



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

The real causes of mass murder

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The growing pile of news reports examining the background of the man charged with committing last week's massacre outside a Tucson supermarket paints a picture of a deeply disturbed and possibly schizophrenic 22-year-old whose delusions and distorted thinking apparently pushed him over the edge. Although Jared Loughner's bizarre behavior has been confirmed by many who knew him, the key to understanding his actions lies much more in his social state of existence than his psychological state of mind.

My Northeastern University colleague Jack Levin and I have studied dozens upon dozens of mass murderers over the past few decades, and Loughner fits a pattern seen time and time again. Although serious mental illness can be identified in some cases, most mass murderers are clear-headed and deliberate. Contrary to popular stereotype, they don't just suddenly snap and go berserk, killing indiscriminately.

The road to mass murder typically involves years of disappointment and failure that produce a mix of profound hopelessness and deep-seated resentment. Socially or psychologically isolated, mass murderers lack emotional support and encouragement from confidants. Moreover, they have no one around to help provide a much needed reality check on their warped perception of constantly being the victim of injustice. Tending to externalizing blame, they seek to punish those whom they hold responsible for their miserable life.

Most often, the mass murderer's rage is directed at specific targets, such as family members or co-workers. Sometimes their grudge implicates an entire class of people, such as feminists, minorities or immigrants who are believed to be stealing all the good job opportunities. Occasionally and when the perpetrator's perceptions are twisted by mental illness, the entire society is held as blameworthy. In such cases, the mass killer may randomly target strangers in some public place.

Were schizophrenia the critical element underlying Loughner's alleged rampage, then one would expect to find profound mental illness in the majority of mass murder cases. Rather, it is his history of failure, rejection and social isolation that set the stage. Had Loughner been successful in his educational or job pursuits, or had he benefited from a strong support network comprised of family and close friends, then his apparent mental illness would have been manifested in far less violent ways.

It would be unfortunate if we were to conclude from probing the alleged Tucson massacre that mental illness, and schizophrenia in particular, is a significant risk factor for extreme acts of violence. It would be worse if we were to become increasingly wary and suspicious of the mentally ill who live among us. Instead, we should focus more on those who, like Loughner, are loners and losers. Offering our friendship and support can go a long way toward helping them cope with disappointment. And who knows? It might even prevent a mass murder.