

Posted 8/8/10

SAY SOMETHING

Is society powerless in the face of mass shootings?

911: "State Police."

Shooter: "Hey, is this 911?"

911: "Yeah, can I help you?"

Shooter: "This is Omar Thornton. The shooter over in Manchester."

911: "Yes, where are you, sir?"

Shooter: "I'm in the building...ah, you probably want to know the reason why I shot this place up. Basically this is a racist place."

911: "Yup, I understand that."

Shooter: "They treat me bad over here and treat all other black employees bad over here, too, so I took it into my own hands and handled the problem. I wish, I wish I could have got more of the people."

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Connecticut state trooper William Taylor was overseeing dispatch at Troop H on the morning of August 3rd. [when a call came in](#) from the man who just [gunned down eight co-workers](#) at a Manchester liquor warehouse. It seemed that the killer couldn't wait to justify his brutal act and bemoan what he considered a low body count.

Omar Thornton, 34, had quit his job minutes earlier after watching a private investigator's video depicting him stealing beer from his delivery truck and placing it in a car. After resigning he went to the kitchen on a pretext, retrieved two 9mm pistols from his lunch box and exited, guns blazing. He ultimately holed up in a corner of the plant and dialed 911. Four minutes into the call, as a police SWAT team closed in, he set down the phone and put a bullet in his brain.

Thornton, a gun enthusiast, frequented a nearby shooting range. He had a shotgun in his car and more weapons at his home. All had been legally purchased.

Shootings by purportedly "ordinary" people have become such a common feature of American life that we seldom give them much thought. Here are some of this year's other examples:

[July 12, 2010 – Albuquerque, New Mexico.](#) An armed man walked into a plant where he once worked and shot six persons, killing two, then turned the gun on

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himself. Robert Reza, 37, had recently split up with his live-in girlfriend, who was still employed there and whom police suspect was his main target. She was gravely wounded.

[June 6, 2010 – Hialeah, Florida](#). A man with a .45 pistol shot and killed his estranged wife outside the restaurant where she worked, then burst inside, killing three female employees and wounding three. He committed suicide when police arrived. Gerardo Regalado, 38, was despondent about his failed relationship and apparently angry at women.

[May 6, 2010 – South L.A. County, California](#). A man armed with an assault rifle broke into a home and fired numerous rounds, killing his former girlfriend, her brother and their father and wounding two others. Joseph Mercado, 26, then set out to burn down the house. He might have succeeded had he not been confronted by a patrol deputy who heard the gunfire. Fortunately, the officer also had an assault rifle and wounded Mercado. The killer's excuse? He was mad at his ex about a child custody dispute.

[April 14, 2010 – Chicago, Illinois](#). A 32-year old man shot and killed his pregnant wife and infant son, a pregnant 16-year old niece and a 3-year old niece and critically wounded his mother and a 13-year old nephew. He also fired a round at his fleeing 12-year old niece but missed. Finally out of ammo, James Larry asked cops to shoot *him*. They didn't.

[January 17, 2010 – Appomattox, Virginia](#). A man shot and killed eight persons, including his sister and brother-in-law and their two children, then fired on officers and a police helicopter, puncturing its fuel tank and forcing it down. Christopher Speight, 39, a sometime security guard, had dozens of guns on his property, including a number of assault rifles. He also had an assortment of homemade bombs.

[January 7, 2010 – St. Louis, Missouri](#). A heavily armed worker stormed into a manufacturing plant and started blasting away. Timothy Hendron, 51, a thirty-three year employee, was armed with an assault rifle, a shotgun and two pistols and wore a fanny pack stuffed with extra ammunition. By the time it was over he had slain three co-workers and wounded five. Hendron was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the firm and was having conflicts with superiors.

Not enough? Going back to 2009, remember the [North Carolina man](#) who went to the nursing home where his estranged wife worked and shot eight dead and wounded three,

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including a police officer? How about the [Alabama man](#) who armed himself with two assault rifles, a handgun and shotgun and killed his mother, seven relatives and two bystanders and wounded six more, including two cops? Or, in 2008, the [Kentucky man](#) who settled an argument about workplace safety by getting a .45 pistol and killing his boss and four others?

And on and on. Editorial reactions to the carnage run the gamut from [bitter denunciations](#) of our firearms-obsessed culture to limp pieces that bemoan the tragedies but offer little in the way of a remedy. In an otherwise thoughtful [commentary](#) about the Timothy Herndon massacre, St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist Bill McClellan took such pains to prove that he's no reflexive gun-hater that even after what happened in his city he endorsed (for others) the idea of bringing guns to work for protection. "I say sure. If it makes you feel better, go ahead."

But will these firearms be wisely used? To paraphrase the gun lobby's favorite jingle, (inanimate) guns don't kill people, (fallible) people do. From what he wrote, Mr. McClellan would have probably said "go ahead" to Omar Thornton, Robert Reza, Timothy Hendron and Wesley Higdon (the Kentucky killer.) He would have probably been fine with arming the others, too.

Indeed, there's no indication that any of the killers bought their guns intending to misuse them. Several, including Thornton, the Manchester shooter, were gun aficionados. Yet in fits of anger, jealousy and just plain craziness, misuse them they did. In the end, it was the presence of a firearm at a particular point in time that made all the difference. Summarizing [recent findings](#) that weak gun laws and high rates of gun ownership lead to more gun deaths, the Violence Policy Center's Kristen Rand said, "The equation is simple. More guns lead to more gun death, but limiting exposure to firearms saves lives."

Well, that's fine. Yet the unmistakable trend is in the direction of making guns available to everyone, all the time. Perhaps it's time to tackle the threat posed by gun misuse as we do with other causes of death, say, impaired driving. In 2007 41,259 persons were [killed in traffic collisions](#), including 29,072 occupants of passenger motor vehicles. DUI's (BAC of .08 and above) figured in 13,041 deaths. According to the [CDC's injury reporting system](#) there were 31,224 deaths from firearm injuries during the same period. Ninety-seven percent (30,335) were violence-related, meaning purposeful; fifty-six percent (17,352) were suicides.

With more people having and carrying more guns you and I and our families are at increasing risk of being shot by someone who may suddenly go berserk. Counting on

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armed citizens to come to the rescue is delusional – in fact, they’re part of the problem. So here’s an idea. Let’s use the White House as a bully pulpit for a national campaign to remind everyone – gun owners, their friends, family members and co-workers – that guns and anger are a lethal combination. “Friends don’t let [angry] friends pack guns.” “If your [angry] friend has a gun, say something.” Take out ads in print and on TV, put up billboards, place posters at gun stores and firing ranges. It’s something worth considering.