

Sample Document

Preface

"We have reports of an active shooter," the newscaster says. We freeze and stop what we're doing to listen. Riveted to cable TV or a radio broadcast, our heart rates speed up with a rush of adrenaline. Family members look at each other as somebody says, *"Where now – a school? Church? Grocery store?"*

It could be any of those places; experience has shown it could even be a shopping mall, a nightclub, or the local Walmart.

As disturbing as each incident is, what may be more alarming is that these events now seem commonplace in the United States. Though statistically, the odds of any one of us being victims of a mass shooting event are exceedingly small, these attacks are increasing. This has a direct influence on our perception of safety as we go about our daily lives. The world begins to *feel* dangerous, and we may change our behavior in response.

One-third of Americans now report that they avoid certain places due to fear of mass killings. Schools across America engage in lockdown drills, which can be psychologically traumatizing to students and teachers. Some parents advocate homeschooling due to fears for their children's safety, and many school teachers have left the profession due to stress-induced anxiety.

Anxiety has skyrocketed in recent years across the population, creating a steady hum of intrapsychic noise. Hypervigilance has become the new normal. A car backfires on a public street, and bystanders duck or run.

Some foreign governments now issue travel warnings for their citizens seeking to visit the United States, warning them about gun violence that seems ubiquitous here.

Some politicians have authorized weapons training for teachers and arming all school personnel.ⁱ Others suggest requiring that elementary school children wear bulletproof backpacks.ⁱⁱ In many places, schools are being redesigned into fortresses with bulletproof glass and barred windows.

"Are we safe anywhere? Why is this happening? When will it stop?"

These questions consume social media for a day or two after each violent event as politicians offer "thoughts and prayers;" battles over gun control are fought on Facebook and Twitter. Eventually, everybody throws up their hands.

"Is this the way we have to live now? Is there anything we can do?"

This book will answer many of these questions. While we don't understand everything about why individuals commit mass murder, we do know a lot. Research is ongoing, and what we currently know has been synthesized in this book.

As a mental health therapist, I've performed dozens of risk assessments and worked in a forensic capacity with killers. I've studied the criminal mind and the impact of violence on victims for close to 30 years.

I'm also a mom, and there's nothing more important to me than children's safety. Since I believe our society can do a much better job of violence prevention, I'm passionate about this subject.

But we can't do anything without the facts and an in-depth understanding of the problem.

Though I'm a clinician, this evidence-based book is written for the layperson as well as professionals: parents, educators, religious leaders, and anyone who wants a deeper

understanding of the phenomenon of mass violence. Mental health and school counselors who do not have specialized training in forensics will also find it helpful.

Chapter 1 explores the current state of our search for accurate data on mass killers, along with identifying common terminology and definitions. The history of mass killings in the United States is reviewed from the country's inception up to the present time.

Chapter 2 gives the foundational concept of pattern analysis and basic categorizations of mass killers that researchers have developed. We look at five factors that influence violent behavior and see that things commonly believed about these killers are not valid. Two distinct modes of violence are explained.

Chapter 3 takes us to the first stage of the pathway to violence and the concept of the injustice collector. We contrast two cases of mass killers who had different grievances but very similar psychological processes.

Chapter 4 moves to the second stage on the pathway to violence and explores the thinking patterns common to most mass killers, including distorted thoughts and violent fantasies.

Chapter 5 explores the third and fourth stages on the pathway to violence and describes how mass killers engage in research and planning, often long before their planned attack.

Chapter 6 discusses the final stages of the pathway to violence and defines empathy and how it impacts behavior. We learn what is different about mass killers that can cause them to lack compassion for others.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the complexities in assessing mental illness and defines major mental illness and its relevancy to mass killings. Various factors that influence the way our minds develop are detailed.

Chapter 8 defines personality, as well the way personality develops and evolves over the lifespan. Personality features often found among public mass killers are identified and defined.

Chapter 9 explores how other vulnerabilities and differences found in some individuals can contribute to the phenomena of mass killings. The impact of trauma, traumatic brain injury, and autism spectrum disorder are explored.

