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ALL IN THE FAMILY

Men are gunning down their spouses and children. Is anyone paying notice?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. A recent FBI report analyzing assaults by “active shooters” between 2000 and 2013 identified 160 events in which 486 persons were killed and 557 were wounded. (These figures include nine law enforcement officers killed and 28 wounded.) Two of the most significant episodes occurred in 2012: the theater killings in Aurora, Colorado, with 12 dead and 58 wounded, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, with 27 dead and two wounded.

To be included incidents had to involve a “mass casualty,” meaning at least three deaths. In an effort to limit the study to “active shooter” incidents – an ill-defined category at best – the FBI excluded killings connected with gang or drug crime and those stemming from “contained” residential and domestic disputes. If nothing else, these measures greatly limited the sample size. In all, the report included only seven lethal, multi-victim shooting events that occurred solely within residences, an average of less than one a year.

As we know, episodes of lethal domestic violence, including those that meet the “three or more dead” threshold, are far more frequent. A quick-and-dirty Google search of family killings with at least three casualties revealed at least six such episodes in 2014 alone, resulting in a total of 32 deaths, 27 by gunfire (one incident did not involve firearms.) Twenty-two victims were children, ranging from infants and toddlers to youths in their teens. Unsurprisingly, each assailant was a male. Four were fathers, and one was a grandfather. Two shooters were arrested, three committed suicide, and one died of an apparent heart attack.

Here are the grim details:

- February 2, Chicago. An apparent dispute with his 17-year old son led Michael Worsham, 43, to gun down the young man. He then shot and killed his wife and their 15-year old daughter. A stepson, 14, and his five-year old nephew managed to get away. Worsham, a school security guard with a valid gun card, ultimately collapsed and died, possibly of a heart attack (he apparently had cardiac issues.) No motive is known.
- May 7, Florida. Darrin Campbell, 49, a respected media executive, shot and killed his wife and two children, ages 16 and 18, and set fire to their upscale rental home. He then killed himself. Campbell, who was apparently intoxicated when he died, had purchased the Glock .40 pistol used in the killings and, more recently, a large quantity of fireworks, in both instances legally. Campbell was reportedly arrears in property taxes and had recently requested leave from his employer, but so far neither friends, family nor police have offered a specific motive.
- July 9, Texas. Ronald Lee Haskell, 33, was gunning for his ex-wife when he burst into the home of her sister and tied up the only person present, a 15-year old girl. When the rest of the family arrived Haskell demanded to know the whereabouts of his former

spouse, and when they wouldn't tell him he opened fire, killing a husband, his wife, and four children (the 15-year old survived.) Police chased down Haskell, who gave up without a struggle. Haskell had an extensive history of violence and domestic abuse. He was facing a restraining order recently filed by his mother, whom he tied up because she had contacted his ex-wife.

- July 26, Maine. Joel Smith, 33, used a shotgun to kill his wife and three children, ages four to twelve, in the modest apartment where they lived. He then committed suicide. Officers reported no prior contacts with the family but said that the Smiths were having "issues" about finances. These "issues" appear serious, as on the night of the murders Smith's wife told a friend that her husband had pointed a gun at his head and threatened to kill himself.
- September 3, South Carolina. In the only mass killing that didn't involve a gun, ex-con Timothy Ray Jones Jr., 32, strangled his five young children, ages one to eight, placed their bodies in garbage bags and dumped them by the side of a road. Nearly a week later Jones was pulled over by police for driving under the influence of synthetic marijuana. Officers found drugs, blood and bleach in the vehicle. Jones' children had been reported missing by his estranged wife, and Jones soon confessed that he killed them. Jones Had gained custody of the children after a "messy" separation, and retained custody despite concerns by social workers who visited his home. Weeks earlier, in an encounter with police, he told officers that his kids were planning to kill him.
- September 16, Florida. Don Charles Spirit, 51, telephoned police and said he intended to harm himself and his family. By the time that officers arrived at Spirit's rural home his 28-year old daughter and her six children, ages two months to 11 years, had been shot dead. Spirit then committed suicide. This wasn't his first lethal involvement with firearms. In 2001 he shot and killed his 8-year old grandson in what was billed as a hunting accident. Due to a prior felony marijuana conviction he was convicted of being a felon with a firearm and drew a three-year prison term.
- [Late addition] December 15, Pennsylvania. In a rampage that took him to three homes, Bradley W. Stone, 35, a former Marine who served in the Gulf War murdered his ex-wife and five of her relatives, including her mother, grandmother, sister, the sister's husband and their 14-year old daughter. Except for the girl, whom he stabbed to death, Stone, who suffered from PTSD, killed his victims with a .40 caliber pistol and possibly a 9mm. pistol (he owned both). Stone also severely stabbed the girl's brother. He then committed suicide. Stone and his ex-wife were in a bitter custody dispute over their two daughters, ages 5 and 8. They were unharmed.

Why do men slaughter their families? Firearms availability is presumably a factor. But it's not just the presence of guns. Violence may have genetic underpinnings, but there is no gene for being an "active shooter." Like other behaviors, gun-slinging and murder are learned, if by nothing else, then by example. And when it comes to such examples the U.S. is a uniquely fertile

ground. Four years ago, in “Say Something,” we bemoaned the epidemic of shootings by so-called “ordinary” people. Here’s what we suggested:

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.

It’s *still* worth considering.