

Posted 10/23/11

THERE'S NO ESCAPING THE GUN

A prosperous community discovers that mass murder is an equal opportunity threat

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. A paunchy middle-aged man turned away from the grisly scene and headed for his car. Eight were dead or dying, including his ex-wife. [Scott Dekraai](#) had just set a record that would go down in infamy.

Acquaintances said that Dekraai, 41, had been a pleasant, easy going man until a 2007 tugboat accident that killed a shipmate and left him partly disabled. His life quickly unraveled. Within months a court order was filed directing him to stay away from his father in law, who claimed that Dekraai had beat him up. (The order, which required that Dekraai temporarily give up his guns, expired one year later.) Dekraai's wife Michelle, a hair stylist, filed for divorce, and they became embroiled in a child custody dispute that would drag on for years. [She told coworkers](#) at a beauty salon that she feared he would kill her.

No one took it seriously. After all, this was Seal Beach, a tony Southern California coastal community of 25,000 where such things don't happen. Who could predict that Dekraai would don a bulletproof vest, [invade Salon Meritage](#) and blaze away with three large-caliber pistols?

But on October 12, 2011 that's exactly what he did.

"He stopped to reload, and then continued gunning people down," said Orange County D.A. Tony Rackauckas. "He was not satisfied with murdering his intended target, his ex-wife. For almost two minutes, Dekraai shot victim after victim, executing eight people by shooting them in the head and chest. He was not done. He then walked out of the salon and shot a ninth victim, a male, who was sitting nearby in a parked Range Rover."

In addition to Michelle, who was first to be gunned down, Dekraai murdered the shop owner, Randy Fannin, stylists Victoria Buzo and Laura Elody, Christie Wilson, a nail artist, customers Michele Fast and Lucia Kondas, and David Caouette, 64, a passer-by whom Dekraai encountered in the parking lot. Laura Elody's mother Hattie Stretz, who was visiting the salon, was gravely wounded but survived.

Dekraai (he quickly surrendered) wasn't a criminal in the conventional sense. Neither was Orange County's previous record holder. In 1976 [Edward Charles Allaway](#), a 37-year old custodian at Cal State Fullerton, turned a semiautomatic rifle he bought at K-Mart on fellow employees, killing seven and wounding two. Allaway's wife had just sued for divorce. Psychiatrists diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to a mental hospital, where he remains to the present day.

Los Angeles County's mass murder record is held by [Bruce Pardo](#). He, too, was no ordinary criminal. On Christmas eve 2008 the 45-year old, freshly divorced engineer barged into the residence of his former in-laws with five pistols and a homemade flamethrower that he had concealed under a Santa suit. By the

time he was done nine were dead including his ex-wife, her parents, a sister, a nephew, and two brothers and their wives. Like Dekaai and Allaway, Pardo had no criminal record. Unlike them, he had the good sense to kill himself.

Learning theory says that behavior is shaped by watching others. While America isn't the only place where disturbed persons use guns to release their demons (keep in mind the recent massacre in Norway) the frequency of these events – what we've referred to as their "ordinariness" – suggests that there's a lot of monkey-see, monkey-do going on in the U.S.A. In March we wrote about the [Tucson massacre](#), where an college dropout with mental issues shot and killed six and wounded thirteen including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D - Ariz.) A post in August 2010 spoke of a disaffected truck driver [who shot and killed eight co-workers](#) after being fired for stealing beer. We took that opportunity to review six other multiple-victim shootings between January and July 2010 that seemed motivated by no purpose other than letting off steam.

Here is an update. Keep in mind that this is only a sample, as to list all such incidents would take a lot more than a blog post.

[10/18/11](#): A New York man facing a divorce trial beat his estranged spouse to death and used a shotgun to kill their two children, Molly, 10, and Gregory, 8. Samuel Friedlander, 50, then shot himself dead.

[10/6/11](#): A "well liked" but disgruntled Northern California truck driver opened fire on coworkers with a handgun and a rifle, killing three and wounding six, some critically. Shareed Allman, 46, then tried to carjack a vehicle, wounding its driver. He was later shot and killed by police.

[9/7/11](#): Disturbed by a failing relationship, a West Virginia man shot and killed five persons inside a home. Shayne Riggleman, 22, then ran over a motorist and critically wounded a gas station attendant. He committed suicide as police closed in.

[9/6/11](#): A Nevada man opened fire with a rifle at a Carson City retail center and inside an IHOP restaurant, killing four and wounding seven. He then killed himself. Eduardo Sencion, 32, was said to have "mental issues." His motive is unknown.

[8/7/11](#): Angered by comments about the appearance of a home where he lived with his girlfriend, Ohio resident Michael Hance, 51, went on a shooting rampage. He killed seven and wounded two before police shot him dead.

[7/24/11](#): A stormy relationship ended at a roller rink, where the husband shot and killed his wife and four of her family members. He also wounded four others. Tan Do, 35, then turned the .40 caliber Glock on himself.

