

America's Mass Shooting Problem Is a Domestic Violence Problem

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Most gunmen have one thing in common: a history of violence against family members

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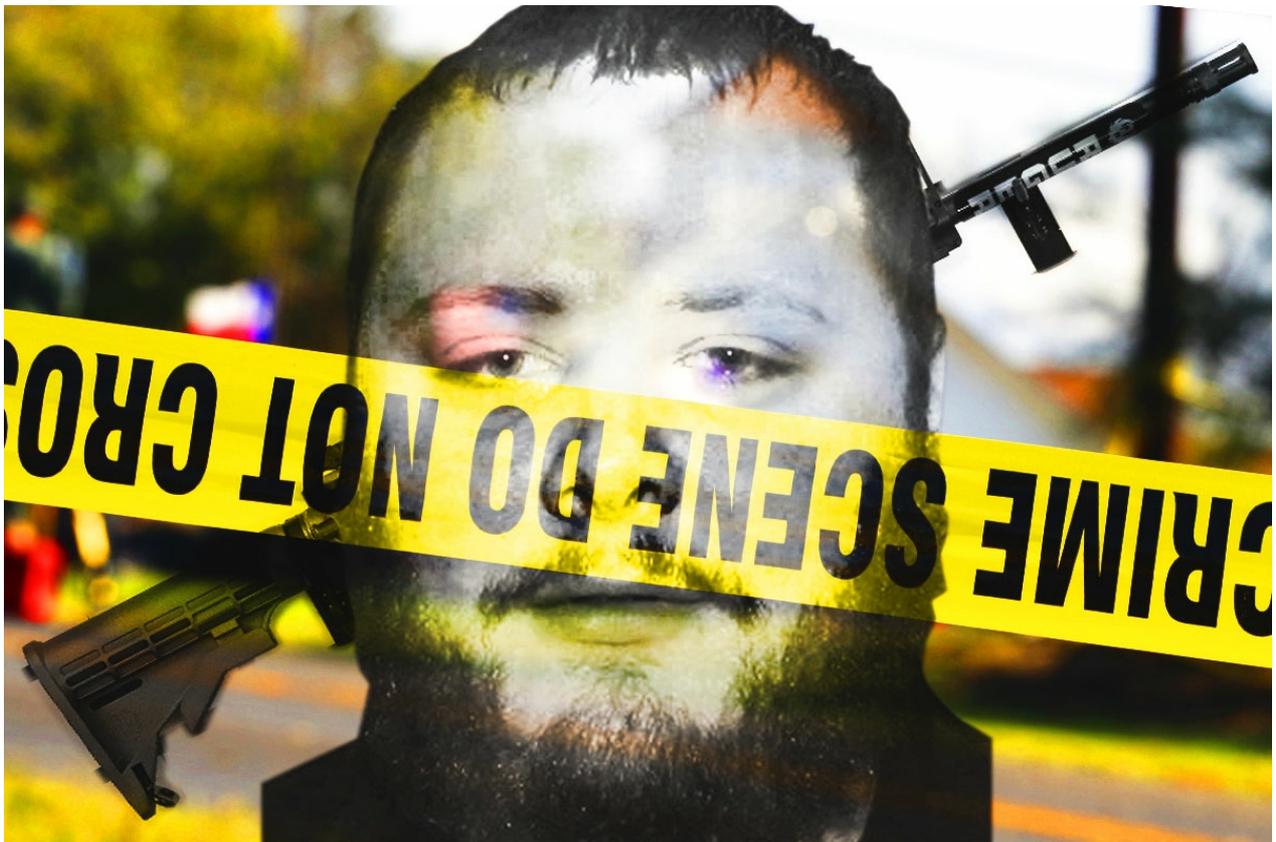


illustration by the village voice

Devin P. Kelley, the 26-year-old man who killed 26 people in a Texas church on Sunday, had a long and documented history of intimate violence. In 2012, Kelley was charged with assault and eventually received a “bad conduct” discharge from the Air Force after he kicked, beat, and choked his first wife. The charges against him included allegations he had pointed a loaded gun at his wife multiple times. Kelley also fractured his toddler stepson’s skull by hitting him with what was described in Air Force records as “a force likely to produce death or grievous bodily harm.”