Chapter 10 looks at the increasing role of extremist ideology in mass violence and domestic terrorism, particularly the dangers of the rising militant far-right and the culture of white supremacy. We see that specific personal characteristics can propel an individual with vulnerabilities toward violent extremist behavior.

Chapter 11 focuses on subcultures centered on the hatred of women (misogyny), particularly the unusual subculture of involuntary celibates, and its relationship to mass killings.

Chapter 12 examines the role of the conspiracy mindset in violent extremism and breaks down the thinking errors that feed hate-based and politically motivated violence. The role of political leaders in influencing conspiracism is clarified.

Chapter 13 explores the relationship of cable television news, the internet, and video games in both copycat behavior and social contagion. The controversial issue of content moderation and the effects of deplatforming are examined, as well as ways families can develop guidelines for healthy media use.

Chapter 14 discusses the relationship of guns to public mass killings and the hot topic of gun safety legislation. Reasonable ways to increase gun safety are explored and the history of gun legislation in the United States.

Chapter 15 Identifies a comprehensive vision for bringing change. The ways we can work to help children develop into healthy adults who will turn away from violence are delineated, as well multiple ways to intervene when there are problems or red flags. Resources for finding mental health and crisis services are identified, along with lists of red flags when quick action needs to be taken. Activities to create positive social change are explored, including content moderation in social media platforms. Included is an in-depth look at prevention strategies, as well as ways to intervene in the pathway to violence long before a potential mass killer picks up a weapon.

The Afterward presents a case study from my practice where specific interventions contributed to a good outcome for an adolescent at risk. There are reasons to hold hope.

Case studies have been woven into each chapter to provide examples of the concepts covered. Repetitive themes will be noticed throughout because mass killers share certain similarities, even when they appear to have little in common at a superficial glance. You will recognize the multiple steps on the pathway to violence apparent in each case presented.

Data has been gathered and reviewed from the FBI, the CDC, the U.S. Secret Service, forensic researchers, and epidemiologists worldwide.

I've studied all information about mass killers available in the public domain, including their journals, social media posts, stories they've written for school, and manifestos posted online. I've poured over the details of their histories and the factors that led to their deadly decisions.

We all like a linear narrative with clear cause and effect, but that approach fails us when it comes to mass killers. Mass shootings result from multiple factors with many variables that coalesce to create violent behavior. That is what makes this topic complicated. Nonetheless, much can be understood, and we are not powerless.

For every complicated problem, the solution is equally complex. I like to think we are up to the task if we understand all aspects of the problem and create a vision to work together for a safer, more peaceful world. When we see that mass killings follow patterns, they are to some degree preventable. Anything that can be predicted can be prevented – if we know what to do.

I hope that we can use this information to do a much better job of prevention; collectively, we can make a difference, at least some of the time. As epidemiologists tell us, anyone who has died from a firearm has died from a preventable injury. This is a public health crisis.

We deserve to live in a world that is safe from mass killings. This is the future I want for my children and all of us.

Author's note: The personal case studies presented from my practice represent composites of multiple actual clients. Names and other identifying details have been changed and modified in the interest of privacy.

"Complicated problems have many moving parts, but the relationships between them are knowable." Noemie Bouhana

Excerpt from Chapter 1

Chapter 1

At War with Ourselves

"Parents had to gather away from the elementary school while squads of police with military-style weapons searched the campus. Helicopters were flying overhead. Parents were not told what was going on. We could only text our children and instruct them on barricading themselves in the classrooms and hiding. The children had to use buckets to go to the bathroom in front of other students. These buckets are now in each classroom because active shooter lockdowns are so common. Parents pray each day when we drop off our kids at school that our babies are safe and we don't get texts like I did this afternoon that my son's school was in lockdown because of a possible active shooter." Dorian Beach, January 18, 2020, Santa Monica California

This mother's experience is every parent's nightmare. Lockdown drills are now a routine part of the school experience in America, with most public schools scheduling multiple drills per year.

