



Behind the Tragedy: Unveiling the Mental Health Profiles of School Shooters and the Legal Consequences

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After several tragic school shootings, society's collective conscience has been shaken as it considers why such catastrophes occur so frequently. One question hangs big in the haunting aftermath of school shootings that have sent shockwaves across our society: *What drives individuals to execute such horrible acts?* According to a study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, around one in every three school shooters displayed indicators of mental health concerns before the attack (Livingston 798). The troubling reality is that each school shooter has a complex history of emotional strife and mental pain, frequently tainted by ignored warning signs. While investigating the complex relationship between mental health and school shooters, it becomes clear that the legal side is just as crucial in comprehending these horrific incidents' broader consequences. This paper dives into the perplexing world of school shooters, shedding light on their mental health issues while discussing the essential role of the justice system in coping with the fallout from these horrible acts. The paper sheds light on the urgent need for comprehensive approaches that include early intervention, mental health support, and responsible gun control measures to prevent future tragedies and protect the well-being of our educational institutions by unraveling this web of psychological distress and legal complexities.

In recent years, one of the most common crimes in the USA has become school shootings, forcing society to look at this devastating reality that needs more attention. Since 2009, there have been 288 school shootings in the USA, compared to 5 in Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, and the UK. Questions concerning the causes of such heinous acts arise as these terrible incidents continue, harming and endangering kids of all ages. The links between mental health concerns and the shooters responsible for these tragic tragedies are some of the topics that are frequently brought up in these debates. Some shooters commit suicide due to these incidents, while others are apprehended and convicted for their crimes. Following these mass shootings, the public learns about the shooters' mental health situation; however, it is only occasionally wholly taken into account during their court proceedings. This paper examines four mass school shootings that occurred at Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Parkland, and STEM School Highlands Ranch. Two of the shootings had perpetrators who committed suicide afterward, while the other two shooters went through trial for their crimes. Society can gain valuable insights into the unknown background of the shooters and their trial and understand the role mental health plays in school violence and its extent in criminal proceedings.

Sandy Hook Shooting

On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza, age 20, entered Sandy Hook Elementary School for five minutes and killed twenty students aged 6 to 7 and six teachers aged 27 to 56. A look into Adam's life showed a long history of struggles. When Adam was in fifth grade, he had written the book, "The Big Book of Granny" which his teachers said was "extremely violent for a kid his age" (Katersky and Kim 1). Many teachers described Adam as someone with "very distinct anti-social issues" (Katersky and Kim 1). In school, he wrote papers obsessing over battles and destruction, and they were so graphic that the teacher stated they could not be

shared with other classmates. Though his parents did not accept it, Adam had extreme Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which is a “mental health condition characterized by the presence of recurrent, intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors or mental acts (compulsions) aimed at reducing distress or preventing perceived harm” (National Institute of Mental Health 1).

Adam Lanza's family's history significantly influenced his upbringing. Peter and Nancy Lanza, his parents, divorced in 2009 following a marital struggle. This disruption to the family highly impacted Adam's emotional stability and well-being. Another factor contributing to Adam's social withdrawal and difficulty forming relationships with peers, in the eyes of many teachers, was his parents' divorce. The availability of firearms was a crucial factor in the Sandy Hook tragedy. Nancy Lanza, the mother of Adam Lanza, was a gun aficionado and a licensed gun owner. Adam reportedly had access to weapons in the home of the family. Hours before the shooting, Adam killed his mother, and after the school shooting, he committed suicide with the same gun. Additionally, Adam and his best friend had a falling out a few months before the shooting. Before this, Adam and his best friend would get together to play video games. They also talked for hours about human nature, mental health, Adam's complicated relationship with his mother, and their shared interest in mass killings.

Analyzing Adam Lanza's tragic past reveals the intricacies of the human experience and the significant influence early hardships can have on a person's course in life., Lanza's upbringing, characterized by emotional issues, social hurdles, and a disjointed family structure, significantly impacted how he eventually behaved. Because of his struggles and issues, Adam often “... had episodes ... where he would completely withdraw,” states one of Adam's high school teachers (Breslow 1). While understanding his background does not excuse or justify the heinous act he committed, it does provide valuable insights into the importance of early intervention and support for individuals facing similar circumstances.