Over the course of the next two years, Kelley was investigated for violence against other women, including, according to a [New York Times report](#), charges that he sexually assaulted and raped someone. He also brutally attacked his dog, hitting the animal repeatedly in the head.

Kelley is emblematic of a strikingly consistent pattern: Most mass killers have histories of domestic violence that went unaddressed. He joins a long list, including Omar Mateen, the Orlando Pulse nightclub killer; [Tamerlan Tsarnaev](#), accused in the bombing of the Boston Marathon; [Adam Lanza](#), who killed his mother before walking

into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and killing 26 people; [Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel](#), who plowed a van through a crowd in Nice, France; and [Khalid Masood](#), who did the same in Westminster, London.

A 2014 study conducted by Everytown for Gun Safety revealed that [more than half of the 100-plus mass shootings in the United States between January 2009 and June 2014](#) involved the killing of an intimate partner or family member. Nine of the ten [deadliest mass killings](#) in the U.S. in the past fifty years were perpetrated by men with histories of domestic violence. Prior to last month's attack on a concert in Las Vegas, the two worst mass shootings of 2017 were domestic violence cases, [one in Texas](#) and [the other in Mississippi](#) — both episodes largely ignored by media.

Shooters like Kelley are among the tens of thousands of men who are bludgeoning women and children in their homes with virtual impunity. Every day, three women are killed by male intimate partners in the United States. If these women were killed at once, instead of in a steady drip, drip, drip, the result would be a weekly mass killing of twenty or more women. In fact, the United States averages [47 murder-suicides a month](#), almost always involving male perpetrators who attack and kill their spouses and children, and then go on to kill themselves. Half of all women murdered in the U.S. are killed by men they know intimately.

Even when men are killing strangers, there is often a history of domestic violence behind the events. According to an extensive [analysis](#) of the Washington State criminal justice system, a domestic violence felony conviction is the strongest predictor of male-perpetrated violent crime. Men who feel free to hurt the people they know develop a sense of entitlement to hurt those they don't.

And yet, intimate violence is, in the minds of much of the public and in politics, a lesser crime whose victims are seen as simply having made bad life choices, often indicated by the knee-jerk response, "[Why didn't she just leave?](#)" That essential framing of this violence — that it's private, based on individual illness, and involves the culpability of the victim — makes its systemic nature easier to dismiss.

After Kelley's Sunday massacre, authorities were quick to point out, for example, that his killing of more than two dozen people was not racially or religiously motivated. At a news conference, authorities described, almost in relief, that the violence instead stemmed from a "domestic situation." Another official seemed mystified by the way private violence had spilled over into the public: "There are many ways that he could have taken care of the mother-in-law without coming with fifteen loaded magazines and an assault rifle to a church," said Commander Freeman Martin of the Texas Department of Public Safety.

It was in the context of his "domestic situation" that Kelley exhibited another textbook canary-in-the-coalmine behavior prior to his mass killing: He texted threats to his mother-in-law, sending the last one on Sunday morning. In [almost half of shootings that include domestic abusers](#), perpetrators leave a trail of warnings that include threats like his, menacing behaviors, and violent acts.

If legislators, police officers, and mental health experts are genuinely committed to preventing mass shootings and stemming the tide of violent extremism, they should begin by addressing this nation's epidemic of gendered and intimate violence. There are several well-understood ways of preventing domestic abuse and the public violence that comes with it. In 2015, activists Salamishah Tillet and Pamela Shifman cited a [landmark four-decade study](#) of seventy countries that found that [having a social commitment to strong, independent feminist movements](#) was a "more important force in reducing violence against women than the economic wealth of a nation, the representation of women in government, or the presence of progressive political parties."

Instead of pursuing solutions like these, though, our nation is moving in the opposite direction in terms of policy and resources. President Donald Trump's [first round of](#) proposed budget cuts, for example, includes [plans to get rid of 25 grants](#) focused on understanding and preventing violence against women. This would have a ruinous impact on exactly these types of organizations and solutions, making at-risk families more vulnerable and increasing the chances of mass killings.

Until our society understands that men's intimate abuse of women and children is a terroristic, anti-democratic, and toxic expression of power and control — and that what happens to women matters — we will be doomed to

see mass killings like these continue.