

Posted 4/5/09

LOOKING BEYOND THE GUN BARREL

Trying to draw lessons from a wave of senseless shootings

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

Only yesterday Pittsburgh (Penn.) police officers responded to a 911 call of a domestic disturbance. [Richard Poplawski](#), 22, was lying in wait, armed with a rifle and handgun and wearing an armor vest. As soon as police entered he opened up with a barrage of fire, killing three officers and wounding a fourth. During the ensuing standoff Poplawski, a gun enthusiast, called a friend and told him that his rights were being infringed on by “the Obama gun ban that's on the way.” Hostage negotiators eventually talked Poplawski into surrendering. That’s when his frightened grandmother (she’s the one who called police) came out of the basement.

One day earlier, in the quiet enclave of Binghamton (NY), [Jiverly Wong](#), 41, donned his own set of body armor, grabbed two pistols and a rucksack stuffed with ammunition and drove to an immigrant service center. Blocking the rear exit with his car, he barged in, guns blazing. Within moments fourteen lay dead, including himself. Acquaintances said that the middle-aged Vietnamese man, who was taking English lessons at the center, was angry about losing his job and despaired of his language skills.

What causes such tragedies? What can be done to protect officers and citizens from armed madmen? Searching this website’s [news archive](#) for similar incidents we found eleven multiple-victim shootings since January 2008 that lacked a traditional criminal motive. We just mentioned two. Here are the rest:

- In March 2009 [Robert Stewart](#), 45, walked into the North Carolina nursing home where his estranged wife worked. Drawing two pistols, he killed seven elderly patients and a nurse and wounded three others, including a police officer. Stewart’s wife escaped injury. Stewart was shot by police and arrested.
- Two weeks earlier [Michael McLendon](#), 28, an unemployed Alabama man with a “life-long fascination with guns” armed himself with two assault rifles, a handgun and shotgun. Before the day was done he had killed his

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mother, seven relatives and two bystanders, wounded six others, including two officers, and committed suicide. Survivalist gear and armored vests were found in his residence. McLendon, who had quit a job for no apparent reason, was estranged from his family. He once wanted to be a cop but flunked out during his first day in the academy.

- In September 2008 [Isaac Zamora](#), a seriously mentally ill 28-year old Washington State parolee with an extensive criminal record went on an armed rampage. He killed six, including a deputy sheriff, before he was arrested. His motive? “I kill for God.” Zamorra’s been declared incompetent. Neighbors knew that he had rifles and pistols but apparently told no one.
- In July 2008 [Jim Adkisson](#), 58, walked into a Kingston Pike (Tenn.) church service and blasted away with a sawed-off shotgun, killing two parishioners and wounding six before he was wrestled to the floor. An unemployed mechanic, he had written a manifesto railing against the “liberalism that’s destroying America” and vowing to kill Democrats “til the cops kill me.”
- In June 2008, soon after an argument with his supervisor got him booted from a Kentucky plastics factory, [Wesley Higdon](#), 25, called his girlfriend and said he was going to kill himself. But first he returned to the plant with a .45 cal. pistol and shot and killed his boss and four coworkers. Then he committed suicide.
- In March 2008 Virginia Beach (VA) apartment dweller [William Smith](#), 52, opened fire with two assault rifles, killing a 32-year old woman and an elderly man and wounding three others, one critically. He then killed himself. Smith was upset that he was being evicted for acting weird and banging on the walls. One of the residents had thought to call police about Smith’s increasingly aberrant behavior but never did.
- Also in March a Palm Beach (Fla.) handyman opened fire in a Wendy’s restaurant with a 9mm. pistol, killing a paramedic and wounding four other patrons before turning the gun on himself. Detectives learned that the shooter, [Alburn Blake](#), 60, was ill and had been behaving oddly. Why the restaurant? It’s where he and his estranged wife used to dine and

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argue.

- In February 2008 [Charles Thornton](#), 52, walked up to a police officer guarding a meeting of the Kirkwood (Mo.) city council, pulled a large-caliber revolver and shot him dead. Taking the officer's weapon, Thornton killed a second policeman, a councilwoman and two officials, and seriously wounded the Mayor and another person. Responding officers then shot him dead. Thornton, a local businessman, had been embroiled in disputes with local officials. He reportedly told his brother that he was "going to war."
- Also in February a veteran LAPD SWAT officer was killed and another was wounded by a mentally ill man armed with a handgun and shotgun. Officers entered the home after [Edwin Rivera](#), 20, called 911 to report, as it turns out correctly, that he had killed his father and two brothers. Rivera was shot dead by a police sniper.

Reducing these episodes to numbers, here's what we learned:

A total of sixty-six persons died of gunshot wounds, including five shooters who committed suicide and two who were shot by police. Fifty-nine innocents also lost their lives. Among them were seven police officers, eleven family members, five coworkers and 36 outsiders (persons unconnected with the shooter.) The number of dead per episode ranged from three (all police officers) to fourteen (thirteen outsiders plus the shooter.)

Five incidents started out or were influenced by family disputes. Five shooters professed political or social agendas.

There was a pronounced split in shooter age. Six were over 40, with four over 50. The other five were all in their twenties.

The shooters led uniformly bleak lives. As far as is known, none was living with a spouse. Seven, perhaps eight were unmarried; three were divorced or estranged. Not counting the one who came back to kill after being fired, only two were gainfully employed. Four had documented mental problems; two had mental problems plus serious criminal records (each wound up killing a police officer.)

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Nine shooters were armed with handguns, four had rifles, three had shotguns, and three a combination. Three wore body armor. One, Jiverly Wong, whom a [criminologist](#) aptly described as a “pseudo-commando,” was responsible for the largest toll, killing thirteen. Another, McLendon, a gun enthusiast, was the second most prolific killer, killing ten and wounding six, including two officers. The third, Poplawski, also a gun enthusiast, murdered three officers.

Can such tragedies be prevented? It’s unlikely. Families and friends described the shooters as angry men, displeased with their personal circumstances and mad at a system that they thought had failed them. That generalization is probably applicable to many fans of talk radio. Given just how much nuttiness there is, to say nothing of the ready availability of firearms, keeping lunatics from acting out their deranged fantasies seems hopeless.

Well, there *is* something that might prove useful. We left out the [recent murder of four Oakland officers](#) from the list because that shooter had what he considered a “rational” reason: he didn’t want to go back to prison. Cornered in an apartment after shooting two officers at a traffic stop, he fired again when police stormed in. Two more officers fell dead. SWAT said they didn’t wait because they couldn’t readily evacuate the building where the shooter took refuge. It’s a decision that will surely be under the microscope for a long, long time.

After the [Columbine high-school massacre](#) police across the country resolved to move in quickly to keep citizens from being harmed. Academies now train patrol officers to form impromptu entry teams. Taking immediate action seems reasonable when facing expressive shooters like Wong, McLendon, Poplawski, whose commitment to redress real and imagined grievances poses a grave risk to anyone they might come across. But for criminals less concerned with making a statement the traditional “surround and call out” strategy may be more appropriate. It’s something to consider before the next time police face the unthinkable.