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James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Preventing mass murder: No easy solutions

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In the wake of Friday's massacre at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Conn., many Americans, some living near the crime site and others located hundreds of miles away, have described a sense of helplessness.

Understandably, people want and need to believe there are constructive measures that can make us and especially our children safer -- specific policies, procedures or programs that can prevent this kind of tragedy from recurring elsewhere, including their own local community. Parents, in particular, are left imagining the incredible pain that the families in Newtown must endure.

So what indeed can be done? What ideas have surfaced in the aftermath of this senseless slaughter, and what are their prospects for making a significant difference?

Predictably, the massacre of so many victims, including 20 children, would and should force us to re-examine the laws pertaining to firearms. Even before the body count was tallied and the perpetrator was identified, a steady stream of politicians and pundits were on hand demanding tighter restrictions on gun sales.

Public officials and private citizens alike are insisting that we must find a way to keep guns away from our most dangerous element, yet are blinded by passion and anger from confronting the practical limitations to such proposals. Mass murderers rarely have criminal records or a history of psychiatric hospitalization. No matter how unstable and odd-looking, they typically are not disqualified from gun ownership. Even if they were prohibited in some way from legally obtaining a weapon, they of course can find one to take or steal in order to achieve their deadly mission.

Mass killers do not just snap and seize whatever weapons of destruction are handy. They are deliberate and determined; they will find the means despite the impediments placed in their path.

There is, of course, a huge difference between firearms generally, and high capacity assault weapons. A ban on such instruments of warfare would make sense. But, of course, many mass killings have involved pistols and rifles that would not be classified as an assault weapon.

Many advocates have also stepped forward to push for expanded availability of mental health services. Unfortunately, countless Americans suffer from depression and loneliness. Many go without the psychiatric treatment that they desperately need, but perhaps cannot afford.

It would certainly be a fitting legacy to the tragedy in Newtown if mental health services improved, but that would not necessarily reach the few on the fringe who would seek to turn a school, a shopping mall, or a movie theater into their own personal war zone. For the most part, these angry and alienated individuals believe that the fundamental problem lies in others, not themselves. As far as they are concerned, it is society that is corrupt and unfair. They see themselves as the victim of injustice and are ready to even the score.

Might troubled souls be more apt to seek treatment, some have wondered, were there not such a profound stigma associated with mental illness? That may be, but so long as we characterize mass killers as wackos or sickos, we only further that shame of with mental illness.

The immediate response to deadly shootings in schools and other buildings is typically a call for enhanced physical security. In the short-term, access control and close surveillance may calm the fears of students and their parents. However, in the long run, transforming our schools into fortresses is counter-productive. Children need not be constantly reminded of their vulnerability. Besides, as we have seen in many instances, including with the newly-installed security system at Sandy Hook, access control measures fail to deter someone who is absolutely dead-set on mayhem.

The fact that gun control, psychiatric services, and security measures are limited in their ability to prevent the dreadful acts of violence doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Although they may stop the next mass murderer, wherever he may strike, we can enhance the well-being of millions of Americans in the process. Besides, doing something is better than doing nothing. If nothing else, it will reduce the debilitating feeling of helplessness.