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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**A GENERATION OF KILLERS:
MASS SHOOTINGS IN AMERICA AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE MARINE
CORPS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

JONATHAN C. GLOVER

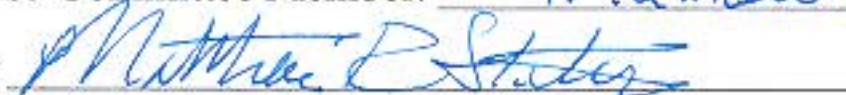
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Executive Summary

Title: A Generation of Killers: Mass shootings in America and what it means for the Marine Corps

Author: Major Jonathan C. Glover, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: There are a variety of reasons emerging from different schools of thought (i.e., religious, academic, medical) for the rise in mass shootings within the U.S. since 1999. An argument will be made that the most persuasive contributors to this disturbing trend are the copycat effect (due to increased detailed media exposure of such events starting with the Columbine shootings in Colorado) combined with untreated mental health issues.

Discussion: This study begins with a review of the three most famous mass shooting cases of the three decades. It is followed by the three most compelling explanations for the sharp increase in mass shootings; beginning with gun control issue, followed by a review of mental health considerations, and concluding with the impact of the copycat effect. Theories from diverse schools of thought are reviewed in order to help make sense of this disturbing trend and provide a recommendation to the Marine Corps.

Conclusion: As Marine Corps leaders, we must be aware of the social and cultural patterns that affect our Marines. Shedding light on a variety of perspectives that help explain the increase in mass shootings provides insight into the generational cohort from which our young Marines and new accessions are emerging. As a means of assisting the recruiting force with mental health screening, the Marine Corps should incorporate additional objective screening measures. Also, the Marine Corps should make spiritual health as much as an emphasis as the other two facets of total health – physical and mental.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

Each generation faces unique challenges that previous generations either did not encounter or were not of the same magnitude. These generational differences and its effect on the defining attributes of that cohort was the starting point for this research. Identifying one issue to focus on was a challenging necessity. The issue of mass killings, unfortunately, resurfaces frequently which spawned the idea of using it as a focal point. Upon commencement of the research, it was clear that issue of mass killings had many complexities that provided insight into the attributes, challenges, and physiology of the generation of individuals joining the Marine Corps or in the junior ranks of its force. Obviously, this research is just a tiny fraction of the tip of the iceberg on this subject but I believe it helps those not of the current generation an insight that will help with leadership and mentoring of these young Marines. I want to thank Dr. Lauren Mackenzie for her mentorship, guidance, and assistance with this paper.

Introduction:

The United States Marine Corps, like its sister services, recruits young men and women into service from the American society which it protects. Sixty-one percent of the Marine Corps is 25 years old or younger and 37% comprise the most junior ranks, lance corporal and below.¹ Its service members are a reflection of society and embody the cultural and psychological characteristics of the environment from which they originate and the greater generational trends and distinctions. Though the entry-level training pipeline, especially recruit training, does a very good job of indoctrinating new accessions with Marine Corps ethos, ethics and culture, it cannot erase 18 plus years of the negative generational characteristics of a recruit's maturation, education and experiences within American society. Therefore, leaders need to be cognizant of the generational characteristics and trends of the society from which young Marines originate.

One of the most disturbing trends in the past 15 years is the rise of mass shootings perpetrated by young men within the recruiting age demographic. Eric Harris, one of the Columbine High School murderers, was the son of a career Air Force officer and spoke with a Marine Corps recruiter about joining the Marine Corps just weeks prior to unleashing unthinkable devastation on his fellow classmates and school faculty. Though he was disqualified for service for both mental and physical health reasons, it illustrates the relevancy of exploring the leading explanations of this trend in the context of recruiting and leading a young force.²

There are a variety of explanations for the increase in mass shootings in the U.S. over the past 20 years. Although many illustrate the political or social opinions of the person providing the explanation, that does not completely discount the hypothesis. Gun control and the decrease in religious communities are two of the more controversial explanations - while untreated mental health issues and the "copycat effect" also help to account for this phenomenon. The varied

hypotheses for the sharp increase in mass shootings are worth reviewing as Americans attempt to make sense of this disturbing pattern. Different schools of thought (i.e., religious, academic, medical) attribute different reasons for the rise in mass shootings within the U.S. since 1999. An argument will be made that the most persuasive contributors are the copycat effect (due to increased detailed media exposure of such events starting with the Columbine shootings in Colorado) combined with untreated mental health issues. This paper will begin with a review of the three most famous mass shooting cases of the three decades. It will be followed by the three most compelling explanations for the sharp increase in mass shootings; beginning with gun control issue, followed by a review of mental health considerations, and concluding with the impact of the copycat effect.

