

The Ignored Factor in New Zealand's Mass Shooting

What turned Brenton Tarrant, the 28-year-old Australian who murdered 50 people at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, last week into a mass killer?

We'll never know for sure. The media has been full of speculation. The suspects include extreme right-wing ideologies, racism, toxic masculinity, resentment of immigrants, first person shooter video games, the internet, bullying, narcissism and readily available high-powered guns. No doubt all of them played a role in poisoning Tarrant's mind.

But there is one factor which is consistently overlooked – a background of divorce. According to a profile of the killer in the [New York Times](#), Tarrant's parents split up early in his childhood. It must have made an impact, as his manifesto alludes to “Broken families with soaring divorce rates, that's if they even bother to get married at all” as a symptom of the decay of Western civilisation.

But divorce is almost never mentioned as a factor in the ever-longer list of mass shootings. After the Columbine massacre by two students, experts from the US Department of Education and the Secret Service published [an analysis of school shootings from 1974 to 2000](#). Although it found that fewer than half of the shooters lived with both biological parents, it overlooked family structure as a contributing factor. This might be understandable – the parents of the Columbine killers were not divorced.

But more than half of the school shooters did appear to come from broken marriages or unconventional backgrounds – surely that is something that requires further investigation.

The link between mass shootings and family structure is not a theme that attracts much attention from social scientists. [A 2015 study of European terrorists](#) identified 18 risk factors – none of them related to family background. [A 2018 study by an American criminologist](#) of mass shooters and suicide terrorists settled on three factors: suicidal motives and life indifference, perceived victimization, and desires for attention or fame. The author ignored the impact of divorce or family structure.

But family break-up is a feature of most of the shooters. Here are a few of the many over the past few years:

A former Marine machine gunner, **Ian David Long**, 28, opened fire in the Borderline Bar & Grill, a country-western bar frequented by college students in Thousand Oaks, California in November 2018. He killed at least 12 people including a sheriff's deputy. His parents had divorced in 1991 when Long was one. Long himself was divorced after two years, with the couple citing irreconcilable differences.

In America's worst case of anti-Semitic violence, **Robert D. Bowers**, walked into the Tree of Life Congregation synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, and used an AR-15-style assault rifle to kill 11 people. Bowers' parents divorced when he was about one-year-old. His mother remarried and divorced again after a year. His father reportedly committed suicide when Bowers was about 6 years old.

In May 2018, **Dimitrios Pagourtzis**, 17, walked into a Houston area high school and killed eight students and two teachers. He is the third child of his father's third marriage, [following two divorces](#).

In the deadliest high school shooting in the United States, **Nikolas Cruz**, a 19-year-old former student at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, shot dead 17 students on Valentine's Day 2018. His adoptive parents were

not divorced, but his father died when he was six.

Shooting from the 32nd floor of a Las Vegas hotel in 2017, **Stephen Paddock** killed 59 people. His father was a bank robber who was largely absent from his life as a boy. Paddock had been divorced twice and had no children.

In October 2015 26-year-old **Christopher Harper-Mercer** gunned down nine people at Umpqua Community College in southwest Oregon before police shot him. His parents were divorced and he lived with his mother, a gun enthusiast.

Dylann Roof, who killed nine people at a Charleston, South Carolina, church in 2015 came from a severely dysfunctional family. His father had divorced his mother and he was mainly raised by his step-mother.

In 2014 **Elliott Rodger**, a 22-year-old student, ran amok in Santa Barbara, and stabbed and shot six people to death before killing himself. His parents divorced when he was seven.

John Zawahiri, 23, killed five people in Santa Monica in 2013 near to and on the campus of a state college. His parents had been separated for years.

In December 2012, **Adam Lanza**, 20, killed his mother, six staff at Sandy Hook primary school in Connecticut, and 20 school children before shooting himself. His parents were divorced.

Wade Page was a white supremacist who shot six Sikhs dead in Milwaukee before being killed by a police officer in August 2012. His parents were divorced.

In October 2011 a California man, 41-year-old **Scott Evans Dekraai**, walked into his ex-wife's hair salon and shot her and seven other people dead. His parents were divorced.

Not all of America's rampage killers have had divorced parents, but this back-of-the-envelope analysis suggests that most do. Some have been through their own divorce. **Devin**

Patrick Kelley, who killed 26 people at a Baptist church in Texas in 2017, came from an intact family, but was divorced himself. The parents of **Omar Siddiqui Mateen**, who killed 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016, were together but distant. Mateen had been through one divorce and one separation.

Obviously, this does not mean that children of divorced couples are doomed to become killers. It is estimated that about half of American children are going to experience the divorce of their parents before their 18th birthday. Most of them have normal lives. But it does suggest that a background of divorce is a factor which should not be ignored by police and criminologists. It's easier to criticise the culture of gun ownership than it is to criticise the culture of divorce. That's why we hear much more about rifles than relationships.

Only a tiny fraction of the millions of rifles owned by Americans are used by mass murderers. Yet politicians and the media demand gun control laws. Similarly, only a tiny fraction of children of divorce turn into rampage killers. Why don't we demand measures for shoring up crumbling families? It needs to be shouted across the roof-tops that divorce can really screw kids up.

As we have argued repeatedly in *MercatorNet*, "perhaps they wouldn't need more gun control if they had better divorce control."

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