

## "Motiveless" Public Assassins

JOHNNIE L. GALLEMORE,  
J.R., M.D., J.D., AND  
JAMES A. PANTON, M.D.\*

Moments after noon on Memorial Day, 1972, a well-developed, nicely dressed 22-year-old black man stepped from an automobile parked several hundred feet from the entrance to a crowded metropolitan shopping center. A passer-by heard him mutter, "There is a whole hell of a lot of people going to die around here this afternoon." Seconds later, taking careful aim, he began firing a series of shots towards the shopping center entrance, using a .22 caliber rifle he had purchased a few hours earlier at a hardware store. When police cars were heard approaching, the gunman turned the rifle to his head and died in a final blast. Twelve casualties, including five deaths, were counted in the shooting spree.

These slayings in a public place in midday were shocking only in their local impact. Just two weeks earlier a presidential candidate had been the victim of an attempted assassination at a shopping center several hundred miles away. On this Memorial Day an incumbent U.S. Senator campaigning for re-election had entered the shopping center mall only minutes before the shootings, and speculation naturally centered upon a political motive for the killings. The Senator's chief press aide was one of those seriously wounded by the gunman, and very shortly afterwards an anonymous call to the headquarters of a gubernatorial candidate warned "he might be next." It became apparent during the hours of investigation that followed, however, that the shootings were unrelated to the presence of the Senator.

The shopping center slayings immediately raised many questions about the background and motives of the young gunman. School officials volunteered that he was "cooperative and obedient . . . a little withdrawn, quiet." Local police records revealed two charges of assault with a deadly weapon, resulting in a short prison sentence, one trespassing conviction, and two minor traffic charges. Following the shootings a police investigator publicly concluded "We may never establish a motive for it or a reason at all." In the wake of these murders, however, another gubernatorial candidate remarked: "I am anxious to hear what our best psychiatrists and psychologists have to say. We should take whatever steps are necessary on a federal and state level."

The tragic actions of individuals who become "berserk" in public and attack strangers are usually described as baffling, or motiveless,<sup>1</sup> and have not been well understood by lay or professional observers. Sensational and terrifying as these outbursts of violence are to the community, they often are perpetrated by obscure individuals about whom little is reliably known, particularly prior to the crime. When the violence is a homicide-suicide, first-hand data about the perpetrator are rarely available.

Largely by chance, a psychiatrist and psychologist affiliated with the State Department of Corrections were drawn by several developments into an earnest retrospective examination of events which preceded the holiday killings in a public place, and into a recovery and analysis of data not previously available. More questions than answers were

\* Dr. Gallemore is Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Duke University School of Medicine, and Psychiatric Consultant, North Carolina Department of Corrections; Mr. Panton is Senior Research Associate, Research and Planning Division, North Carolina Department of Corrections, Raleigh, N.C.

ultimately produced by the investigation. The findings, however, do suggest some of the circumstances which may underlie "spontaneous," individual acts of violence.

## Methods

Within days of the shootings, a correctional employee who routinely obtained social histories of inmates made unauthorized disclosure of his recollection of an interview, approximately ten months earlier, with a gunman, who was then serving a six-months prison sentence for aggravated assault. This disclosure prompted a review of the subject's psychological test data, part of the material routinely obtained on all new prison admissions, by a correctional psychologist. The presence of an uncommon MMPI profile inspired a further inquiry into the past physical and emotional health of the gunman, his family background, and his previous public behavior (including criminal conduct). Also important in spurring further investigation was the remark by a police officer at the close of an interview weeks later: "You know his old man served time for murder."

The data examined included newspaper accounts of the shootings, the medical records of a nearby university medical center, the assailant's autopsy report, records of the Department of Corrections and the Department of Parole (including personal and psychological test data), official police reports of the shopping center ambush, and interviews with police officials and acquaintances of the family.

