

# The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research

---

Volume 16

Article 6

---

2015

## An Exploration of the Motivations Behind School Shootings and a Discussion on How These Violent Trends Can be Stopped

Maria Muscoreil  
mfm03491@sjf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Muscoreil, Maria. "An Exploration of the Motivations Behind School Shootings and a Discussion on How These Violent Trends Can be Stopped." *The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research* 16 (2015): 21-25. Web. [date of access]. <<https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur/vol16/iss1/6>>.

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur/vol16/iss1/6> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjf.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjf.edu).

---

# An Exploration of the Motivations Behind School Shootings and a Discussion on How These Violent Trends Can be Stopped

## Abstract

Autogenic massacre is a term used to describe the indiscriminate killing of multiple individuals in one isolated incident, where the perpetrator is motivated by a combination of personal problems and/or psychopathological issues. In the past two decades in the United States, this phenomenon has been experienced by families who are forced to grieve the loss of their loved ones as a result of these violent actions—specifically, as a result of school shootings. Using information derived from the disciplines of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and general psychopathology, this paper endeavors to uncover factors that may contribute to the motivations behind, as well as the manner and details, of violent crimes of this nature (e.g., the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings). Efforts to facilitate healing and move towards a more peaceful standard of living in the wake of these tragedies have been analyzed, with emphasis on treating the individuals responsible for these tragedies with the same caring disposition which we afford to those wounded by them.

## Keywords

school shootings, autogenic massacre

*An Exploration of the Motivations Behind School Shootings and a Discussion on How These Violent Trends Can Be Stopped*

*Maria Muscoreil*

**Abstract**

Autogenic massacre is a term used to describe the indiscriminate killing of multiple individuals in one isolated incident, where the perpetrator is motivated by a combination of personal problems and/or psychopathological issues. In the past two decades in the United States, this phenomenon has been experienced by families who are forced to grieve the loss of their loved ones as a result of these violent actions—specifically, as a result of school shootings. Using information derived from the disciplines of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and general psychopathology, this paper endeavors to uncover factors that may contribute to the motivations behind, as well as the manner and details, of violent crimes of this nature (e.g., the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings). Efforts to facilitate healing and move towards a more peaceful standard of living in the wake of these tragedies have been analyzed, with emphasis on treating the individuals responsible for these tragedies with the same caring disposition which we afford to those wounded by them.

The United States has witnessed a staggering rise in the prevalence of mass criminal actions over the past two decades. Specifically on the rise over these past 20 years in our nation has been the incidence of a phenomenon known as autogenic massacre. Autogenic massacre can be defined as the killing of two or more individuals during a single isolated incident, motivated by personal problems or psychopathology. Some of the most notably

brutal, large-scale massacres in the United States have occurred at Virginia Tech and Columbine High School. Birkland & Lawrence (2009) describe the latter occurrence as “the most closely watched news event of the year [1999], with 68% of the public reportedly paying close attention to the story” (p. 1405). While these massive outbursts of violence are unquestionably inexcusable, they may not be wholly inexplicable. Autogenic massacre in this country is perpetrated almost exclusively by adult, or young adult, males as an evolutionary defensive response to perceived threats to their social status, coupled with a high level of exposure to violence situations in each perpetrator’s respective home and community environments.

In its most basic form, what the United States is currently experiencing with special regard to its school settings is an epidemic of murderous incidents, known formally as autogenic massacres. This title may initially sound excessively harsh, but in order to more completely understand the reasons for these strongly-worded labels, one must come to a fuller understanding of these terms as they will be defined in this paper. Herein, the term murder will be defined as “the killing of another human being with malice and forethought” (Harrison & Bowers, 2010, p. 916). This definition makes the term in question distinct from homicide, which is commonly used interchangeably with murder, but is actually quite different due to the fact that malice and forethought are not always components of homicides. Additionally, the term massacre should be herein understood as “indiscriminant killing” (Harrison &

Bowers, 2010, p. 916). These definitions will be important to keep in mind in order to glean a more complete understanding of the possible motivations behind these very specific criminal actions of mass violence. These terms will also add clarity to this discussion as it attempts to reach some realistic conclusions on how to halt the high prevalence rate of autogenic massacre in this nation.

Certain promising theories in evolutionary psychology contain exciting potential in providing a logical route towards explaining the underlying causes of autogenic massacre as we know it in our sociocultural strata in this nation. Applying the study of evolutionary psychology to these outbursts of extreme violence may be beneficial because according to Harrison and Bowers (2010):

*behavior does not fossilize, it is impossible to survey behaviors and mental processes in our ancestral environment; however, we can make predictions about modern human behavior based on psychological strategies and coping mechanisms that likely evolved over millions of years as a response to its presumed conditions (p. 917).*

Analyzing the motivations and actions of the gunmen involved in these massacres through this lens opens the door for exploration of an interesting hypothesis. This holds that the individuals who perpetrate these mass violent crimes may do so based on an evolutionary compulsion to take action against a perceived threat to their status as males, which may pose a serious threat to their viability as mates and to their ultimate survival.