[7/11/11](#): Wyoming man Everett Conant III, 36, shot and killed his three teenage boys and his 33-year old brother inside the mobile home where they lived. He also seriously wounded his wife. A former employer said that Conant was having personal problems. Police arrested him without incident.

7/8/11: Angered by his wife's decision to leave him, a reportedly bipolar 34-year old ex-con with a violent past shot and killed her, their daughter and his in-laws. He then went gunning for others, killing a former girlfriend, her sister and the sister's daughter. Rodrick Dantzler then took his own life.

6/13/11: Barred by a restraining order from visiting his children, Maine resident Steven Lake, 37, grabbed his shotgun, went to his estranged wife's home, and shot and killed her and their two children. He then committed suicide.

11/14/10: A 29-year old Pennsylvania man shot the mother of their three children, then shot the kids and himself. A two-year old was the sole survivor. The "sweet" couple had reportedly been arguing.

9/27/10: A 41-year old Florida man ignored a restraining order and went to the home of his estranged wife. He shot and killed her and four stepchildren, ages 10 to 14, and wounded a 15-year old. He committed suicide as officers arrived.

9/11/10: Enraged that his eggs weren't cooked right, a rural Kentucky man "not known to be a violent person" used a shotgun to murder his wife and four neighbors. He then turned the weapon on himself.

9/1/10: A few days after being arrested for violating a restraining order a California man shot six persons in an Arizona resort city, killing five including his estranged spouse. He returned with two children to California, where he committed suicide. The children were unharmed.

We've long argued that the availability of guns overwhelms our ability to prevent their misuse.

According to the NRA there are nearly 300 million firearms in the U.S., including 100 million handguns, with about 4 million new guns entering circulation each year. That may actually be an underestimate. According to ATF in 2010 [American gun makers produced](#) a whopping 5,403,714 firearms. Only four percent were exported.

Here's one old refrain: "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Here's another: "Let's enforce the laws we have." Federal and state laws bar convicted felons, persons adjudged as mentally defective and individuals under active restraining orders from possessing firearms. But our examples aren't about ordinary criminals. Our chronology of terror includes only one ex-con. True, some of the shooters were emotional basket cases, yet none had been adjudicated mentally ill, the threshold before laws kick in. And while three were under active restraining orders, trusting in a piece of paper to convince an embittered man (all the killers were male) to give up his guns seems a very, very long shot.

It's for such reasons that the NRA promotes gun carry laws. Armed citizens, it insists, can keep shootings from happening in the first place. Well, good luck with that. An armed citizen was present at the [Tucson massacre](#). He didn't intervene, partly for fear that he might shoot an innocent person, and partly because responding officers might shoot *him*. As for the episode in Seal Beach, it would have taken snipers lying in wait to repel Dekraai's attack. And what's to be done about the many incidents that take place inside a home? Should family members pack guns to the dinner table? Should spouses always be armed? And when it's time to go night-night, who puts away their Glock first?

Carrying pro-gun arguments to their inevitable, ridiculous conclusion highlights the profound intractability of America's gun dilemma. But while we can't rely on the law to work miracles, maybe we can promote the notion of watching one's temper and using guns wisely.

Consider, for example, that the UCR attributes at least [one in four homicides in 2010](#) to "arguments," and that these led to the deaths of 323 wives, 60 husbands, 28 mothers, 62 fathers, 39 sons and 15 daughters. [NIJ](#) reports that about 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are assaulted by an intimate partner each year, and that as many as half of all female homicide victims ([2,918 women were feloniously slain in 2010](#)) were murdered by their partners.

Domestic murder-suicide has become such a common occurrence that it merits [its own NIJ page](#). As one might expect, virtually all are by gun: "More incidents of murder-suicide occur with guns than with any other weapon. Access to a gun is a major risk factor in familicide because it allows the perpetrator to act on his or her rage and impulses." According to the [Violence Policy Center](#) there were 591 such deaths during the first six months of 2005. Three out of four involved an intimate partner, and three out of four happened at home. Researchers coined the category of "family annihilator" to describe men who go berserk and gun down everyone, including the kids and the dog. Nearly all (92 percent) of murder-suicides are done with guns, so their availability is thought crucial:

The most common catalytic component in murder-suicide is the use of a firearm. Firearms allow shooters to act on impulse...The presence of a gun allows the offender to quickly and easily kill a greater number of victims. If there had not been easy access to a firearm, these deaths may simply have been injuries, or not have occurred at all. Efforts should be made to restrict access to firearms where there is an increased risk of murder-suicide, for example where an individual has a history of domestic violence and/or has threatened suicide.

Well, good luck with that, too. We'll instead peddle our favorite remedy, a national campaign to alert the public to the problems of gun violence. Let's remind everyone that rage and guns are a lethal combination and that early intervention by friends, family members and mental health professionals is the best preventive.

Friends may not be able to keep angry friends from owning guns, but they can surely do *something*. In our gun-crazed culture there is really no alternative.