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Larry Starr, PhD
Thomas Jefferson University

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Solving the Wrong Problem

Larry M. Starr, PhD
Director, PhD in Complex Systems Leadership and DMgt in Strategic Leadership
School of Continuing and Professional Studies
Thomas Jefferson University
Lawrence.Starr@Jefferson.edu

Over the Memorial weekend, I read editorials and listened to opinions from New York, Philadelphia, and Washington trying to make sense of the senseless mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Each person defined the root cause then argued how to solve the problem by fixing what is broken.

Some suggest the problem is in the person who has mental health challenges, the oft-repeated, guns don't kill people; people kill people. When mass murder is reduced to individual pathology, improving the availability of mental health to at-risk children and adults is cited as the solution.

Others suggest the cause is American gun culture. Culture is a context problem wherein a person, family, and community believe a gun is an inherent right essential to control against the many threats that emerge from within and outside society. To change a culture is difficult and requires a fundamental shift in how guns are understood and marketed, and how politicians representing these citizens communicate with their constituencies about guns.

A popular problem description is that the death of children and adults is a physical weapon and policies problem. Offered solutions include making technologically smart guns, setting policies where guns are more difficult to get, and where buyers must demonstrate they are responsible users.

A fourth conception of the problem is to blame not the shooter but the security and police. Institutions including schools and communities have designated safety and police officials whose job is to protect. When this fails, the solution to this root cause is to enforce and ensure designated responders are qualified and motivated to act responsibly and ethically.

A fifth conception is that shooters often give plenty of warning before they act, commonly on social media, but signals are not collected and dots not connected. Social media refers to people's social interests and if one person describes

interest in killing, it is the obligation of others in a rational society to report this and to confirm it was received and understood in order to prevent acts of violence. The solution to this problem is more technology governance and reminders of our ethical obligations when we see something believably threatening to say something.

What kind of problem is explained five different ways?

For decades, management scientists and practitioners have researched and labelled this type of problem “wicked” and a “complex mess.” A complex mess problem involves many interacting parts, technological issues, and people and groups with different purposes and perspectives. These kinds of problems sometimes have terrible outcomes.

Editorials and commentaries have analyzed the problem into root causes identified separately. But a complex mess problem has no root cause and no single source or single cause to fix. Instead, we need to use a different mindset to understand these unthinkable events as emerging from many forces not in addition but in interaction from our systems of mental health, culture, guns and policies, safety qualifications, social media and more. Ironically, we have learned that by focusing on solving a single issue, the problem can become worse. To solve this kind of problem, we must stop thinking only analytically, only using research to justify choices, which, alas has not and cannot solve the problem.

We must understand mass murder by applying systems thinking. This way of thinking focuses on the interrelationships among many critical elements that coproduce outcomes. There are at least 10 systems thinking approaches that can be valuable for this kind of problem. And informed by systems thinking, we must apply design thinking methodologies and tools to solve a complex mess problem. Design-based problem-solving with varying approaches creates novel solutions by using rigorous methods and tools, and by including critical stakeholders in the problem description and decision making.

For example, when the Tony Blair government was elected in 1997, its mandate was to address the ailing and failing National Health Service which was a complex mess. This was addressed starting in 2000 not by fixing broken parts but as a national transformation applying and integrating design thinking, and was described as “the most ambitious, comprehensive and intentionally funded

initiative to improve healthcare quality in the world.” For 2022, the UK’s healthcare system is ranked 13th in the world; the US system is ranked 18th.

I believe our founding fathers had an inherent systems and design mentality when they designed our system of government, and that design remains deeply part of the American psyche. Among America’s global and historical distinctions is that we co-designed with many representatives and stakeholders what we wanted in our society.

The murder of our children, families and colleagues is the kind of problem motivating us to decide what we want in our society now. Using systems and design thinking is a pathway to navigate to the society in which we want to live.

References

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