliness, methodical and collected guns. He had received some treatment for anxiety and depression. The close planning of the massacre indicates a resentment and determination for revenge. Suicide was the final piece.

Conclusion

Not all massacre perpetrators take their own lives. Martin Bryant who killed 35 (Australia, 1996), Anders Brevic who killed 69 (Norway, 2011) and Brent Tarrent who killed 51 (New Zealand, 2019) are all alive at the time of writing. However, Mullen (2004) states his opinion that the massacre of unknown people begins with the desire for suicide. And this can be achieved either by self-killing or arranging for police to do the killing.

In the 6 cases described above, the perpetrators all killed themselves. It is also important that these people all bore many of the suggested (Mullen, 2004) features. These were socially isolated people, most had not been raised in loving, warm homes, and many had been bullied at school. They did not have fulfilling employment. We can conclude these people were disappointed and resentful, and planned to exercise their resentment and escape from an unhappy world by suicide. A knowledge and possession of firearms made this plan a possibility.

This group of people was included because they completed suicide – they contribute insignificantly to the total number of suicides – but they give evidence of that suicide is an answer to a distressing life dragged down by lack of hope and prospects. As Sir Thomas Brown (1642, page 50) wrote, “We are in the power of no calamity while death is in our own”.

References

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