

The Orlando Shooting: Part One

I tell people all the time, Oh My God, it's great to be LGBT in Orlando because it's so welcoming and opening. And the fact that this would happen in our town has shocked us all, I think to a degree that we have even yet to kind of get our minds around.
CNN.com

Most of us in the LGBT community are reeling in the aftermath of the Orlando massacre – the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, and the worst terrorist motivated attack on American soil since 9/11. As I write this, investigators have not determined why Omar Mateen, the 29-year-old gunman who opened fire in Pulse, chose the popular Orlando LGBT nightclub as the site of the massacre. There is speculation that Mateen may have himself been gay, something that was culturally frowned upon in Afghan society. This suggests that he may have been acting out internalized homophobia, but this has not been conclusively confirmed.

We do know that the Islamic State has been clear in its hatred of LGBT people. They have not only advocated throwing homosexuals (their word) off the roof or stoning them to death, they have actually executed a number of men and boys thought to be homosexual and posted video of the killings online. Still, Mateen's link to the terrorist group is sketchy at best and therefore leaves the "why target a LGBT nightclub?" question unanswered. Mateen not only pledged allegiance to the head of the Islamic State, but also mentioned the Boston Marathon bombers (who were not remotely affiliated with the Islamic State) and the Vero Beach man who became a suicide bomber in 2014 (who was affiliated with a group that was against the Islamic State) in his calls to the police.

A former police academy classmate painted Mateen as socially awkward and not liked by his peersⁱⁱ. And although he graduated from the police academy, at the time of the attack, he worked as a security guard. He never achieved the goal of becoming a police officer and was fired from his job as a guard at a state prison soon after he was hired. This is significant because many of the perpetrators of mass shootings and have histories doted with rejection and inability to fit in, but again, this does not provide an answer to "why target a LGBT nightclub?"

We may never learn why Mateen specifically targeted an LGBT club, but we do know the impact. To us, it's personal. When he opened fire on all of those people at Pulse, it's as if he was opening fire on all of us. Mateen was not shooting specific individuals, he was shooting people he perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. The unfortunate victims were simply representatives for the group (aka us) that Mateen hated. His message was clear: "LGBT people deserve to die simply because of our sexual orientation and/or gender identity." He saw himself acting not as an individual or part of a small pack, as has been the case with the other mass shooters from Columbine to Virginia Tech to Aurora, Sandy Hook, CT, but as part of a global Islamic terrorist movement that has killed thousands in the

US and abroad. In the wake of 9/11, and the more recent attacks in Paris and Brussels, not to mention all of the attacks that have happened in the Middle East and Africa, it's hard not to be alarmed. In the context of the antigay executions committed in the name of Islam, Mateen's attack on a LGBT nightclub highlights that not only are random people not safe from terrorist attacks, something that we have all been adjusting to since 9/11, but that we, LGBT people, may now be particularly at risk.

But how much at risk are we really? What are the odds of being a target of a mass shooting? According to the gun violence archive, since January 1, 2016, there have been 213 deaths that meet a liberal definition of a mass shootingⁱⁱⁱ. Given that according the census, there are approximately 322,367,564 people in the United States (according to 2015 census estimates), the odds of being killed in a mass shooting so far this year are .6607 in a million^{iv}. Compare this to the odds of drowning in a bathtub: 1 in 685,000, or the odds of dying in a car crash: 1 in 18,585. In other words, the odds of being killed in a mass shooting in the US, terrorist attack or otherwise, are really, really low, less than a 1 in a million.

There is a yoga saying that the heart opens in love and closes in fear. In the wake of this tragedy, I think we have to choose love – love for our selves, love for the victims and their friends and families, and love for our community. Those who hate us want us to cower in fear and limit our lives. They want us to disappear. But when we open our hearts and live from love, we choose to live our lives, out and proud. We can't let fear of the possibility of an unnamed, random attack diminish us just as we don't let the fear of a fatal car crash keep us from driving.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com. Her essay "Unequal Wedding" appears in **Untangling the Knot: Queer Voices on Marriage, Relationships, & Identity**, published by Ooligan Press.*

i <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>

ii <http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/news/orlando-shooter-omar-mateen-was-gay-former-classma/nrfwW/>

iii 3 or more people were injured – for some lists, in order to qualify as a mass shooting, 4 or more people must be killed

iv <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>. Last year the odds of getting killed in a mass shooting was 0.00000143% - a one in a million chance
<https://blogs.princeton.edu/librarian/2015/12/calculating-my-odds/>