Virginia Tech Shooting

Now, let us examine a different incident, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. A 23-year-old student named Seung-Hui Cho committed one of the bloodiest mass shootings in American history. Thirty-two innocent lives were cut short due to the catastrophe, while 17 others were injured. Cho, born on January 18, 1984, in South Korea, emigrated to the US when he was eight. His parents tried to provide their children a better life but had trouble adjusting to a foreign language and culture. Seung-Hui Cho was considered a reserved, introverted person with trouble interacting with others. Cho had a documented history of mental health issues. Throughout his schooling, he encountered communication barriers and experienced bullying and ostracization from his classmates. He was diagnosed with Selective Mutism as a child, a condition “where a person is unable to speak in certain situations (NHS 1).” Given his introversion and difficulties in social situations, Cho's decision to enroll in Virginia Tech as a business student in 2005 puzzled some people. Unfortunately, the atmosphere at the institution appeared to make him feel even more lonely. The enormous campus size and the intense academic competition further worsened his feelings of inadequacy and gloom.

Many red flags surfaced while Cho was a student at Virginia Tech that should have prompted worries about his mental health. He produced scary and violent plays and writings for his English classes that horrified his professors and peers. Along with these unsettling writings, he also displayed unpredictable behavior, according to his roommates, and spent most of his time alone, immersed in violent video games. Moreover, when he did communicate with others,

it was in unpleasant ways as he "...began bothering girls, he frightened a friend by writing lines from "Romeo and Juliet," on her door board, in which Romeo says: "My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself..." (Ruane 1). Although they knew of his problems, university officials could not force him to receive psychiatric testing or treatment. On April 16, 2007, Cho came onto the Virginia Tech campus carrying two firearms. A few hours after killing two people in a hostel, he went inside Norris Hall, a classroom building. He continued on a shooting spree inside Norris Hall, murdering 30 more people and injuring many more before committing suicide.

The Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech shootings were two of the deadliest mass shootings in US history. Each shooting was carried out by troubled individuals but with distinct characteristics. Both men were described as introverts with a history of mental health issues and social isolation. They both had an obsession with violence and an addiction to disturbing video games. Evidence shows that "73% of youth from age two and up play video games, and 85% of games contain some form of violence" (Nelson 1). While it is not scientifically proven, Lanza and Cho's background shows that video games may contribute to violent behavior. Either way, video games were not the sole reason for what caused the school shootings, as there were many other confounding variables.

Regarding motives, Cho expressed many personal grievances towards Virginia Tech, the school he was attending. While it is unclear why Lanza targeted young children, a symbol of innocence and vulnerability, perhaps it was easier for him to release his anger at a vulnerable and defenseless group of victims. Despite their different motivations, one constant aspect for both perpetrators was their mental health challenges and trauma that could have caused them to harbor delusions and distorted perceptions. Following the shooting, both Cho and Lanza committed suicide, perhaps because of their distorted thinking or to avoid consequences. Cho and Lanza come from different backgrounds; however, their loneliness, grievances, and devastating impact are similar. The Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech shootings shocked the nation and led to a powerful national movement for gun control reform and mental health advocacy.

Parkland School Shooting

The horrific Parkland school shooting occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018. Nikolas Cruz, the offender, committed a terrible act that resulted in the deaths of 17 innocent children and staff members and the emotional and physical scarring of several others. Nikolas Cruz, born on September 24, 1998, in Margate, Florida, had a turbulent upbringing characterized by instability and loss. After going through the trauma of losing his birth parents, the passing of his adopted parents made his mental wounds more severe. Reports suggest that "he grappled with intense feelings of anger, isolation, and depression" (McCall 1).

Cruz's past placements in foster care, which may have further damaged his sense of security and belonging, made his problems even more difficult. Nikolas Cruz withdrew from social connections during his adolescence and depended more on the Internet to express his emotions. His online behavior was characterized by "unsettling material, such as threats, self-harm imagery, and violent fantasies" (McCall 1). Some examples included images of weapons, guns, and knives, threats towards peers, disturbing images of animal cruelty, and messages of self-harm. Those who came across his posts were alarmed by this virtual representation of his inner problems, but regrettably, these worries did not result in appropriate help. Cruz posted a comment six months before the shooting stating, "I'm going to be a professional school shooter" (McCall 1). The 19-year-old former student of Marjory Stoneman

Douglas High School entered the school's grounds that day with an AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle, which he bought from an authorized gun dealer.

Despite his complicated past and troubling behavior, he passed the background investigation necessary for obtaining firearms. Cruz was able to wreak enormous destruction during the roughly six-minute attack. He was then captured thanks to first responders and law enforcement authorities' quick actions, halting more casualties. A potent response to the Parkland school tragedy was the emergence of the "March for Our Lives" movement. Students from Parkland, Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School served as the movement's leaders. Their objectives were to increase public awareness of gun violence, promote stricter gun control laws, and call for safer neighborhoods and schools.

