

American mayhem: Three horrible crimes over the weekend

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31 March 2009

At least 17 people are dead after three violent episodes in the US over the weekend.

On Sunday, in Carthage, North Carolina, sixty miles southwest of Raleigh, a 45-year-old man allegedly shot and killed seven elderly patients and a nurse. According to news reports, the individual's wife worked at the facility.

Also on Sunday, in an upscale subdivision in Santa Clara, California—in Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco—six people died in an apparent murder-suicide. The suspected gunman, whose identity has not been revealed, was believed to be among the dead who included three children.

In Milton, Massachusetts, south of Boston, a 23-year-old killed two of his sisters, one by severing her head, in an act of rage on Saturday. He was shot dead by police. The young man had recently been released from prison and was apparently despondent about his job prospects.

The three tragic incidents, which will leave countless individuals, families and entire towns traumatized, occurred within disparate communities and social layers. Their only links are their national setting and a brutalized atmosphere characterized by increasing social tension.

In the North Carolina massacre, Robert Stewart is alleged to have entered the Pinelake Health and Rehab Center armed with a number of weapons. Reportedly, he went from room to room, shooting residents of the nursing home, including those in wheelchairs. He shot 11 people in all, including a police officer, whose gunshot eventually brought him down.

The dead patients, mostly women, ranged in age from 78 to 98. The nurse, identified as Jerry Avant Jr., was 39. Avant's sister commented to the media that police believed her brother died trying to stop the gunman. Frances Green said, "He just lay down his life to protect the residents and employees there."

According to press reports Tuesday, Stewart and his wife were recently estranged. It remains unclear whether the woman, a certified nurse assistant, was at work Sunday morning or not. Carthage Police Chief Chris McKenzie told the media, "We're certainly looking into the fact that it may be domestic-related."

The Associated Press reported that one of the victims, Jessie Musser, 88, had lived at the facility for only six weeks. His son-in-law, Jim Foster, told AP that the man "had Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases and was blind, deaf and confined to a wheelchair. Foster said the family was now trying to figure out how to tell Musser's wife, who has dementia and lives at the same facility, that her husband is dead.

"She was upset that they didn't bring him to see her yesterday," Foster told AP. "I don't know how we're going to break it to her. You got a clue?"

An ex-wife of Stewart, Sue Griffin, indicated she had had no contact with the man since their divorce in 2001. Griffin commented: "He did have some violent tendencies from time to time. I wouldn't put it past him. I hate to say it, but it is true."

Griffin said that Stewart had recently been trying to reach out to family members, telling them he had cancer and was preparing for a long trip and to "go away."

A neighbor described Stewart, who had been renting a house and 10 acres of land for about a year, as "just a good old country farm guy." (*New York Times*)

Media focus has been on the police officer who stopped Stewart's rampage with a single shot. The American establishment has given up attempting to explain why such terrible events take place with alarming regularity.

In California, many questions remain about the tragic deaths in Santa Clara, including the identities of the deceased. Police were alerted Sunday night around 8:30 pm when an injured woman was seen outside a home in the city's upscale Rivermark community.

When officers entered the house they discovered five dead bodies. Two of the deceased were men, one in his 30s and another in his 40s; the latter is believed to be the gunman. The other victims were a girl, approximately 4 years old, a boy about 10 and a young woman in her early 20s. An infant girl found injured at the scene later died in the hospital. The wounded woman remains hospitalized.

Two handguns were apparently used in the killings. Santa Clara police indicated that a passport from India had been found in the house.

There were no reports of previous incidents at the address, located only a short distance from California's Great America amusement park which, ironically, happens to be up for sale.

The incident, however, is not the first tragedy of this sort to occur in Santa Clara, headquarters to Applied Materials, Intel, Sun Microsystems, Agilent Technologies and other high-tech firms. (The "valley" in Silicon Valley refers to the Santa Clara Valley.) Last November 14, engineer Jing Hua Wu allegedly shot to death three executives of wireless chip-maker SiPort after being dismissed without any warning. Wu, according to his lawyer, was on the verge of bankruptcy. His trial is currently under way.

Police believe the victims of Sunday's shootings were members of the family that resided in the Rivermark home. Santa Clara Police Department Lt. Phil Cooke told the media, "We do believe this appears to be a family-on-family murder-suicide." Cooke commented,

"It's horrific. There's no other way to describe it."

Reporters for the *San Jose Mercury News* noted numerous residents "driving out of the high-end development today in Mercedes Benzes and BMWs." They described the Rivermark subdivision, with some 1,100 homes, as "a well-manicured community with lush green lawns and late-model cars parked on spotless driveways. ... Homes here are as large as 3,400 square feet, where, in its heyday, sold for more than \$1 million."

