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Scientists Try To Explain What Makes A Mass Murderer



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In the aftershock of an incident like [this morning's Colorado Batman shooting](#), we are left wondering why — what propels a person into a theater, to shoot strangers at random. Is there something in his brain that's blown a circuit? Is it how he was raised? Is it dark and twisted music, TV and video games?

There are three different types of "multicide," the killing of three or more people: mass murder, serial murder and spree murder. The incident early this morning in Colorado is a mass murder, the killing of a number of people at one time in one place.

Researchers have been trying to answer these questions for decades, but haven't come to a clear conclusion, though they have some hints. By studying previous incidents, researchers have determined that most mass murderers are men, they tend to spend a lot of time alone and have few friends, and they often feel alienated from the rest of the world. They are depressed, angry, and humiliated by the world.

"All of them are both sad and depressed enough to be willing to die and also angry or paranoid enough that they are blaming other people for their suffering and misfortune," forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz, explained in a [Q&A with SecurityInfoWatch](#). "Those are two of the critical ingredients, there has never been a mass murderer, acting alone, who didn't have both of those (characteristics)."

Neil S. Kaye, an assistant professor at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia noted that "The problem with that is that mass killers do this for multiple reasons, and even when you develop a profile of people at risk, 99 percent of them never go out and do anything bad."

It's rare that they are truly psychotic — hearing voices and the like — Michael Welner, a professor at [New York University](#), told [The Washington Post](#) in 2007.

"But they don't 'snap,' as you so often hear people say," Welner says. "It's more like **a hinge swings open, and all this anger comes out.**"

They plan everything about the killings, he says, except how to get away.



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"It's about suicide," Welner says. "It's about tying one's masculinity to destruction."

One interesting twist on the Colorado murders involves the shooter James Holmes himself. Usually mass murders commit suicide or force the police to kill them. Not many are taken into custody like the Colorado shooter.

Most of the time, police are left with only a suicide note or other physical things left behind to understand a mass murder's motivation. It will be interesting and useful for doctors, therapists and researchers to learn more about his motives to open fire in a theater full of strangers.

"It's very unusual for the killer to open fire on strangers. He's much more likely to be selective in his choice of victims," Jack Levin, a criminologist at Northeastern University, [said in a Q&A with The Daily Beast](#) from 2007. "The more indiscriminate the massacre, the more likely it is that mental illness plays a part."

Some, like Robert Hawkins, who committed suicide after shooting eight strangers in a Omaha mall in 2007, seem to be in it for the glory. In his suicide note, Hawkins wrote "now I'll be famous." Some researchers suggest that the way the media publicizes these mass shootings incites others to do the same, as suggested by Lavin in [The Daily Beast](#) interview.

We send the wrong message to our youngsters, and it's very simple: "You want to be famous, you want to get a lot of publicity, you want to feel important and powerful and dominant and in control of things? Fine, kill somebody, and while you're at it kill a lot of people, because then you'll definitely make the 11 o'clock news and you'll be on every cable news program in existence."

Research by Dietz indicates that the level of news coverage in the US lead to, on average, one [more mass murder](#) within two weeks of the first. He explains what he thinks is going on in these copycat's heads:

When they watch the coverage of a mass murder, one or two will say — 'That guy is just like me! That's the solution to my problem.'... They will say this quite openly to you when you interview them. It's a conscious process... The massacre seems to offer them both an escape from their unbearable pain, and an opportunity to punish the people they blame for their plight.