

PSYCHIATRIC TIMES

“As individuals and as a nation, we now suffer from social narcissism. The beloved Echo of our ancestors, the virgin America, has been abandoned. We have fallen in love with our own image, with images of our making, which turn out to be images of ourselves.”

-Daniel J. Boorstin

CBS News New York announced on February 28th that Governor Cuomo wanted to modify the state’s new gun control law to fix errors in the recently passed legislation. It seems the legislation passed so quickly that no one noticed it placed police officers, security officers, investigators, and others in violation because they carry high-capacity magazines and “military style” weapons in the scope of their employment.

Interestingly, the Governor also wants to modify the new legislation to include exemptions for the film industry saying, “We spend a lot of money in the state bringing movie production here, post production here. So obviously we would want to facilitate that.”

Now let’s stop and think about this. First, it appears that the New York legislature passed a bill that they either did not read, did not understand or didn’t care what it contained. Second, the Governor wants to promote an industry that needs weapons, real or otherwise, to tell stories that promote violence in New York cities.

The 1976 movie Taxi Driver featured Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle, a mentally unstable Vietnam War veteran who worked the night shift hacking a taxi in Manhattan. He befriends Iris played by Jodi Foster who is young runaway working the streets the only way she knows how. Travis intended to shoot a presidential candidate but ends up in a bloody shootout with Iris’ pimp and becomes a hero.

You may recall John Warnock Hinckley, Jr. He was obsessed with Jodi Foster and her part as Iris in Taxi Driver. Hinckley stalked Foster; moving to New Haven, Connecticut, attending classes at Yale, sending messages and calling her. At the same time Hinckley was targeting President Ronald Reagan utilizing information collected about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Not unlike Travis Bickle, Hinckley was a man on a mission.

On March 30, 1981, in an attempt to impress Jodi Foster, Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Reagan at the Washington DC Hilton Hotel as the President was leaving following a presentation at the AFL-CIO conference.

A police officer and secret service agent were injured. Press Secretary James Brady was severely wounded in the head and paralyzed. The President suffered a chest wound from a ricochet off of the limousine.

Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity and sentenced to psychiatric facility. The President returned to office after his recovery. James Brady became the namesake of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act that created many of the rules and regulations that govern weapons sales throughout the country today, including background checks. It is indeed ironic that many of the national gun laws are based on the results of a mentally ill person who was obsessed with a young actress in a violent movie filmed in New York.

Clearly, it could be argued that many, if not all, of the enacted legislation would have occurred regardless of a film or assassination attempt, however, the irony of the process that did occur cannot be overlooked.

The February issue of Psychiatric Times takes on the issue with the article “Mass Shootings: Research and Lessons” by Dr. James Knoll, IV. The article points out that overall crime is down throughout the country. However, mass murder, the killing of 4 or more people at one location within one event, appears to be increasing.

While these violent events are not new, they “have taken on a different quality. This quality has been affected by cultural shift, social media, and enhanced media coverage.”

During a recent public information officer class I attended the instructor, Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell, Clinical Professor of the University of Maryland’s Emergency Health Service Department of Emergency Health Services, mentioned the impact of media and mental health in 14 of the last mass school shootings (excluding Connecticut and George because the results were not in yet). He summarized five factors common with all the shooters:

- All had well documented mental health disorders
- All had engaged in target range shooting
- All were heavily involved in electronic gaming
- All were frequently left alone as children
- All were utilizing prescribed psychoactive medications

Dr. Knoll reports in his article that research is limited and hampered by “methodological problems.” Nonetheless, he suggests that there are certain consistent psychosocial factors including problems with self-esteem, persecutory and paranoid outlooks, narcissism, depression, suicidal tendencies and social rejection.

School shootings have the current headlines but mass murder occurs in the context of domestic violence and workplace violence too. Goleta is still home of one of the largest workplace shootings in the country when, on January 30, 2006, Jennifer San Marco killed her neighbor before killing six postal employees and committing suicide. Other notable postal shootings include Edmond, Oklahoma in 1986, Ridgewood, New Jersey in 1991, Royal Oak, Michigan in 1991, Dearborn, Michigan and Dana Point, California in 1993, and Baker City, Oregon in 2006.

The study “Violence and School Shootings” suggests that there may be other factors that

explain school shootings such as culture, the social ecology of a school or other community factors. No doubt this is true. Do you think social media, television, music; trophies for everyone because everyone is a winner have become problematic? Is our society creating narcissistic people and enabling destructive behavior under the guise of political correctness, equal opportunity, equity of access and just a simple lack of honesty, or worse, corporate profits?

In the article “Violence Exposure, Psychological Trauma, and Suicide Risk in a Community Sample of Dangerously Violent Adolescents” that appeared in a 2001 issue of the Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry suggests “there are differences between urban and suburban school shootings – some acts are related to threats to the perpetrator’s social identity.”

