

## Case Study - San Ysidro McDonald's Mass Shooting

San Ysidro, San Diego, California

July 18, 1984



This photo of Omar Hernandez lying next to his bicycle on July 18, 1984, became a symbol of the devastating mass shooting at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, San Diego, California. The 11-year-old boy, who was going to McDonald's with two friends for sundaes, was among 21 people killed by the perpetrator. (File Photo - San Diego Union-Tribune)

### Uninspired Perpetrators

Another horrific mass shooting, another Mexican border town, another crazed killer with Latinos in his sights.

McDonald's and Walmart.

### McDonald's

On July 18, 1984, a mass shooting occurred at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, San Diego, California, which abuts the United States-Mexican border that killed 21 people and injured 19 others. Five of the dead were under 11 years old.

A Wikipedia article states that "[His wife] asked him [the perpetrator] where he was going, to which he replied he was 'going hunting ... hunting for humans.'" <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there are multiple versions of that statement online, and in at least one case the same source uses three different versions.

The McDonald's where the mass shooting occurred was approximately 200 feet from the perpetrators home.

An excerpt from the heading "July 18, 1984—San Ysidro, CA: The McDonald's Massacre" in the book *Coloniality of the US/Mexico Border: Power, Violence, and the Decolonial Imperative* states that "Nearly 90% of the town's population at the time of the shooting were Mexican, both United States citizens and 'legal' residents included," and "Seven of those shot were residents of Tijuana [Mexico], ... ."

The foregoing book also states that "[The perpetrator] began shooting, not 'randomly' but rather premeditatedly, at the predominantly Mexican customers and employees who he arguably viewed as responsible for his own unemployment, after having specifically told his wife he was going out to hunt Mexicans that day."<sup>2</sup>

Another publication sums it up. A *La Prensa San Diego* article states that "[The perpetrator] was an unemployed security guard that blamed Mexicans for his inability to get a job."<sup>3</sup>

## **Walmart**

On August 3, 2019, a mass shooting occurred at a Walmart Supercenter (referred to as just Walmart) near the Cielo Vista Mall on the east side of El Paso, Texas, near the United States-Mexican border where 22 people were killed and 24 others were injured.

An *AP News* article states that "[The perpetrator] ... confessed to officers while he was surrendering and later explained that he had been targeting Mexicans, ... ." and "Most of the dead had Hispanic last names and eight were Mexican nationals."<sup>4</sup>

An *El Paso Times* article states that "Chris Grant's account of Saturday's shooting, told through his family, appears to support the idea that [the perpetrator] came to El Paso specifically to shoot Hispanic people. El Paso's population is 83% Hispanic," and "'He stated that the shooter was targeting Mexicans and was passing whites, African Americans,' said Laura Hromatka, Grant's former wife."<sup>5</sup>

These two mass shootings are hauntingly similar. First, the political piece. The perpetrator at McDonald's apparently blamed Mexicans for his unemployment and was motivated to kill as many of them as possible. The perpetrator at Walmart apparently warned of a "Hispanic invasion" of Texas in a manifesto posted online and was motivated to kill as many of them as possible.

Some people have argued that Donald J. Trump, president of the United States, inspired the Walmart attack with his anti-immigrant rhetoric. Nonsense. Trump didn't inspire the Walmart perpetrator any more than he did the McDonald's perpetrator. In 1984 Trump was a relatively unknown and unheard from real estate tycoon living and working thousands of miles away.

Concerning the Walmart mass shooting a *New York Post* article states that "In his unhinged manifesto, [the perpetrator] himself said that he wasn't motivated by Trump, that his white supremacist beliefs predated the president (the media mostly ignored this)."<sup>6</sup>

Contrast that to a *The Nation* article which states that "... the 'hate' slaughter of Mexicans and Hispanics in El Paso, Texas, by a gunman with a Trumpian 'Hispanic invasion of Texas' engraved in his brain."<sup>7</sup>

The point here is that these two wackos and their counterparts don't need inspiration.

Another case in point.

On April 28, 2000, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, shootings occurred in multiple locations killing five people and injuring (paralyzing) one other. A *The New York Times* article states that "The suspect in the shootings, [the perpetrator], a 34-year-old lawyer, is accused of killing a lifelong Jewish neighbor, two Asian restaurant workers, a grocery store clerk born in India and a black karate student." This event doesn't appear in incident data because "The carnage occurred over a two-hour period across two counties and four townships ... ." Therefore, it doesn't fit mass shooting definitions.

But it certainly fits the definition of a perpetrator not needing inspiration. In fact, the foregoing article states that the perpetrator "... was described by his lawyer today as deeply troubled psychologically and under medication. 'He clearly has an extensive history of mental illness,' said the lawyer, ... ."<sup>8</sup>

And another.

