

## **Disaster Recovery: Saint Paul, Minnesota October, 2021**

I drove past the Seventh Street Truck Park bar in St. Paul on Monday afternoon, two days after the mass shooting there. It is a neighborhood I know well, having worked for decades in downtown St. Paul and had countless pizza lunches across the street at Cossetta's. I wasn't sure what to expect, but was surprised to see that everything looked remarkably normal, except for a number of TV news crews and three Disaster Recovery trucks parked out front.

My work for the past decades has been in Public Health, focusing primarily on violence prevention. I wish this experience would leave me with clear and simple answers to understanding the tragedy here Saturday night and similar tragedies across our communities and nation; what I have learned through my work is that simple answers often avoid or ignore the complexity of the problems we face. At the same time, I believe it is imperative to seek tangible, doable, measurable solutions that might reduce the incidence and impact of violence in our homes and communities.

One tool from Public Health that might be worth considering is the practice of Epidemiology. A short explanation of this powerful practice is that in order to properly assess and address a problem, we need to understand 1) **What** it is, 2) **Why** it is occurring, and 3) **How** it could be addressed, and hopefully, prevented.

Based on available information, it appears that:

**What** happened is that at least two men got into an argument, possibly concerning allegations of abuse of a family member of one of the men by the other man -- and that this conflict quickly escalated to a gun fight between at least these two men late at night in a crowded bar, resulting in the death of at least one woman and wounding of roughly a dozen others, including the two men with guns.

**Why** this happened is a complicated question, but it is indisputable that at least two men were able to enter a crowded bar late at night with guns, and in a few moments kill and injure a large number of people who had nothing to do with their argument.

**How** can this be addressed and prevented? A question with no simple and easy answers. Again, after decades of working in Public Health and violence prevention, when I look at the problems of community and gun violence that plague our Twin Cities and our nation I am often left speechless and with little or no hope. However, in this case, Epidemiology might point to some potential actions, one being to begin checking all bar patrons for weapons prior to entrance.

This is not an argument for banning all guns (and knives and other potentially deadly weapons) in our communities, as I know this is not going to happen. Looking at bars and weapons though is a different matter. Whatever one's stance on "gun rights", it is indisputable that, had there been no guns in the hands of any patrons at the Truck Park bar that night, no one would have been shot. Period. Add to the mix a crowded environment with people in various states of alcohol consumption and lowered inhibition and cognitive function as a result, and the potential for what happened that tragic night becomes more clear.

This is a small, doable approach that could be implemented immediately, and at little cost. And its impact would become quickly evident, as the problem of shootings in bars would likely quickly decrease to near zero.

Based on my understanding of state law, bars and other establishments have the right to ban weapons within their premises. Most if not all bars have people at their entrances checking IDs; hand-held metal detector wands could be added at relatively little expense. People who wish to carry weapons, legally or not, would not have their "rights" restricted outside of bars, and the rights of everyone else in the bar to life and the pursuit of happiness would be respected as well.

As we try to make sense of the senseless, it is common for us humans to seek people and things to blame. In my opinion, there was little or nothing that the mayor, the police, nor anyone else, except for the individuals who chose to pull out their guns in a crowded bar, could have done to prevent this horrific tragedy. This also was not in any way caused by the people who are experiencing homelessness who are cared for down the street at Freedom House, any more than it was caused by the other patrons at Truck Park, Cossetta's or anywhere else in the West Seventh neighborhood. It was caused by two or more angry, out of control men with guns in a crowded bar.

Three Disaster Recovery trucks parked out front of West Seventh Truck Park two days after another horrific mass killing. That night was a disaster indeed, caused by a few out of control people with guns in a crowded place, and in part by us all. To honor the young woman shot in the back and murdered that night, her family and everyone else affected --all those present, all the wounded, and their families, friends and communities -- in other words, all of us -- let us commit to reducing these disasters as best we are able. Eliminating the mix of late nights, alcohol, and guns seems to be to be a doable and reasonable start.

Donald Gault  
Building Peaceful Community Roseville, MN  
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