## Personal Background of the Gunman

*The early years.* During a prison interview less than a year prior to the shopping center killings, the subject described his birth and early childhood as healthy and completely unremarkable. He denied any educational difficulties. Upon the insistence of a school teacher, however, he was brought to a nearby university medical center at age 13 for evaluation of "blackouts." History obtained from the mother at that time indicated that the youth had developed slowly and learned less well than his peers. She stated that he had been a disciplinary problem in school, had done poorly in his work, and had failed the fourth grade. She related that children at school "picked on him" and that he often became involved in fights. She also characterized him at home as a "problem child" who was inattentive, who complained of inability to hear at times, and who became preoccupied with activities.

The medical and neurological examination of the youth at the medical center revealed no abnormal findings. The only history of trauma was a "grazing" of the head by a brick. Skull films were completely normal. The mother described periods of unconsciousness preceded by "dizzy spells" in which excitement, hyperactivity, and inability to see occurred. The youth would awaken in 5 to 10 minutes, admit feeling better and have no memory of the episode. Other seizure phenomena were denied. *Petit mal* attacks were considered a distinct possibility, and the young patient was scheduled to return for an electroencephalographic examination. He failed to return, and the mother in an interview the day following the shootings recalled, "They wanted to make all kinds of tests at the hospital, but I didn't want them to mess with his brain so I didn't sign."

The subject completed high school but was reported to be in the lower part of his class. He had no record of suspensions or expulsions from school. Officials recalled that the student, 6'4" tall at the time of his death, played on the school basketball team and seemed to enjoy this activity. However, he led a somewhat restricted social life and dated only infrequently.

*The later years.* The subject married at the age of 20 and stated in a prison interview, "Marriage is the best thing that ever happened to me." He denied having any sexual intercourse prior to his marriage, explaining that his mother had told him to avoid sexual activity. He also credited her wishes as the basis of his abstinence from tobacco and

alcohol. By all accounts, he was devoted to his wife, treated her fairly, and attempted to provide good support. The couple rarely participated in social events, reportedly because he preferred to stay at home with his wife.

Several months after the marriage, and approximately sixteen months before the shopping center murders, the wife spontaneously aborted after several months' gestation. The subject later concluded that the continuation of sexual relations during the pregnancy probably caused the premature termination of the pregnancy. Within several months the wife again became pregnant and was pregnant during the time that the subject served a prison sentence for assault. The infant died shortly after birth, about five months before the shopping center attack. The wife had learned of her third pregnancy only a few days prior to the shootings. Shortly after the onset of the second pregnancy, and prior to the subject's prison sentence, the wife was hospitalized for four days at the State Mental Hospital for a "nervous breakdown."

The subject held several jobs following his graduation from high school, the longest for eight months. The father recalled that his son had no trouble getting jobs, but just could not keep them. The subject was generally known as a quiet but good worker. On his longest job prior to the prison sentence, he was observed by his employers to be continually wearing ear plugs of cotton, despite relatively quiet surroundings. Audiometric testing was obtained by the employer and no abnormality was found. Interestingly, in the MMPI described below, a critical item given a true response was: "When I am with people I am bothered by hearing very queer things." The subject later told the same employer that he had cut a man in the past for "messing with" his wife. He abruptly terminated this job one day, reporting that he had applied for a "police job" in a neighboring city.

*Criminal History.* Police records indicate that the subject was first charged with assault with a deadly weapon at the age of 15. Little is known about this offense, and apparently no prison sentence resulted. Approximately sixteen months before the shopping center shootings, the subject pulled a pocket knife and stabbed a white youth during a scuffle on a basketball court. Four months later he was convicted of aggravated assault, inflicting serious injuries, and received a six-months' prison sentence. In prison the subject described his trial as unfair because he was black and the victim and the judge were white. He indicated that if the judge had been black he would not have gone to prison.