Mass Shootings in American Society: A Review of Three Infamous Cases

The increase in the number of mass shooting in American society is more than a perception perpetuated by the 24-hour news cycle, it is an alarming reality. In December of 2012, Congress passed the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act 2011. This bill formally requested that the Department of Justice conduct an investigation into the perceived rise in mass shootings. It also provided clarity on the definition of a mass shooting defining it as “three or more killings in a single incident”. In the FBI’s report, it confirmed that mass shootings have increased at a startling rate since 2000. The FBI conducted their study by using the broader definition of “active shooter incidents”. An “active shooter” is used by law enforcement to discuss a shooting in progress that may change the law enforcement personnel’s response to the situation.³ This definition does not include violent crimes with weapons such as robberies, gang violence, etc....Within the 14 years analyzed, there were 160 incidents. On average, 11.4 incidents occurred annually with a sharp increase in the last 7 years, 6.4 incidents, from the first

7 years, 16.4 incidents. Forty out of 50 states and the District of Columbia had active shooter incidents.⁴ Forty percent of the reports incidents (64) meet the definition of a mass shooting.⁵ In addition to establishing the fact that mass shootings have increased, the report made two other observations that are relevant. First, only six of the shooters were female, all others male.⁶ Secondly, nearly a quarter of all the incidents occurred at an educational institution which is indicative of the potential age of the shooter.⁷ Thirty school officials, teachers and staff were either killed or wounded in these attacks in addition to many of the students.⁸ The data is conclusive, there is an increase in mass shootings, especially by males within military age, in the United States that must be explored to better understand the society from which are young Marines originate. Though each shooting is unique and there is must to learn from each, three shootings illustrate and encapsulate many of the issues that need to be explored: Columbine High School, Columbian, CO, 1999; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, VA, 2007; and Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newton, CT, 2012.

Mass shootings have occurred throughout modern American history. However, the mass murder/suicide at Columbine High School in Columbine, CO on April 20, 1999 was a paradigm shift. Many of the elements of the event are unique to modern society and are repeated in subsequent killings. Eric Harris, 18 years old, and Dylan Klebold, 17 years old, killed 12 students and teacher, wounding 24 others before taking their own lives. The motivation for the acts is as simple as it is terrifying; they wanted to kill as many people at their school as possible before killing themselves.⁹ They executed their assault with an arsenal of explosive devices, knives, saw off shotguns, a pistol and a carbine rifle.¹⁰ Both killers either displayed symptoms of depression and/or took antidepressant medication.¹¹ The wealth of information available provides a picture of two individuals who expressed extreme anti-social behavior with no respect

for human life seeking god-like power to extract vengeance on people who offended them either initially, accidentally or imaginatively. The Columbine massacre set the stage for other such killings.

America experienced another horrific mass killing almost exactly eight years later on April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech. Seung Hui Cho, 23 years old, had a history of mental illness and psychiatric treatment both prior to and while attending university.¹² After illegally purchasing two fire arms¹³, Cho killed 32 and injured 17 students and faculty¹⁴. The tremendous loss of life brought this iconic university to its knees with grief, as well as the nation. What makes this case even more of a painful event is that it could have been avoided. Numerous mistakes were made, primarily a lack of interdepartmental communication at the university in relation to Cho's mental instability.¹⁵ In the spring of 2006, he even wrote a paper for his creative writing class describing, prophetically, a man killing his fellow student before killing himself.¹⁶ No alarms were raised. Much like the killers at Columbine, Cho's mental health led to unusual atypical behavior which in turn resulted in social isolation.

