



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Norway massacre fits the mold

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As details surface in the days and weeks ahead about Friday's massacre in Norway and about Anders Behring Breivik, the man believed to have perpetrated the bloodbath, we will hopefully be able to make some sense of what now seems so unfathomable. However, even with the sketchy information uncovered in the immediate aftermath of the shooting/bombing, the crime and the accused fit the mass murder mold in many respects.

My Northeastern University colleague Jack Levin and I have studied countless mass killings over the past three decades. Certain characteristics are seen time and time again:

1. Mass killers do not just suddenly snap and go berserk. Rather these crimes are well-planned, methodical executions. Although there may be warning signs, including angry threats vocalized or uploaded, they unfortunately do not become clear until after the deadly fact.
2. The victims are not usually selected at random. Rather, those targeted are perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be responsible for the killer's misfortune or unhappiness. The victims can be blamed personally, or just as members of a group against which the killer has some deep-seated grudge. The defining characteristic for victims can be based on race, gender, religion, lifestyle or politics. In addition, victims are occasionally innocent proxies purposely targeted to avenge the perceived enemy.
3. Most mass killers do not fit the common stereotype of a crazed madman. They may be mad in terms of their angry mindset, but not in terms of some psychotic view of the world. The killer's battle plan may seem extreme,

bizarre, outrageous, even delusional, yet not represent someone who is insane.

4. Almost by definition, mass murderers are well trained and comfortable with their chosen weapon of mass destruction. Guns are usually preferred, as bombs can be less predictable.
5. The media has focused on the Norwegian suspect's interest in violent entertainment. A mass killer's attraction generally reflects a personality type having strong identification with power, but not a cause of the will to kill.
6. The perpetrators of mass murder often blend in rather well, appearing extraordinarily ordinary at least superficially. It is not uncommon for neighbors and acquaintances to describe them as a "regular guy."
7. Mass murderers do not typically see themselves as criminal, but instead as the victim of injustice. They often consider themselves as a heroic champion for right over wrong and their crimes as absolutely justified.
8. Finally, mass murderers tend to be socially isolated, either living alone or just not particularly connected with others. If it happens that the man accused of the Norway massacre had collected most of his "friends" through his *Facebook* page, I would not be surprised.

These are some early observations of Friday's tragedy that devastated the entire nation of Norway, if not the world. It will be important to learn as much as we can about the accused and his possible motivation. At the same time, however, the police and the media must avoid inadvertently turning him into a celebrity or, worse, an icon for similarly-minded extremists.