In “Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings” (author) states, “Suburban and rural shootings may be characterized by social alienation, whereas urban incidents may be associated with a general inner-city tolerance of violence. The issues of social marginalization and familial dysfunction are other common findings.”

Studies support the finding that shooters who expressed their threats online were frequently bullied and depressed. Their online threats presented a clear picture of what they were going to do. Verbal threats indicated problems with impulse control and delinquent behavior. The recent rampage of former Navy Lieutenant and LAPD officer Chris Dorner is a good recent example. The entire world watched on television and commented endlessly in Social Media forums during the entire episode as if they were somehow personally involved.

Copycat shootings are also an issue. Mental health treatment for depression, suicidal ideas and impulse control issues were present in a majority of copycat incidents. Nevertheless, according to studies, it appears that “the assertion that severe mental illness is to be blamed for mass shootings is a distraction. In reality, research shows that even if one assumes that the association between severe mental illness and recorded violent crime is entirely casual...the overall contribution of patients with severe mental illness is a mere 5%.”

In the quest for answers it appears that “other factors that contribute to mass shootings, particularly cultural and social ones, it is impossible to avoid the issues of narcissism and media responsibility. Narcissism is the classic American pathology, but there is concern that it may be proliferating ‘virally’ and gaining momentum.”

The study “The Narcissism Epidemic” reports “crimes due to narcissism or a wounded ego are directly relevant to mass shootings.” Studies show that social rejection and narcissism are factors working together to cause aggressive behaviors well documented in the histories of mass murder shooters.

Narcissism has been a growing trend in the United States since the early 90s. All one has to do is watch today’s television, listen to the music, look at social media or talk to people to know this is the country of me, myself and I.

For the disenfranchised, the depressed or the person looking for attention Knoll says, “It becomes difficult to deny that the media coverage given to mass shooting perpetrators has sent the message that committing a spectacular act of murder or killing is a great way to get attention.”

Today, with one horrible act a nobody can become somebody – fifteen minutes of fame – a legend – and the media will do all the work as Americans sit mesmerized in front of their televisions, social media and blogs.

So how do we as a society deal with mental health issues? We medicate. A compilation of mass shootings from throughout the world lists the medications that many of the shooters were utilizing including such household names as Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, Anafranil, Luvox, Cymbalta, Celexa, Wellbutrin, Lexapro and Effexor.

The side effects of these psychotropic medications can be significant. However, it is important to note that only 4 percent of those involved in gun violence have been formally diagnosed with a mental illness.

Moreover, it may be more myth than fact that medication “really warrants any sort of direct causal effect as it is similar to the faulty conclusion to avoid the hospital because more people die there than anywhere else. The type of ‘defective’ person who would perpetrate such a crime is going to be more likely to have been treated for mental illness,” according to Santa Barbara Psychiatrist Glenn Miller, MD.

The obvious question is what would occur if these patients were not medicated at all? Dr. Miller responds: “How many potential ‘mass killings’ may well have been thwarted because the potential perpetrator was effectively treated with medication and/or otherwise? That, of course, we will never know.”

I turned to the Santa Barbara County Public Health for information on identification and treatment of mental health patients. Assistant Deputy Director Susan Klein-Rothschild said that 4 million children suffer from severe mental health issues. Here are the facts:

- 1 in 10 children have mental health issues severe enough to impair how they function at school, home or with peers
- The onset of mental illness may occur as early as 7-11 years old
- Half of all cases which continue into adulthood, begin by the age of 14
- 20% of adolescents have at least one major depressive episode during adolescents
- 50-75% of anxiety disorders and impulse control disorders develop during adolescence
- In any given year, 20% of children with mental health needs are identified and receive treatment. Therefore 80% who need help do not receive it.
- Despite effective treatments, there are often long delays between the first onset of symptoms and when treatment is sought. Untreated mental illness can lead to more severe and significant issues.

The research is clear, she adds, pointing out the consequences of untreated mental illness including:

- Suicide (3rd leading cause of death in youth 15-24)
- School failure (50% of students age 14 and older who are living with mental illness drop out of school. Highest dropout rate of any disability group)
- Juvenile and criminal justice involvement (youth with untreated mental illness end up in jails and/or prisons. Per NAMI study, 65% of boys and 75% of girls in juvenile detention settings have at least one identified mental illness)

Ms. Rothschild stresses that, “early identification and treatment are essential. Research shows clearly that early identification and treatment work and can minimize the long term effects of mental illness and increase resiliency”

The more we as a society explore the why, the more we realize we don’t know. Communication and education is good place to start. Daniel Boorstin, historian, professor, attorney, writer and past librarian of the United States Congress once said, “Education is learning what you didn’t even know you didn’t know.” Clearly, we have a lot to learn.