America experienced yet another heart wrenching mass shooting in Newton, CT., December 14, 2012. This shooting was even more disturbing due its target: innocent children. Adam Lanza, 20 years old, in a little over 10 minutes entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 children and six adults before taking his own life. Prior to coming to the school, he killed his mother at their home.¹⁷ The shooter, like the previous two case studies, had a history of mental health issues.¹⁸ He used or had in his possession a Bushmaster Model XM15-E2S semi-automatic rifle, a Glock 20, 10 mm semi-automatic pistol, a Sig Sauer P226, 9 mm semi-automatic pistol, a Izhmash Saiga-12, 12-gauge semi-automatic shotgun, a Savage Mark II rifle. All were legally purchased by his mother.¹⁹ Lanza had a news article about a school shooting at

Northern Illinois University, a book about an Amish schoolhouse shooting in Pennsylvania in which five children were killed, a list of mass murders over the years with information about each and displayed a high interest in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting.²⁰ He was also an avid video game player some of which were violent and was very computer savvy.²¹

These are just three examples that encompass the many complex components of the mass shootings and, due in large part to the numerous victims killed, captured the nation's attention in the past 15 years. The tremendous loss of human life is staggering; so many innocent people's life cut short by a seemingly senseless act. It is logical to look for reasons for why this would increasingly happen. The common denominator in all these killings is the use of firearms which makes gun control an obvious topic of discussion in relation to these tragedies.

Gun Control Considerations

The gun control debate is a very contentious subject in America and the opposing sides tend to disagree dramatically, revealing either a strict or a more liberal interpretation of the Constitution. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows for the right to "keep and bear arms". However, there has been numerous Supreme Court cases that sought to define what that means such as *Robertson v. Baldwin (1897)*, *United States v. Miller (1939)*, *District of Columbia vs. Heller (2008)* and *McDonald v. Chicago (2010)*.²² It was the Heller decision that acknowledged the fundamental right to own guns but also stated that right has limitations therefore providing legal justification to gun control regulations.²³ There were two such regulations that were significant. First, The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act that was signed into law in 1993 stipulated a five-day waiting period and background checks on gun purchases as well as made it illegal to sale them to the mentally ill. It also established the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS)²⁴ Secondly, the Violent Crime

Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994 more popularly called the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (AWB). It forbade the sale of semiautomatic assault weapons and high capacity magazines. It had a ten-year life span and was not renewed when it expired in 2014.²⁵

After every mass shooting tragedy, the gun control debate reemerges and new laws and regulations are introduced at both the state and federal levels. The investigation into the Columbine High School shooting revealed that the shooters used guns purchased at a gun show, (which by law does not require back ground checks), by a friend, who was 18 and legally able. This became known as the “gun show loophole”.²⁶ Within the year of the shooting over 800 bills were introduced to regulate guns and to correct the “loophole”. About 10% were successful and the “gun show loophole” was not one of them.²⁷ The Virginia Tech shooting saw a similar reaction. The biggest failure leading to that massacre was the failure to report the shooters mental health issues to the Central Criminal Records Exchange which would have prevented him from legally purchasing the weapons that he would use to kill.²⁸ Among other laws, the NICS Improvement Amendments Act passed in 2008 designed to improve reporting and coordination between the states and federal governments. However, less than 100 mental health records from 24 states were submitted in a five-year period.²⁹

The rather meager success of gun control legislation in spite of these horrific tragedies speaks to the contentiousness of the debate and the lack of support to get these laws pushed though. An analysis of American public opinion is very intriguing and illustrative of the challenges to getting gun control legislation passed into law. Over the past 19 years there has been a steady increase in those who favor gun ownership versus those who prefer more gun restrictions. More specifically, there was a marked increase in those preferring gun ownership after both the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings, illustrating the will of many Americans to

defend themselves if they be confronted by a shooter.³⁰ Despite the legal foundation for restrictions on gun purchases and ownership and some legislative success, there has not been a groundswell of public opinion in support of the effort. The two sides of the debate are still just as far apart.

The fundamental difference in the opposing sides of the gun control debate lies in the perception of the primary cause of the criminal action: the gun used or the person using the gun, and how does that compare to a person's right to own guns. Those that favor control believe fewer guns results in fewer deaths. Those opposed believe the internal motivations of the shooter should be the primary focus not the weapon used and the restriction to gun ownership will not address the true issues but only serve to violate personal liberties. These differences can be described as fundamental cultural distinctions. Individualism and collectivism are useful sociologically conditioned characteristics to explain the two sides of the gun control debate.³¹ Individualism is most closely aligned with the values of capitalist democracies. It values self-reliance and personal achievement. Those in this category are opposed and suspicious of government interventions in personal and business spheres to act as an equalizer. It promotes a belief that everyone should have the same opportunities without special treatment for any one group.³² Individualist tend to own guns and be opposed to gun control efforts.³³ Collectivism, conversely, value group interest over self-interest and feel responsible to help others in need or that have a perceived disadvantage.³⁴ They are more likely to support gun restrictions.³⁵ Both arguments are far too simplistic to fully explain why a person takes the life of others but are a starting point for the discussion. This paper will explore both arguments.

