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The Signs Were All There. Why Did No One Stop the Maine Shooter?

Shortcomings in mental health treatment, weak laws and a reluctance to threaten personal liberties can derail even concerted attempts to thwart mass shootings.

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Police records, including the accounts of family members and colleagues in his Army Reserve unit, show that Robert Card's friends and relatives had grown increasingly alarmed about his mental condition. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

By Shaila Dewan, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Chelsia Rose Marcius
Shaila Dewan, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Chelsia Rose Marcius are reporting on the mass shooting in Lewiston and on the gunman who carried out the massacre. They welcome information through nytimes.com/tips.

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Robert Card displayed a textbook set of warning signs: He was hearing voices. He told people that he was planning violence. And his behavior had markedly changed in the months leading up to the mass shooting he carried out last week.

His family, his superiors in the military and the local police knew all of this. Yet no one stopped him.

His killing of 18 people with an assault-style rifle in Lewiston, Maine, points to how shortcomings in the mental health system, weak laws and a reluctance to threaten personal liberties can derail even concerted attempts to thwart violence in a country awash in guns.

"So often I think we're talking about how to get people on the radar," said Jillian Peterson, the executive director of the Violence Project, which studies mass shooting perpetrators. "And in this case, he was on the radar of a lot of different systems, and they still couldn't get him intervention."

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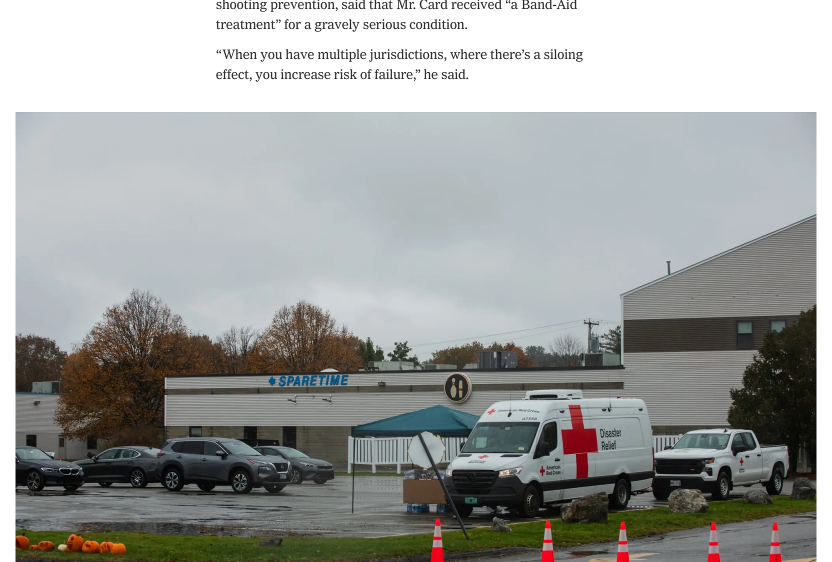
Police records, including the accounts of family members and colleagues in his Army Reserve unit — one of whom sent an anguished late-night text message to his supervisor six weeks before the shooting — show that Mr. Card's friends and relatives had grown increasingly alarmed about his mental condition.

But even as they communicated with each other and law enforcement, even as he was confronted and hospitalized and had a sheriff's deputy come knocking, nothing went far enough.

J. Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist and F.B.I. consultant on mass shooting prevention, said that Mr. Card received "a Band-Aid treatment" for a gravely serious condition.

"When you have multiple jurisdictions, where there's a siloing effect, you increase risk of failure," he said.



Seven victims died at the Just-In-Time Recreation bowling alley. Andrew Cullen for The New York Times

After the shooting, Mr. Card's siblings told the police that their brother had been in a relationship with a woman he met at a cornhole competition at Schemengees Bar & Grille — the bar that he later attacked — and became delusional in February after they had a "bad breakup," according to affidavits released on Tuesday by the Maine State Police.

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Mr. Card's sister, Nicole Herling, said that he had been prescribed medication but stopped taking it, according to the police affidavit.

He wrongly believed that several businesses in the area, including the two that he attacked, were broadcasting online that he was a pedophile, she said.

