Elementary School Shooting: Who’s to Blame and Why Does it Matter?

Unless you have been in a cave in the last 36 hours, I’m sure you’ve heard of the awful tragedy in which at least 26 people, mostly elementary-aged children, were gunned down in Newtown, CT. I myself live in a “news cave” and still heard about it. The tragedy is everywhere you look, causing everyday citizens to feel shock, anger/rage, sadness, depression, anxiety and a gamut of other feelings that unspeakable things cause. Most of the op-ed articles and Facebook posts I have read involve all of the feelings mentioned above PLUS blame. It’s the gun owners’ faults; it’s the school counselor’s fault; it’s the parents’ faults; it’s the teachers’ faults. Of course, when you get down to the nitty gritty, it was 20-year-old Adam Lanza’s fault exclusively. He made the plan and the decision to do what he did. But because he’s dead, we need to find someone or something to blame.

Let’s Blame the Mental Health System:

The New York Daily News ran an article yesterday (12/14/12) that included this quote from a Lanza “family insider,” “This was a deeply disturbed kid. He certainly had major issues. He was subject to outbursts from what I recall.” The article also alleged that Lanza, who friends and officials said suffered from Asperger’s syndrome or a personality disorder, had a tortured mind. He was socially awkward and at times unstable, but also extraordinarily bright [italics mine]. A “longtime” family friend said that Lanza had a condition “where he couldn’t feel pain. A few years ago when he was on the baseball team, everyone had to be careful that he didn’t fall because he could get hurt and not feel it,” said the friend. This condition was probably Congenital Insensitivity to Pain with Anhidrosis, or CIPA for short. Most people who don’t have CIPA think that would be a great thing to have. To never feel physical pain or sweat ever again is quite appetizing. However, according to Dr. Michael E. Shy of Wayne State University School of Medicine, in folks with CIPA,

“20% of patients die due to hyperpyrexia [fever], usually before the age of three; body temperatures as high as 109°F have been reported. Patients have been known to bite off the tips of their tongues when they develop dentition [teeth] and self mutilate their lips and the tips of their fingers. Most children [but obviously not all] are also mentally retarded with IQs between 41 and 78 [Mental Retardation is considered when IQ test scores are 70 and below].

There are no specific cures for inherited neuropathies [nerve desensitivity]. Most patients will require some form of physical or occupational therapy. Orthotics or ankle bracing is the corner stone of foot care and if done well, can help patients ambulate [get around] independently throughout their lives. Difficulties with fine movements of the fingers are also frequent in patients with [CIPA]. In these cases, occupational therapy can help with techniques to aid in buttoning, zipperng and other hand movements requiring dexterity. A final point concerns medications and their affects on [CIPA] patients. In general medications that have clear neurotoxic [poisonous to the nerves] affects such as vincristine [Oncovin, used to treat Leukemia and some other forms of cancer] or cis platinum [another chemotherapy drug] should be avoided, if medically possible, in [CIPA] patients because they are likely to exacerbate the already existing neuropathy [make things worse].”

It doesn’t sound that great after all, does it? The mental strain in CIPA patients can reach dysfunctional levels quickly, depending on the IQ and the age of the patient. The higher the IQ and age, the faster dysfunction can emerge unless there’s intervention.

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1 Shy, Michael E. Inherited Peripheral Neuropathies, Wayne State University School of Medicine.
If Lanza also had Asperger’s Syndrome, that would have made him incredibly smart and creative, but socially awkward. Asperger’s is on the Autism spectrum, near mild Autism, and it makes it difficult for the person to be able to understand what other people are feeling. It also makes social interactions extremely awkward, with the Asperger’s child not knowing why other kids react to him in certain (usually unpleasant) ways. Add that to CIPA, in which the other kids had to treat Lanza with special care (and Lanza most likely did not want the attention), and you have a very confused and disturbed child. If he had yet another disorder, my guess would be a form of Attachment Disorder, in which the child cannot form bonds with caretakers due to trauma or neglect. From what I understand, Lanza’s parents were divorced and wealthy – just the right cooking surface for Attachment Disorder, CIPA and Asperger’s Syndrome to heat up and blend. Add them all together and you have one very lonely and angry kid who can’t figure out what’s going on in his own mind. It could have tortured him every waking moment until he had worked out this plan, including his own demise.

