

The geography of grief: Portapique saddled with the stigma of mass killing

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HALIFAX — For years to come, the village of Portapique, N.S., will likely be defined by tragedy.

As the starting point for one of the worst mass killings in Canadian history, the rural enclave on Cobequid Bay has joined a long list of small communities that have become synonymous with horror and grief.

Columbine, Sandy Hook, Mayerthorpe — the list goes on. If there's an atlas for violence and pain, Portapique is now included.

The 100 residents of the devastated rural hamlet already know this.

Christine Mills, who lives close to where a gunman disguised as a Mountie started a murderous rampage last week that claimed 22 victims, says she fibbed the other day when a caller to her small business asked where it was located.

"I didn't say Portapique for the simple reason that I knew there would be questions," she said in an interview.

“I know that for the next while, when I say the word — that I live in Portapique — people are going to say, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s where that horrible stuff happened.’”

This is the new reality for Mills and her neighbours.

“But I’m hoping that, in time, people will get past that and remember us for something else,” she says.

Though it may seem unlikely, experts say there is good reason to believe Portapique could one day shed this terrible stigma and become a symbol of hope.

Will Rifkin, a professor at the University of Newcastle in Australia, says that’s exactly what happened to Port Arthur, a small town on Australia’s island state of Tasmania.

On April 28, 1996, a man armed with semi-automatic weapons murdered 35 people and wounded 23 others there before he was arrested and sent to prison.

In the weeks that followed, the massacre prompted a national conversation about gun control.

The Australian government responded with a compulsory gun buyback program and legislation that includes a ban on all semi-automatic rifles and semi-automatic and pump-action shotguns.

The senseless slaughter in Port Arthur, home to 250 people, “stimulated a national movement that made the country safer,” said Rifkin, who holds the chair in applied regional economics at the Hunter Research Foundation Centre.

To this day, gun control advocates consider Australia's legislation as the gold standard.

"So there's something national that could come from what happened in Portapique," Rifkin said. "It may not be a gun control. It may be something about mental health. Maybe stricter laws about impersonating a police officer."

On Tuesday, a senior Mountie confirmed the Nova Scotia gunman was armed with several semi-automatic handguns and two semi-automatic rifles when he killed 13 people in Portapique on April 18 and another nine people the following day in several other communities.

His victims included an RCMP officer, two nurses, two correctional officers, a family of three, a teacher and some of his neighbours in Portapique.

An RCMP officer fatally shot 51-year-old Gabriel Wortman at a gas station in Enfield, N.S., about 90 kilometres south of Portapique at 11:26 a.m. on April 19.

The following day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pointed to the "senseless violence" in Nova Scotia before reminding Canadians that his government has committed to strengthening gun control and banning military-style assault rifles.

The governing Liberals have also said owners of legally purchased firearms that fall under the ban would receive fair-market compensations for their weapons as part of a buyback program similar to the one in Australia.

Meanwhile, the residents of Portapique have begun what will be for some a long and agonizing process, says Simon Sherry, a professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

“The psychological harms stemming from homicide are immense and can often involve post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or prolonged and complicated forms of grief,” said Sherry, who is also a psychologist.

“That population will be at very high risk for a range of serious mental health problems.”

He said federal and provincial officials should focus on offering mental health services to the local population.

“When you have a group of people who have been traumatized and subjected to shocking and horrific events, it’s often the case that those difficulties don’t stay with one generation and can be passed on to the next,” he said.

Like Rifkin, Sherry says Portapique’s agony could prompt a call to action.

“The events that happened there could be pivotal in Canada if we start making policies that help prevent these types of events from ever happening again,” he said, citing proposals for a so-called red-flag law.

Such legislation would allow doctors, educators and other professionals to ask the courts to remove guns from people who are considered at risk of hurting themselves or others, which would require a breach of confidentiality.

As well, Sherry said a public inquiry into the case could raise public awareness about the factors that lead to mass shootings.

“I’m talking about using these horrific events as a way to promote some incremental change,” he said, noting that the events last week in Nova Scotia should be viewed as a systemic problem and not the actions of just one disturbed person.

“These events could be the impetus and the catalyst for societal change that helps reduce gun violence.”

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