

The 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history and the perpetrators' family environments

Kenji Abe¹

Globalization & Social Pathology

Professor, Department of Law

Toin University of Yokohama, Yokohama, Japan

Abstract: Mass shootings are becoming a major challenge in American society. The question as to why they occur so frequently countrywide is often posed. This paper focuses on the 10 deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history and attempts to determine the nature of the perpetrators' childhood family environments. The neglect of children by their parents was found to be a common denominator.

Keywords: mass shootings, mass murder, cause, family environment, childhood background.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Linnane, from Texas to Sandy Hook, mass shootings were already a tragic and all too regular occurrence [1]. The number of victims of mass shootings is almost comparable to the number of war casualties (Figure 1) [1]. Most people are in agreement that mass shootings are an unspeakable terror, and they need to be stopped.

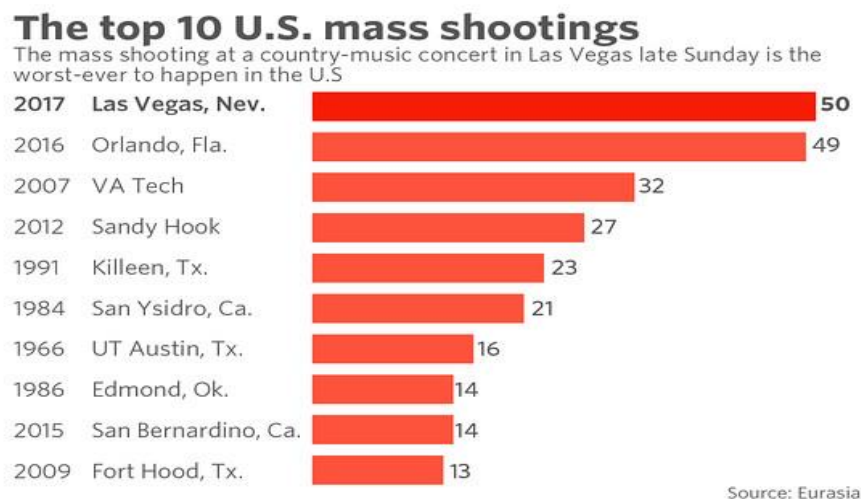


Fig 1: A graph depicting the top 10 deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history [1].

In 2020, Abe provided a revised version of *Nine Types of Childhood Background That Produced Mass Murderers* in his paper *Mass Shootings in the U.S.—Why Are they Happening so Often?* [2]. It provides suggestions as to how the American family environment can be improved. An evaluation of this publication was performed to determine the extent to which the identified nine types of childhood background were linked to the 10 deadliest mass shootings that have taken place in modern U.S. history.

II. NINE TYPES OF CHILDHOOD BACKGROUND THAT PRODUCED MASS MURDERERS

The nine types of childhood background shown to have produced mass murderers are now described [2].

Type 1: Neglect

The subject is left alone owing to parental indifference, parental pursuit of self-interest or death, or for financial reasons, which results in him or her being passed around or placed in an orphanage. Childhood neglect is a major cause of mass murders because it deprives the subject of an opportunity to learn communication skills and develop an ego, both essential to functioning within society.

Type 2: Neglect and discrimination (Family Scapegoat)

When the subject becomes the family “scapegoat” in a family environment that is characterized by neglect and intentional discrimination, this can result in anger. In the case of serial murderers, neglect and discrimination are accompanied by abuse.

Type 3: Lack of familial communications

The absence of normal family communications usually occurs when there is a cold relationship between the parents and the subject or because one or both the parents has an idiosyncratic personality.

Type 4: Inflexible parents with idiosyncratic personalities

Inflexible or rigid parents, who have a strong sense of duty or who are highly religious, fixate on their own direction and not that of their child. These subjects absorb their parents’ attitudes unconsciously. They often respect their parents’ attitudes, while feeling sad and lonely because they are not given adequate attention by them.

Type 5: No physical intimacy during infancy

A lack of maternal bonding owing to the absence of mother-infant skin-to-skin contact can result if the mother has a peculiar personality or mental issues. This can lead to the child developing a mechanical, machinelike personality. These children tend to develop a strong obsession for something specific in the absence of human love and communication. Serial killers are associated with the absence of mother-infant skin-to-skin contact, in conjunction with subsequent substantial abuse. Although mass murderers are affected by the absence of mother-infant skin-to-skin contact, they have not been associated with substantial abuse-related factors.

Type 6: Under highly demanding parents or an unstable family condition, leading to the suppression of true feelings

The children of parents with high expectations cannot express their true feelings. The parents’ high expectations (i.e., for the child to be successful) are often linked with a fear, by the child, that failure to achieve will result in a divorce. These children suppress their own ego and try their best to accept their parents’ values. This is dissimilar to the violent abuse experienced by serial killers, which causes anger by antipathy and frustrations. Likewise, in the case of fragile families, the child also suppresses his or her own ego and assumes the role of the ideal child voluntarily in an attempt to ameliorate, and not deteriorate, an already critical situation.