Final contact with law authorities occurred approximately 36 hours before the shootings. The subject had apparently become angry when an uncle refused to purchase a car tendered to him by the subject. Several hours later the subject reported to police that this car had been stolen. After an investigation he was charged with falsely filing an auto theft report and causing false information to be broadcast on a police radio. He was taken into custody and held in the city jail until his father provided a \$200 bond for his release at 2:00 a.m.

*Family History.* The subject was the oldest of three siblings, with sisters ages 19 and 14. He apparently had a good relationship with his sisters and his parents. Both of the parents were employed at the time of the shootings and were reportedly compatible. The mother had twice been admitted to the State Mental Hospital for a "nervous breakdown," the first time six years prior to the shootings, and the second time three years prior to the shootings. Hospitalizations were limited to several weeks on both occasions.

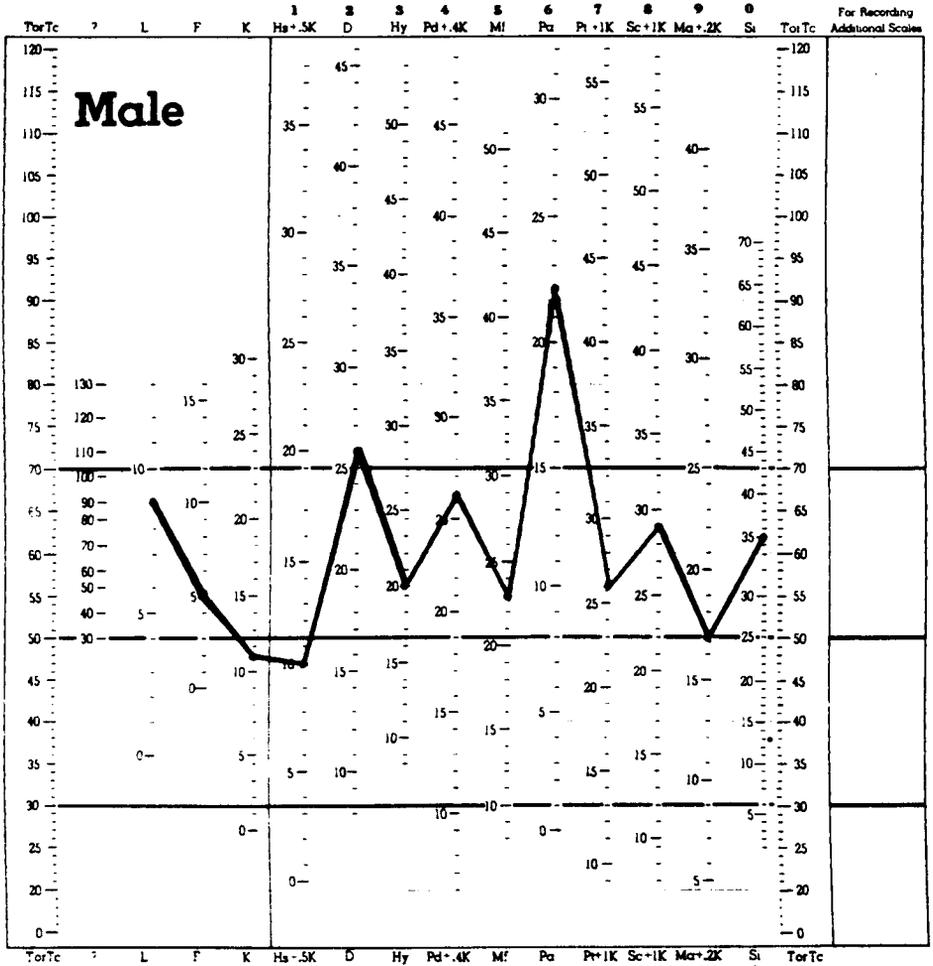
Unknown through most of the investigation was the father's murder of two men and the wounding of a third in a public night spot some 38 years prior to the shopping center murders of his son. The father was 22 at the time. He claimed in defense that two brothers advanced on him with deadly weapons after an argument on a crowded dance floor. Although he pleaded not guilty, he was sentenced to be executed in the state's electric chair. After some 20 months on Death Row and several reprieves, his sentence was commuted to life and later to 30 years. He compiled an excellent record as an inmate, and after parole, as a state hospital employee.

