

US: Nine dead in Omaha, Nebraska mall shooting

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A young gunman shot and killed eight people and wounded five others when he opened fire Wednesday afternoon at a shopping mall in Omaha, Nebraska, before taking his own life. It was at least the fourth mall shooting in the US so far this year.

As in other similar incidents that have become tragically commonplace in America—at high schools, college campuses, workplaces, malls and other public places—survivors, victims’ relatives, local residents and the US population at large are struggling to come to grips with what drove the shooter to carry out this seemingly senseless violent act.

Robert Hawkins, 19, entered the Von Maur department store at Westroads Mall after 1 p.m. on Wednesday, concealing a semiautomatic rifle under a hooded sweatshirt. He took an elevator to the third floor and began shooting when the door opened, firing more than 30 rounds, mostly in a customer service area. Terrified holiday shoppers and employees ran for cover, hiding in storerooms and behind coat racks.

Jan Hopkins, who was working wrapping gifts, hid in a stockroom as the shots continued. She told the *Kansas City Star*, “We could hear him. He kept walking back to the customer service area and kept shooting.” Those killed included two shoppers and six Von Maur employees, ranging in age from 24 to 66.

The gunshots stopped after Hawkins turned the weapon on himself. After several minutes of hushed silence, police escorted traumatized survivors out of the store to the parking lot. The mall was shut down and remained closed on Thursday as police investigators collected evidence.

The shooter in Wednesday’s incident, Robert Hawkins, was a troubled teen with a considerable history of mental health problems and family difficulties. Still, friends and acquaintances were surprised that he was capable of such violence. He seemed to have been pulling himself together in recent months.

Shawn Saunders had known Hawkins for about two-and-a-half years. He told CNN, “No. No way. The Robbie I knew was a lot like me, and I just never thought he’d do something like that.”

“He was the one guy, you know, if people would be getting in a fight he’d be trying to break it up,” Saunders commented. “If

there were arguments among our friends or groups, he was kind of like the calm, cool and collected one.”

However, as the story of Hawkins’s final days began to come together, it appears that the young man felt his life had begun to unravel as a set of personal problems beset him. His girlfriend left him two weeks ago, then he was fired from his job at McDonald’s, for allegedly stealing \$17.

These setbacks, combined with his history of mental health issues, apparently worked to push him over the edge. He reacted with despondency and anger to such a degree that he made a calculated decision to secure a weapon, write a suicide note, send out final text messages and plan and execute the fatal shootings.

In his 19-year life, Hawkins experienced significant turmoil. His parents divorced when he was three. He was made a ward of the state of Nebraska in September 2002, although parental rights had not been severed; none of his siblings were state wards. In August 2006, the state terminated custody. At the time of the shooting he was living with the family of friends in suburban Bellevue, a small town sandwiched between the city of Omaha and the Offutt Air Force Base.

He dropped out of Papillion-La Vista High School in March 2006 and had a criminal record, including one drug conviction and several misdemeanors. He was arrested for underage possession of alcohol 11 days before the shooting.

As a ward of the state, he received services costing \$265,000, according to the Nebraska Division of Children and Family Services. He lived in several group homes, received various outpatient services, and was placed in a number of foster homes. He was treated as an inpatient at several state facilities, including for addiction and depression.

A spokesman for Children and Family Services stated at a press briefing Thursday that Hawkins’s case did not represent “a failure of the system to provide appropriate services.” As his medical files are presently sealed, that is difficult to judge.

It is clear, however, that he was acutely unhappy and whatever interventions and treatments had been attempted had been less than successful. He had been prescribed anti-depressant medication but had stopped taking it recently because he didn’t like the way it made him feel. He had also been treated for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Hawkins had been living with Debora Maruca-Kovak in Bellevue. He was a friend of her two teenage sons and he came to live with her family about a year and a half ago, saying he had “some issues with his stepmother” and could not live at home.

She told CNN he “reminded me of a pound puppy that nobody wanted” and that “when he first came to live with us, he was in a fetal position and chewed his fingernails all the time.” She had thought, however, that his outlook had been improving. “He was depressed, and he had always been depressed,” she said, “but he looked like he was getting better.”

On Wednesday, Maruca-Kovak said Hawkins left the house at about 11 a.m. and called her about two hours later, just before the shootings. He spoke about being fired from his job. “He just said he wanted to thank me for everything I’d done for him ... and he was sorry,” and that he’d left a note. She asked him to come home to discuss it, but he said it was “too late.”

Maruca-Kovak called Hawkins’s mother, who came to the house. In the note, “He basically said how sorry he was for everything,” she recalled. “He didn’t want to be a burden to people and that he was a piece of shit all his life and now he’d be famous.” She took the note to authorities and went to her job as a nurse at the Nebraska Medical Center, where she later saw victims from the mall shooting being brought in.

In the wake of Wednesday’s carnage in Omaha, the media has asked the obvious question: Why did he do it? As in the case of other young shooters, details from Robert Hawkins’s history are pointed to, illustrating a life fraught with mental illness, family problems, school and work issues, brushes with law enforcement.

The most that is made of this, however, is that the young man inexplicably “snapped” and we will never understand why. Of course, it’s not possible to look inside his mind. But why was his response—and the response of others involved in similar incidents—so violent, so sociopathic? Is it not possible to draw some conclusions about what such recurring violent tragedies say about the state of society in contemporary America?

Omaha, Nebraska is in many respects typical of many Midwestern US cities. With a population of just under 400,000, it is the 43rd largest city. Once home to four of the five largest meatpacking companies at the turn of the 20th century, its most prominent businesses today include insurance companies, banking and architecture. The Air Force base is a major employer.

Omaha ranks eighth among the nation’s 50 largest cities in both per-capita billionaires and Fortune 500 companies. Warren Buffett, one of the richest people in the world, is the city’s most prominent businessman. At the other end of the economic spectrum, 11.3 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and average per capita income stands at \$21,756.

Such income inequality is a fact of life across America, and fuels anger over access to jobs and educational opportunities.

At the same time, every young person today lives in a society where, in perpetuation of this inequality, wages and working conditions are attacked, factories are shut down, jobs hemorrhage.

Homeowners are faced with foreclosure and destitution as a result of predatory, sub-prime lending practices. Although Nebraska is not a leader in foreclosures, more than 1,200 homes in the state are currently in foreclosure or pre-foreclosure. Families come under tremendous stress and are torn apart by financial pressures.

Finally, the government sets an example of military violence, launching illegal, preemptive wars based on lies. The political establishment—Democrat and Republican alike—perpetuates neo-colonial occupations as it prepares for further military aggression. Congress authorizes torture, secret renditions and indefinite detention of “enemy combatants.”

Communities bury soldiers killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and struggle to deal with returning veterans with a host of physical and psychological injuries. The president threatens World War III while the overwhelming majority of the population opposes the government’s military policy.

Under these conditions, one can begin to understand what lies behind violent outbursts like the one in Omaha on Wednesday. This promotion of militarism, inequality and violence takes a tragic toll on the most disoriented sections of society, particularly among younger people who have struggled with mental illness and other social problems. A few, like Robert Hawkins, strike out, changing forever the lives of their victims.



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