

Unconventional Wisdom #106

The Mass Shooting Epidemic

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by

Scott Garber

After more than two years of COVID-19, we thought we were learning to live with an epidemic. But in mid-May the daily reports of death and despair began anew. Only this time it was a plague of mass shootings.

The epidemic began in Buffalo. Then a shocking slaughter in Uvalde. And, now, a murderous assault on a Fourth of July parade in suburban Chicago (7 killed and 38 injured) serves as a gut-wrenching reminder that this scourge is still spreading.

The CDC defines an epidemic as “an unexpected increase in the number of disease cases in a specific geographical area.” That’s a pretty apt metaphor for the raging infection of hate and slaughter and paralyzing grief that has gripped America since May 14.

Truth be told, even before this recent outbreak, mass shootings weren’t exactly a novel occurrence in this country. 2022 had already seen almost 200 events in which four people other than the perpetrator were shot. But in just the last 52 days America has suffered 120 more mass shootings, involving more than 700 casualties. The pre-Buffalo rate of 1.48 mass shootings per day has jumped over 50% to 2.28.

As the enormity of this epidemic has become ever more undeniable, calls for action have echoed loudly across the land. Enough to bring even Congress together, and they hardly ever agree on anything. To be honest, however, their historic legislation amounts to little more than baby steps. To really get this epidemic of mass shooting under control will require far more fundamental changes, in both public policy as well as in the public psyche.

That’s because the epidemic of mass shootings is not a stand-alone problem. Indeed, I would argue that it’s just the tip of a much larger iceberg. As a result, there’s no way to address mass shooting without addressing the causes behind this effect. Let’s take a look at four of these related problems.

First, the menace of mass shooting is part and parcel of a much larger gun violence problem. In 2021 over 45,000 people died by firearms in America. That's nearly as many as the 47,000 hostile deaths suffered by Americans soldiers in the entire Vietnam war.

It's true that the vast majority of those who have a gun do not use it to shoot people. But it's equally true that everyone who shoots someone uses a gun. Firearms are relatively easy to obtain in this country, even those capable of inflicting massive damage in a short period of time. And we have a seemingly unending supply, far more than enough to arm every citizen. Moreover, the current filters for keeping guns out of the hands of people who pose a risk to others are shockingly porous.

In 2019 the U.S. firearm-related death rate was 12.21 per 100,000. Compared to other developed countries in the G-7, that's six times more than the next on the list, Canada, and 200 times higher than Japan. In fact, four of the other six countries have a rate below 1 per 100,000.

We also maintain a lopsided lead in mass shootings (actually mass *killings*, as international statistics track incidents in which at least four people are killed apart from the shooter). Between 1998 and 2019, 83.5% of all mass killings in the G7 countries occurred in just one country, the United States.

To the extent that our more general gun violence problem fuels and facilitates our mass shooting problem, anything we can do to keep weapons out of the hands of the wrong people should also lower the incidence of mass shootings. That strategy is working in other countries. If they can manage to protect themselves from themselves, there's no reason why we can't do the same.

Second, and closely related to America's gun violence problem, we have a gun culture problem. It's not just that we're swimming in weaponry. Something about our process of socialization orients us to turn to guns as a solution. Perhaps there's a little Wyatt Earp in all of us.

Firepower is a force multiplier. The privileged want firepower to protect their superior status. The lowly want firepower to make them somebody. Criminals want firepower to enable their illicit activities. Others want firepower to protect themselves from everybody else's firepower.

In this ever-escalating gun culture, the more guns we have, the more guns we think we need. Some even believe that the only way to combat gun violence is to have more good guys with guns than bad guys with guns. Of course, this works about as well as solving a noisy neighbor problem by out-shouting them.

Individuals can, of course, try to break this deadly spiral by opting out of the gun culture. Nevertheless, many hesitate to place themselves in a power deficit. As a result, the only way to re-orient the gun culture is through effective regulation that applies across the board, reducing the perceived need for greater firepower. It's either that or continue to expand our circular firing squad.

The third component of the mass shooting problem is a values problem. Quite a lot of us, it seems, are more concerned about the Second Amendment than we are about the Sixth Commandment. Just to be clear, the Sixth Commandment is the one about “Thou shalt not kill/murder.” Tellingly, we all know the subject matter of the Second Amendment.

I’m actually getting kind of concerned about the First Amendment, which guarantees “the right of the people peaceably to assemble.” Because it doesn’t mean much that you’re allowed to stage a peaceful public event, if that peaceful public event is likely to be turned into target practice.

So, who’s going to organize the next parade? Or attend it? Or allow their teenager to play in the marching band?

Last but not least, we have a patriotism problem. Not that patriotism itself is bad or that we Americans suffer from any lack of it. But sometimes what passes for patriotism is little more than a jingoistic abstraction that ends up being more self-serving than self-sacrificing.

True patriotism must go beyond love of country—to love of countrymen and women. True patriotism obliges us to ensure our mutual security and allows us to go about our daily business—sending our kids to school, going to the grocery store, attending a place of worship—free from the specter of mass violence.

But, frankly, it feels like a long way from here to there. In the wake of yesterday’s massacre, Highland Park is not the only community that will never be the same. Because America saw *seven* mass shootings on July 4th. Thirty in the last nine days. 29 people dead, 184 more injured. In nine days. Including a gun battle in Kentucky in which seven police officers were shot, three of whom will never go home to their families. This is, indeed, an epidemic.

Everything I’ve said above leads me to believe that we can still beat back the scourge of mass shootings. But sometimes this constant drip of senseless death makes it hard to hold on to hope. God help us.

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