The aftermath of the Parkland school shooting caused the nation to turn away from the tragedy's immediate anguish and onto the quest for justice and responsibility. The trial of Nikolas Cruz lasted several weeks; the prosecution sought to prove Cruz's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, while the defense focused on portraying Nikolas as a troubled young man with severe mental health difficulties. Before the trial had started, the defense had offered prosecutors "for Cruz to plead guilty and be sentenced to 34 consecutive life sentences" (Death Penalty Information Center 1). However, the prosecution rejected the offer and wanted Cruz to get the death penalty. During the trial, the defense presented evidence that Nikolas was born with a neurodevelopmental disorder, which is a "condition that affects how your brain functions" (Dignity Health 1). This was due to his biological mother drinking alcohol throughout her pregnancy, and his adoptive parents were dismissive of Nikolas's behavioral problems. The defense closed their argument by stating, "...in a civilized humane society, do we kill brain damaged, mentally ill, broken people?...I hope not" (Death Penalty Information Center 1).

To defend Nikolas, expert witnesses testified about Cruz's psychological illnesses in court, highlighting his severe emotional and cognitive difficulties. Instead of unequivocal condemnation, the defense painted him as a distraught individual needing psychiatric help and rehabilitation. The lead prosecutor's main argument was that Nikolas Cruz was a sociopath who carried out "a systematic massacre" in which he "hunt[ed] his victims" (Death Penalty Information Center 1). The prosecution used surveillance footage, witness confessions, and Cruz's confession to make a convincing case. Many victims took the stand, including teacher Stacey Lippel, who told Cruz, "You don't know me, but you tried to kill me" (Andone 1). After a lengthy trial, the jury gave Cruz a life sentence without the possibility of parole. The trial of Nikolas Cruz is not a straightforward situation of good versus evil; instead, it is a situation made from various elements. His circumstance also highlights the connections between societal problems, personal history, and mental health.

STEM School Highlands Ranch Shooting

A horrific act of violence occurred on May 7, 2019, at the STEM School Highlands Ranch in a suburban neighborhood of Colorado. One student lost their life, and eight others were injured when Devon Erickson and Alec McKinney, two classmates, went on a shooting rampage inside the school. Devon Erickson was born in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, on December 13, 2000. His formative years were a patchwork of events that helped shape the man he would eventually become. Devon's father was worried about his mother, who was receiving therapy in Arizona. Devon also consumed copious amounts of cough medicine and other substances. He was not getting adequate sleep, and his weight dropped to 90 pounds. An interview with a STEM school student revealed that Erickson frequently made jokes about school shootings and

even went so far as to inform those around him, "Don't come to school" (Cramer 1). Additionally, it is important to note that Erickson's username on Snapchat, a social media platform, was "devonkillz" (Cramer 1).

Alec McKinney was a sexually abused, bullied, and neglected individual/teenager. Alec McKinney, formerly known as Maya, is a transgender individual who identifies as male. Beyond his sexual orientation, Jose Quintana, McKinney's father, was a coyote who led undocumented immigrants from Mexico, a drug mule, and often abused McKinney's mother. On the day of the incident, Alec secretly removed his parents' guns from their possession. On June 20, 2019, a statement summarizing the two suspects' police interrogations was made public. In the statement, McKinney claimed that the attack had been planned for weeks, and Erickson said that he had learned of the incident the previous evening via Snapchat. According to Erickson, McKinney threatened him, and he obeyed McKinney's instructions out of fear for his life. McKinney claimed he intended to specifically target two classmates who had called him "disgusting" and tormented and made fun of him because of his gender identity. McKinney said, "he wanted the kids at the school to experience bad things, have to suffer from the trauma like he has had to in his life" (Sherry 1). Additionally, McKinney claimed he had homicidal and suicidal impulses and heard voices since he was 12. He refused to accept medication so that he "wouldn't feel alone" (Sherry 1).

Both individuals claimed to have consumed cocaine before the occurrence of the shooting. Alec McKinney, 16, and Devon Erickson, 18, entered the school with handguns and other weapons concealed in guitar cases at 1:53 p.m. on the day of the massacre. They started firing in two different places, hitting several students. The Douglas County Sheriff's Office tweeted a warning to avoid the area after the school declared a lockdown and described the situation as "unstable." Two minutes after the initial 911 call, police arrived at the school, and a bomb-disposal robot was rushed there when tactical equipment was discovered inside one of the suspects' vehicles.