I find it saddening that all of these “family friends” have come forward to the media, stating that he had all of these quirks and possible mental problems, yet not one of them (or anyone else), forced him to go to see a psychiatrist and/or a counselor. In theory, a teacher or counselor at school would have referred him for psych services years ago just because of the CIPA and/or Asperger’s if his own parents hadn’t. It is illegal not to report things like this. With Attachment Disorders, once a person moves through puberty and adolescence, the door is often closed to psychiatric help. The behavior is set and since he is now an adult, no one can force him to seek out services; besides, by then everything we find dysfunctional has become perfectly normal to the patient. Do these facts and allegations make Lanza’s parents, teachers, counselors or brother to blame? I think every reader here can at least acquiesce to the fact that these folks did add to the violent cocktail stirring in Lanza’s mind, even if their only crime was doing nothing. But it was still Adam Lanza’s choice to do what he did. It was not an impulsive decision. In fact, he got “warmed up” by shooting his own mother in the face before he drove her car to nearby Sandy Hook Elementary, where his mother was thought to have volunteered in the past.

**Let’s Blame Adam’s Family and Friends:**

Much of this topic has already been discussed in the previous sections of this article. From what I have been able to learn from my research, Adam was a very troubled, quiet guy who was never popular, but never really treated cruelly at school. Adult neighbors described him as “a good kid.” Young people who knew him from school referred to him as a “brainiac.” So what kind of home and social life did this smart, polite kid have and how did it contribute to his decision to kill? My guess is that he didn’t have much of a social life at all, and if he did maintain any friendship, it would be with another kid like Adam. With wealthy divorced parents and a remarried father, I’m guessing that Adam felt unimportant, invisible, angry/rageful (which is a common cover for pain and suffering) and longed for some type of revenge. Oh yeah, and he had resources. If you’ll recall, his first victim was his mother, which tells me that things were not all right in that household. As his suicide indicates, he was also probably severely depressed and experienced a high level of self-hatred.
I have never been to Adam Lanza’s house or met his folks or even visited his town. So, all of the things I write here are educated guesses, based on facts coming out of my own research and my experience and training as a mental health professional. I don’t know if Adam hid his pain well. From interviews I have read, some people claim to have known him as very troubled, while others say he was quiet, polite and a good kid. With any of the alleged illnesses he had, he would have developed a coping mechanism to appear charming – or at least non-threatening – in front of others, especially adult strangers. However, when you live with someone (as in your own children), you get to know them pretty well. Did Lanza’s mom choose to ignore her youngest son’s mysterious behavior, attributing it to his post-adolescent mood swings? Did she try to buy his love with expensive gifts or money? I mean he had to have gotten a good deal of cash to buy those guns. Was Adam even unpleasant to his mother? And what about his brother Ryan? He was the police’s first suspect after the shooting and was taken into custody before they got to the right man. Apparently, everything with Ryan checked out – he has a good job, is an upstanding citizen and a great addition to productive society. But what did he say about Adam? What did he know? And why is there no picture of Adam available after 2005?

I remember back in 2001 when I was following the Andrea Yates case. At one point, my full contempt was focused on her husband for not paying attention to her and for keeping her pregnant, against doctor’s orders. Sure, those were facts, but not all of them. Andrea had allowed her husband to treat her like that. So, I am again hesitant to point my finger exclusively at Lanza’s family and friends (if he had any), though I am sure that they were a big part of the problem. However, Adam Lanza still made the choice to kill those kids. The question of whether or not he knew the difference between right and wrong will never be answered, but premeditation suggests some knowledge of the consequences he’d face.

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2 Picture source: http://kdvr.com/2012/12/14/newtown-conn-elementary-school-shooter-identified-as-24-year-old-ryan-lanza/
Let’s Blame Guns (and People Who Have Guns):

I live in Texas, so I am no stranger to firearms. I’ve never owned a gun, but I do have a date to go with a friend to a firing range and to choose a gun for personal protection. This date was made way before the CT shootings; so recent events did not influence my decision. What got me thinking about buying a gun was an incident that happened on my own street a few months ago. A neighbor heard someone breaking in to his neighbor’s house when the no one was home. So he got his weapon and ran out in his boxer shorts and a t-shirt looking for the perpetrators. I watch TV as much as the next person and have seen plenty of guns and shootouts on the small (and big) screen. But nothing could have prepared me for standing in my driveway, watching a white man in his sleepwear run toward me waving a handgun around. I had never met him and wouldn’t have known him from anyone else until my next-door neighbor recognized him as a “good guy.” And he did get the perps in time for the police to haul them to jail. But could this “good guy” have snapped and been on his way to kill all of his neighbors? Thankfully, not that day.

