


Analysis: Mass shootings signal a dubious 'back to normal' in America

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Americans have been saying for a year they want to get back to normal. Tragically, they're getting their wish.

With the gradual return to public places comes a specter the country was all too willing to set aside as it grappled with a pandemic capable of killing thousands of Americans a day. Mass shootings are starting to make headlines again, and though their return is most unwelcome, they've proved to be an inextricable part of life in the United States.

The latest mass killing left 10 dead at a grocery store. For the past 12 months, Americans have been vigilant in grocery stores to avoid contagion. Monday's slayings in Boulder, Colorado, reminded them that even with pandemic hope on the horizon, they should remain vigilant for a different reason.

Americans shouldn't have to fret about dying in a supermarket, or at a spa, or anywhere for that matter. Catching a bullet should be far from their minds, but with a return to American normalcy comes the reality that anyone could die for nothing, just about everywhere.

Seven mass shootings in seven days

Just as the country is conquering a new pandemic, an old, familiar epidemic makes its return. The last week has been a harbinger of what "back to normal" means for the US. The most recent string of senseless gun violence began March 16 when a shooter killed eight people at three Atlanta spas. The next day, a drive-by in Stockton, California, injured five people who'd gathered for a vigil.

Four people were hospitalized Thursday after a shooting in Gresham, Oregon. On Saturday, a pair of shootings at clubs in Dallas and Houston left a young woman dead and 12 people injured. Shortly thereafter, a shooter opened fire at what Philadelphia police termed an illegal party, killing one man and injuring five more.

Now, Boulder makes seven in seven days. When the gunfire at King Soopers stopped, 10 lay dead, including hero officer Eric Talley, the first policeman on the scene. His wife and seven children will pay an astronomical debt for their dad's bravery.

"Flags that have barely been raised back to full mast after the tragic shooting in Atlanta that claimed eight lives and now the tragedy here, close to home, at a grocery store that could be any of our neighborhood grocery stores," Colorado Gov. Jared Polis said Tuesday.

The King Soopers location where the melee unfolded is one of about 1,000 providers in Colorado working to repel the killer Covid-19.

Steven McHugh's son-in-law had queued for a dose of vaccine, like more than a million other Coloradoans. He was third in line, and his daughters chatted with their grandmother on the phone as he waited, McHugh said.

When the gunfire erupted, a bullet found its way to the woman at the front of the line. Her fate is unclear, as is much about Monday's shooting. Authorities haven't divulged a motive, but history tells us it won't make sense.

McHugh's son-in-law fled with the girls -- one in seventh grade, the other in eighth -- to an upstairs staffing area above the pharmacy and hid in a closet. Dozens more shots rang out, McHugh said, citing his son-in-law.

It was "extraordinarily terrifying," the grandfather told CNN, "and of course the little one's saying, 'The coats weren't long enough to hide our feet,' as they were standing behind the coats in the closet."

'A normal we can no longer afford'

The US government doesn't have a centralized database to track mass shootings, but anecdotal accounts indicate they were down during the pandemic as Americans were encouraged to stay home and many of their favorite gathering places were shut down. Former President Barack Obama called for action Tuesday, expressing disbelief that only Covid-19 could quell the gun violence the country has long endured.

"A once-in-a-century pandemic cannot be the only thing that slows mass shootings in this country," he said. "We shouldn't have to choose between one type of tragedy and another. It's time for leaders everywhere to listen to the American people when they say enough is enough -- because this is a normal we can no longer afford."

For the mass shootings that did unfold amid the pandemic, their locations were frighteningly familiar: a Buffalo, Minnesota, health clinic; a bowling alley in Rockford, Illinois; a Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, mall; parties in Rochester, New York, and Washington, DC; and a brewery in Milwaukee where, authorities would learn later, the gunman had been employed.

Gun violence is not a uniquely American phenomenon, but part of the rich American tapestry are threads of evil and violence: people (almost always men) who use weapons (often firearms) to snuff out innocents. Sometimes they're mentally ill, but more often they're just angry or vicious.

Their reasoning -- when it's attainable -- fails to provide closure. Outrage invariably erupts after each massacre. One side demands stronger gun laws. They're labeled un-American. Their opponents tout the Second Amendment. They're labeled callous. A stalemate ensues until the next killing, then repeat.

Within an hour of the Boulder killings, the National Rifle Association tweeted the Second Amendment. It later retweeted it. Nothing more.

It should surprise no one that a special interest group champions the Second Amendment. The amendment is a promise to every American, but 15 years prior to its ratification, the Declaration of Independence brought other promises of rights deemed "unalienable." The full guarantees of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" will never be achieved by Officer Talley, Tralona Bartkowiak, Suzanne Fountain, Teri Leiker, Kevin Mahoney, Lynn Murray, Rikki Olds, Neven Stanistic, Denny Strong, Jody Waters -- or any of the thousands of victims who fell before Monday in Boulder.

'Part of the American experience'

In all likelihood, another person died by a gun while you were reading this. Despite the media's breathless focus on mass shootings, gun violence takes myriad and frequent forms.

According to numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the country saw 14,414 homicides in 2019 -- about one every 36 minutes -- while another 23,941 souls fatally turned guns on themselves -- roughly once every 22 minutes.

In his statement, Obama called out other scapegoats: disaffection, misogyny, hate. The United States has monopolies on none of these, though it has special brands that can be pernicious.

Sandy Phillips, who co-founded the organization Survivors Empowered to console and guide survivors of gun violence, pointed to the victims who suffer in silence, because the killings of their loved ones are seemingly not important enough for the newspapers or the nightly news.

Doubt her? Google the details about last week's shooting in Stockton, California, one of the most racially diverse cities in the nation.

"We have mass shootings in slow motion every day in this country, in other neighborhoods that never get the press, that never get the opportunity to speak out about what's happening in their communities -- and we need to change that," Phillips, who lost her 24-year-old daughter Jessica Ghawi in 2012 to gun violence in Aurora, Colorado, told CNN.

Those neighborhoods often belong to minorities, who have had a particularly rough time of the pandemic as well. It's another crushing American axiom that society's ills tend to home in on people of color, and those victims must yell so much louder to be heard.

There will be much yelling in coming days, perhaps weeks. Obama is right when he said Americans possess the ability to "make it harder for those with hate in their hearts to buy weapons of war. We can overcome opposition by cowardly politicians and the pressure of a gun lobby that opposes any limit on the ability of anyone to assemble an arsenal."

The margins are thin, though, and the complexity of that American tapestry will be on display. A Gallup poll from late last year showed 42% of Americans had guns in their homes, a number that's risen since 2019. Another Gallup query indicated 57% of Americans want stricter gun laws, a percentage that's on the decline.

Former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe said "absolutely nothing" will stop the country's return to pre-pandemic mass violence if lawmakers refuse to curb access to the weaponry.

"This has become part of the American experience, and let's not forget: It's completely unique to us," he told CNN. "There's not another similar country on Earth that experiences the same number, the frequency of mass shootings as we do, and it is directly attributable to the profusion and the availability of guns, particularly high-powered assault-style weapons and how easily pretty much anyone can acquire them here in this country."