

Risk factors for youth violence should guide policy in response to mass shootings, psychologists say

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An international committee of experts on aggression and youth violence issued a report urging policymakers to consider the research before arming schoolteachers or implementing other measures in response to the latest school shootings.

Iowa State University's Craig Anderson and Douglas Gentile, both part of the International Society for Research on Aggression's Youth Violence Commission, have a combined 52 years of research on [media violence](#). The two are routinely asked about its influence following a [mass shooting](#). Gentile, a professor of psychology, says that we usually start with the wrong question.

"After a tragedy like a school shooting, we typically ask, 'What was the cause of this?' This is the wrong question because it makes the assumption that there could be a single cause, which is almost never correct," Gentile said. "Humans are more complicated than that, and aggression is multi-causal."

Gentile and Anderson stress that multiple risk factors, acting in combination, contribute to violent acts, but too often policymakers, media and the public focus on a single cause. The ISRA committee's report provides an overview of the research detailing differences between mass and street shootings as well as the known risk factors – individual and environmental – of all forms of [youth violence](#).

According to the report, although [mass shootings](#) have become more common in America, they are still a rare occurrence.

Mass shootings tend to differ from other gun homicides in many ways. For example, mass shootings typically occur in rural or suburban middle class communities, the shooters usually do not have a history of criminal violence, and they often use multiple guns including legally purchased semi-automatic rifles with high-capacity magazines.

Known risk factors for youth violence

Extreme violence – assault, murder, mass shootings – is more complex than public debate suggests. Individual risk factors include:

- **Gender and age:** Young men are more likely to be physically aggressive and violent. The most dramatic differences occur in late adolescence and young adulthood, in which young men (15-25) commit the vast majority of homicides.
- **Aggressive behavior in early childhood:** Research over five decades shows that physically aggressive children are the most likely to become violent adults.
- **Personality and emotion regulation:** Some people are more prone to aggression and violence, including children who are characteristically angry. Personality traits of narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and sadism are also related to violent and aggressive behavior.
- **Obsession with weapons, death:** This includes an intense interest in guns, bombs or explosives.

Environmental risk factors include:

- **Easy access to guns:** Studies show access is a strong risk factor and that stricter gun laws reduce gun-related deaths.

- Social exclusion and isolation: This often limits access to a support system that could protect against violent behavior. Victims of bullying may start to resent a particular group or community, which is a risk factor for mass shootings.
- Family, neighborhood characteristics: Divorce, child abuse, [domestic violence](#) and socioeconomic conditions all contribute to aggression in [young men](#), as does growing up in a violent neighborhood and witnessing crime.
- Media violence: The link between violent media and aggression is found in every country where studies have been conducted.
- School characteristics: Mass shootings are more likely to occur in schools with large classes, in which students feel isolated or lack a strong sense of community.
- Alcohol, drugs: Substance use is not a common factor in mass shootings. Alcohol is frequently associated with aggressive and violent behavior.
- Stressful events: Frustration, provocation and other stressful events can trigger violence.

Anderson, a Distinguished Professor of psychology who has studied aggression and violence for almost 40 years, says it is wrong to assume that any one risk factor is "the single cause" of [criminal violence](#). "It is the accumulation of multiple risk factors that increase the likelihood of violence. The more risk factors that are present the greater likelihood that a violent act will occur," he said.

In fact, there are many misperceptions about youth violence. For example, research shows that neither mental illness nor low self-esteem are major risk factors for violence. Instead, aggressive people tend to have unrealistically inflated or narcissistic self-views.

"Understanding these [risk factors](#) can lead to better policy, treatment and intervention. It is impossible to alter some factors, such as prior abuse or

exposure to domestic violence, but it is possible to help at-risk youth manage their anger, reduce use of violent media and limit access to guns," Anderson said.

Role of news media

In its report, the committee also asks journalists to consider their role in reducing gun violence. Prolonged media attention gives the perpetrators in mass shootings publicity they may be seeking. The researchers recommend that reporters do not mention the shooter's name to deter future shooters who use fame as a motive for [violence](#).

More information: Report of the Youth Violence Commission:
[www.israsociety.com/special-st ... -violence-commission](http://www.israsociety.com/special-st...-violence-commission)

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