



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Accused mass killer: Over-exposed

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With the movie theater massacre days in the past and the booby-traps discovered at the suspect's apartment having been disarmed, the media has turned its focus on assembling a clear picture of the 24-year-old man who the police say caused so much pain to so many. The race is on to locate sources -- neighbors, former classmates, friends, and even relatives who can explain what seems inexplicable.

We have learned that the accused mass murderer dropped out of graduate school, despite his earlier academic achievements -- the kind of profound disappointment that typically characterizes this type of offender. We also have learned about his fairly recent move from San Diego to the Denver area -- the kind of social upheaval that can strand someone on a social island, without adequate support systems or a sounding board for keeping things in perspective.

While this rush to know as much as possible about the accused gunman and to solve the motivational puzzle may satisfy our curiosity and fascination with the dark side of human behavior, it also feels like an empty exercise that lacks any practical value. No matter how much we uncover about this man believed to have killed 12 innocent movie-goers and wounded scores more, we will never be able to use this intelligence to predict or identify like-minded individuals who potentially pose a threat to public safety.

Over the past few decades, my Northeastern University colleague Jack Levin and I have studied countless cases of mass murder, and certain traits emerge time and time again within the backgrounds and biographies of these assailants: social isolation; failure in various pursuits; and the tendency to see others, but not themselves, as being responsible. At some point, they form a deliberate plan to punish others, if not society in general, for their perceived mistreatment.

Unfortunately, profiling mass murderers in such a way does not lead to a solution. While the warning signs may be crystal clear in the aftermath, no one could have reasonably predicted the awful outcome. In fact, mass murder would be considered out-of-character behavior even for those who have gone to this extreme.

Not only does the usual after-the-fact psychological autopsy constructed in newspaper and on websites lead us nowhere, but there is a significant risk to this wholly undeserved attention. Excessive focus on the details of the accused gunman's background and stories from those who knew him before only humanizes someone who allegedly acted in an incredibly inhumane way.

How often must we see the alleged murderer's name in print and his face shown in photographs from happier times? It is an appropriately sympathetic gesture that stories and photos of victims are being featured as well; but will their identities be eclipsed as time and the prosecution moves forward?

It is perfectly reasonable to shed light on the tragic event without a media spotlight on the alleged assailant. It is shameless, if not dangerous, to transform an obscure nobody into an infamous somebody who may be revered and admired by a few folks on the fringe. At a minimum, we should resist the temptation to repeat his name, for his identity should be as unspeakable as the crime with which he is charged.