Review of The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic

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Outstanding social science goes beyond examining the causes and consequences of a social phenomenon; it invites audiences to rethink the nature of the thing itself. Peterson and Densley have achieved that level of scientific insight into mass shootings, and they present their ideas in a form that casual readers can readily grasp. Simply put, The Violence Project deserves a central place in the national conversations about gun violence.

Consistent with other professionals and experts in this subfield, Peterson and Densley define mass shootings as “any event in which four or more victims (not including the shooter) are murdered with guns in a public location such as a workplace, school, house of worship, or restaurant” (p. 3). But where Americans’ narratives about the meaning and causes of these events are muddled and contradictory, The Violence Project cuts a clear and cogent line of thinking: Most often, the people who carry out mass public shootings are “insiders” to the scenes of their violence, mimicking previous shooters in a dramatized “final act” that will end in suicide or death at the hands of law enforcement. That reality must drive our personal, institutional, and societal responses to the mass shooting epidemic.

In The Violence Project, Peterson and Densely summarize findings from their research initiative bearing the same name. The goal of that initiative is to understand and prevent mass shootings by gathering as much information as possible about every mass shooting in the United States since 1966. And in this book, Peterson and Densley compile the diversity of that data into a compelling form, moving deftly between narratives, basic statistics, and summaries of relevant research. In particular, Peterson and Densley successfully pair the atrocious acts of gun violence and the humanity of persons who perform them. That pairing draws readers from the very start.

The early substantive chapters of the book are a classic exercise in the sociological imagination, detailing how the phenomenon of mass shootings in the United States emerges from a complex interplay of societal, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics. In a chapter entitled, “America,” the authors remind readers that although mass shootings are hardly unique to the United States, Americans face an exceptionally high probability of being shot. Then, working between their correspondence with mass shooters and their larger sample of mass shootings, Peterson and Densley sketch a pattern in the biographies of mass shooters. People who sometimes become shooters are likely to experience trauma as children or adults; to be in an observable state of crisis leading up to the shooting; and to eventually gather information about previous shootings for social validation and tactical innovations. Here and throughout the book, Peterson and Densley make smart use of counterfactual cases—cases in which a person knowingly or unknowingly prevented a shooting—to demonstrate that no risk-factor predestines a person to shoot other people, and that evidence-based interventions can prevent shootings long before they begin. They also illustrate that many steps to preventing mass violence also contribute toward people’s overall well-being, things like forming trusting relationships and responding effectively when a person is in crisis.
Later chapters of *The Violence Project* address the memeification of mass killings through social media and other outlets, the roots of hate-based mass shootings, and the ready availability of guns to Americans. Where some readers might expect political talking points, the authors model a process for weighing evidence to how to reduce mass killings. They are disciplined stewards of their readers’ attention, relying upon empirical findings to guide their audience past red herrings and false dichotomies. When addressing policies that clearly reduce gun violence, such as universal background checks, they state that evidence plainly. But Peterson and Densley also deserve praise for their recognition of uncertainty, conflicting findings, and relative risks. For example, case studies lead Peterson and Densley to conclude that although the Department of Justice has invested heavily in school resource officers in schools, the behavior of school resource officers during shootings in pretty unpredictable. Moreover, the likelihood of school resource officers preventing a school shooting is very low, especially compared to the likelihood that their presence will reproduce racial disparities in school discipline and arrests (pp. 153-156).

As Peterson and Densley conclude, they elaborate upon their refrain that nothing about mass shootings is inevitable—not their frequency, not their deadliness, not the all-too-familiar media cycles or political inefficacy that Americans now take for granted, and not the truncated empowerment offered by active shooter trainings. That sense of inevitability is perhaps the most pernicious part of how Americans misunderstand mass shootings. As a direct response to this misperception, Peterson and Densley offer a roadmap of things “we all can do to stop the mass shooting epidemic,” at the individual, institutional, and societal levels (p. 186). Their ideas are research-based, actionable, and well-packaged. It is difficult to imagine a book on this topic offering more to our current crisis than Peterson and Densley have in *The Violence Project*.

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