US: Four dead, five wounded after Missouri factory shooting

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In a tragic episode all too familiar in the US in its general contours, a 25-year-old factory worker in Jefferson City, Missouri fatally shot three co-workers and wounded five others, before turning the gun on himself July 1.

According to witnesses, Jonathon Russell appeared for work at the beginning of his night shift at the Modine Manufacturing Co., smoked a cigarette and sipped on a soda before punching his time card. He walked to his work station on a soldering line, then pulled out a concealed handgun—a semiautomatic pistol—and opened fire on fellow employees.

Killed in the shootings were a supervisor, Terry Wilson, 44; Ricky Borts, 29; and Tim Wilbers, 41. One of the wounded, Kevin Rash, remains in critical condition at University of Missouri-Columbia Medical Center; he is expected to survive the attack.

After the plant shootings, Russell drove to the Jefferson City police headquarters where he became involved in an exchange of fire with two police officers. At a certain point Russell fled on foot, stopped near the police station's front door and put the .40-caliber Glock to his head.

Russell had taken out a gun permit in Callaway County on June 7. "We checked him out in the computers and he had no criminal record, so there was no reason not to issue the permit," observed Sheriff Dennis Crane. Russell purchased the Glock, which had originally belonged to the Missouri State Highway Patrol, at Bob's Guns and Knives in Jefferson City.

The Modine plant in Jefferson City employs 270 people and produces radiators to cool engines for off-highway equipment for Caterpillar, John Deere, Case New Holland and others. Specializing in thermal management, Modine Manufacturing, founded in 1916 and headquartered in Racine, Wisconsin, has 8,000 employees in 19 countries. The company closed the plant for the week.

Local police continue to speculate that Russell's action was related to disciplinary action he was facing at work. Company officials confirmed that the third-shift radiator technician, who began working at Modine in January 2001, was on employment probation for "attendance issues," i.e., for missing work too often. Police Capt. Jim Johnsen suggested that Russell might have been about to be laid off, although company officials downplayed the possibility.

A coworker of Russell's told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that workers on the 10:30 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift could quit work as early as 5 a.m., but would have demerits assessed against them. "A worker would be put on probation at nine points and risk firing after that," according to the newspaper. "Russell 'was really close to being gone,' the coworker said."

Company officials told the *Kansas City Star* that Russell had been placed on a similar probationary period a year earlier. Mick Lucarelli, a Modine spokesman, asserted that there was no indication Russell was going to be discharged. "He'd been on probation before and gotten off just fine," Lucarelli told the *Star*.

Witnesses and police disagreed as to whether Russell shot at random during his spree. Capt. Johnsen suggested there was evidence that the 25-year-old had picked out specific targets, noting that he had walked by several coworkers without firing. "We talked to victims from the afternoon shift, who were still there and could have been victims, but he passed them over." All eight shooting victims worked on the third shift.

However, Travis Parker, one of the wounded, told his aunt, Christy Hargis—who spoke to the media—that he barely knew the shooter and probably had not exchanged five words with him at work. Parker asserted that the shootings were indiscriminately carried out.

One feels that one has encountered so many of the details of this incident in countless previous tragedies in America—whether they be school shootings, workplace violence or random acts of antisocial behavior, such as last year's Washington sniper shootings.

Jefferson City (named by settlers from Virginia in the 1820s for Thomas Jefferson), population 40,000, is considered to be an 'average American town,' the capital of Missouri and seat of Cole County, located midway between the much larger St. Louis (in the east) and Kansas City (in the west). The largest local employer is the state government. The population is 82 percent white and 15 percent African-American. The average household size is 2.21 and the average family size is 2.90. The median income for a household in Jefferson City is $39,628 and the per capita income is $21,268. Officially 12 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Major industrial employers include Johnson Controls, Unilever Home & Personal Care, Modine and Quaker Window Products.

At the time of the shooting Russell actually lived in Holts Summit (population 3,000) in Callaway County, across the Missouri River from the capital. Per capita income in Callaway is $18,423. Holts Summit was also home to two of the murdered men.

Friends and relatives of the victims and local residents expressed disbelief that such an event could take place in their city. Denny Sykes, the brother-in-law of one of the victims, told the media, "We're in shock and disbelief that someone would think they have the right to indiscriminately start shooting people. Jefferson City is not so big. You think something like this happens somewhere else." The owner of a convenience store located near the Modine plant commented to the *Jefferson City News Tribune*, "This is something you hear in big cities, not in your back yard." A local resident echoed the sentiment, "It's a shock to know it happened in Jefferson City. Things like that just don't happen here."

The limited amount we know about Jonathon Russell's life points to a bleak existence, also not unknown in America today. He was born on the Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton, California, indicating his father was in the military. At some point he moved with family members to mid-Missouri and attended Jefferson City public schools, but dropped out in high school.

Nearly everyone cited by the press used the word "quiet" to describe Russell. Cole County Sheriff John C. Hemeyer reported that Russell was not communicative with his coworkers and described him as being "very placid." He went on, "This was not a person who was confrontational or

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combative." A co-worker told the *News Tribune*, "He didn't seem like there was anything wrong with him. He was kind of a quiet person." A neighbor of Russell's told a reporter, "I didn't know him well. He seemed nice."