## Observations and Testing

During the course of a prison interview, the subject stated that as a child he had made friends easily because he wasn't suspicious of other people. He added that it now took him longer to make friends because he didn't trust people as well. The interviewer concluded: "He is extremely prejudiced. He doesn't trust white people at all. He attributes his feelings of black supremacy towards the teaching of Mohammed Speaks, a prophet, and the teaching of the Moslem religion. This began three years ago. He is paranoid and he appeared very depressed. He was very concerned with his wife being alone. He is very possessive of his wife and restricts her social contact. His ability to articulate is good; however, his intellectual rationalization is poor. He has become entirely dependent emotionally on his wife, and at this stage if something were to occur to disturb the relationship, he could go off the deep end."

Psychological assessment nine months prior to the shopping center shootings revealed the subject to be of dull-normal intelligence with an IQ of 85. His tested educational achievement was 9.8, compared with his claim of a high school education. The MMPI profile (Figure 1) demonstrates that the regular clinical scales revealed little elevation

Figure 1



other than a very high score on the Pa scale. Examination of subscales indicated a high-strung, sensitive individual, overly subjective in his interpersonal relationships, who thought of himself as special and different. He appeared to harbor strong ideas of persecution, to be very righteous about ethical matters, and to have a perfectionistic view of himself. Other features suggested excessive rigidity, a need to produce a favorable impression, a feeling of isolation from others, a tendency to externalize blame, a pessimistic attitude in general and a tendency to become easily despondent and agitated under situational stress. Psychotic material was minimal, and there were no significant sociopathic, violent, or assaultive trends. Overall, the profile suggested a rare paranoid type with ideas of reference and persecution built into a framework of apparent reality. The subject appeared to have a modest amount of anxiety at the time of testing, but was cooperative and appeared to be honest and candid in his responses.

### **The Final Hours**

Reference has been made to the final contact with law enforcement officers, approximately 36 hours prior to the shopping center murders. Upon his return home from the jail in the early morning hours, the subject was described by his wife as "very upset." His mother recalled that her son did not look well and would not talk with her the following morning. She heard him remark he was "through talking with people." Despite reassurance from his parents, he indicated that he was certain to be sent back to prison.

During the afternoon prior to the shootings, the subject's wife overheard his call to a hardware store, inquiring about the purchase of a pistol. Several times he commented that he was tired of people messing with him and that they were trying to take him away as they had before when his wife was pregnant and lost the baby. Late that night he awoke on several occasions, shaking and talking about people "messing with" him.

Several hours prior to the shootings the subject dressed, indicated that he was going out of the home on business, took unusually long to tell his wife how much he cared about her, and offered to help her pack some things. After withdrawing all \$101 in a savings account, he entered a hardware store and asked, "May I see some .22's?" An employee in the store recognized him as a former schoolmate. The subject paid slightly over \$50 for a 10-shot, semi-automatic rifle after answering four or five questions on a firearms form. He denied existence of a police record, and no permit was required to obtain the rifle.

Approximately one hour before the shootings the subject returned home. When his wife walked to the car with him she discovered the rifle on the floor of the back seat. She told him that they did not need a gun and asked him to return it. She was under the impression that he was leaving with this intention, although he actually proceeded directly to the shopping center.

The autopsy report on the assailant indicated no obvious abnormal findings, other than the bullet wounds which resulted in his death. Late on the afternoon of the shooting the father of the gunman was interviewed and commented, "I don't have a bit more idea than you why he did it. If it had been a fight it would have been a different thing. What's done is done. You might as well laugh as to cry."