One comment that I came across in my research was a quote from an unknown person saying that, “if the teachers had had guns, no one would have been killed except that jackass.” REALLY? So all teachers in elementary schools should carry concealed weapons now? Is THAT the problem? If the teachers were packing, chances are there would have been even more killing and/or injuries because of the simple fact of human nature. Most elementary school teachers are women. Unless a woman has served in the military or has grown up with brothers or around guns, firearms generally make them nervous. Sure, they’d have to take a gun safety class to get their weapons, but does that really get a person ready to face a mass shooting? The possibilities are endless in this scenario: teachers shooting blindly, not shooting at all when directly threatened, snapping under the pressure and killing themselves…it goes on and on. Whether you like guns or not, people really do kill people, not the guns themselves. Guns are merely tools, like hammers and vacuum cleaners (which could both be used to kill someone).

These are the guns that Adam Lanza had with him on that fateful day:³

Obviously, Lanza wasn’t kidding or planning just to scare people. The cost estimates listed are just that – estimates. The guns could have been stolen (costing significantly less), bought legally or purchased on the black market (costing significantly more). I don’t know where a 20 year-old kid would buy an assault rifle legally, but I’ll admit that I don’t know everything. In fact, about 75% of firearms used in mass shootings are obtained legally.\footnote{Source: http://motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map} Where did Adam get the cash to buy the guns? His wealthy parents? Did he rob people over time? Did he have a nice job at the local grocery store to save his paychecks from? Where did he meet the people he bought the guns from? His grocery store co-workers? At the local gun range? From that nice old lady that called him “polite”? The fact is that Lanza was able to get these very powerful firearms and take them into an elementary school. The guns did not sprout legs and get to the school themselves, before squeezing each other’s triggers. They weren’t already lying around on the playground, suddenly to animate and fire themselves magically. A \textit{person} brought them into the school and \textit{made the choice} to use them. Period. Finding access to the guns was just a small part of this overall plan – and if someone wants something badly enough, he or she \textit{will} find a way to get it.

\textbf{Let’s Blame the Media:}

Sure, we’re surrounded not only by fictional shootouts, but real ones as well (think Virginia Tech, Columbine and UT Tyler). Other people have written the script and unfortunately, many people have used it before Adam Lanza did. It’s perfectly reasonable to assume that one or more of these other tragedies were models for Lanza’s plan. But let’s also look at the similarities often found among mass shooters:

- \textbf{Revenge as a motive}: as of now, I can’t tell you why little kids were involved in this plot; most likely, the adults (perhaps a teacher) were the targets and the kids were collateral damage. Most mass shooters take down their primary target(s) first and then open fire on innocents. Criminologist Jack Levin of Northeastern University in Boston says, "At the most basic level, the revenge is directed against family members," who are the main victims in about 30 percent of all mass killings.\footnote{Quote source: http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/experts-track-the-patterns-of-mass-murders-337604/} We now know that Adam's first victim was his mother.

- \textbf{Blaming society in general for problems}: if the shooter can’t take responsibility for the bad situations in his or her life, they’ll look outside themselves. Perhaps family or friends are not good candidates for the shooter’s wrath, so the gunman takes it out on society: shooting up a mall, a movie theater, and sometimes targeting a specific group of people for revenge (i.e. Virginia Tech).

- \textbf{Access to high-powered weapons}: Harvard Health Policy Professor David Hemenway says, "You need to understand how our society permits easy access to lots and lots of guns if you're going to understand why these kinds of killings happen so much in the United States as opposed to somewhere else. As far as I can tell, the psychological problems of these killers are not unique to the United States, but what
is unique is that it's so easy for people in the U.S. to get access to weapons.' Daniel Nagin, a criminologist at Carnegie Mellon University, agreed. "It's technologically impossible to kill a lot of people very quickly without access to these assault weapons," he said. Other countries, for example Switzerland, have more guns per capita than the United States; yet have never experienced a mass shooting.

- **Behavioral and psychological characteristics that mass shooters seem to share:**
  - Blames others for his/her problems;
  - More likely to have a chronic and/or severe mental illness than murderers in general;
  - Mostly a loner, with very few associations, if any, with friends;
  - Carefully plans out his/her attack, often taking months to "perfect" it;
  - Much more likely to be suicidal than a typical killer; he/she often considers his/her life not worth living, so he/she will either commit suicide or force the police to end his/her life.

Do those traits sound a little bit familiar? And I'm not only talking about Adam Lanza here. Think about the major mass shootings in the past and what we have learned about the shooters. They could have a club – with t-shirts.

**Let's Blame the Government/Society:**

George Birchard from the website "Daily KOS” has found some pretty interesting things while researching mass murder in America: "'We're not going to turn our country into one big fortress,’ said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminology at Northeastern University and one of the nation’s foremost experts on mass murder. 'People hate when I say this but it's true: This kind of tragedy is one of the unfortunate prices we pay for our freedoms.’

