

# ROOT CAUSE OF MASS SHOOTINGS IS ROOTLESSNESS

When the two mass shootings took place in August, it was distressing to listen to all the chatter about Republicans and Democrats being blamed for what happened. Most of the talk is pure bunk. At the heart of the problem are what I call the three "B's": beliefs, bonds, and boundaries (see my book *The Catholic Advantage* for the details).

It is not people of faith who are the most likely to go on a shooting rampage; it is those who have no religious convictions. This does not mean that simply being an agnostic or an atheist is sufficient to cause someone to become a mass murderer. That's nonsense. But to discount the role of religion in examining the lives of young men who are socially dysfunctional is also nonsense, and this is especially true of mass murderers.

Bonds matter greatly. If someone has a strong relationship with his family and his friends (not to mention God), he is considerably less likely to become a mass killer. This does not mean that all loners are likely to wind up like the El Paso and Dayton killers. But it does mean that this characteristic, when coupled with the other two "B's," is an important variable.

Not respecting boundaries is also associated with criminal behavior. All of us cross the line once in a while, but to those who find it easy to do so (no pangs of guilt), and who do so with regularity, beware: They are more likely to hurt someone than the rest of us.

From what we know about the suspected El Paso killer, he was a classic loner. Leigh Ann Locascio, a former neighbor of Patrick Crusius, called him an extreme loner who sat alone on

the school bus. "He wouldn't talk to people," she said. "No one really knew him."

Connor Betts, the suspected Dayton killer, was described by one of his bandmates, Jesse Creekbaum, as a "loner." Another person who knew him, Brad Howard, said Betts was a quiet kid who kept to himself.

It is not clear what religious affiliation, if any, Crusius had. But we know that Betts worshipped Satan and wore satanic patches on his jacket.

Much too much is being made of the political leanings of these men. Crusius was upset with the "Hispanic invasion of Texas," and in the eyes of some that makes him a white nationalist. But he was also an extreme environmentalist, a critic of big corporations, and a proponent of universal health care. Betts was a self-described leftist who championed the cause of left-wing terrorists.

There are many things that can be done to lessen the likelihood of mass shootings, but not to address rootlessness is a serious mistake. Last year a Cigna study showed that the most likely persons to be lonely were young people, not the elderly. Most of them, of course, will not become mass murderers, but it is from their ranks, not the well adjusted, where the next mass shooter is likely to come from.

Earlier this year, a study was published in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology that found a significant increase of mental distress, depression, and suicidal thoughts among adults. The greatest increase was among young people.

What's going on? The lack of social interaction is a real problem. By 2012, it was evident that smartphones and social media had overtaken the lives of millions of young people. The authors of this study concluded that there was a relationship between the increase in loneliness among young people and the use of smartphones and social media. It's the amount of time

that young people spend on their phones that is most disturbing. Indeed, the more time spent with these devices, the greater the risk of depression.

Of course, most young persons who are addicted to their phone are not likely to murder. But again, we would be remiss not to study the forces that create the milieu in which anti-social behavior is more likely to occur.

It is irresponsible to allow ideologues to drive the discussion of mass shootings. This problem will not be curbed by blaming white nationalists or Christian nationalists (they are the new bad guys in the left-wing playbook). After all, young black men who kill each other in the inner city with abandon have nothing to do with white nationalists or Christian nationalists. That they are given less attention by the media than violent white men smacks of racism.

Cities, towns and villages across the nation should institute hot lines for the public to call when they suspect that a young person is seriously in need of help. The hot lines would not involve the police: they would be staffed by the clergy, guidance counselors, social workers, and psychologists. After fielding a call, they would make an assessment and, if necessary, contact those who know the individual. If the troubled youth cooperates, he would be given the help he needs.

There won't be any major progress until we focus on what can be done about the lack of beliefs, bonds, and boundaries that are characteristic of mass killers. Kids are back at school, so time is of the essence.