Type 7: An overprotective mother

Overprotection removes the ability of the child to develop an ego and the social skills needed to become independent.

Type 8: *Parenting that invokes anxiety or self-blame and leads to drug-induced psychosis*

Children raised in homes characterized by unstable family conditions or with excessively demanding parents may become fixated on delusional ideas, partly to reinforce their weak selves, while under the influence of hallucinatory drugs. Serial killers who used hallucinatory drugs were demonstrated to have been excessively dominated by both parents, which led to feelings of anger toward outside world. On the other hand, in case of mass murderers who used drugs under high demands and expectations by their parents or the fear of the family separation, anger is directed toward self-destruction involving others, due to self-blame or self-denial. In case their murder act can be justified to have met such parental expectations, they may not head toward self-destruction.

Type 9: *Secondary psychopath highly intoxicated*

Children who grow up and engage in repeated antisocial acts and petty crimes due to their childhood environments may commit mass murder while under a state of high intoxication with alcohol (and sometimes prescription or not highly hallucinatory drugs). Although they usually feel guilt while/after committing each of such acts and crimes, the mixture of daily stresses and the high intoxication push them across the line of committing mass murders when they encounter an alluring situation. Once the effects of the intoxication have worn off, some revert to their antisocial personality. However, others do not come back from an irrational, drug-induced psychological state.

III. THE 10 DEADLIEST MASS SHOOTINGS IN MODERN U.S. HISTORY

This information was originally adapted from Linanne [1]. Brief information about the perpetrators' childhood backgrounds was added later and correlated with the nine types of childhood environment outlined previously.

1. Las Vegas: October 1, 2017

Victims: 58 killed and 515 wounded.

Shooter: 64-year-old Stephen Paddock.

Motive: Unknown.

Childhood family environment: Stephen Paddock's father burgled banks and was on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "most wanted" list. This had a significant impact on the development of his negative identity. His father was also often not present at home. The family was effectively a single-parent unit (headed by his mother), which meant that he had to assume a fatherly role toward his younger sisters. Thus, he was unable to express his frustration [3]. (This correlates with **Type 6:** *Highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings*).

2. Orlando: June 12, 2016

Victims: 49 people killed and 58 wounded.

Shooter: 29-year-old Omar Mateen.

Motive: Terror, hate crime.

Childhood family environment: Omar's father, Mir Seddique (Seddique Mateen), had ambitions to be the president of Afghanistan and was also highly authoritative. With such a dominating father with high pressures, Omar was volatile and often lost his self-control at school. The situation was exacerbated because he was a homosexual (which was a known fact to those very close to him) and could not live up to his father's expectations; the latter abominated homosexuality. Omar could not be his true self and meet his father's demands [4]. (This correlates with **Type 6:** *Highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings*).

3. Blacksburg: April 16, 2007

Victims: 33 killed (including the shooter) and 17 wounded on the campus of Virginia Tech.

Shooter: 23-year-old Seung-Hui Cho.

Motive: Mental health issues.

Childhood family environment: There was no normal communication at home owing to Seung-Hui's father's idiosyncratic reticent personality. His mother was also quiet. She did not say a word, even when dropping him at school. Both parents worked long hours at their cleaning business seven days a week. His immigration from South Korea at seven years of age also worked against the development of friendships and the acquisition of communication skills at school [5], [6]. Seung-Hui was diagnosed with selective mutism. (This correlates with **Type 3: Lack of familial communications**).

4. Newtown: December 14, 2012

Victims: 28 killed, including the shooter and his mother, along with 20 children aged six and seven, and 2 wounded at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Shooter: 20-year-old Adam Lanza.

Motive: Mental health issues.

Childhood family environment: Adam's mother volunteered at Sandy Hook Elementary School when Adam was six years old until he was 10 years old. He hated his mother because he thought that she preferred her students to him. Adam also hated being touched, was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and had Asperger's syndrome. He allegedly could not touch door knobs and changed his socks 20 times a day. His mother was also insecure, had a fascination with weapons and often took him to a shooting range. Adam's extremely pathological symptoms, along with his mother's peculiar character, suggest the possibility that there was a lack of mother-infant skin-to-skin contact and maternal bonding. She was the first person to be killed by her son [7], [8], [9]. (This correlates with **Type 5: Lack of maternal bonding owing to the absence of mother-infant skin-to-skin contact**).

5. Sutherland Springs: November 5, 2017

Victims: 26 killed, 20 injured in a massacre at the First Baptist Church in a small southern Texas town.

Shooter: 26-year-old Devin Patrick Kelley

Motive: Unknown.

