

# More guns, fewer mass shootings?

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D. ©2016



Aurora, CO - July 30 - Carrying a cross for a memorial  
*Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images*

In the summer of 2012, there were numerous on-line discussions about the string of mass murders in Aurora, CO, at the Sikh Temple and at Texas A&M. I had assumed that most people would want to know of other options for controlling violence beyond debate over guns and waiting for the FBI to determine each killer's motive. Apparently, this is not necessarily true. A growing segment of Americans are so filled with love for the Second Amendment that they are using these killings to spew hatred at their "enemies:" the government, the media, the liberals, advocates for gun control and, oddly enough, the president.

One of the most surprising examples of ideological extremism is the idea that the shootings are caused by President Obama who wants to create fear, as fear will lead more people to embrace gun control (see, e.g. [Orfanides](#), August 16, 2012; [Phelps](#), August 17, 2012. (Others blame Obama for not doing enough to control guns, see "Comments," to [Chelsea-Seifert](#), August 15, 2012.) In none of these articles are the mass murders themselves deemed sufficiently tragic in their own right. Instead, they seem to be used as mere tools to dredge up hatred for others who have nothing whatsoever to do with them. (No one has explained how the Sikh Temple shooter, a white supremacist, became the patsy of our president. Did they collude?) But do facts matter when what is being spewed are the generalized resentments toward the poor and all those who would be excluded as members of "out-groups?"

Social psychologists have found that liking for unfamiliar words (**whether vegetables or trees or any other category of words**), for persons or for *any* stimulus is increased by the “mere exposure phenomenon” (Feldman, 1985). People, in general, like things more the more familiar they become. But there are limits; for instance, with too much exposure, novelty wears off and satiation occurs. The mere exposure phenomenon does not seem to have worked to Barak Obama’s advantage. Why? I would suggest that it is basic conditioning theory: The circumstances of his presidency, namely the economy, are worse than for any president in recent memory. No matter the improvements he may have made or tried, his name and face have been paired with bad news for four years. He has come to be associated with problems that are not of his doing. But we’ve become conditioned to thinking of him in the context of bad news.

This is a small part of what is a particularly sad turn of events because it is in the “post-violence” phase – in the aftermath of major violence – that a nation comes to clarify events, or to muddy them, and to prevent – or to stimulate – their repetition (Wertham, 1969). We need both formal (criminal justice) and informal (moral) sanctions to stop a contagion of notorious violence. If no one cares about the victims enough to focus on the criminal responsibility of their killers, then there are no moral sanctions or condemnation to assure a future killer what is risked with such behavior. Without condemning mass murder, we fail to demonstrate that we value life. We’re on our way to losing the ethical foundations that once kept people from even considering taking their everyday grievances to the extremes that mass killers do.

News reports of modeled violence tell us not only about new forms of behavior but also about the consequences, whether the model is rewarded, punished or neither, as when there is no arrest, trial, conviction or punishment. Instant fame and widespread name recognition, plus any confusion regarding the killer’s responsibility, makes it more likely that observers may one day perform an act of violence that draws from the multiple models from whom they learn about violent behavior, acceptable targets and anticipated consequences.

The founding fathers’ views were those of the Enlightenment and drew largely on the work of Cesare Beccaria. In *Beccaria's* view, the measure of a crime is the harm done to society, the social injury it causes, “the example that it gives, the incitement to repeat it if it is not punished, the possibility of becoming widespread that it bears within it.” Murder is “the reason . . . punishment appears” (Foucault, 1979, p. 92).

## **SUGGESTED LINKS**

- **The serial killers’ crimes: How they obtain their victims, continued (Part 16)**
- **The serial killers’ crimes: How they obtain their victims (Part 15)**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Are there victim-types? (Part 14)**
- **The crimes of serial killers: Motives, continued (Part 13)**



**Barrie Ritter**

Crime & Justice  
Examiner