

U.S.

One Year Later, Experts Dig Deeper to Find Vegas Shooter's Motive

Theories emerge as officials struggle to find reason behind the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history



Angelica Cervantes cries as she stands in her son Erick Silva's room at their home in Las Vegas on Sept. 19, almost a year after he was killed in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history. PHOTO: JOHN LOCHER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Zusha Elinson

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One kept her television on 24 hours a day in the aftermath to try to gather every detail that could help her understand what happened. Another delved into the attacker's family history. Others have debated the case informally among colleagues and officially at professional conferences.

One year after Stephen Paddock killed 58 Las Vegas concertgoers, criminal psychologists and threat-assessment experts are still puzzling over why a wealthy, 64-year-old gambler committed the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

Experts are used to finding answers as to why mass shooters commit their crimes, be it anger at co-workers or fellow students over perceived slights, terrorism or mental illness. Several hypotheses on the Las Vegas gunman's possible psychopathy and desire for infamy have begun to emerge, but they are tentative and based on limited evidence—a troubling outcome for people whose job it is to look for clues that could help prevent such a deadly incident in the future.

"People are bewildered by the case—there's a bewilderment, and there's a horror," said J. Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist and clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego who often gets questions about the Las Vegas shooting at lectures and conferences. "The most troubling cases are those without an answer."

A 10-month probe by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department turned up no evidence of Paddock's motives after interviews with his relatives, girlfriend, ex-wife, doctor and casino hosts, as well as searches of his computers, phones and internet history. He left no manifesto or suicide note, wasn't affiliated with a terrorist group and had no mental-health diagnosis that might explain his actions.

Sheriff Joseph Lombardo, head of the Las Vegas police, said upon the release of the final

report in August that Paddock's gambling losses may have been a factor; his bank accounts dwindled from \$2.1 million to \$530,000 in the two years before the attack. But the sheriff said investigators weren't able to "definitively answer the why."

"We wish we knew more about it," said John Nicoletti, a psychologist and partner in the threat-assessment firm Nicoletti-Flater Associates. "With all the missing data, what everybody says, it's just speculation."

Federal Bureau of Investigation criminal profilers are working on their own report on Paddock that is expected to be released soon. The top FBI official in Las Vegas said in a radio interview this summer that the report may not deliver "a definitive why."

"It's a puzzling case and a challenging case," said Mary Ellen O'Toole, a retired FBI profiler. "In a lot of ways, he is an outlier."

From the start, Paddock defied much of what professionals in this grim field have come to expect. Typically, mass shooters are younger men who nurse real or perceived grievances, according to a recent FBI study of 63 such attackers. Four out of five displayed some concerning behavior before an attack, including telling others on social media or in person of their violent intent.

Paddock was more clandestine. Video-surveillance footage shows him calmly gambling, eating and bringing more than 20 pieces of luggage up to his 32nd floor suite in the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino in the days before the attack. The luggage contained an arsenal of semiautomatic rifles, and he turned his room into a sniper's nest to rain bullets down on a defenseless crowd at the Route 91 Harvest country music festival before killing himself on Oct. 1, 2017.



Heather Melton sits by the grave of her husband, Sonny, on the grounds of her home in Big Sandy, Tenn., on Tuesday He died while protecting Heather during the mass shooting at the Route 91 Harvest Festival. PHOTO: MARK HUMPHREY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the months after the tragedy, as investigators struggled to find any animus that might explain the attack, Russell Palarea, president of the threat-assessment firm Operational Psychology Services, began formulating his own theory on Paddock's motive.

Dr. Palarea said that in mass shootings when there is no grievance, the motive is often infamy. When Las Vegas police revealed that Paddock had also scoped out other rooms high above other outdoor concert venues, he said, it confirmed his suspicions that Paddock wanted to kill as many people as possible.

"Some people kill for notoriety and infamy, and that's what he did," said Dr. Palarea.

Dr. Meloy, the forensic psychologist, began to develop his own hypothesis on the gunman after reading a 1960 psychological examination of his father, Benjamin Hoskins Paddock, a bank robber and con man who was put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list in 1969 when he escaped from prison. A psychiatrist determined after one arrest that the father was a sociopath.

“I began to think about psychopathy,” said Dr. Meloy, “when I was struck by the history of the dad and the fact that his biology was rooted in a father who had a diagnosis as a psychopath.”

Dr. Meloy said speculation by Paddock’s brother in interviews with investigators that “he had done everything in the world he wanted to do and was bored with everything” further backed his hypothesis, as did the fact that several others described Paddock as emotionally detached.

The coldblooded and grandiose assault on a crowd of people Paddock had never met also bore characteristics of psychopathy, not of someone having a mental breakdown, said Dr. O’Toole, the retired FBI profiler. “It was a complete lack of empathy for the trauma and damage done to strangers,” she said.

This hypothesis does
have holes. Paddock
didn’t have a history
of violence,
impulsiveness or
lying, and he helped
those closest to him.

He called his mother before the attack to make sure she was prepared for Hurricane Irma. He shared his investments and his wealth with his family and girlfriend, Marilou Danley. He also was prescribed medicine to calm anxiety—not a trait often associated with those who have no conscience.

“In order to say that Stephen Paddock was a psychopath, you would have to do a posthumous assessment with case materials, you’d have to do interviews, you’d have to go back over years of behavior,” said Dr. O’Toole.

Even among law-enforcement officials close to the investigation, no speculative consensus has emerged.

“My opinion is he was pissed over getting his butt kicked gambling, or he wanted to follow in his father’s shoes,” said one official familiar with the investigation.

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