On March 1, 2000, in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, shootings occurred in three places—an apartment building and two fast food restaurants. A *The New York Times* article states that "A black man accused of killing three people and wounding two [in critical condition] in a shooting rampage had anti-white writings in his apartment and singled out whites during the attack, reassuring a black woman in his path, 'Not you, sister,'

the authorities and witnesses said today." The perpetrator "... was later diagnosed as a schizophrenic and is undergoing evaluation at a state mental hospital."<sup>9</sup>

We could continue but it seems evident that history is awash with crazy violent people hell-bent on killing others. They don't need inspiration, they need help. Refer to other sections of this book for more on that. The point is we as a nation are hellbent on finger-pointing and not focused on pinpointing what will prevent incidents. With that, I'll get off the soapbox.

### **"If You See Something, Say Something®"**

The second thing about the July 18, 1984, mass shooting at McDonald's in San Ysidro, San Diego, California, as it relates to current events is the fact that the perpetrator told his wife, Etna, he was "going hunting ... hunting for humans." Nowhere does it indicate that she did what she should have done and was told to do with that information. In fact, an online Murderpedia entry states that "Earlier that day he had commented to his wife 'Society had its chance,'" and "When questioned by police, Etna gave no explanation as to why she failed to report this bizarre behavior. A witness, who spotted Huberty as he left his apartment and proceeded down San Ysidro Boulevard with two firearms, phoned police, but the dispatcher gave the reporting [sic] officers the wrong address."<sup>10</sup>

The "Society had its chance," comment by the perpetrator likely, at least in part, referred to his attempt to get help from a mental health clinic which was also mishandled by a receptionist.

We laud the neighbor and berate the wife. Long before "If You See Something, Say Something®" that neighbor acted and acted correctly. As for the wife, we talk a lot today about red flags. She didn't need the ability to decipher such things. He told her explicitly what he was going to do, and given the events leading up to his statement, she surely should have thought he might just do it. And according to a *UPI* article she did think so. The article states that "The next day [the day the incident happened], 'a woman who said she was [the perpetrator's] wife called the National City Health Center and said her husband had guns and was going to kill someone. She was told to call police. She did not call police,' Kolender said." Kolender is Police Chief Bill Kolender, San Diego Police Department, San Diego, California.<sup>11</sup>

Even though it was 1984, when our mindsets were different, she was told explicitly by her husband what he was going to do. Likewise, she was

told explicitly by the National City Health Center what she needed to do but didn't. There's no excuse for her negligence.

### **Police Engagement for Active Shooters**

The July 18, 1984, mass shooting at McDonald's in San Ysidro, San Diego, California, is in stark contrast to how they unfold today. The police failed to stop the incident for 77 harrowing minutes, which according to numerous people resulted in many deaths and allowed the dying to die. A *San Diego Free Press* article states that "Some say that so much time went by, a few victims bled to death although they could have been saved."<sup>12</sup>

In a documentary about the McDonald's mass shooting titled *77 Minutes* which premiered September 22, 2016 one victim, Albert Leos, who was a 16-year-old McDonald's staff at the time, and who was shot several times, was asked "During this time [during the incident] are you wondering 'Where in the world is the police?'" He emphatically replies, "Yes, I am." It should be noted that Leos later became a San Diego, California, police officer rising to the rank of Lieutenant.

Another victim, Wendy Flanagan, also a McDonald's staff had a lot more to say. The following content, while substantially accurate, may not be grammatically correct or verbatim due to it being transcribed by listening to the video. A video to text online application was used to capture what Flanagan said but its results were worthless. Nonetheless the following transcript drives home the point that the police were so very absent that fateful day:

When I was in there, it, it, I was like, I was wondering. Where are the police? Where are the police? Like it just kept going on and on, and I know that's not like it's okay he's still shooting, it's been like ongoing and ongoing. He's killing more people and the police aren't coming in. Shoot him, shoot him, and they just, ar, we thought they weren't there. We were like we could like hear the sirens and stuff coming but nobody came in, like nobody stopped him. He just kept shooting and shooting, people screaming, and then it got quiet and he kept shooting and I was like what is he shooting at now?

It should be noted that something similar happened more recently. According to Wikipedia the 2011 Norway Attacks, referred to in Norway as 22 July or as 22-7 were two sequential lone wolf domestic terrorist attacks. Normally we wouldn't cite an incident that occurred in another country for a variety of factors, but it seems this one is worthy of breaking with tradition. The first attack was a car bomb explosion in