Autogenic massacre may not be as mysteriously motivated as it seems on its surface. Harrison and Bowers (2010) present

an interesting possible explanation for the epidemic of this particular type of violent outburst in the United States. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, Harrison and Bowers (2010) argue that these individuals may perpetrate horrific crimes based on an evolutionary compulsion to take action against a perceived threat to their social status as males. The strength or weakness of their social status among male competitors may influence the choices of the selective females around them. From an evolutionary standpoint, their goal is to successfully form relationships, procreate, and further their lineage with these selective females. In order to prove their dominance, power and viability as suitable mates among their competition, males will attempt to eliminate any negative perceptions of themselves or eliminate their competition in order to make themselves more desirable. Harrison and Bowers' (2010) theory involving the evolutionary relationship between this perceived status threat in males and the relatively high incidence of autogenic massacres in our nation sheds light on the complex issue of subliminal impulses, and their role in the perpetration of acts of criminal violence. This predisposition towards serious, finite acts of violence, driven by a desire to preserve mate viability and reproductive success, should be seriously considered in conjunction with another motivating factor. This factor encompasses an individual's exposure to violence experiences in past and present social environments, and can also be a relevant contributory factor involved in the perpetration of these types of crimes.

Males who perceive threats to their social status are often increasingly in tune to social imbalances in their exterior environment (i.e., the way their immediate circle of peers perceives them). This social 'hyper-vigilance' may arise due to prolonged familiarity with a sociocultural

environment which promotes acute awareness of one's social status, brought on by fear that harm may come to oneself or one's family. In simpler terms, a child exposed to violent actions of varying degrees and in various settings has an increased probability to develop psychopathologic disorders in their young adulthood. Slopen, Fitzmaurice, Williams, and Gilman (2012) support this claim in their research findings, which indicate that individuals who experienced increased exposure at a young age to violent actions in multiple settings of their life had a higher incidence rate of developing psychiatric diagnoses such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and major depressive disorder (MDD) in their adolescence. Elements of psychopathology are more easily developed in the minds of individuals whose environments have taught them that violence is the standard behavioral response for adults in problematic interactions with their peers, and it is acceptable to act violently towards those who may not be directly involved.

Autogenic massacre is a multifaceted issue that has unfortunately remained current for the past two decades, however identifying motivators behind this brutal expression of social disillusionment and frustration offer both insight and hope for recovery from the high incidence of this trend. The 'evolutionary impulse' element of this explanation offers a logical base to draw various conclusions about the extent to which individuals who perpetrate these types of crimes bear complete conscious culpability for their actions. The environmental 'violence exposure' element of this argument offers an analytical insight into the extent to which circumstantial contexts are essential to an individual's decision to perpetrate mass violent crimes, such as autogenic massacre. Indiscriminate killing of one's peers or members of one's

own community seems unsettling to the vast majority of people in both the national and international communities. Perhaps what is most startling most about these crimes is the idea that the perpetrators seem to have no regard for the sanctity of human life they take, who may be completely disconnected from their particular suffering. Fortunately, there remains a source of hope for progression away from this trend of indiscriminate violence, towards a more peaceful standard of living in this nation.

On April 6, 2007, the United States was shaken by the Virginia Tech shooting, during which a lone gunman, then senior Seung-Hui Cho, shot and killed 32 innocent people, and injured dozens more before finally turning the gun on himself. The nation reached out to the victims' families with physical aid, but little was available in the way of explanation as to why this tragedy happened in the first place and how it could have been avoided. Consolation for these emotionally bruised and confused families was sparse for quite some time.

In early 2010, colleagues Jun Sung Hong, Hyunkag Cho, and Alvin Shiulain Lee composed an article as a means by which to dissect the personal life and history of Seung-Hui Cho in hopes to identify any impact the various environmental and social constructs in his life had on his decision to take such drastic actions. These colleagues were able to take away that Cho came from a South Korean ethnic background, and that his parents were traditionally adherent to the distant parenting style widely practiced in South Korea. His peers and family members noted that Cho always exhibited a more reserved personality type. Cho's social isolation and worrisome personality tendencies eventually convinced even his parents that Cho might benefit from psychodynamic therapy. Cho showed no significant improvement, despite the efforts of the professional help he received in

therapy and at school. By the time Cho committed the shooting, he had completely isolated himself from everyone in his life that ever made an effort to connect with him.