Those who advocate more restrictive gun laws point to the high numbers of mass shootings in the United States, which has minimal gun control laws, when compared to other

industrialized western countries, which have significantly more restrictive laws on gun ownership. Within a thirty-year period, 1983 – 2013, the United States had more than double the number of mass shootings than the other 24 countries analyzed combined.³⁶ When mass shootings are examined internationally there is a direct correlation between gun ownership rates and the number of mass shootings.³⁷ Additionally, the only factor that is the best predictor of fewer death by guns is stricter gun control legislation.³⁸ The international correlation between more restrictive gun control laws and fewer gun related deaths is also seen internal to the United States. States with tougher gun laws tend to experience fewer deaths by guns with the converse being true for states with fewer.³⁹ There is one inconsistency with the data. The previously mentioned correlation is with gun violence not mass shooting. Actually, states with stricter gun laws have a higher rate of mass shootings. It is difficult to quantify the type of gun controls in place at the time of a mass shooting.⁴⁰ One data point is clear, however, there are more deaths when the shooter has more than one weapon and/or used high capacity ammunition clips.⁴¹ Needless to say, there is significant information for those who are inclined to advocate tougher gun restrictions to support their position.

There are some key proposals that advocates for more restrictive gun control laws make the case for. The first is universal background checks that keep guns out of the hands of felons and the mentally ill. This includes private gun purchases.⁴² Another is the banning of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines clips. This may not eliminate mass shooting events but it could reduce the number of victims in a shooting. This proposal has considerable merit when the Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School massacres are used as examples of the destruction those type of weapons can cause.⁴³ Lastly, more extensive safety features on guns. This would require gun manufactures to make these changes for the sale of new guns.⁴⁴ As

recently as January 2016, President Obama signed an Executive Action that implements these types of gun control measures.⁴⁵

Research shows that gun control laws are a deterrent to gun violence, with mass shooting remaining inconclusive, but this addresses only a fraction of the contributing causes of gun violence and mass shootings. Several other social factors also contribute the likelihood of deaths by guns, such as unemployment and the percentage of certain racial groups in a state.⁴⁶ Gun rights advocates look at these other factors focusing on the person doing the shooting vice the weapon being used. The personal right and liberty given by the Constitution should not be sacrificed when there is not definitive and convincing proof that gun control will reduce gun violence.⁴⁷ There are studies that counter the gun control advocates desire for stricter gun laws that show no support for the premise that gun control reduces crime rates.⁴⁸ High crime rates may actually provide popular support for gun control laws and are subject to a partisan divide.⁴⁹ Personal liberty and the inherent right of self-defense are principles that should not be compromised, according to gun rights advocates.⁵⁰

Gun right advocates point to defensive gun use and the associated benefits of concealed weapons, and the use of guns for recreational purposes as counterarguments to illustrate that the proposed restriction of personal liberty and rights does not outweigh the benefits. There is significant data to support the assertion that the number of lives saved by using a gun for protection, either through its use or threat of use, far exceed the number of gun homicides and suicides.⁵¹ There was also an almost immediate reduction, with subsequent declines in murder, rapes and aggravate assaults when states passed permissive concealed carry laws.⁵² These restrictions also serve to put limits on those that use guns for sport and hunting which is

primarily an activity for those in rural communities thus making it a cultural issue. This is argument ties back into the values of individualism.⁵³

The gun control debate does little to explain the increase in mass shootings in America. Both sides have plenty of evidence to support their position. It is at its core a political debate that does more to illustrate the personal beliefs and political philosophy of the person presenting the argument. It describes cultural distinctions between the very diverse segments of the American population. It also illustrates its political polarization. A very limited understanding of a person can be summarized by their opinion on the subject. This can be useful to understand the thought process and cultural heritage of young Marines with the recognition that we recruit from all walks of life from across the country and the gun control debate, of its self, as little direct impact on Marines and its mission. There are other aspects of mass shootings in America that have a greater impact on the Marine Corps, such as the issue of mental health.