Oslo within Regjeringskvartalet at a building housing the office of the Prime Minister. The explosion killed 8 people and injured at least 209 people, 12 of them severely. The second attack occurred less than two hours later at a summer camp on the island of Utøya in Tyrifjorden, Buskerud. The perpetrator, dressed in a homemade police uniform and showing false identification took a ferry to the island and opened fire, killing 69 and injuring at least 110, 55 of them seriously. The first shot was fired by the perpetrator at 5:22 PM (1722 hours) and he surrendered to police at 6:35 PM (1835 hours). Which means it took police 73 minutes to stop him. While the second half of this incident did occur on an island meaning a police response would expectedly be slower 73 minutes is inexcusable. The police claimed their helicopter wasn't suitable for transporting groups of police for an airdrop on the island. The police boat had to be transported to the lake from Hønefoss. When it arrived and was launched police started for the island in it but it took on some water and the engine failed after just a few hundred meters probably due to water in the fuel. Police ultimately reached the island in a civilian boat. It should be noted that the ferry left the island but fearing there might be more terrorists went 1.7 miles north instead of returning to the mainland.<sup>13</sup>

Anyways, back to the July 18, 1984, mass shooting at McDonald's in San Ysidro, San Diego, California.

According to Wikipedia "Approximately 10 minutes after the first 9-1-1 call was placed, the police arrived at the correct restaurant. [A dispatcher had mistakenly directed responding officers to another nearby McDonald's.] They imposed a lockdown on an area spanning six blocks from the site of the shootings. The police established a command post two blocks from the restaurant and deployed 175 officers in strategic locations. (These officers were joined within the hour by SWAT team members, who also took positions around the McDonald's restaurant.)"<sup>14</sup>

An *The San Diego Union-Tribune* article states that "'This is an extremely difficult tragedy to analyze,' Minn wrote in a statement he said would appear at the end of the movie. In it, he says he understands the explanations provided by San Diego [California] police but concludes that it's difficult to comprehend how one gunman managed to 'control' 175 police officers." Minn is New York filmmaker Charlie Minn who produced a documentary about the incident titled *77 Minutes* which premiered September 22, 2016.<sup>15</sup>

It does sound strange. Now.

But that was standard operating procedure (SOP) then. We didn't go in. We waited. For hostage negotiators to work, or not, their magic. For special weapons and tactics (SWAT) to save the day. Today, we know that we must engage perpetrators like active shooters immediately. For the police that means immediately on arrival at the scene of the incident they must confront the threat.

That's why on November 7, 2018, when Ventura County (California) Sheriff's Sergeant Ron Helus arrived along with a California Highway Patrol officer within minutes of the first 911 call reporting shots being fired at the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, they entered the building. Helus was shot and died at a hospital. In addition, 11 other people died and more than 15 others were injured.

It should be noted Helus was killed by friendly fire. He was shot six times, five of those shots came from the perpetrator's gun, but Helus was also struck by one bullet fired from the rifle of the California Highway Patrol officer. An online *Taste of Country* article states that "Authorities have concluded that Helus might have survived the other wounds and that the rifle shot was the one that killed the first responder. Ventura County Medical Examiner Dr. Christopher Young says the shot from the rifle struck Helus in his heart, characterizing it as the 'most lethal wound' Helus sustained during the exchange of gunfire."

The foregoing article also states that "Ventura County [California] Sheriff Geoff Dean lauded the officer's courage. 'He went in to save lives, to save other people,' Dean said."<sup>16</sup>

He lost his life by attempting to confront the perpetrator immediately on arrival, but that's what must be done, and is being done, in America today.

As has been stated it took police 77 minutes to stop the San Ysidro McDonald's Mass Shooting perpetrator. The average response time for law enforcement to an active shooter situation is now generally just 3 minutes, meaning that if they stop a perpetrator immediately after arrival—and the chances of that are fairly good—it's generally approximately 70 minutes faster than that fateful afternoon.

It may not seem like it, but that's progress.

### **Accuracy Is Vital**

We'd like to think we've also made progress in another important way.

At least three times during the San Ysidro McDonald's Mass Shooting information wasn't handled properly as follows:

- "... [The perpetrator] had contacted the health center July 17, [1984], and was put in contact with the mental health unit. Due to a clerical error, his name was recorded ... [incorrectly]."<sup>17</sup>
- "A witness, who spotted [the perpetrator] as he left his apartment and proceeded down San Ysidro Boulevard with two firearms, phoned police, but the dispatcher gave the reporting [sic] officers the wrong address."<sup>18</sup>
- "... the dispatcher mistakenly directed responding officers to another McDonald's two miles (three kilometers) from the San Ysidro Boulevard restaurant."<sup>19</sup>

This is totally unacceptable.

In the case of the first one, had the mental health center responded in a timely fashion and taken appropriate action all indications are that it would have prevented the mass shooting. The perpetrator reached out for help, like we want to happen, but due to incompetence, he got no help. Like he said, "Society had its chance." True. Although it most certainly doesn't justify his actions.

The second and third ones seem to speak for themselves.

Those in pivotal information sharing roles, like receptionists and dispatchers, need to get it right. It sounds trite, but lives can and do depend on it.



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