

How the Media and Police Could Discourage Mass Shootings

Another public shooting came and went last week in West Texas. Close on the heels of the El Paso Walmart shooting, the Odessa shooting had some peculiar aspects, including its spontaneous eruption from a traffic stop and the killer's shooting of hapless civilians from a moving vehicle. Like all mass shootings, this led to substantial grief within the community and calls for gun control among the usual suspects. One additional peculiarity of this shooting was that the police, at first, [refused to release the shooter's name](#) in a bid to deny the killer any recognition.

While the desire to deprive these killers of the fame and notoriety they seek is admirably forward-thinking, hiding basic information about these killers and their crimes is counterproductive.

For starters, crime involving random victims is always unusual and newsworthy. The vast majority of homicides and other violent crimes are [intramural](#), so to speak, involving criminals and others who choose to associate with them. [These don't make the national news](#) or, at most, are on page 29 below the fold. On the other hand, when a nice church lady, mail carrier, or otherwise respectable member of society is victimized, we all feel more sympathy for the victims and are fascinated by the details.

This morbid curiosity must be a [natural part of human psychology](#). It's the reason we stare at car accidents, even though this rubbernecking doesn't change what's already happened. This may also be the reason that there are [dozens of television shows](#) on criminal investigations, women who snap,

unsolved mysteries, and serial killers. People want to know what is going on in the world around them, and they have a right to know.

Authentic knowledge is an antidote to misleading folk wisdom on these issues, such as the myth that most serial killers are [high-IQ geniuses](#) and may be lurking among your respectable friends and neighbors.

Similarly, for many years, the [myth](#) persisted that the two teenagers who murdered 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School were avenging angels responding to bullies. These myths are fundamentally misleading.

The Public's Right to Know

The greater proportion of violent crime is not like serial killing or mass murder, but instead the predictable actions of violent people living a [lawless lifestyle](#). As for the serial and spree killers, the vast majority are what can only be [described as losers](#): low IQ, impulsive, aggressive, short time horizons, and frequent failures in every aspect of their lives. In this sense, the Odessa shooter was typical; he lived in a [shack](#), could not hold a job, and [was previously committed to a mental institution](#).

While the impulse to hide information about a killer may be rooted in trying to prevent copycats, there is intrinsic arrogance involved in officials hiding information as basic as the killer's name. The police don't have a greater right to this information than the general public has, for one thing.

Further, in many cases, the media in particular have worked to conceal important details about various crimes, mostly because the facts would upset their preferred narrative on [guns](#), [race](#), [illegal aliens](#), or some other politically correct viewpoint. The largest school shooting ever involved [the use of handguns](#) by an Asian man previously

committed to a mental institution. A would-be terrorist in Miami is described as [only being aggrieved about workplace issues](#). A black Muslim immigrant church shooter in Tennessee [hardly broke out of the local news](#), whereas the “white supremacist” in El Paso became a national media phenomenon. Mirror image cases, but one is played up and the other is played down.

It is all reminiscent of the bureaucrat’s stated desire to avoid panic portrayed in the “Chernobyl” television series. But there, as here, the real desire is often to avoid accountability or the unraveling of an official narrative, and in either case, the practice is equally totalitarian and damaging to public trust.

We have a system of government where the people elect the rulers and need reliable information to do it. Instead, they are treated frequently both by the media and the government as a fickle and irrational mob, who cannot be trusted with the facts. Further, their perceptions are distorted in support of policies like gun control, which presuppose just about everyone is dangerous, when in fact criminal homicide is confined to a very small sliver of the population, many of whom cannot legally own guns in any event.

Not infrequently, the killers have been in and out of prison – as in the case of the recent [Philadelphia shooter](#) – suggesting that “mass incarceration” is actually an essential part of keeping the rest of us safe and that background checks are of limited utility. More generally, you would not know it from all the recent calls for gun control, but violent crime and homicide is [down by more than half](#) from 30 years ago.

Overcoming Media Malpractice

One benefit of the internet is that [raw data is more available than it once was](#), and thus the media’s capacity to control

this and other narratives is reduced. From these raw data, people often draw their own conclusions about whether these shootings are a problem of hardware, mental illness, race hatred, or [other kinds of anger and resentment](#).

In addition to concealing important facts, the media, in particular, have unwittingly furthered one of the goals of these killers through their reporting. In the age of the mass shooter, they turn extreme and rare local incidents into nationwide crime stories and, thus, turn the killer's themselves into nationwide figures.

This is similar to how they previously made serial killers into larger-than-life figures and glamorized them – in the case of Ted Bundy, the [hagiography continues to this day](#). This is less a question of facts than of presentation. The choice of photos and tone and prominence are in the control of the media, and they bear some blame for this. Perhaps the worst example of this phenomenon was the glamour shot of Boston Bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who was decked out like a rock star on the [cover of Rolling Stone](#).

Most experts agree that mass murderers are often [suicidal](#) and motivated to “go out with a bang.” They hold a lot of resentment about their lot in life, including their lack of status, and mass murder gives them a chance to feel powerful and obtain status through their God-like power over the lives of others. While most do not survive the event, they are often motivated in part by the [desire for post-mortem infamy](#).

Instead of suppressing information, however, the government and media should be cognizant of these factors and consider their depictions as a type of “[information operation](#).” And the basic message should not be one of “evil geniuses” and “a society run amok” but instead a truthful message that emphasizes the low status of these people – that they are pathetic losers, both in life and in death.

A good example of the narrative being shaped effectively and positively can be seen in the [photo released](#) by the Defense Department showing the captured al-Qaeda terrorist, Khalid Mohammad. He appeared in an oversized t-shirt and looking quite rough. Nothing glamorous about it. This photo was almost certainly chosen deliberately to counteract the heroic and manly image al-Qaeda preferred to present to its coreligionists.

Debunk Mass-Shooter Myths With Plain Facts

Nature abhors a vacuum. The media and government should not conceal the details of mass killers from the general public because, in the absence of information, useless speculation and conspiracy theories will take its place. More important, the details of these killers' lives are often unflattering and would counterbalance the persistent myths about "normal guys who just snap," which creates needless fear and is employed to support gun control aimed at law-abiding Americans.

The most basic factual details would show that these mass shooters are undesirable in every possible way: friendless, angry, incompetent, and unsuccessful, often with a capstone of a violent and painful death. Such a presentation of the information would be a responsible way of reducing the stature of these killers and thus reduce the appeal of following in their footsteps.

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