Complicating Factors Associated with Mental Illness

Mental health is serious issue in the United States. There are correlations between it, lack of treatment or mistreatment and mass shootings. Seventeen nations were a part of the World Mental Health Survey, the United States had the highest rate of mental illness of those surveyed.⁵⁴ The United States is estimated to have over 18% of the population, 18 years old or older, with some type of mental illness.⁵⁵ Serious Mental Illness is a sub-category that includes those that have serious functional impairment which limits one or more major life activities. Over 4% of the population is estimated to fall within this range.⁵⁶ Many with mental health issues see the onset of their illness in adolescence; 75% are diagnosed by age 24.⁵⁷ Mental illness is not, in and of itself, an indicator of violence. Only a small percentage, those with symptoms of paranoia and delusions, have an increased risk of violent behavior.⁵⁸ However, some reports

indicate that as much as 60% of shooters in mass killings since 1970 displayed those type of symptoms. This strongly implies that perpetrators of these crimes are often mental ill and ostracized from society.⁵⁹ In addition to being 15 times more likely to be involved in some sort of violence, they are also at a high risk of suicide.⁶⁰ Mental illness is not the only reason for increased violence in this population. Societal issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, isolation, lack of treatment and access to guns also contribute. Caution should be used when examining mental illness in the context of mass shootings but there is enough evidence to suggests that there is reason for concern especially with such a high rate of mental illness in the country.

There are barriers to treatment that adds to the potential risk some mental ill pose. One is the high cost of treatment. Mental illness ranks third as the most expensive health issue to treat in large part due the need for lifetime care.⁶¹ Due to the complexities of the illness a patient may not get the most effective care and not all practitioners accept insurance for evidence-based treatment due to relatively low reimbursement rates.⁶² Previously, to qualify for Medicaid, the largest funder of mental health care, someone with a mental illness needed to display a disability which generally meant some damage was already done. The 2008 Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act and the Affordable Care Act took positive steps to correct this flaw in the system and prevent preventive care.⁶³ There are still improvements required to ensure those most in need get care. However, the care must be sought out by the mental ill. Isolation is a tremendous barrier to mental health services.

In all three of the mass shootings reviewed earlier, Columbine, Virginia Tech and Newtown, social isolation was a contributing factor that led to the perpetrators unleashing their unthinking violence. Eric Harris and Dylan Kelbold expressed extremely anti-social comments. They felt that they had evolved above those around them with a fixation on natural selection.⁶⁴

This could have led to social isolation or was because of it. In either case it was a very pervasive part of who they were.⁶⁵ Seung Hui Cho, who had a diagnosed mental illness, displayed signs of social isolation as early as 6th grade.⁶⁶ His social awkwardness and socially disturbing behavior acutely manifested itself while at Virginia Tech leading to run ins with law enforcement. Adam Lanza became so socially withdrawn he ceased contact with his father and brother despite their many attempts.⁶⁷ For mental ill individuals, social isolation is a serious hindrance to care contributing to their anger and alienation.⁶⁸ It is also a potential symptom of a development of even more serious mental health issues, such as schizophrenia.⁶⁹ This isolation and the corresponding anger also prevents concerned family members from getting their loved one help due the privacy laws. Mental ill individuals over 18 years old must consent to care. This will the ability to mask homicidal intentions make getting in front of a catastrophic event.⁷⁰

After most mass shootings there is a renewed effort to identify the mentally ill in order to keep them from purchasing guns. A failure in mental health professionals properly reporting to databases that gun sellers use was a key component to Seung Hui Cho getting the guns to kill 32 people. Though no one thinks the mentally ill should have access to guns, this is also problematic. First, a registry of this kind misses the highest risk population, those that do not seek care. It may actually contribute to the growth of that population by dissuading some from getting care if they know they will be placed on a federal registry, especially people suffering with paranoia.⁷¹ Secondly, there are ethical questions for the practitioner. Does the patient need to consent to a risk assessment? Do they have a right to request not to be placed on a registry? What happens if the practitioner makes an error in their risk assessment?⁷² These are complicated questions that make this issue even more problematic. Lastly, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals may not be the right group to be the clearinghouse for gun ownership. There

are weaknesses with psychiatry such as being observationally based and evolving diagnosis that are contributors to violence. For example, schizophrenia, which is now known to have symptoms that manifest in violence, was “considered an illness of docility for much of the first half of the 20th century”.⁷³ Despite commendable efforts to keep guns out of the hands of the mentally ill in order to prevent the prevalence of mass killings, a national registry may not be the right answer.