If there is one saving grace it is to be found in statistics. Fox has collected data on every mass murder in the United States going back to the mid-1970s and, though we certainly see and hear about these incidents more quickly today, the numbers of such incidents have not increased over time (ed note: This is an assertion not supported by scientific evidence.) He counted 19 in 1976 and 18 in 2010, with the range going from a low of seven in 1985 to a high of 30 in 2003. The FBI defines a mass murder as one in which four or more people are killed."  

One thing that may perpetuate our country's perpetrators is that the American family is practically non-existent these days. Some statistics that Birchard presents illustrate this: "The family indicators are as follows, along with the US rank: teenage pregnancy births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 (28 out of 28); paid maternity leave entitlement as a percentage of annual wage (29/29); public spending on family benefits in

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6 ibid.
7 ibid.
8 Source: http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/07/24/1113037/-Aurora-The-Sickening-Reality-of-America-s-Violence
The reality, the most important piece of a puzzle is the person assembling it. He could have say “STRESS?”

When we factor in healthcare, again Birchard’s statistics speak: “The indicators in this category, along with the United States’ ranking, are as follows: life expectancy at birth (24), healthy life expectancy at birth (24 [tied] out of 29), probability of not reaching the age of 60 (25), infant mortality rate (25), obesity (30), practicing physicians per capita (23), acute care hospital beds per capita (25 out of 29), psychiatric care beds per capita (25 out of 29).

There is no indicator for percentage of people with health care, perhaps because universal coverage is taken for granted in the rest of the developed world, which includes virtually all of the OECD members except Turkey and Mexico. On the combined index of health care indicators, the US comes in at 28, just ahead of Turkey and Mexico.” However, the United States ranks number 1 in military expenditures, imprisonment and gun violence. So we here in the US are the wealthiest people in the world with the most advantages in life. Why are we generally sick with bad doctors or no doctors at all, a shrinking average life span, homeless and with no affordable options for mental healthcare? This is what has happened to our sense of family – and by extension, our sense of community.

This country has changed so much just since the late 1970’s. Remember when you and your friends could run around the neighborhood all day, just as long as you were home for dinner? Not only are today’s parents too scared to let their kids bike alone through their neighborhoods, many parents don’t even have a home for their children to come home to. In 2010, it is estimated that 1.6 million children were homeless.

So sure, society and the government score pretty low on providing services to take care of the Adam Lanzas of the world, assuming, of course, that they would even seek help in the first place. People have lost their sense of national pride and have become cynical – myself included. Many folks won’t even look into government programs because they are already convinced that it’s a waste of time. Our government not only needs to stick behind its promises, but it also needs a major image overhaul. When I see Uncle Sam, I think “cheating, lying bastard.” How about you? However, Uncle Sam, lack of public policy and the rise in teen pregnancies did not make Adam Lanza’s choice to make his plan, collect his guns and kill those people.

So, Whom Can We Really Blame?

This question is like asking individual pieces of a puzzle which one is the most important. The corners will probably say they are because they make up the foundation. The sidepieces would say “ME!” because they perpetuate the shaping of the puzzle. The highly colored pieces that make up one of the puzzle’s images would claim importance because without them, it would be impossible to navigate through the puzzle at all. But, in reality, the most important piece of a puzzle is the person assembling it. He could have
bought it for himself or received it as a gift. He could have hidden his loathing for puzzles in front of his mom or his crush. He could have kept his building frustration locked away so no one would see him explode over a freaking puzzle. His friends may have the same puzzle and all of them finished it way before he did. It doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that he got the puzzle out, completed it and walked away. If the puzzle combusted, we wouldn’t blame the individual pieces, though we understand that their existence contributed to the ensuing fire. If the puzzle solver finished it and tossed all the pieces up in the air, just to stomp on them, we wouldn’t blame the person who bought him the puzzle or wonder why that person bought a puzzle for this obviously puzzle-hating boy. Responsibility rests on the boy himself.

Hopefully, more teachers, classmates, counselors, parents and clergy will pay more attention to the children passing through their busy lives in the future. Maybe the government will come across some gun control ideas that would prevent assault rifles being sold to teenagers. Perhaps parents will work together more, whether still married or divorced, to tune into the needs of their kids. But I suspect that things will most likely get back to business as usual sooner or later. If you’re still looking desperately to blame someone for this tragedy and you can’t place it on a dead man, I suggest looking in the mirror. What have you done to better your community? What about society as a whole? Have you been involved in government issues you care about? Have you volunteered to spread the word about how to establish a stable family, even if there’s just one parent? Have you gone to a lecture about the mental health of people like Adam Lanza? Have you told your children about him and what he did yet? If all of your answers are “no,” then I suggest you take a longer look in the mirror, give up your victim stance, and go make a change in the world, no matter how big or small. I know I am. Come join me!

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