



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## Takeaways from the Sandy Hook Report

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment November 25, 2013 09:30 PM

---

The just-released report on the Sandy Hook shootings does not reveal any real surprises about the gunman Adam Lanza, his background and behavior. The report fails to identify a clear-cut motive for the killing spree, a fact that might frustrate some of the surviving families and members of the community who seek to understand why the tragedy took place. Of course, even if Lanza had left a note detailing his purpose, the loss of life would remain unchanged.

Even without a clear resolution concerning Lanza's motivation, there are some important takeaways that emerge from the document:

1. Rather than a sudden explosion of rage, Adam Lanza planned ahead, including his suicidal intent. Contrary to the common vernacular, mass killers don't just snap. They plan where, when and how they will wreak havoc on society.
2. Although Lanza's mental health problems were well-known to family and neighbors, no one could have anticipated the violent outcome. Notwithstanding his obsession with mass murder and school shootings in particular, no one believed him to be dangerous. The fact is that countless Americans are fascinated with mass murder, and follow the news of mass shootings very closely. Many also at some level may admire the mass murderer's willingness to take matters -- and guns -- into his own hands and strike out against perceived injustice. The vast majority of these people will never hurt anyone, much less commit mass murder.
3. Nancy Lanza, the shooter's mother, is a victim of her son (and unfair public opinion), not an accessory to mass murder. With conveniently clear hindsight, some people have questioned her parenting decisions. There is no evidence, however, that she acted without the best intentions for her son. Nancy Lanza enjoyed sport shooting, and wanted to share her passion with Adam as a way for mother and son to bond.
4. Violent video games did not drive Adam Lanza to kill. His preoccupation with gaming was more a symptom of his psychological problems rather than a cause of his rampage. Anxious and socially withdrawn, he retreated to the safety of his bedroom and the basement, filling the hours with games, both violent and non-violent.

When tragedy strikes, we invariably look to assign blame, and consider all those who may have played a role. And when the perpetrator is dead, we often look for other places to release our collective anger. In this case, Adam Lanza is the culprit, not his mother, not video games, not drugs, not bullying, not lax gun

laws. While we might look for strategies that will help dispirited and lonely souls among us, there is, unfortunately, not much that can do in our free society to prevent this rare but uniquely frightening crime.