

The Age of the Lone Wolf Terrorist

Last month, the world was once again heartbroken and transfixed by a high-profile act of mass murder, this time in a most unexpected place: New Zealand. While some killings, like the ones at Columbine and Las Vegas, seem to have been driven purely by the demons haunting the shooter, in New Zealand, the murderer was motivated at least in part by extremist politics. That makes it not simply murder but terrorism, specifically what is called “lone wolf terrorism.”

Lone wolf terrorists motivated by Salafist-inspired jihadism have gotten the most attention in recent years, but now white supremacist terrorism has become a threat, too. It has struck in Norway, [the United Kingdom](#), [the United States](#), and now New Zealand, targeting people of color, Muslims, and Jews.

White supremacism and jihadism might appear antithetical, even at war with each other, unified only by a propensity to kill the defenseless. Both use similar alibis, claiming to act in self-defense and only resorting to violence because they are forced to do so. But in reality, the psychological foundations and enabling social frameworks of both types of terrorism have much in common.

Today's lone wolf terrorists are inspired by extremist organizations and ideologies that they have tenuous or no formal ties to. This makes it difficult for security forces to identify and stop them. And through a process of pathological emulation, they are proliferating. One act of lone wolf mass murder inspires others.

Often the Internet and social media are blamed for the rise of lone wolf terrorism; sometimes violent entertainment and video games are faulted. Another culprit is the easy availability of

the tools of mass murder, whether semi-automatic weapons or explosives made from readily available materials. More recently, blame has fallen on some political leaders for mainstreaming extremist ideas. In fact, all of these factors are only a small part of the picture. The roots of the phenomenon lie deeper in the tensions and pathologies of our time.

In 1893, French sociologist Émile Durkheim introduced the concept of *anomie*, which he defined as “a condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals.” For a range of reasons, we live in an epoch of anomie, as traditional authority structures of all types, from religious institutions to news broadcasts to political leaders, have become less effective at instilling and enforcing ethical norms and at providing a structure for individual meaning, self-identification, and belonging. This has particularly affected young men, who generally need structures outside the family and want to see themselves as heroic protectors of something. The result is a dark pool of people—mostly young men—who, without traditional authority structures, have become lost, angry, and alienated.

The vast majority eventually outgrow this. Some find non-pathological structures of which they are able to see themselves as heroic protectors. Others deflect their anger and alienation via an alternative framework, whether as an athlete or sports fan, or through entertainment like video games and superhero movies, or through a network of friends. Some find fulfillment in faith. Some turn to gang membership. But a few cannot manage or redirect their anger and alienation and choose instead to politicize it. Some of these are drawn to extremist ideologies. A small number with particularly demanding demons turn to violence.

Lone wolf terrorists inspired by jihadism and white supremacism are not only driven by a common psychological foundation—they also construct similar frameworks for

understanding the world and conceptualizing how to address what they see as threats to the identity group they have chosen. Both types are motivated by myths and caricatures, often obtained from the Internet or social media. They share a bizarre belief that their nation or the world is on the verge of an outright war between what they define as their own group and their enemies, and that a high-profile act of mass murder is all that's needed to spark that conflict. This idea has been repeated over and over again by violent extremists, from Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh, and Osama bin Laden to today's lone wolf terrorists. Their shared motivational framework leads them to think in parallel, using the same twisted ideas and delusional logic.

The key question is what can be done. Many lone wolf terrorists are stopped before they commit mass murder, so part of the palliative is resourcing, integrating security services, and encouraging the public to share information with law enforcement when someone they know—even a family member—exhibits symptoms of violent extremism. Better controls on the weapons that allow a terrorist to maximize the number of people they are able to kill before stopped also make sense, though that isn't a full solution.

It would also help if political and thought leaders avoided rhetoric that demonizes people or encourages "othering," but even this wouldn't entirely solve the problem.

In the broadest sense, if violent extremism and the lone wolf terrorism it sometimes generates is a result of anomie, then the solution is to reconstruct authority structures. Young people—particularly young males—need identity and a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, a way to feel heroically protective. They need a system to channel anger and aggression into something both satisfying and positive. They need a way to distinguish positive information from the false and malignant.

This is a huge task. In the absence of unifying authority structures, the tendency is for societies to devolve into antagonistic tribes, whether political, racial, or something else. This does not automatically result in extremism and violence, but it can enable it. The reconstruction of unifying authority structures will be extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible in this age of information profusion. And the siren song of extremism will always be there, a mouse click away. But if anomie cannot be addressed, lone wolf terrorism will persist.

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