



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

GUNS AND GUN LAWS , MURDER AND MAYHEM

## Mass murder -- Unpredictable and unpreventable

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Outrageously tragic crimes -- like Saturday's mass shooting outside a grocery store in Tucson, Arizona that claimed the lives of 6 people and caused serious injuries to many more -- typically signal open season for finger-pointing. Once the gun smoke and emotional shock have passed, a multitude of critics and speculators seize the opportunity to place blame, even beyond just the shooter.

Given that a Congresswoman may have been the prime target of the gunman, at least one politician has emphasized the role of acerbic political discourse commonplace today in the electronic media and cyberspace. According to this view, the gunman was inspired and encouraged by strident and hateful words often thrown about to characterize government officials of either side of the political spectrum.

Some observers have focused specifically on the suspect's My Space page and YouTube uploads as a window into his thinking and mindset. Notwithstanding the apparent delusion and incoherence, were clear-cut warning signs of a young man bent of violence (clear-cut with hindsight, that is) tragically ignored?

In the wake of crimes like this, gun control advocates question how an individual with a long criminal record was able to acquire his own weapon of mass destruction. Although similar events have occurred in countries with far more restrictive gun laws, momentum builds for making it more difficult for madmen and hate-mongers to get revenge from the back end of a gun. At the same time, many gun owners argue that concealed carry laws would permit legally-armed bystanders to stop a gunman in his tracks before the body count grows.

The truth is that mass murder is rare, unpredictable and largely unpreventable. Over the past three decades, on average, about 20 mass shootings with at least four slain victims have occurred annually in the United States, claiming nearly 100 lives each year. Without minimizing the pain and suffering of these victims and their families, the risk of this type of crime is significantly less than a wide array of other catastrophes that we confront every day.

Although upgrading the level of political discourse may be much needed and changes in gun laws (whether stricter or more permissive) may be argued, these steps will likely not make a shred of difference

in term of the incidence of mass murder. Mass killers, though often delusional, are deliberate and determined. They seek revenge against specific individuals, or against society as a whole, in large part regardless of whatever social policies we put in place.

Short of rounding up all the guns and all of those who spew angry epithets or appear psychologically unstable, senseless episodes like the Tucson shooting will likely continue to occur. Mass murder is but one of the difficult and unfortunate prices that we pay for our freedoms.