Schools no longer feel like safe places, and all of us ask ourselves why. We flash on the 2017 Route 91 Harvest Music Festival in Las Vegas, where one 64-year-old man left 61 people dead and 867 injured, and all the other mass shooting attacks that have happened since then. We ask ourselves if we're safe anywhere, why so much about our society has changed, and if there is anything we can do to ensure the safety of our loved ones.

Our collective imagery about life in America has darkened. We sense it.

The active-shooter has become the modern boogeyman, a terrifying monster in military gear who could appear out of the ether at any time or place to murder our children in their classrooms, at a concert, or a shopping mall.

We want to do something, but for the most part, we're baffled.

Though there was no shooter was found in that Santa Monica elementary school on that chilly January day, the psychological effects of the school lockdown live on for Dorian Beach and her child. School lockdowns come with emotional consequences. They teach us to expect the worst and change our view of the world.

Most of us will never forget the blank-eyed faces of the adolescent killers who have stared from television screens. Echoes of Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and dozens of other schools where children have been victimized, continue to reverberate. The list of the infamous murderers grows longer every year. We can easily visualize the memorials to the dead that we've seen on the news, the white crosses and flowers, the candlelight vigils, the photographs of smiling faces of happy children who are no longer with us.

After each event, we collectively say "*Never again!*" which inevitably is followed by "*It happened again.*"

How many times have we said, "*This is madness!*" and "*It makes no sense?*"

There have been more school shootings in the past 20 years than most of us can track. A database on school shootings, going back to 1970, shows there were more school gun incidents and more deaths in 2018 than any other year on record.ⁱ 2019 brought a total of 417 mass shootings across a wide variety of locations in the U.S.ⁱ Four of the deadliest mass killings in

history occurred between 2016 and 2020. And in just one month in spring 2021, there were 45 mass shootings of various sorts across the country.

School shootings are just one subset of public mass killings. The phenomenon is spreading beyond schools and into other public locations. In early March 2021, a twenty-year-old Florida man with a semiautomatic weapon murdered eight people in a killing spree in three spas owned by Asian-Americans. Six days later, a 21-year-old man in Colorado killed ten strangers in a supermarket.ⁱ There is a contagion effect with each mass killing, something that will be clear throughout the text of this book. You will notice patterns.

Indirect victims

As a therapist, I work with distressed adults and children, both victims and perpetrators of violence. Part of my role is to assess the potential for any one of my high-risk clients to become violent and help those victimized by violence recover from the trauma. Both are imperfect and complicated processes.

This is particularly apparent with children who live in fear of violence. They are indirect victims, no matter how removed they are from witnessing violence first-hand. Kids see horror stories on the news and then practice drills at school where they hid in closets or rehearse throwing P.E. equipment in hopes of stopping an armed attacker.

Kids are more fragile than adults and don't have coping skills to help them manage stress from their environment. They're sensitive to changes in routine and the emotional states and behavior of the adults around them. Violence changes their perceptions of the world and their sense of safety in it.

Since children don't have well-developed coping skills, they're quick to react to stress with changes in behavior that are often not understood by adults. When they're unable to put their feelings into words, they may become moody, argumentative, or apt to have health complaints. Kids are affected by the environment they live in far more than we realize.

The brain is rapidly maturing during childhood, constantly incorporating information from the environment permanently into its structure. The environment in which we grow up is a significant factor in the kind of adults we eventually become and partly determines how we relate to others and engage with the world.ⁱ Kids who perceive the world to be a dangerous place become anxious and often grow into anxious adults. Living under the threat of violence changes the way we're wired.

Anxiety disorders in childhood are rising dramatically, and many believe that lockdown drills are one factor.ⁱ On this topic, psychologist and violence researcher Jillian Peterson says, *"In schools, we're running our kids through lockdown drills, we're spending billions of dollars on homeroom security, we're putting police officers in the corridors, and we're even arming our teachers. It's safe to say it's not working because you can't get to true prevention until you understand who those motivated offenders are and why they're motivated."*ⁱⁱ

"As a parent of three kids, I'm concerned with research showing that these drills are traumatic, and my own research showing they increase anxiety. This generation is known as the 'school shooting generation,' and they have more mental health problems than generations before them."

Mental health clinicians who work with children agree with her.
