

Heart of darkness: Research probes the intersection of religion, mass shootings, suicide and hate

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Outside the bounds of community, individuals can succumb to a tide of despair and solitude. Some may find their answers in God, renewing

their sense of community within the context of religious faith. Or they may find themselves drawn into the close-knit communities of hate groups, which capitalize on alienation and rejection.

Others give in to alienation, and succumb to deaths of despair from suicide or addiction. Some choose to enact their rage on the community itself, committing horrific acts of random violence.

"Culturally speaking, America is at a moment where there are a lot of people who feel alienated and isolated from social, economic and political institutions," observed Brendan Szendro, a doctoral candidate in political science at Binghamton University.

A native of New York state who earned his bachelor's in political science and journalism from SUNY Purchase College, Szendro recently published a pair of papers exploring these dire dynamics. "Community, faith, and public violence: A county-level examination of religious institutions and mass public shootings in the United States" appeared in the *Journal of Crime and Justice*, while "Suicide, social capital and hate groups in the United States" was published in *World Affairs*.

The two papers draw on themes from his dissertation, which looks at the relationship between religion and globalization across nations. Szendro has long been interested in the intersection of religion and politics, and particularly with how religion fosters what political scientists call "social capital."

"In academic terms, it's a community's capacity for collective action, but in practical terms, it refers to the direct network ties between people," he explained. "It can be kin relationships; it can be anything that's interpersonal."

Think of it this way: When you have a bad day, you might turn to

personal sources of support: friends and family, coworkers and acquaintances. People tend to cope with adverse situations more readily the more robust such social circles are. On the other hand, isolation and alienation can be psychologically traumatic, in some ways akin to physical pain, he explained.

For the *Journal of Crime and Justice* paper, Szendro analyzed county-level data from across the country, making sure to account for such factors as population density. He found that communities with more religious congregations have fewer mass public shootings, although the decline in violence didn't hold true for shootings that took place in the context of other crimes.

"What the religious institutions are good at mitigating are these forms of violence that specifically speak to isolation or alienation from community, rather than ones that speak to socio-economic disparity," he said.

Religious institutions often connect individuals with their larger communities, particularly when the overall community is small; urban environments tend to be less reliant on religious institutions to foster interpersonal relationships. In the context of mass shootings, Szendro considered how disconnection from communal elements could lead to a sense of isolation and resentment, and the ultimate choice to commit an act of random violence.

"I'm not saying that religious institutions play the only role in mitigating these events, but it does speak to the notion that the more people in a group support each other, the less likely you are to have people fall through the cracks," he said.

Public [violence](#) isn't the only threat that stems from a lack of social capital. In the past decade, the United States has seen a stark rise in both

hate group activity and what is usually termed "deaths of despair" from suicide, overdoses and liver failure.

Hate and despair

In his paper for World Affairs, Szendro linked county-level suicide rates with an increase in the number of hate groups. According to the data, each 5.38% increase in the suicide rate is associated with the formation of one additional hate group.

To combat alienation, people may try to manufacture social capital and a sense of meaning on their own through the creation of alternative communities. In essence, these individuals find fellowship in hate, synthesizing a sense of community that ends up being a destructive force in the body politic.

Historically speaking, authoritarian and totalitarian movements have seized on this desire for communal structure among individuals who feel isolated in the wake of change, Szendro said. Consider the fascist movements of the early 20th century: People had transitioned from agrarian communities to an increasingly urban society that focused on manufacturing, to the detriment of communal life. It's not a coincidence that today's right-wing populist movements seize on the same elements.

Smaller communities in particular often depend on social capital—interpersonal relationships, primarily—rather than bureaucracy. When the community changes—for example, the local factory closes, forcing workers and their families to leave town to look for work—these relationships break down, and there are few other sources of support to fall back on.

Szandrö has seen this firsthand; outside of academia, he has spent extensive time traveling around the country, observing different

communities and talking to people. So far, he's visited every one of the lower 48 states except Maine.

"A lot of these communities in middle America seem to be facing this vacuum of purpose," he explained. "And a lot of it is because, 'Well, we used to work at the factory, but they outsourced or mechanized the jobs.'"

While participation in religious life can build social capital, there is a correlation between religious adherence and hate group formation, he acknowledged.

With colleagues at the University of Virginia and the University of Kent in the United Kingdom, Szendro will be looking at religious isolation: namely, what happens to congregations when their numbers decline. Those who remain in these dwindling congregations appear to become increasingly hostile to people of other religions or political viewpoints, which could explain the correlation of religion and hate groups.

In fact, population decline appears to contribute to the overall loss of social capital and the negative consequences that follow, Szendro said. In many middle-American communities, more women than men are leaving, creating a gender imbalance that may contribute to mass shootings. The vast majority of shooters are men, some of whom are acting out their resentment against women; hate group members also tend to be male.

"I think all of these things are connected, because they're all about these communities that are trying to find meaning, and how communities structure meaning," Szendro explained. "It may appear to be a contradiction in that religion fosters social capital, but also religion seems to correlate with these hate groups that are acting in absence of social capital. I think it can be reconciled by examining how these

communities have changed over time."

More information: Brendan Szendrő, Community, faith, and public violence: A county-level examination of religious institutions and mass public shootings in the United States, *Journal of Crime and Justice* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/0735648X.2021.1990786](https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2021.1990786)

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