As stated previously, not all mentally ill individuals are violent and likely to commit atrocities such as the one in Newtown, CT but it is clear that many of such events involve someone with a mental illness. It is not the illness that is the true source of concern but whether or not that illness is receiving the appropriate care. That care must start early and the societal financial cost must be addressed. Also, there must be more analysis done to determine why the United States has such a large population with mental illness. Care is vitally important but prevention and mitigation would be better.

Spirituality

One often overlooked but important component of mental health is spirituality. Spirituality is the “central way of life which guides people’s conduct and is the essence of individual’s existence that integrates and transcends the physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional and social dimension”⁷⁴. Religion is an extension of spirituality manifested as the organized expression of spirituality usually associated with rituals and social groups.⁷⁵ Though very similar, there are differences in the two, however, both contribute to the overall mental health of an individual. Despite its benefits, there is a decline in spirituality and religious beliefs in the United States. In 2010, compared to 1970, more than twice as many college and high school seniors said they never attended religious services and 75% more reported that religion had no importance in their lives.⁷⁶ Some scholars and conventional wisdom purports that

spirituality is replacing religion. That is not the case, as it seems secularism is replacing both. Since 1990, there is a considerable decline in college students who consider themselves spiritual, pray, or mediate.⁷⁷ The decline of spirituality and religion coupled with a generation that is experiencing a considerable increase in mental health issues should not be ignored but must be examined as part of the problem and therefore part of the solution.

Spirituality and religion's influence on mental health is complex, but is quantitatively relevant and a key factor. The social aspect of religion plays a part in its benefit. Positive social interactions are directly associated with fewer depressive symptoms with the converse also being true.⁷⁸ Altruism, gratitude, and forgiveness or important components of most religions and have direct impacts on positive mental health.⁷⁹ These aspects of spirituality and religion encourage a person to think and act beyond themselves applying empathy and compassion. These characteristics stand in stark contrast with the lack of empathy, coldness, and social isolation seen in most perpetrators of mass killings.

The impacts of spirituality and religion on children and adolescents is also worth noting. The ritual rites of passage associated with most religions such as baptisms, circumcisions, marriage, and coming-of-age ceremonies assist in helping individuals move from one stage of life to another.⁸⁰ Adolescents that are religiously involved have lower rates of drug, alcohol, and cigarette use. Drugs and alcohol tend to make mental health issues far worse and more destructive. Additionally, they are less likely to carry weapons and get in fights.⁸¹ Overall, not only is spirituality and religion good for positive mental health it is especially beneficial for the very peer group most susceptible to mental health issues.

The “Copycat” Effect

Another theory for the increase in mass shootings is the “copycat” phenomena or the idea that certain crimes appear more permissible with repeat exposure. This, of course, is exasperated by the role mass media plays in modern American culture. A recent study examined this idea by applying a self-excitation contagion model which is when “recent prior events increase the probability of another event happening in the near future”⁸² to school shootings similar to ones used by financial markets and social media resulting in fascinating conclusions. Using data from multiple sources between 1997 to 2103, the number of school shootings, on average every 31.6 days, allowed for this model to be applied.⁸³ The research found significant evidence to support the idea that mass killings and school shootings are contagious. Conversely, shootings that involve three or fewer people killed are not due in large part to the lack of sensationalism compare with a mass shooting, as defined previously, with four or more victims. The location of a school shooting also had no correlation on the subsequent shootings potential due to the large amount of mass media to exposer to such events.⁸⁴ There is the greatest chance of a “contagious” killing occurring with 13 days of the previous one. A mass shooting incites 0.30 new incidents and school shootings incites slightly fewer at 0.22 new incidents.⁸⁵ With a large number of shooters either committing suicide or killed by law enforcement during the event, it is hard to truly understand what motivated someone to carry out their crime. However, the data suggest there is some correlation between such events.

Another theory further builds on this premise. Malcolm Gladwell, in a *New Yorker* article, applied the theories of a Stanford socialists, Mark Granovetter, to school shootings. Granovetter sought to explain why people do things that seem contrary to who they are and what they think is right by using riots as a case study. What he concluded was that riots were not the

