

UK: How was the Plymouth mass shooting made possible?

Julie Hyland
20 August 2021

The inquest into the murderous shooting rampage in Plymouth, southwest England opened Thursday.

Jake Davison, 22 years old, killed five people on August 12, before turning the gun on himself. It is the first mass shooting in England since 12 people were killed in Cumbria in 2010.

The inquest heard that this followed an argument between Davison and his mother. Maxine Davison, who had been treated for cancer, was his first victim. Within 12 minutes, Davison had shot and killed four others: Sophie Martyn, just three years old, her father, Lee, Stephen Washington and Kate Shepherd. Two others, a mother and her son, were shot through their front door but survived. All were strangers to Davison.

Much of the media coverage has centred on Davison's links to the "incel" or involuntarily celibate movement. Overwhelmingly young men, it combines self-loathing with misogyny, blaming women for the lack of sexual and social status. It came to prominence in 2014, when avowed incel Elliot Rodgers, also 22 years old, killed seven people in California including himself. Since then, several self-proclaimed incels have been responsible for a spate of killings in America, Canada and Germany.

Socially isolated, with long standing mental health problems, Davison posted videos of himself weightlifting in his mother's front room and was reportedly using steroids and amphetamines. His videos on YouTube under the name Professor Waffle refer to "inceldom" and rage about his virginity and lack of attractiveness to women.

In his last video, Davison described himself as "beaten down and defeated by life" and said, "I wouldn't clarify [sic] myself as an incel but have talked to people similar to me who have had nothing but themselves."

The nihilism of the incel movement means it is associated with alt-right groups. So far there is little evidence that this motivated Davison, although internet posts indicate he was a supporter of former US President Donald Trump and had a fascination with guns.

The media have led demands for the shooting to be categorised as terrorism and for a clampdown on incel sites and chatrooms. Leading the way is the *Guardian*, with Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, insisting, "The incel movement is a form of extremism and cannot be ignored

anymore", and linking it to "the everyday sexism that is rife in our society".

The government is pressing for social network providers to collect the real identities of their users and make them available to police. This is supposedly to address the issue of how Davison was given a gun licence, despite the UK having among the strictest firearms regulations in the world.

This law-and-order approach, aimed at further eroding democratic rights, will do nothing to prevent such atrocities. Quite the reverse. It is an integral part of the reactionary climate in which disassociated and dysfunctional personalities can become mass shooters.

The "incel" movement is undoubtedly a particularly poisonous and violent outcome of the "culture wars" championed by both the right and "liberal" proponents of identity politics in its various guises.

Many of Davison's internet posts refer to the incels he has engaged with as "similar to me, they've had nothing but themselves. And then they've socially had it tough, probably grew up in a s*** background." He complained of "fighting an uphill battle with a big f***king rock on my back", while others get "a free ride to the top". "Everything is rigged against you", "imagine failing at everything in life and having absolutely no support whatsoever", he says. "How can you have drive and willpower, you know, when you've been defeated a million times?"

This situation he blames entirely on women. There is a complete absence of awareness of any broader socio-economic context.

Then there is his fascination with guns, which has largely passed without comment in the media. At 22 years of age, Davison was born at the height of capitalist triumphalism, and its accompanying outburst of imperialist militarism. In that timeframe, the UK has been involved in 11 wars (out of the 36 since 1900). Three of them cover almost all of Davison's short life-span—the bloody neo-colonial ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and the open-ended "war on terror". Those now demanding the state accrue even greater powers to "protect" women against misogyny are among the same forces that champion imperialist intervention into these countries on the grounds of defending "women's rights".

Davison was reportedly an apprentice crane operator at the defence and security company Babcock, one of Plymouth's major employers. The port city is at the centre of the UK's defence industry, with Devonport Dockyard the country's only naval base to refit nuclear submarines. The south west is responsible for more Ministry of Defence employment and spending than any other region, with the dockyard accounting for 10 percent of Plymouth's income.

At the same time, Plymouth has higher than average levels of poverty and deprivation. Life expectancy, even before the pandemic, was the lowest of any area in the south west, and it is no coincidence that cases of COVID-19 have risen exponentially.

Davison's misanthropy mirrors that of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who proclaimed regarding the pandemic that he would rather "let the bodies pile high in their thousands" than impose a further lockdown. More than 150,000 people have died from COVID-19 due to the government's "herd immunity" policy, one of the highest death rates in the world. Strikingly, Davison and Johnson both used film characters to represent their actions—Davison describing himself as the *Terminator*, while Johnson compared himself with Larry Vaughan, the mayor of Amity in *Jaws* who orders the beaches to stay open despite shark attacks.

Davison's mental health problems were well known. He had attended a special needs school due to autism and other conditions. His former teacher, Jonathan Williams, told the media, "For me, having spent so much time with him and done all I could to help him, for it to end like this is heart-breaking. Jake would have had an education, health and care plan, which means the state would be required to provide support up to the age of 25. Was he really receiving the support needed?"

Relatives have said Maxine tried repeatedly to get help for her son for years, but "she was let down by the adult social care". A family friend said Maxine "begged for mental health support", but the National Health Service "said they are short staffed and that was it. The family even asked the police to come out to see him as he was talking and acting strange—they didn't do a welfare check. And now six people are dead."

Plymouth's health and social care service, Livewell Southwest, confirmed they had been in contact with Davison during the pandemic by telephone but gave no further details.

Livewell Southwest has been described as a "pioneering social enterprise", one of a number carved out of the privatisation of the NHS. A "community interest company", created under the then Labour-controlled local authority, it took control of much of the city's social and mental health provision. Last year, the "not for profit" enterprise made a £970,000 surplus, enabling it to hike the salary of its highest-paid director to £180,000 from £153,000.

Such moves are part of the systematic running down of social provision, especially after the 2008 financial crash and the imposition of austerity, with expenditure on public services as a

share of GDP slashed to its lowest levels since the 1930s. COVID-19 has been used as the pretext for transferring even greater amounts of social wealth to the super rich, while public provision, especially in health care, is collapsing.

Finally, there is the question as to how Davison was able to hold a gun licence, despite his mental health diagnosis and previous violent incidents.

Devon and Cornwall Police has referred itself to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. Local police oversee the issuing of shotgun and firearm certificates on the grounds that they are more aware of mitigating circumstances.

Gun licences are extremely hard to obtain. Recent figures show 567,358 people licenced to hold firearm/shotgun certificates, broadly unchanged over the last decade. Those applying need to show "good reason" for their request and must prove that they "pose no danger to public safety or the peace". Independent referees must provide character references, criminal records are searched, and an applicant's doctor is approached for evidence of alcoholism, drug abuse or signs of a personality disorder.

Yet Davison had a history of anger-related mental health issues. In 2016, he beat up a teenager and his girlfriend. In September 2020, he assaulted two teenagers in a skate park. His gun was taken away from him by police following that incident but returned to him just months later after he apparently attended an anger management course. He had reportedly beaten up his father around the same time.

Relatives of Davison's victims have spoken of their anger that a young man with such a history was considered a suitable candidate for a shotgun. Williams asked, "How is it possible that a police officer read Jake's history of obsessive compulsive disorder, anger issues and depression and concluded he should be allowed to own a firearm?"

It is a further tragedy that the victims and their families are unlikely to receive any satisfactory answer to their questions because that would mean the ruling elite admitting to the malignant tendencies they are responsible for incubating and encouraging.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact