

Why do mass shooters kill? It's about more than having a grievance

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An acutely troubling aspect of life in contemporary America is the [growing proliferation of mass shootings](#) that [claim thousands of innocent lives](#) year after painful year and make everyone feel unsafe.

The year 2023 is still young, and already there have been at least [146 mass shooting events](#) in the U.S. on record, including [the killing of five people](#) in a Louisville, Kentucky, bank that the shooter livestreamed. There were 647 [mass shootings](#) in 2022 and 693 in 2021, resulting in 859 and 920 deaths, respectively, with no respite in sight from this ghastly epidemic. Since 2015, over 19,000 people have been [shot and wounded or killed](#) in mass shootings.

In the wake of most shootings, the [news media](#) and the public reflexively ask: What was the killer's motive?

As [a psychologist who studies](#) violence and extremism, I understand that the question immediately pops to mind because of the bizarre nature of the attacks, the "out-of-the-blue" shock that they produce, and people's need to comprehend and reach closure on what initially appears to be completely senseless and irrational.

But what would constitute a satisfactory answer to the public's question?

Media reports typically describe shooters' motives based on specific individual details of the case, on their "manifestos" or [social media](#) postings. These generally list insults, humiliations or rejections—by co-workers, potential romantic partners or schoolmates—that a perpetrator may have suffered. Or they may cite alleged threats to the shooter's group from some imagined enemy such as Jews, people of color, Muslims, Asians or members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Though perhaps informative about a given perpetrator's way of thinking, I believe these motives are too specific. Each shooter's life story is unique, yet the growing number of mass shootings suggests a general trend that transcends personal details.

Quest for significance

Perhaps surprisingly, the general motive that drives mass shootings is a fundamental human need. It is everyone's [quest for significance](#) and [a feeling that their life matters](#).

That need gets activated when someone feels the loss of significance, the sense of being slighted, humiliated or excluded, but also when there is an opportunity for a gain in one's sense of significance, being the object of admiration, a hero or a martyr in other people's eyes.

I took part in a recent study carried out in the aftermath of the 2016 Orlando mass shooting. In that study, headed by [social psychologist Pontus Leander](#) of Wayne State University, we subjected American gun owners to [feeling a loss of significance](#) by giving them a failing score—or not—on an achievement task. We then asked this random sample of gun owners to respond to a number of questions including whether they would be ready to kill a home intruder even if they were about to leave the home they invaded, and also how empowered those [gun owners](#) felt by owning a gun.

We found that the experience of failure increased participants' view of guns as a means of empowerment, and enhanced their readiness to shoot and kill a home intruder.

And a [2020 review of mass shooting incidents](#) between the years 2010 and 2019 found that 78% of mass shooters in that period were motivated by fame-seeking or attention-seeking—that is, by the quest for significance.

If the need for significance is so fundamental and universal, how is it that mass shooting is an isolated phenomenon perpetrated by a handful of desperate individuals—and not by everyone?

Two factors can push this common human striving into mayhem and

destruction.

First, it takes [extreme heights of significance craving](#) to pay this high a price for potential notoriety. Shooting is an extreme act that demands self-sacrifice, not only giving up on acceptance in the mainstream society, but also producing a high likelihood of dying in shootouts with law enforcement.

Research shows that [about 25% to 31%](#) of mass shooters exhibit signs of mental illness, which is likely to induce in them a deep sense of disempowerment and insignificance. But even the remaining 70%-75% with no known pathologies are likely to have suffered extreme significance issues, as attested by their ample statements about humiliation, rejection and exclusion they believe they or their group suffered at the hands of some real or imagined culprits. These feelings can create a [one-track significance focus](#) that can ultimately precipitate a mass shooting.

Yet even someone who really really wants to feel significant is not necessarily going to carry out a mass shooting.

Shortcut to stardom

In fact, most highly motivated people satisfy their egos quite differently; they focus their extremism on various socially approved areas: business, sports, the arts, the sciences or politics. Why would some then choose the repugnant road to infamy paved by the massacre of innocents?

There is a method to this madness: The shocked public attention a shooting attracts delivers instantaneous "significance." Climbing the steep hill of a respectable career, however, is fraught with obstacles and uncertainties. Success is elusive, takes ages to attain, and is inequitably afforded to those with unusual ability, grit or privilege, or some

combination of those.

Committing a mass shooting represents a widely available shortcut to "stardom."

There are over [390 million guns](#) in today's America and a lack of background checks in many states. People have the freedom to purchase assault weapons at a local store. Thus, planning and executing a mass shooting is a road to notoriety open to anyone, and the narrative that links gun violence to significance—that is, the idea that by becoming a mass shooter you become famous—has been spreading ever wider with each successive shooting.

Killings celebrated

A final puzzle is this: If significance and respect are what the shooters are after, how come they do things that most people despise?

In today's fractured public sphere [dominated by social media](#), it is easy to find networks of supporters and admirers for nearly anything under the sun, including the most repugnant and unconscionable acts of cruelty and callousness. In fact, there is [ample evidence](#) that mass shooters are celebrated by appreciative audiences and can serve as role models to other would-be heroes who seek to outscore them in casualty counts.

What my colleagues and I [call the "Three Ns:"](#) need, narrative and network, refer to the would-be shooter's need to become significant or notorious, the narrative that says being a shooter means being important, and the network that exists to support such behavior. They together combine into a toxic mixture, driving a person to carry out a mass shooting.

But this framework also suggests how the tide of this horrific epidemic

may be stemmed: Negating the narrative that depicts violence as an easy path to significance and dismantling the networks that support that narrative.

The two go together. Disproving the narrative that gun violence is an easy route to fame by making it hard to obtain guns, for instance, and reducing media attention to shooters would reduce the appeal of gun violence to people seeking to feel more significant.

It is equally important to identify and make available alternative paths to significance, conveyed in alternative narratives. This would likely require a concerted effort across society and its institutions. Understanding the psychology of it all may be a necessary precondition for taking effective steps in this direction.

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