Childhood family environment: Devin carried deep anger and engaged in frequent domestic violence and hideous animal abuse. He also was highly obsessive and stalked his wife before their marriage. His unusual aggression suggests that he may have felt abandoned while growing up. He felt extreme hostility toward his mother-in-law, possibly because he was afraid that she would try to get her daughter to divorce him. Although his target, his mother-in-law, was not in church (which she attended frequently in general) when the incident took place, her mother and a good friend were killed. Devin clearly stated that the shooting did not have anything to do with race or religion [10], [11]. (This correlates with **Type 2: Neglect and discrimination**).

B. 6. Killeen: October 16, 1991

Victims: 24 killed (including the shooter) and 27 wounded in a massacre at a Luby's Cafeteria.

Shooter: 35-year-old George Hennard.

Motive: Hatred of women and ethnic minorities.

Childhood family environment: George's father was an authoritarian orthopedic surgeon who worked in army hospitals. The family moved around during his childhood. The parents did not care about their son. George could not express his true self with such an authoritative father. He became quiet and antisocial after a massive argument with his father. He seems to have targeted women after his failure to befriend them [12], [13]. (This correlates with **Type 6: Highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings**).

7. San Ysidro: July 19, 1984

Victims: 22 killed (including the shooter) and 19 wounded.

Shooter: 41-year-old James Huberty

Motive: Mental health issues.

Childhood family environment: James contracted polio at the age of three years. It is likely that he missed out on mother-infant skin-to-skin contact and bonding as his mother was devout and later abandoned the family to perform sidewalk preaching. This had a profoundly negative impact on young James, who later became sullen and withdrawn. He felt abandoned by his mother in favor of her own religious interests [14]. (This correlates with **Type 1: Neglect**).

B. 8. Austin: August 1, 1996

Victims: 18 killed (including the shooter) and 31 wounded in what became known as the University of Texas tower shooting.

Shooter: 25-year-old Charles Whitman.

Motive: Mental health issues. Notably, a brain tumor was also identified after his death.

Childhood family environment: Charles' father, a self-made man who was brought up in an orphanage, was highly demanding, which meant that Charles could not express his true self. After a major fight with his father, he chose to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps without his father's sanction [15], [16]. (This correlates with **Type 6: Highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings**).

9. Edmond: August 20, 1986

Victims: 15 killed (including the shooter) and 6 wounded.

Shooter: 44-year-old postal worker, Patrick Sherill.

Motive: Revenge after a workplace supervisory reprimand. This incident inspired the phrase "going postal."

Childhood family environment: Though his family denied it, Patrick's father allegedly had a mental illness. Patrick was known to peep through windows and chase neighbors in a rage. He seems to have had a lonely childhood, which could be attributed to his parents' problems. He had difficulty coping with daily challenges and "went postal" after the accumulation of considerable stress as a result numerous complaints encountered during his job at the post office [17], [18]. (This correlates with **Type 1: Neglect**).

B. 10. San Bernardino: December 2, 2015

Victims: 16 killed (including the two shooters) and 24 wounded.

Shooters: 28-year-old Syed Rizwan Farook and 29-year-old Tashfeen Malik, his wife.

Motive: To commit an act of terror after the shooters were radicalized online and had committed to jihadism.

Childhood family environment: Farook was a U.S. citizen, born in Chicago. His parents had both emigrated from Pakistan. Malik was a native Pakistani and obtained permanent U.S. residency after their marriage. Farook was raised in a home with an authoritative first-generation father, who was abusive to both Farook and his mother. Thus, Farook could not express himself at home. At the same time, he felt prejudiced for being a Muslim and could not acculturate into American life. Unable to find a niche, both at home and in U.S. society, he came to sympathize with *ISIS*, an ideology that Malik also shared. They chose their native identity as being *Muslim* over their new identity of being *American* and committed *jihad* against the U.S. Their crimes continue to haunt people in their native land. They left behind a six-month-old daughter [19], [20]. (This correlates with **Type 6**: *Highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings*).

IV. CONCLUSION

Although it is impossible to precisely determine the most influential association between childhood family environment factors and mass shootings, the findings of this research demonstrated that the factors most likely to have an impact, in descending order of significance, were highly demanding parents in an unstable family, leading to the suppression of true feelings (**Type 6**) (5 of the 10 mass shootings); neglect (**Type 1**) (2 of the 10 mass shootings); and neglect and discrimination, lack of familial communications, and lack of maternal bonding (**Types 2**, **Type 3**, and **Type 5**) (1 each [3 in total] of the 10 mass shootings).

Being unable to express their true feelings as a result of having parents with high expectations of their children was most significantly associated with mass shooting cases and large casualties. Although the reasons for performing these mass shootings are not clearly evident, frustration, which was common to all, was linked to an explosion of anger by the shooters. That said, even though inferences sometimes have to be made, based on available situational information, it is feasible to say that various types of neglect were closely linked to these deadly shootings. It is hoped that these findings will be of some help in alleviating the continuation of pathological mass shootings in the U.S. Further research, with a larger number of cases, is warranted to confirm this.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Linnane, "These are the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history," Available from: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/these-are-the-10-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-us-history> [6 Nov. 2017].
- [2] K. Abe. Mass Shootings in the U.S.—Why Are they Happening so Often? *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 8(2), 70-79. [2020].
- [3] J. Hurtado and K. Jacob, "Stephen Paddock's brother speaks out about family life," Available from: https://www.fox5vegas.com/news/stephen-paddock-s-brother-speaks-out-about-family-life-october/article_ae3d255a-0092-58e9-8e99-fce516a6d512.html [28 March 2018].
- [4] Heavy.com, "Mir Seddique, Omar Mateen's father: 5 fast facts you need to know." Available from: <https://heavy.com/news/2016/06/mir-seddique-omar-mateen-father-son-afghanistan-orlando-mass-shooting-family-reaction/> [30 March 2017].
- [5] Sharon, "Cho Seung Hui background...No one saw it coming." *Baby Boomer Advisor Club*. Available from: <https://babyboomeradvisorclub.wordpress.com/2007/05/12/cho-seung-hui-backgroundno-one-saw-it-coming/> [12 May 2007].
- [6] YouTube, "The worst massacre in American history—Virginia Tech massacre—Mass murder full documentary," Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE8IzG03Iqc> [3 Dec. 2014].
- [7] C. Kuruvilla and V. Chinese, "Families of Newtown victims say Adam Lanza's mom shares blame for raising a murderer." *Daily News*. Available from: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/newtown-families-blame-adam-lanza-mom-raising-murderer-article-1.1531903> [29 Nov. 2013].
- [8] J. Kovener and D. Altmari, "Courant exclusive: More than 1,000 pages of documents reveal Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza's dark descent into depravity." *Hartford Courant*. Available from: <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-sandy-hook-lanza-new-documents-20181204-story.html> [9 Dec. 2018].

- [9] L. Boyle, "Adam Lanza hated his mother he shot dead because he thought 'she loved the students at Sandy Hook more than him.'" *Mail Online*. Available from: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2530371/Adam-Lanza-shot-dead-teacher-volunteer-mother-thought-loved-students-Sandy-Hook-him.html> [28 Dec. 2013].
- [10] T. Stelloh, C. Fichtel, and T. Connor, "Who Is Devin Kelley, the Texas church shooter?" *NBC News*. Available from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/texas-church-shooting/who-devin-kelley-alleged-texas-church-shooter-n817806> [6 Nov. 2017].
- [11] S. Foster-Frau, "Exclusive: Guilt and grief overwhelm the mother-in-law of the Sutherland Springs gunman." *San Antonio Express News*. Available from : <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Exclusive-Guilt-and-grief-overwhelm-the-12556616.php> [6 Feb. 2018].
- [12] AmokWiki, "George Hennard," Available from: https://amok.fandom.com/wiki/George_Hennard
- [13] T. Madigan, J. Gonzalez, and K. Potter, "Killer was like a raging volcano ready to explode." *New York Times News Service*. Available from: https://www.greensboro.com/killer-was-like-a-raging-volcano-ready-to-explode/article_cb9eace9-328a-5a7c-9bdd-a6f5b1edc59a.html [27 Oct. 1991].
- [14] B. Cardoso, "Mass murderer: 'always very sad and very lonely'." *UPI Archives*. Available from: <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/07/22/Mass-murderer-always-very-sad-and-very-lonely/4891459316800/> [22 July 1984].
- [15] Time-Life Books *Mass Murderers* (True Crime). Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books. [1993].
- [16] M. Macleod, "Charles Whitman: The Texas tower sniper." *Crime Library*. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20120701063429/http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/notorious_murders/mass/whitman/charlie_2.html [1 July 2012].
- [17] N. Clay, "Sherrill feared mental illness, rejected." *The Oklahoman*. Available from: <https://oklahoman.com/article/2177416/sherrill-feared-mental-illness-rejected> [28 Feb. 1987].
- [18] J. V. Lamar Jr, "'Crazy Pat's' revenge." *TIME*. Available from: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,144859,00.html> 24 Jun. 2001].
- [19] S. Ahmed, "Who were Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik?" *CNN*. Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/03/us/syed-farook-tashfeen-malik-mass-shooting-profile/index.html> [5 Dec. 2015].
- [20] L. McShane, "San Bernardino shooter Syed Farook grew up in abusive home and witnessed father attack mother: court records." *New York Daily News*. Available from: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/syed-farook-allah-fearing-man-snowboarding-article-1.2453836> [3 Dec. 2015].