



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

FAMILY VIOLENCE , MURDER AND MAYHEM

Truth behind mass murder may not surprise

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment June 17, 2010 10:45 AM

A 41-year-old woman, her two young children and her mother were found dead yesterday inside their Winchester home, and her husband -- Thomas Mortimer IV -- has been arrested in connection to the quadruple homicide. This is the kind of heart-wrenching story with so many perplexing questions that, unfortunately, we've encountered far too many times before.

Even though the person responsible and the motives for the crime remain in doubt, there are some common characteristics of mass murders that can help us make some sense of this seemingly senseless crime. As it happens, this most recent tragedy appears to fit the mold in many respects.

Nearly 900 mass murders occurred in the United States between 1976 and 2008, for an average of over two dozen incidents annually. Almost 30 percent of these crimes take place in suburban areas, as did yesterday's murders in Winchester.

Family annihilations, like the Winchester massacre may be, are the most common form of mass killing. As many as one-third of mass murders implicate a family member -- usually the husband/father -- as the assailant. The perpetrators are typically middle-age white males who appear unremarkable in many ways -- to friends, co-workers and neighbors, they seem extraordinarily ordinary. Many are left wondering why a man with a nice family, living in a nice home in nice neighborhood, and with no criminal record, would carry out such a horrible crime.

Even though mass murderers are not particularly distinguishable, there are certain underlying factors and traits that emerge time and time again. Mass killers, especially those who target family members, do not just snap and suddenly go berserk. Their murders result from long-standing issues involving work or family-related frustrations/failures, and culminate with some catastrophic precipitant, typically job loss, marital break-up or the threat of either. For the most part, these men see themselves as law-abiding citizens who have been the victim of familial or financial unfairness, and they decide after much deliberation to even the score.

Mass murderers do not generally kill at random, but target certain people selected specifically to avenge some type of perceived mistreatment, whether it occurred at home or elsewhere. In family massacres, oftentimes one individual, usually a spouse or estranged spouse, is the primary target, and others are killed because of their association with the main victim. In what has been called "murder-by-proxy," a man may murder not just his wife, but all of her children, as a further means of punishing her.

Much about this case will likely be learned over the next days and weeks, as evidence is uncovered and the person of interest is discovered. Although undeniably shocking, the

true story behind the murders on Windsong Lane in Winchester may not be all that surprising.

Authors note: Along with my Northeastern University colleague Jack Levin, I have studied multiple homicide for nearly 30 years, having written several books and dozens of articles on the topic, and recently headed an investigation of a mass shooting. These observations and generalizations are based on years of research on similar crimes.

N.B. I generally welcome and respond to comments from readers. However, because of the sensitive nature of this topic, and out of respect for the grieving family, I've decided to suspend the posting of comments on this particular entry. I can always be reached by e-mail at j.fox@neu.edu.