The shooting at the STEM School in Highlands Ranch was a horrific incident that shocked the neighborhood and the country. The trial that followed aimed to provide resolution, justice, and a better understanding of the circumstances behind this tragedy. Devon and Alec each faced 48 criminal counts during their initial court appearance. McKinney faced adult-level charges, "though his lawyers tried to move his case to the juvenile court, the judge denied the motion" (Sherry 1). McKinney pleaded guilty to 17 charges in a plea bargain with the prosecution. On the first-degree murder charge, he faced a minimum sentence of 40 years to life in prison. However, he could be eligible for release earlier if he enters a rehabilitation program and earns time off for good behavior. He had intended to commit suicide after the shooting, which was likely one of the critical factors in his decision to take the plea deal (Sherry 1). However, "his plan was thwarted when he realized he did not know how to release the safety mechanism on his handgun" (Sherry 1). Erickson, on the other hand, pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder and other charges. He asserted that he was an accomplice compelled to carry out the shooting. One of his defense attorneys said that he was a "confused kid" and "....not a monster" (Schmelzer 1).

In his testimony as a witness for the prosecution, McKinney said that he and Erickson had been preparing for the shooting for several weeks and that films of McKinney yelling at Erickson were faked so that Erickson could claim he had been coerced into the shooting. Throughout his entire trial, Erickson did not testify, nor did any of his family members. By the end of the trial, Devon Erickson was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole

plus 1,282 years. The legal procedure attempted to bring justice and reveal the complex complexities of the case, but it also sparked crucial discussions about gun regulation, mental health care, and the need for proactive prevention measures.

The trials of Nikolas Cruz and Devon Erickson are two notable incidents involving school shootings that have significantly affected American society. The proceedings involving these two individuals shed light on the issues surrounding criminal justice, gun control, and mental health. Both shootings served as evidence that Devon and Nicolas's untreated mental illnesses were the cause of their behavior. It is unfair to argue that these offenders should not have received punishment due to mental health issues. However, despite a judge's order that Nikolas Cruz and Devon Erickson obtain mental health treatment, "no one knows if they actually receive psychiatric help while in jail or prison" (Byron 1). The lack of finance, personnel, and treatment options could be some of the key reasons why they did not receive treatment. The establishment of dedicated mental health units within correctional facilities may be a solution to this issue. Despite several warning indications, these offenders did not receive assistance before their crimes; however, this paper argues that they should now receive mental health assistance. Another method to increase financial support for mental health courts is to "provide a more holistic and compassionate approach to addressing the criminal justice involvement of individuals with mental health issues" (Bureau of Justice Assistance 1). These courts have the option to prioritize rehabilitation over punishment.

Conclusion

More significantly, determining nature vs. nurture is crucial when the jury deliberates in a criminal court. This distinction can influence the development of successful preventative and intervention programs and the legal reaction. Society can adapt its approach to crime prevention and rehabilitation and address core causes by identifying the relative importance of traumatic events, social factors, upbringing (nurture) vs. genetics, neurological disorders, and brain chemistry (nature). This knowledge can "guide policies that promote early intervention, mental health support, educational initiatives, and targeted interventions, fostering a more informed and compassionate approach to justice" (Hegger 1) that considers the broader context in which criminal behavior develops. Severe punishment is necessary if the crime was committed because of who they are. However, in each of these instances, the shooting was partly caused by the criminals' childhood experiences, as shown by evidence from their upbringing, backgrounds, social media, and the fact that most of them attempted or committed suicide following the shooting.

The histories of these five school shooters are explained not to justify their actions but to show the intricate interplay of many causes that led to them. Even while every instance is different, patterns frequently appear. These histories may include experiences of social exclusion, bullying, dysfunctional families, exposure to violence, untreated mental health conditions, and a lack of appropriate support or intervention. By understanding these backgrounds, society can work to implement strategies that prevent the escalation of feelings of alienation and despair, ultimately striving to prevent such tragic events from occurring in the first place.

The legal system can also be highly beneficial in addressing criminal conduct and the underlying mental health condition when people commit crimes due to mental health concerns. First, the judicial system can assure a fair and reasonable outcome by considering the offender's mental state during the crime. This can entail performing in-depth psychological

assessments to ascertain whether the person is mentally fit and conscious of their acts. The death penalty is controversial; it is an absolute and irrevocable punishment for the most severe and deliberate offenses. However, in situations where mental health was a significant factor, the person's capacity to fully understand the effects of their actions may have been impaired. Recognizing the underlying mental health issue as a mitigating circumstance that considerably lowers the person's level of responsibility is crucial. The US legal system can promote mental health-focused solutions that put treatment and rehabilitation ahead of sanctions and the immediate legal reaction.

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