Hong et al. (2010) assert that if more consideration was given to the impact of racial isolation, combined with parental and generalized social disinterest, on the mentality of youth during their impressionable formative years, significant headway could be made into improving the quality of life of individuals who feel socially isolated and alienated. This thought process, while comforting in its humanity towards violent individuals who feel socially inept and alone, also carries the potential to significantly reduce the incidence of violent actions of all types and degrees of severity. Stepping in when it's inconvenient and caring about someone else's discomfort and struggles could be some of the best medicine for individuals who would turn to violence when they felt certain that love and acceptance were not within their reach (Hong et al., 2010).

Some readers may challenge these views about the causes and reasonable measures towards slowing the imminent threat of autogenic massacre by insisting that school shootings are singularly the result of poor parenting and personally bad choices. These same individuals might insist that these choices and parenting styles are wholly unrelated to any hypothetically existent sociocultural or evolutionary factors of human development that might be part of the reason for the prevalence of these types of violent crimes. While it is true that neglectful and unsuccessful parenting styles and ill-informed personal decisions do substantiate many of the subliminal motivations in an individual's life to lash out with violence, it is also true that this reasoning does not account for all reasons as to why these shootings happen, and

therefore cannot be accredited as a complete explanation for these crimes.

Mass shootings are not the only type of horrific violent crimes that are perpetrated by troubled youth in this nation. Only recently did the U.S. witness a crime with numbers of wounded, but without one single shot fired throughout. On the morning of Wednesday, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, students at Franklin Regional High School in Murrysville, Pennsylvania (a small town near Pittsburgh) were assembling for class. Just before the start of classes, a sophomore student at the high school named Alex Hribal drastically changed the lives of 24 students and faculty, as well as those of an entire community. By 7:13am, Alex attacked and stabbed 21 of his fellow classmates, while also stabbing one security guard and injuring two other individuals. A few brave students attempted to stand up and block Alex's attack, but these individuals threw themselves into the 'line of fire,' so to speak, only to be left with gashes, requiring stitches in some cases. Many of the victims were in critical condition for days after this incident occurred.

According to first-hand accounts, the physical injuries were not the most disturbing element of this tragic event. In an interview taken shortly after the stabbing had occurred, Nate Moore, one of the individuals who witnessed the incident from the beginning and attempted to intervene, told local news reporters that the scariest part of the entire event was the look on his Alex's face throughout the attack. Nate told reporters that the look on his classmate's face was just as it had been every other day in school for as long as he'd known him. It was not as if Alex made an effort to "show no fear," as Richardson, Brown & van Brakle note in their article as one of the values that many violent youth offenders tend to hold in high regard during their

crimes (2013). There was no notable shift in his facial expression that would denote any frustration, anger, or hostility. Nate told reporters that he did not say a word or alter his facial expression throughout his entire attack on his classmates. All throughout, Nate remembers only that Alex's face was completely blank. This act of seemingly random and inexplicable violence on school grounds becomes yet another incident the national community is compelled to reflect on the causal factors involved in this tragedy and what practical measures can be taken to prevent this violence in the future.

This discussion is not to bring attention to a problem that has no attainable solution, and is therefore bound to a hopeless end. The U.S. national community must not use these violent outbursts as an excuse to mourn without merit, without mustering the strength to pull ourselves together and seek practical measures of change. Left alone, this can begin to alter our collective attitude towards attending to troubled young adults whose combined ideations and beliefs might lead them down troubled paths. The true purpose of spending so much mental energy revisiting the wounds left by incidences of school shootings and other acts of mass violence nationwide, has been to expand our minds about what the potential underlying causes of these tragedies might be. Improving the understanding of these causes will help to provide assistance for those whose life circumstances might make them more vulnerable to enact these crimes, as well as for those who mourn loved ones who were victims of these crimes. With open minds ready to work towards healing and peace, the nation should look towards a future where youth, nor any of those with whom we share our human community, do not carry out acts of extreme violence.

## References

- Birkland, T.A. and Lawrence, R.G. (2009). Media framing and policy change after Columbine. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(10), 1405-1425.
- CBS Radio Inc. (2014, April 9). 24 injured in stabbing at Franklin Regional High School. *CBS Pittsburgh*.
- Harrison, M. A. and Bowers, T. G. (2010). Autogenic massacre as a maladaptive response to status threat. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 21(6), 916-932. doi: 10.1080/14789949.2010.506618
- Hong, J.S., Cho, H., and Lee, A.S. (2010). Revisiting the Virginia Tech shootings: an ecological systems analysis. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15(6), 561-575. doi: 10.1080/15325024.2010.519285
- Macgillis, A. (2013). This is how the NRA ends. *New Republic*, 244(9), 16-23.
- Richardson Jr., J.B.; Brown, J.; and van Brakle, M. (2013). Pathways to early violent death: the voices of serious violent youth offenders. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(7), e5-e16. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2012.301160
- Sloven, N., Fitzmaurice, G., Williams, D., and Gilman, S. (2012). Common patterns of violence experiences and depression and anxiety among adolescents. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 47(10), 1591-1605. doi: 10.1007/s00127-011-0466-5