collective acts of individuals but a social process. During riots “people did things in reaction to and in combination with those around them”⁸⁶. People had different thresholds for violent behavior but once that threshold was met they too would participate in the violence of the riot. An otherwise upstanding citizen could loot a building if the right threshold was met. His modelling and research on this phenomenon had two pertinent conclusions. First, people differ morally in how they behave as an individual in comparison with the group. Secondly, this threshold of violence was contagious. Those that join the riot act in similar ways to those that instigated it to start with.⁸⁷ Gladwell applies these ideas to school shootings. School shootings seem to build on one another. Each one providing justification and a template for the next. The Columbine High School shooting appears to provide a script for all other shooters to follow. In eight out of 12 school shootings in the eight years after Columbine, the shooter made references to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Many other shootings that were, thankfully, prevented when investigated were clearly Columbine inspired.⁸⁸ The “riot” of school shootings is evolving with each shooter building on the next with slightly different motivations yet still reflective of the initial infection – the Columbine High School massacre. Each shooting provides the “go-ahead” for next. The lessons learned and after actions are provided to them 24 hours a day on multiple cable channels, not to mention the wealth of information accessible online, for weeks after the shooting. Each shooting is a contagious virus preying on the mentally unstable, social isolated or the psychopath just waiting for a reason to unleash their evil. Each transference breeds something a little worse, a little more disturbed, a little deadlier.

Both of the contagion theories have a common thread, the role of mass media. The media does not cause mass shootings but it is worth exploring what role they play in its spread and increased occurrence. With any high profile news story, the media, in an effort to keep the story

new and entertaining, reframes the story by focusing on different aspects and details of the event. This journalistic practice is called “frame changing.”⁸⁹ Frame changing also allows the media the opportunity to focus on certain frames therefore agenda-setting. Both frame changing and agenda setting are important to mass killings. As stated before, the vast amount of national media coverage over an extended period of time, and its many sources, of a school shooting negate the necessity of proximity to enable a contagious effect. A school shooting that happens in Lancaster, PA at an Amish school house is just as contagious in Pennsylvania as it is in California. The media coverage also provides subsequent killers with detailed information on what to do and what not to do if they decide to carry out their disastrous intentions. It provides the attention and notoriety many of the killers seek. It can also serve to manipulate public opinion of on the cause of the increase in mass shootings. The role guns play in mass killings is a highly contentious subject and to a lesser extent mental health. How the media frames the story and the overt or covert agenda setting makes the challenge of finding solutions to the subject then greater. The media owns some of the responsibility on the increase of mass killings. At the very least, it serves as a facilitator to the many challenges associated with the topic.

Recommendations

The salient factors that are part of the discussion of the rise in mass killings in America are important to the Marine Corps. It is a vehicle to understand the cultural of individuals joining the organization and to ensure Marines do not become part of the discussion either as a victim or a perpetrator. The gun control is a key argument when discussing mass killings. As discussed previously, there is no clear winner in the debate. Both sides, gun rights and gun control advocates, make convincing arguments each one with their own set of data points in support. What is important for the Marine Corps is not, necessarily, who is right or wrong but how the

discussion applies. The gun control advocates make the case that access to guns is a key factor in mass killings and how deadly they are. Therefore, that access should be restricted. Even if they were correct, this argument is not useful to the Marine Corps. Access to weapons, mostly highly efficient and deadly ones, is part of the job requirement. Additionally, a majority of Marines come from areas of the country where guns are a part of the cultural and daily life. So, at least internal to the Marine Corps, it is more useful to examine what the gun rights advocates perceive to be the motivations for mass killings and other crimes with guns. This requires a look at the individual using the gun vice the gun itself. Moral decision making, mental stability and self-discipline are required when access to guns is removed from part of the equation. The Marine Corps should emphasize the three aspects of health- mental, spiritual, and physical, equally and to a much larger extent, to ensure Marines have the internal fortitude and personal health to avoid falling prey to societal factors that contribute to the mass killing phenomenon. It should also institute more vigorous screening procedures in the accessions process to prevent individuals with mental health issues from entering the Marine Corps.

To ensure those with mental health issues do not enter the Marine Corps, Recruiting Command needs more detailed and thorough mental health screening procedures. Currently, mental health screenings are conducted within the recruiting stations by recruiters and leadership in conjunction with the screenings by medical professionals at the Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS). This process depends on the honesty of the applicants and the ability of the screener to detect when the applicant is not being truthful. Though it is a fairly proficient process it is still very possible to access an applicant with mental health issues due to their ability to deceive the screener and/or and lack of diligences. The Marine Corps should incorporate into

their screening process and test similar to the Tailored Adaptive Personality Assessment System (TAPAS) screening tool used by the Air Force and Army.