Modine worker Roger Schaefer told the *Fulton (Mo.) Sun* that Russell "was a quiet, nice, clean-looking kid ... not someone you would expect. It's always the person you don't expect."

Other police officials described Russell as "a quiet man beset by personal woes." He was reportedly separated from his wife. Initial reports suggested that Russell lived at the Evergreen Apartments, "a group of two three-story buildings tucked behind Doolittle Utility Trailer Manufacturing," but an apartment manager told journalists that he no longer resided there.

Instead Russell was living with his mother and brother at the Jefferson Regency Trailer Park in Holts Summit. Kathy Pruitt, the park's manager, told the *Post-Dispatch* that "a trailer on Lot 40 was rented to Russell's mother and brother. 'They just pay their rent and they're very quiet,' Pruitt said. 'They've been here about a year.'"

The news account continues, "No one answered the door Wednesday at Lot 40, a beige trailer with rickety steps and a loose storm door. Two cars were parked in the grass, and a dog barked inside."

Aside from his apparent marital and job difficulties, one of the "personal woes" referred to by police may have been a "problem with gambling," according to several plant workers who spoke to the *Post-Dispatch*. Apparently Russell went with his mother every Friday to the Isle of Capri casino in Boonville, Missouri, about 60 miles northwest of Holts Summit.

On its web site, the Isle of Capri urges: "Grab your own slice of paradise at the only tropical oasis of fun and excitement in the heart of Missouri. Our 28,000 square foot casino will sizzle with 900 slots and 35 table games. 3 signature restaurants, a retail and entertainment center, and a historic display area in the pavilion." It is difficult to imagine a more demoralizing spot than this "tropical oasis of fun and excitement."

The general manager of the casino confirmed that Russell "has been a customer of ours," but said that he had "hit none of the triggers" indicating that he had a gambling problem: bouncing checks, expressing anger after losing or asking for help. But then Russell was "quiet" and "placid."

Workplace violence is a horrifying fact of everyday life in the US. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, "Some 2 million American workers are victims of workplace violence each year." Homicide is the third-leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the US (3,826 workplace homicides between 1996 and 2000). The vast majority of workers are injured or killed in robberies or other similar crimes. However, 15 percent of all work-related homicides are initiated by disgruntled workers or former employees.

In a study of internal workplace violence, veteran law enforcement official Larry Chavez notes that the typical perpetrator is a male between the ages of 35 and 45, "most having significant tenure on the job." He explains, "Current employees constituted the bulk of the perpetrators at 43.6 percent, while former employees made up 22.5 percent. Domestic violence, spilling over into the workplace, took third place at 21.4 percent, while those having client-type relationships numbered 12.5 percent."

A study conducted in 2000 by Integra Realty and Resources, a real estate advisory and appraisal firm, argued that workplace stress and long hours were creating a growing phenomenon of "desk rage," with increased numbers of employees having arguments and breaking down under the pressure. "One of 10 Americans (10 percent) say they work in an atmosphere where physical violence has occurred because of stress, with 42 percent saying their workplace is a place where yelling and verbal abuse takes place."

Russell's mad act is only the latest in a series of mass workplace killings. The phrase "going postal" entered the lexicon following a number of episodes, including the August 1986 Edmund, Oklahoma massacre of 14 postal employees by Patrick Sheryl and the 1991 Royal Oak, Michigan murder of 4 by fired postal worker Thomas McIlvane. In March 1995, Christopher Green, a former postal worker burdened with "a mountain of debt," killed four and wounded another during a holdup at a Montclair, New Jersey post office; in March 1995, Bruce William Clark walked up to his boss in a postal processing center in City of Industry, California and shot him to death.

Other recent workplace shootings (based on a list compiled by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) in the US include the following:

* In December 2001 a gunman opened fire at the Nu-Wood Decorative Millwork plant in Goshen, Indiana, killing one coworker and wounding six others. The gunman, a disgruntled employee, then committed suicide.

* In February 2001 a former employee killed four workers at the Navistar engine plant in Melrose Park, Illinois and wounded four others before turning the gun on himself. He was to have reported to jail for stealing company property the next day.

* December 2000—an employee at Edgewater Technology in Wakefield, Massachusetts, is accused of killing seven co-workers at the Internet consulting firm. At the time of his arrest he was armed with an AK-47 assault rifle, a shotgun and a semiautomatic handgun.

* In March 2000—a fired carwash worker is charged with killing five people at his job in Irving, Texas. The convicted man is currently on death row.

* In December 1999 a hotel worker is alleged to have opened fire in Tampa, Florida, killing four coworkers.

* In November 1999 a former employee of Northlake Shipyard in Seattle is accused of killing two men and wounding two others. Police claimed he was angry over terminated disability benefits.

* Also in November 1999 a Xerox repairman is charged with shooting seven coworkers at a warehouse in Honolulu.

* In August 1999 an employee of Ferguson Enterprises, a heating and air conditioning company, is accused of shooting two coworkers to death and then driving to a former place of employment and killing a third person.

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