

Tucson shooting - Questions about mental health, guns and rhetoric

In the week following the shocking Tucson shooting that left six people dead and 14 more wounded, the country has been searching for answers. Two questions have dominated the country's discourse: Why did this tragedy happen? And what can we do to ensure that it doesn't happen again?

While many people have opinions on the two questions, neither has an easy answer. The country may never have clear answers to either question.

In searching for answers, attention in the media has focused on three issues: mental health, guns and political rhetoric.

Mental illness?

Was the alleged shooter, Jared Loughner, suffering from an untreated mental illness that could have led to his violent attack aimed at Rep. Gabrielle Giffords? This question leads to others: Did the health care system fail to work? Should it have prevented the shooting?

Concern about Loughner's mental stability and potential for causing harm were enough to prompt Pima County Community College to ban him from the school until he could prove that he could get a mental health professional to verify that he was not a physical threat to himself or others.

Plenty of people, organizations and media outlets have been quick to draw attention to problems in the health care system's handling of mental illnesses.

Newsweek [reports](#) on "Our broken mental-health system."

Yes, there are legitimate problems that need to be addressed, but it isn't clear that the system failed to the catastrophic degree it did with Cho Seung-Hui, who killed 32 people in the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech.

Time [identifies](#) six "warning signs" of Loughner's behavior before the shooting, but their list seems to be based more on retrospective fear rather than clear thinking. Several items could be examples of mental illness, or they could just appear that way when viewed in hindsight.

The college might have failed to follow through by contacting local mental health authorities who might have been able to get some treatment for Loughner, [according to](#) Washington Post reporter Jennifer Rubin.

Another Washington Post reporter [notes](#) that Pima County mental health officials had no knowledge of Loughner.

Acknowledging that there are no quick answers to the possible role of mental illness in the shooting, Rubin writes: "We aren't going to prevent all crimes by those with schizophrenia who behave violently, but we should examine the problem of untreated people with mental illness and also how well our mental health programs are treating those who gain access to the system."

Access to guns?

Did the system fail by allowing Loughner to have access to a handgun? This question again leads to others: Would stricter gun laws have prevented the shooting? Should gun laws be stricter?

In Washington, new gun control bills are already being drafted, including creating no-gun zones around members of Congress, [reports](#) The New York Times. These proposals for stricter gun control seem to be part of the rush to find answers and solutions to the horrific act of violence in Tucson. It isn't clear that more restrictions would have stopped Loughner.

Mentally unfit people are not supposed to be able to buy guns, but that presumably doesn't matter since concerns about Loughner were never reported to health officials and a court never declared him mentally unfit, [according to](#) Jeffrey Miron, a Harvard economist and senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

Given that Loughner's grudge against Giffords seems to date back to 2007, he had plenty of time to get a gun -- legally or illegally -- or plan to use another weapon, such as the bomb used by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City.

Political rhetoric?

Did heated, vehemently-partisan political rhetoric inspire Loughner's actions?

Probably not. Many people quickly assumed Loughner's motivations and targeting of Giffords had been fueled by the increasingly bitter and acrimonious tone of the country's political discourse in recent years.

A quick view of Loughner's YouTube profile revealed scattered political views (among his favorite books were The Communist Manifesto and Mein Kampf). No clear evidence has emerged that he was inspired by political rhetoric.

Nonetheless, people have been quick to attack politicians and pundits they disagree with. Sarah Palin came under fire from many despite the complete lack of proof of any connection between her and Loughner.

The country does need to change the tone of politics. Too often people of differing political viewpoints speak as if there is no value in their opponents' views. But that problem has not yet been connected to the Tucson shooting.

For the time being, as Glenn Reynolds [wrote](#):

"To be clear, if you're using this event to criticize the "rhetoric" of Mrs. Palin or others with whom you disagree, then you're either: (a) asserting a connection between the "rhetoric" and the shooting, which based on evidence to date would be what we call a vicious lie; or (b) you're not, in which case you're just seizing on a tragedy to try to score unrelated political points, which is contemptible."

(To be fair, Palin's response, in which she cast herself as a martyr, was also in extreme poor taste. The only real victims of this tragedy are the ones in Tucson.)

Politics rarely is a motivating factor in assassinations of politicians, according to a [study](#) published in the Journal of Forensic Science.

The study examined the motives of 83 assassins or would-be assassins who had targeted prominent public officials in the U.S. since 1949. The Secret Service participated in the study, and many of the subjects were interviewed by the researchers.

What they found was that most often the attackers were scared of being non-entities, and their lives were beset with failure and feelings of invisibility. Killing someone famous gave them a chance at notoriety. Killing a politician allowed them to justify their actions with broader political issues.

Perhaps there are no quick and easy answers or solutions to the shooting in Tucson. Perhaps some will arise after careful examination and deliberation of the circumstances around the tragedy.

- **Dan Catchpole**