TAPAS is a complimentary assessment to the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). The ASVAB is used by all services to assess the cognitive ability of a potential applicant. TAPAS assesses non-cognitive personality characteristics providing the services a more holistic evaluation of a potential service member. TAPAS evaluates 28 dimensions of the Big Five personality traits: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Open to Experience.⁹⁰ The assessment is designed to be fake-resistant and provides “a comprehensive but non-redundant description of the lower order personality dimensions”⁹¹ previously stated. Though not a mental health evaluation, the assessment provides indications of the applicant’s personality characteristics that are indicative of potential issues. TAPAS is one example of an assessment the Marine Corps should incorporate into its accession process to make it more objective.

The Marine Corps should also emphasize the benefits of spiritual health to their Marines. In the current highly politically correct environment, talk of religion and spirituality is typically viewed as unacceptable, especially in a military structure where the influence of those of superior rank have, potentially, a large impact. This is a flawed view of the issue. A specific religious affiliation or belief does not need to be emphasized but the general benefits of believing in something bigger than yourself and having an ethical code to live by should be the focus. Marine Corps leadership should not shy away from spirituality. It should emphasize it as much as physical health. The social benefits of connecting with a local religious congregation would assist Marines and their families with the stresses of military life, i.e. constant permanent change of station moves, deployments, and extended field exercises. An emphasis on spiritual health

would also help to develop a fighting force that exhibits compassion and empathy. Though on the surface these characteristics may seem counterintuitive to a fighting force, they are important to good leadership, ethical decision making, and ability to operate not only in a kinetic environment but in stability and humanitarian operations. The Marine Corps needs members that understand the importance of unselfishness, discipline and self-sacrifice which are basic tenants of most religions. Spirituality helps individuals cope with stressful situations and challenging life events. With the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress, depression, alcohol abuse, and suicide in the Marine Corps and among veterans, encouraging a way of life and belief systems that assist with handling those issues are vitally important to the health of the force. Lastly, as identified previously, spirituality and religious beliefs tend to result in a much healthier person physically.

⁹²This is another form of force preservation. The Marine Corps should not be in the business of telling Marines which belief system to have or religious affiliation to be a part of but it should make an equal emphasis on spiritual health, along with mental and physical, as part of total health. This would serve as counterbalance to the lack of spiritual health and religious beliefs in the civilian society from which Marines originate.

Conclusion

Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook are just a few of the many (increasingly common) horrific mass killings that have plagued our country. Each one representing countless innocent victims, families, friends, and communities that felt the touch of a seemingly unthinkable crime. Each one leaves those that remain behind with far more questions than answers seeking to understand why. The gun control debate, mental health issues, a decline in spirituality, violent entertainment such as video games and movies, and the contagion effect are all factors contributing to the rise in mass killings in the United States over

the last 15 years. Each provide an interesting window through which to observe and analysis the issue. Issues concerning the increase, cost, mistreatment and under treatment of mental health illnesses stand out as one of the primary reasons for the recent uptick in such horrific acts. The contagion effect, which is facilitate by the national mass media's insatiable appetite to keep a sensual story alive as long as possible, also is a key component. Each aspect of the rise of mass shootings provides insight to the cultural and psychologically of the generational cohort maturing within this environment. It is important that leaders within the Marine Corps understand this environment in order to increase their knowledge of the current population of Marines as well as those who intend to join the Corps. They are the products of the world they come from. Eighteen or more years of cultural influences shape them in ways that are much different from the generation that the majority of their leadership originate. The entry-level training process, beginning with recruit training, allows for some baseline commonality. It introduces organizational ethos, ethics, and values but it cannot erase or replace societal influences prior to their entry into service. Nor should it. A military organization should not and cannot afford to isolate and completely separate itself from the very people and way of life it seeks to protect. But it is imperative for Marine Corps leaders to understand where their Marines come from in order to lead efficiently and continue the process of developing the organizational ethos started at recruit training. Without a good understanding of their native culture, that process is increasingly challenging. It is also important to become educated about this generational phenomenon to ensure Marines do not become part of that narrative, either as a victim or a perpetrator. Despite what side of the issues associated with mass killing is right, the core issues of access to guns, mental health issues, and media influence is just as much an issue inside the Marine Corps as in the civilian community, arguably more. Mass killings are a uniquely modern American issue that

are illustrative of larger cultural issues. These issues must be addressed in a level headed, unbiased way in order to truly identify the cultural and political motivators and enablers to this issue. The Marine Corps can lead the way by examining the topic and taking steps to ensure Marines do not become part of this disturbing trend.

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