

## Opinion: Bad Public Policy Contributes to the Death Count

By KRISTIN A. GOSS

When news broke Monday of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, the question many horrified Americans most wanted to answer was, "Who was the shooter?"

It's an urgent and understandable question, but one that rests on a dangerous assumption: that if we only knew more about the killer, then what he did would make sense -- and we would know what to do to prevent such a thing from happening again.

The assumption that we can make policy based on individual stories is dangerous because, for a variety of reasons, individual stories call our attention to factors that make those cases unique, not factors that tie them together. What ties these massacres together is guns.

In the immediate aftermath of the Virginia Tech killings, before the gunman was publicly named, speculation swirled about his identity and motives. He was rumored to be, alternately, a lone gunman with no known ties to the university; a jealous boyfriend seeking revenge on his girlfriend; a disgruntled former student seeking revenge against the university; or a Chinese national possibly bent on harming America.

Yesterday we learned that the gunman was a troubled 23-year-old South Korean national who was also a resident student at Virginia Tech. Important as that information may be to law-enforcement officers piecing together the crime, it's hard to see how those details help us frame meaningful policy to prevent further shootings. Understanding an assailant's motives or his place in the social order tells us very little about what to do next.

And yet we persist in analyzing these massacres in terms of the unique stories of the individual perpetrators: the South Korean immigrant loner at Virginia Tech; the psychologically haunted milk-truck driver at the Amish school last year; the white supremacist at the California day-care center in 1999; the alienated "Trenchcoat Mafia" at Columbine High School eight years ago.

Why do we understand these events as dark tales of deranged individuals? Part of the answer is that human beings need to make sense of senseless events, and narratives help us do so. The stories we construct tend to reassure us that such traumatic events won't happen to us -- that the event was an "isolated incident," perpetrated by a "lone nut" in circumstances that don't apply to our lives.

But there may be particular reasons why Americans, more than people from other nations, are especially likely to construct narratives that revolve around individuals as both villains and heroes.

For one, individualism is deeply ingrained in our political culture -- the set of assumptions drummed into us by the nation-building stories we learned as schoolchildren and by the Constitution, which enshrines individual rights and liberties as the foundation of our democracy. Our individualistic political culture is nowhere more apparent than in debates over firearms. After all, our founding myths -- musket-bearing citizen militias overthrowing a distant tyrant, rugged frontiersmen who made the nation great -- revolve around guns. So does the Second Amendment to the Constitution.

Our cultural predilection to understand public events in terms of individuals is reinforced by the news media, which are in the business of constructing and selling narratives. By focusing on an individual, whether as hero or villain, journalists can condense complex information into a format, the dramatic story, that busy readers or viewers can quickly grasp. Good stories are good business.

Yet recognizing the power of stories about heroes and villains does not mean that these stories are a solid

foundation for public policy.

The problem is nowhere more apparent than in the case of school shootings. In 2002 the U.S. Secret Service conducted a comprehensive analysis of all such shootings from 1974 through 2000 -- a total of 37 incidents, with 41 assailants. Among the report's most striking findings: "There is no 'profile' of a school shooter; instead, the students who carried out the attacks differed from one another in numerous ways." In other words, focusing on individual traits would have told us nothing about how to construct policies to prevent such shootings from happening in the future.

Indeed, portraying public problems in terms of individual stories may actually hinder effective policy responses. In a 1990 study, the political scientist Shanto Iyengar, of Stanford University, found that, when news-media stories about poverty spotlight poor individuals, viewers are far likelier to hold the poor person responsible for his plight than when the media spotlight structural forces, such as unemployment in the manufacturing sector. A logical implication of this study is that focusing on individual woes may curtail important debates about collective solutions to poverty.

If history is any guide, the nation is about to embark on a collective search for a narrative to explain what happened at Virginia Tech. And if history is any guide, those narratives will revolve around the private story of killer Cho Seung-Hui, his mental-health status, his parents, and his upbringing.

The privatization of our very public problem of gun violence was apparent after the Columbine massacre, in 1999. Shortly after that shooting spree, in which two high-school students killed a teacher and 12 classmates, the polling company Market Strategies asked a random sample of adults nationwide which of four possible measures would "be most effective in preventing future violent acts such as those at Columbine." Three of the four measures focused on policy change: more gun control, more censorship of gratuitous violence in the entertainment media, and increased discipline in school. The fourth measure focused on private action: increased parental involvement in the lives of children.

Consistent with Americans' predilection to understand policy questions in individualist terms, the private remedy -- parental engagement -- dwarfed the others combined. It was favored by nearly 6 in 10 respondents as the most effective preventive measure.

While no public policy can perfectly "solve" any public problem, policies do help. Speed limits haven't put an end to vehicle deaths but have reduced the carnage. Yet Americans' tendency to view traumatic events through an individualist lens may keep us from having a serious debate about systematic features of our culture and politics that at the very least enable individuals with firearms to cause so much misery.

The founding fathers themselves well understood that individuals have great capacity for evil. But rather than giving up on collective remedies, they believed that our capacity for evil was precisely why we needed government as a controlling force. As James Madison noted in "The Federalist No. 51," "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

As the framers demonstrated, recognizing individuals' capacity for wrongdoing and imposing systematic public-policy remedies are not incompatible. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin.

Likewise, public-policy remedies are not incompatible with private interventions. In the poll about the single most effective way to prevent future Columbines, nearly one-fifth of the respondents insisted that, in fact, a *combination* of private and public-policy approaches would be optimal. Both more parental involvement and stricter gun laws have a role to play.

Each time a mass shooting occurs, gun-rights advocates cite the carnage as an example of the failure of gun control as a general proposition. With the news that the Virginia Tech shooter apparently obtained his handguns legally, even despite Virginia's one-gun-a-month law, we can expect to hear a lot about the futility of gun laws.

Framing these events in terms of stories about the deranged shooter facilitates that argument and leaves the public feeling that all public policies are pointless -- that nothing can be done.

That is not true. No law perfectly solves the problem it is designed to confront. But many policy interventions, even modest ones, have quite significant positive effects -- effects that our tendency to view policy as individual narrative obscures. It is to those collective interventions, not to individual stories, that our national attention must now turn.

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