

One week in America: workplace shootings, murder-suicides, killing spree plot

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11 July 2003

Even by American standards, the past week has witnessed an uncommonly large number of violent incidents—including two workplace shootings, murder-suicides and multiple homicides. Three teenagers were also arrested for allegedly plotting a killing rampage.

Between July 1 and July 8, 20 individuals were killed in these incidents and another 14 wounded. Many more domestic tragedies, street shootings and other “everyday” acts of violence have undoubtedly claimed the lives of others, but have not received national news coverage.

It is impossible to delve exhaustively into the psyches of those who carried out or planned these killings, although their lives exhibit certain common features: loneliness, desperation, the desire for revenge against real or imagined enemies. In one case, racial hatred or bigotry appears to have been added to the mix. All the individuals clearly had reached the point at which violent, anti-social acts appeared to be the only way out of their respective dilemmas.

If one such incident takes place, or two, or even three, it might be possible to dismiss those as isolated events. When a society, however, confronts an epidemic of school and workplace violence, as well as apparently random killing sprees, some deeper dysfunction must be at work. The relationship between the overall state of a society and the mental health of its individual citizens is extremely complex. A social order does not “drive people crazy” as such. If one were to examine the lives of the perpetrators of last week’s mayhem, each would no doubt reveal specific traumas and pressures, as well as “triggering” episodes. Each incident could be explained on its own terms.

And yet the existence of a pattern containing common socio-psychological features—seething anger, pent-up resentment and bitterness, unrelieved tension, none of which can find redress or even articulation within any existing institutions—points inescapably toward a more general explanation. What is it about American life today that makes it so conducive (more conducive than any other) to these tragic explosions?

The roots of the pervasive violence are not difficult to discover. A climate of killing permeates American society and is promoted at the highest levels of government. In regard to the latter, the Bush administration has pioneered the criminal policy of “preemptive war,” launching invasions against Afghanistan and Iraq in the space of a year and a half. It is presently engaged in the colonial-style occupation of the Iraqi people, and has plans for further military aggression worldwide.

The occupant of the White House is a sadist with a penchant for killing. As governor of Texas, George W. Bush oversaw the executions of more than 150 death row inmates, and as president he has reveled in the US military violence launched in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. Members of Congress and even sections of the military brass were taken aback by his call to “Bring ‘em on”—taunting Iraqis fighting back against US troops occupying their country to attack the soldiers.

Social tensions in the United States are in turn fueled by a developing economic crisis, with unemployment levels rising to new highs, reaching 6.4 percent in June. American working people are struggling to hold their

lives together under conditions in which no jobs are secure, education, health care, and essential social services are in an advanced state of disintegration, and the chasm separating the majority from the ruling financial elite widens every day.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress have pushed through multibillion-dollar tax cuts for the rich, while providing no relief to working class families suffering under the weight of rising medical bills, increasing consumer debt, layoffs and expired jobless benefits.

A survey of the most violent of last week’s events gives an indication of the devastating social effects of this explosive mix. Anger and discontent are not only simmering beneath the surface of American society but also breaking through in tragic dimensions with these violent incidents.

July 1—The WWS recently reported the workplace shooting at Modine Manufacturing Co. in Jefferson City, Mo. [“Four dead, five wounded after Missouri factory shooting”]. According to witnesses, 25-year-old worker Jonathon Russell walked to his workstation on the soldering line and opened fire with a semiautomatic pistol, killing three co-workers and wounding another five before fatally shooting himself later at city police headquarters.

Co-workers and acquaintances invariably described Russell as “quiet.” Local police speculated that his attack was provoked by disciplinary action he faced at work. He was reportedly estranged from his wife, and lived with his mother and brother in a trailer park in nearby Holts Summit. One police official described him as “a quiet man beset by personal woes.” Russell may have been a problem gambler, and one of the highlights of his bleak life appeared to be his weekly trip to the Isle of Capri casino in Boonville, Mo.

July 4—Before thousands at the Taste of Minnesota festival on the Fourth of July in the Twin Cities, Naomi Gaines kissed her 14-month-old twin sons, threw them off the Wabasha Street Bridge in St. Paul, and then jumped herself into the Mississippi River, a 75-foot drop, yelling “Freedom!” all the way down. Onlookers pulled her and one of her sons to safety, but her other son’s dead body was found two days later 11-12 miles downstream.

Gaines’s twins were named in the tradition of the Five Percenters, a sect that split from the Nation of Islam. According to her family, she didn’t practice as part of the sect. But Naomi’s aunt LaShon McMillan commented, “My niece has a big problem with how society was. She basically felt we were slaves without the chains.” This may have prompted her calls for “Freedom” at the July Fourth festivities—choosing to attempt the murder-suicide on the day politicians and the media promote patriotism.

By all accounts, Naomi Gaines, 24, was a disturbed individual with a history of mental illness, including postpartum depression and manic behavior. She told police that she had come to the festival searching the crowd for one friendly face, reportedly telling the officers she would “rather be dead than live in a place where I’m not free to be who I am; I’m not free to see other moms out, single black moms with their kids,

enjoying their kids.”

Gaines was a single mother, with a seven-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter in addition to her twin boys. She attempted to attend to her mental problems while taking care of her children. According to Ramsey County court records, she was “unable to care for self; found wandering street talking and singing nonsensically, with her four small children; psychotic.”

She was admitted to the Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis for psychiatric treatment in August 2002, but released six months later and taken off her medication, on the advice of doctors. Family members said she still suffered from depression.

