



COMMENTARIES

Isolation, ‘psychache,’ violence and self-destruction: What research shows

High-profile events of the last half-year have something in common.

By Jillian Peterson and James Densley

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Mourners visit a makeshift memorial for victims of the New Year's Day terror attack on Bourbon Street in New Orleans on Jan. 6. (EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN/The New York Times)

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In the past six months, public violence has dominated headlines with an unsettling frequency and diversity: political assassinations, a female school shooter and mass murder committed with a car. At first glance, these tragedies seem dissimilar and unrelated. Yet, a

deeper look reveals a disturbing common thread – each perpetrator planned their acts as desperate, final gestures with no intention of surviving.

Consider several cases that have unfolded recently:

The 20-year-old man who shot former President Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pa., over the summer and killed an attendee was fatally shot at the scene.

A 15-year-old girl who killed a classmate and teacher at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wis., in December ended her attack with a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Weeks later, a 42-year-old man drove a pickup truck into a crowd on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, killing 144 people, before dying in a shootout with police.

On the same day, a 37-year-old man was found inside an exploded Cybertruck outside Trump's Las Vegas hotel, dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

And in New York, the 26-year-old who murdered UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson could have hidden himself. Instead, he was found sitting in a McDonald's in Pennsylvania with his manifesto and murder weapon in his backpack – clearly with no plan beyond committing murder.

More than a century ago, sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that social isolation can drive both suicidal and homicidal behavior. Modern psychology extends this understanding through the "psychache" model, which suggests that unbearable psychological pain underpins acts of both self-destruction and outward violence. These tragedies aren't impulsive; they're rooted in a profound sense of hopelessness, where violence becomes a final, desperate act.

This insight has profound implications for public safety. Harsh punishments, including the death penalty, are designed to deter crime. But when perpetrators are already planning to die, the threat of punishment becomes meaningless. It's a lesson we've learned repeatedly with mass shootings – and one we must now apply to other forms of public violence.

In our latest research, we conducted life history interviews with 18 individuals who committed homicide in the Twin Cities during the 2020-21 murder spike. The cases varied – from gang retaliation to domestic violence to botched robberies – but a striking pattern emerged: Nearly every participant had experienced prior suicide attempts or pervasive hopelessness before their crimes. Among the younger participants, many of whom were teenagers at the time, a sense of "futurelessness" was palpable.

One participant stated: "Did I have plans for the future at any point? Hell no. I would die or go to jail." Another participant, when asked if ever thought about where he would be at 25, said, "Either dead or in prison. You can't leave that life. All of our life spans were real short." Both respondents perpetrated homicide before their 18th birthday.

Our interviews further revealed that many of these individuals had been holding on by tenuous connections – to pastors, school counselors or community support networks. Then the pandemic hit, severing those fragile threads all at once. What followed was a cascade of violence driven by isolation and despair.

One young participant dropped out of his COVID-enforced virtual school, dismissing it as impractical for his circumstances: "I wasn't doing that." Without "rules" and "routines," he described his life as "nothing" and "empty," feeling "lost." This eventually led to the shooting and killing of a drug dealer during a robbery planned on social media.

If we're serious about preventing violence, we must reframe our approach. It may not be intuitive, but the best prevention strategies don't start with tougher penalties or more surveillance. They start with connection. Suicide prevention is violence prevention. When we rebuild relationships, foster community, and invest in mental health and support systems, we create the safety nets that prevent despair from spiraling into violence.

We must act with urgency and compassion. The more connected we are, the safer we will become.

Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology at Hamline University and executive director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center. James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metropolitan State University and Deputy Director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center.

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Jillian Peterson And James Densley

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