A resident told the *Mercury News*, "It just simply never happens here. I mean never. ... We are in hard times here."

Indeed, the unemployment rate in Silicon Valley jumped from 7.8 percent in December 2008 to 9.4 percent in January, a 21 percent increase in one month. Silicon Valley Leadership Group CEO Carl Guardino told the *Mercury News* in early March he worried that worse was to come: "If the January unemployment numbers resemble a horror movie, then I fear the sequels that will be released in February and March, as they will probably be even more frightening."

In mid-March, Santa Clara County schools sent out more than 1,000 layoff notices, a consequence of the region's economic woes, the state budget crisis and the decision by many older teachers to delay retirement.

The cause of the shooting Sunday remains unknown, but this is an area in which a good many people banked on a continually expanding high-tech-based economy and recent job cuts and other symptoms of the current crisis have meant quite spectacular declines in income and expectations.

At any rate, Santa Clara Mayor Patricia Mahan felt obliged to link the killings with the general situation, stating: "When things get tough in life, in the world, it seems these kinds of incidents erupt, and I would just urge all of our community to pay attention to your neighbors."

AP noted that this is the fourth murder-suicide involving multiple deaths in recent months in California.

*In January, a man recently laid off from his job at a hospital killed his wife, his five children and himself in Wilmington in suburban Los Angeles.

*On Christmas Eve, a man dressed in a Santa Claus suit opened fire at a family party at his ex-wife's home in Covina, California (also a Los Angeles suburb) and then set fire to the house; nine people died. The gunman later killed himself.

*In October 2008, a jobless accounting industry worker in despair over his financial situation, in the Los Angeles area as well, killed his wife, three children, mother-in-law and then himself.

The Milton, Massachusetts murders on Saturday afternoon were particularly grisly. According to police, 17-year-old Samantha Revelus phoned 911 and told dispatchers that her brother, Kerby Revelus, had wounded her and that she was dying. She was apparently fatally stabbed while police were on their way to the location.

When the cops kicked in the door, Revelus reportedly grabbed his 5-year-old sister Bianca by the neck and decapitated her before their eyes. Revelus was eventually shot dead in a second-floor room allegedly attempting to kill a third sister, 9-year-old Sarafina. The latter had apparently taken the telephone from her dead older sister's hands and kept talking to 911 dispatchers. Sarafina survived the attack. "The scene was beyond anything a human being would be able to comprehend," declared Milton Police Chief Richard G. Wells Jr.

Police believe the rampage was connected to a fist fight between Kerby Revelus and a neighbor Friday evening and a resulting family argument about the incident.

Revelus had recently been released from prison on a gun charge.

Another sister, Jessica, who had moved from home to raise her child and be safe, told the *Boston Herald* that her brother just had "a temper. Anything would set him off." She added, "'Jail made him worse. ... The first time he came out it was, 'What happened to you?' she said, describing the family's shock over his change in attitude. 'The second time it was, 'Who are you?'"

Neighbors told the *Boston Globe* "that some mornings, Revelus would stroll down Belvoir Street as people headed to work, talking nonsensically and taking swigs from a bottle in a brown bag. Sometimes he would talk cryptically about God's purpose for him ... and other times he acted edgy and hostile."

He had become particularly depressed because his criminal record was preventing him from finding a job. An uncle from New York told the *Globe* that Revelus "felt like he was nothing. ... He said, 'Everywhere I applied, they don't want to take me because I was in jail. I'm trying to change my life,'" but he felt nobody wanted to help him, the uncle said.

Three horrible crimes in two days. The local official response is bewilderment and perplexity; from the national media and political establishment, indifference and guilty silence.

In each case, there are of course individual and distinct elements. Human beings suffer psychotic breakdowns for a complex series of reasons. However, when crimes like this come in clusters, a more general, social source has to be sought.

At the very least, the extraordinary level of indifference to the suffering of the old and infirm, the very young and one's intimate relations revealed in these crimes must have a wider significance. It speaks to a society whose most emotionally fragile members feel, on the unconscious level at least, official sanction for the most violent and murderous solutions to their problems.

It is also self-evident, as studies have shown, that economic pressures and hardships lead to a growth in domestic abuse and violence. Anita Altman, deputy managing director of the United Jewish Appeal-Federation of New York's Department of Government Relations and External affairs, told a recent gathering of social workers, "Whenever the economic situation turns sour it can seriously aggravate the relationships in any family. ... In a recession we always expect much more domestic abuse."



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