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Attempts to characterize dangerousness and to comprehend "motiveless" violence have provided the inspiration for thoughtful scientific comment in the past.<sup>2-7</sup> Although certain inferences can usually be drawn from available clinical material, the episodic, isolated and unanticipated nature of public violence frequently inhibits collection of sufficient data which can be substantiated. The complex interaction of many potential

contributing factors to violence also frustrates simple answers and reliable conclusions.

In this case, many factors often associated with serious criminal behavior could be identified: a problematic educational experience, marginal occupational and social adjustments, a family history strongly positive for mental illness and violent behavior, evidence of severe mental disorder in the assailant, etc. As intriguing as these etiologic and diagnostic considerations are, however, even more impressive were the compelling sequence of events and the numerous contacts with community institutions—hospital, school, prison, police, and finally the retail gun merchant—through which an inevitability of crisis could be traced, affording various opportunities for recognition and intervention.

The role of alert, sensitive, trained and responsible personnel, acting individually or through community agencies, in the recognition of developing crisis should by no means be underestimated. This case suggests what may be quite as critical, however—rapid, meaningful communication and action in concert by those personnel. The latter requires an awareness of the needs of the troubled individual, mechanisms for discreetly recording and transferring important information, a willingness to relax traditionally hard territorial boundaries among professionals, and where appropriate, the enactment of enabling legislation (e.g., gun control laws).<sup>8</sup>

The values of hindsight notwithstanding, the possibility of averting tragedy in this case is clear. A number of individuals were critically situated to appreciate the violence to come, but each lacked some important perspective. The immediate crisis might have been at least temporarily defused by the family, the police or the gun merchant. "Secondary prevention" could have fallen within the scope of the school, employer, or correctional institution. This case suggests, therefore, that the potential inherent in many community agencies for understanding and preventing violence deserves exploration by mental health professionals no less exhaustively than the role that serious if not conspicuous mental illness may play in the genesis of violence.

Shadowing the above considerations is yet another concern—the preservation of fundamental civil and constitutional rights of those who may become violent. Legal scholars, in reviewing and proposing revision of statutes, have directed some attention to this area.<sup>9-11</sup> Further consideration, in the light of critical steps in the eruption of violence and of community resources, is warranted, including the familiar issues of involuntary treatment, the right to be treated, control of dangerous weapons, and confidentiality of government records.

While the findings above do not afford an adequate basis for generalizations about the relationship of mental disorders to crimes of violence, they do suggest that further examination of individual and community determinants of violent behavior, greater emphasis on early recognition of and sensitive, flexible response to disturbed individuals in the population, more effective communication and coordination among those responsible for public order and welfare, and realistic revision and enactment of legislation which respects human dignity, may be critical in reducing the potential for individual acts of violence. Prevention of violence would appear the ultimate challenge for mechanisms of social control which would protect the community while serving it, and restrain individuals without destroying them.

## References

1. Satten J, Menning K, Rosen I, *et al*: Murder without apparent motive: A study in personality disorganization. *Am J Psychiatry* 117:48-53, 1960
2. *Ibid.*
3. Boslow H, Kandel A: Psychiatric aspects of dangerous behavior: the retarded offender. *Am J Psychiatry* 122:646-652, 1965
4. Katz J, Goldstein J: Dangerousness and mental illness. *J Nerv Ment Dis* 131:404-413, 1960

5. Rappeport J, Lassen G: Dangerousness—arrest rate comparisons of discharged patients and the general population. *Am J Psychiatry* 121:776-781, 1965
6. Rotenberg L, Sadoff R: Who should have a gun? *Am J Psychiatry* 125:841-843, 1968
7. Tanay E: Psychiatric aspects of homicide prevention. *Am J Psychiatry* 128:815-818, 1972
8. Edwards G: Murder and gun control. *Am J Psychiatry* 128:811-814, 1972
9. *Ibid.*
10. Biggs J: The legal control of dangerous behavior. *Am J Psychiatry* 122:652-655, 1965
11. Katz A: Dangerousness: a theoretical reconstruction of the criminal law. *Buffalo Law Review* 19:1-33, 1969