The young mother found joy in music—she recorded a CD of songs at a friend’s studio—and several times recited poetry at spoken-words performances at local clubs. However, she appears to have been unable to shake the dark cloud of depression hanging over her, no doubt worsened by lack of treatment and the burden of raising four young children on her own.

Despite these circumstances, she was charged July 7 with second-degree murder in the death of her son. Ramsey County Attorney Susan Gaertner said she didn’t anticipate a successful mental illness defense.

July 6—Three teenagers from Oaklyn, N.J., in suburban Philadelphia were arrested on charges they plotted to kill three teens and open fire randomly on others with a cache of guns and ammunition.

The three were arrested after an attempted carjacking, and allegedly possessed a large supply of weapons belonging to 18-year-old Matthew Lovett’s father, including rifles, a shotgun, several handguns, swords and 2,000 rounds of ammunition.

Matthew’s former schoolmates said he was tormented by the teasing he and his 14-year-old brother James endured. Students made fun of James’s speech impediment, caused by a cleft palate. Matthew reportedly kept a list of enemies dating back to elementary school, and he was planning to seek revenge.

Matthew was a loner, who was apparently obsessed with the film *The Matrix*, often dressing in black, and carried around a baseball bat at times. A student from Collingswood High School commented, “He wouldn’t even talk. He was just by himself.”

Ron Lovett, the boys’ father, told the press that he had noticed some changes in Matthew since he had graduated from high school. He said Matthew was confused because “he didn’t know where he was going to go.” The older Lovett said he hoped his son “can receive the counseling he needs.”

In the context of the ongoing “war on terrorism,” such help is exceedingly unlikely. Authorities have indicated they will seek aggressive prosecution of the three. Bail was set at \$1 million for Matthew Lovett, 18, and the other two unidentified boys were ordered held at a youth detention center. Prosecutors have indicated they will seek to try them as adults.

July 8—Another workplace shooting took place at a Lockheed Martin plant in Marion, Miss., outside Meridian. Doug Williams, 48, shot and killed five co-workers and injured nine others before killing himself. It was the deadliest workplace shooting since seven people were killed when a software tester opened fire at Edgewater Technology Inc. in Wakefield, Mass., on December 26, 2000.

The killings shook Marion, a small town in Lauderdale County on the Alabama border. Lauderdale, population 78,000, is heavily dominated by the military and is home to Meridian Naval Air Station, a Mississippi Air National Guard air refueling group and an Army reserve artillery unit. Thirty percent of Marion’s 1,300 residents live below the federal poverty level. The Lockheed Martin plant opened in 1969 and employs about 120 workers. It produces structural military components for several military aircraft.

Doug Williams was a known white racist at the plant. Four of his five

victims were black, a fact authorities tried to downplay by noting that a number of the wounded were white. Booker Stevenson, a worker at the plant, told the Jackson, Miss. *Clarion-Ledger* that less than a month ago Williams chose to leave work rather than remove a head covering resembling a Ku Klux Klan hood. Stevenson said that five years ago Williams threatened to kill a half-dozen black employees after an argument over interracial dating.

Two of the black workers killed, Thomas Willis, 57, and Lanette McCall, 37, had complained to Lockheed Martin management about Williams’s racist threats. Bobby McCall, Lanette’s husband, told the *New York Times*, “He said he was going to come in one day and kill up a bunch of niggers and then he was going to turn the gun on himself.”

Ironically, Williams had been attending the company’s annual “ethics class” before going on his killing spree. According to the local president of the International Association of Machinists, which represents workers at the plant, topics covered in the class included everything from “a problem on a plane you’re working on, would you confront your supervisors, to sexual harassment to ethnicity.”

Williams reportedly signed in to the ethics class at a trailer at the plant Tuesday morning, but left immediately, returning to the trailer dressed in camouflage and carrying a shotgun and a semi-automatic weapon. He shot five people in the trailer before moving to the main building, where he shot nine more. Of the 14 dead and wounded, 5 had worked at the plant since it opened in 1969, and another 7 had worked there for 18 years or more.

Also on **July 8**, police found the bodies of four people, apparent victims of a murder-suicide, in a small, well-kept ranch-style home in Magnolia, N.J. Magnolia—whose motto is “One Square Mile of Friendliness”—is only about five miles from Oaklyn, the town where the three teenagers were arrested in connection with the planned killing spree.

The dead included Steven Lee Wasserman, his girlfriend and two children—a boy, about 10, and a girl, about 7. The man and his son were found dead in a vehicle in the garage, apparently from carbon monoxide poisoning. The woman and girl were found dead inside the home.

Neighbors said Wasserman was prone to fits of anger, often directed against his children. “He wasn’t well liked,” neighbor Liz Syvertson told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “He used to talk bad to the kids. A lot of yelling and screaming.”

Marie Bracken, a teacher’s aide at the school where Wasserman’s daughter attended kindergarten, told the *New York Times*, “He had layoffs from different jobs, but he took care of [the children]. He always seemed like he made it, whatever he did.”

Another multiple shooting was discovered on **July 8**, this time in Bakersfield, Calif. The bodies of a grandmother, mother and three young children were all found shot dead in their home. A friend went to check on the family when they failed to show up for church services on Sunday afternoon, and summoned police on the grim finding.

Police went in search of the children’s father, Vincent Brothers, 41, the vice principal at Fremont Elementary School, who was married to one of the victims, Joanie Harper, and who sometimes lived in the home. Authorities said an annulment had been sought between Brothers and Harper, but it was unclear whether a judge had approved it.

Vincent Brothers turned himself in to police in Elizabeth City, N.C., where his mother lives, on July 9. He was arrested on probable cause for the five murders but then released after Bakersfield police concluded that they lacked sufficient evidence to hold him.



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