

The psychological impacts of mass shootings and violence

October 26 2015, by Ellen Mbuqe

College of Arts and Sciences Associate Professor Leonard Newman, area director of social psychology, offers expertise on the mass shooting and violence that has gripped the US during the past two decades.

Q: Are we (US society) becoming psychologically desensitized to mass shootings?

A: Actually, I don't think so. I think you could just as easily argue that we're becoming less numb to them. The recent shootings in Oregon certainly triggered an outpouring of emotion. What we are getting numbed to is all of the thousands of shootings that don't make headlines. Most people who die by gunfire do not die in mass shootings, and we might have it within our power to do more to prevent those kinds of deaths than the ones caused by school shooters and their ilk.

Q: How do these mass shootings impact the average person?

A: Whenever any kind of dramatic death or other kind of negative event consistently gets a lot of media attention (mass shootings, plane crashes, kidnapping by strangers, pit bull attacks), people end up with an exaggerated sense of the frequency with which they occur—and that leads people to feel more vulnerable to them.

Q: What's your advice to people who fear something like this will happen where they work, live, or attend school?

A: I would remind them that as horrific as these events are, the average person is much more likely to be injured or killed by (for example) car crashes or slipping in the bathroom. Of course, people feel that they have some sort of control over those kinds of accidents in a way that they don't feel control over mass shootings. The fact is that there's little individuals can do to control their destiny if they find themselves in the middle of a [mass shooting](#). But they CAN play a role in controlling these events by pressuring their representatives to pass legislation that might make it less likely that they will occur.

Q: Can you share a brief summary of your 2013 lecture on school shootings and mental stigmas?

A: It should not be a surprise that people who perpetrate mass shootings are much more likely to suffer from a severe mental illness than the [average person](#). It also seems reasonable to most people that a system should be in place to make it harder for people diagnosed with severe mental illnesses to purchase firearms. But that should not distract from the fact that the vast majority of people with mental illness for not engage in violent behavior, and that only a small minority of shooting deaths come at the hands of people with mental illness. To frame the issue of gun violence in terms of [mental illness](#) makes no sense.

Provided by Syracuse University

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