

Community togetherness plays vital role in coping with tragedies

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Community solidarity and support have remarkable benefits for people coping with traumatic mass shootings, according to an American-Finnish research study recently published by the University of Turku.

James Hawdon and John Ryan, both professors of sociology at Virginia Tech, with Finnish researchers Atte Oksanen and Pekka Räsänen, investigated the responses of four [communities](#) that suffered from similar tragedies in the United States and Finland.

People in all four communities expressed their need for belonging after the shootings, and this [solidarity](#) appeared to have remarkable benefits for their well-being. The study, published Oct. 30, compared responses to tragedies at a [shopping mall](#) in Omaha, Neb., and at schools in Jokela and Kauhajoki, Finland, and Blacksburg, Va.

After each of these incidents, the afflicted communities responded with displays of solidarity. [Mass gatherings](#), community vigils, and spontaneously erected monuments to the victims all demonstrated that the community was in shock, yet united, the researchers said. The residents gathered to express their collective grief, and the intense rituals focused their attention on their collective loss and on each other.

While there were similarities in how the communities responded to the tragedies, there were also differences. Community response was more evident in the United States, and the state, the media, and residents played an active role in promoting solidarity. In Finland, however, it

appeared that neither the state nor the media emphasized informal social support generated by community solidarity.

The reliance on state-sponsored crisis counseling and the media's tendency to focus stories primarily on the shooters, rather than the victims or communities, may have hindered the emergence of a beneficial solidarity and instead contributed to the emergence of a more stigmatizing behavior.

Researchers say people assisting communities after tragedies should be careful not to let efforts to provide counseling interfere with the community's activities. Based on the team's research, participating in the activities of local businesses, religious establishments, volunteer organizations, and social clubs shortly after a tragedy promoted solidarity but seeing a crisis counselor did not.

Provided by Virginia Tech

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