Ryan Card told a police officer that he had tried to help his brother but that he "could not be reasoned with," according to the affidavit.

The first public record of family members notifying law enforcement of their concerns came in May, when Mr. Card's teenage son and ex-wife reported that he had become paranoid and angry, and had picked up 10 to 15 guns from his brother's house.

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A Sagadahoc County sheriff's deputy, Chad Carleton, began an ad hoc intervention process, trading information with both Mr. Card's Army Reserve command, which said it knew about his problems but not their severity, and his brother, who had witnessed Robert drinking heavily and making "angry rants about having to shoot someone."

Despite those threats, Deputy Carleton told Ryan Card to reach out in the future if he thought his brother was a danger to himself or others, implying that the department would then take action.

Dr. Peterson and other experts on mass shootings say that this is a common misstep. Somewhere from 60 to 90 percent of perpetrators "leak" their plans to other people in advance. But people either do not take them seriously enough, or allow the person who made the threat to convince them that it is not genuine.

"He literally said, 'I am a danger to others. I want to go shoot this place.' So that should be enough to escalate it," Dr. Peterson said.

Instead, Mr. Card's siblings visited him. He answered the door with a gun in hand but agreed to see a doctor about the paranoia and voices, according to Deputy Carleton's report.

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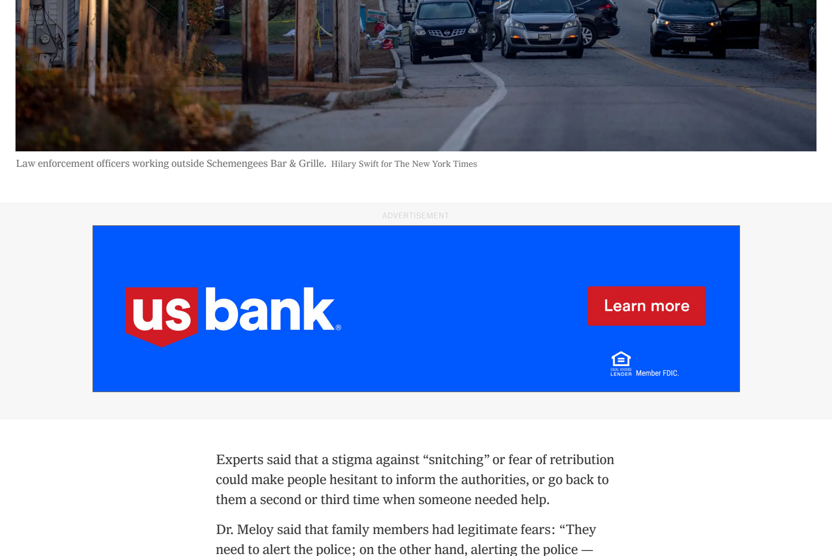
Neither Deputy Carleton nor Mr. Card's relatives have responded to requests for interviews. Sheriff Joel Merry of Sagadahoc County said in a statement that he believed his agency had "acted appropriately and followed procedures," but would evaluate its policies to look for improvements.

Gov. Janet Mills of Maine announced on Wednesday that she would create an independent commission to probe "the facts of what happened on that tragic night, of the months that led up to it, and of the police response to it."

The Army Reserve's plan in May was "to sit down with Robert in the near future and see if they could get him to open up about what has been going on," according to the deputy's report. Asked for comment, a spokesman said the Army was continuing to investigate Mr. Card's service record.

It is not clear how either plan played out. But it is clear that Mr. Card's son and ex-wife had grown afraid of him. They did not want him to know that they had gone to the authorities, and sought to keep their involvement confidential.



Law enforcement officers working outside Schemengees Bar & Grille. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

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Experts said that a stigma against "snitching" or fear of retribution could make people hesitant to inform the authorities, or go back to them a second or third time when someone needed help.

Dr. Meloy said that family members had legitimate fears: "They need to alert the police; on the other hand, alerting the police — and then a paranoid individual finding out about that — can bring a blowback."

In July, Mr. Card came to the attention of the authorities again, when he attended annual training at Camp Smith in New York with his Army Reserve unit. There, according to police records, Mr. Card accused three soldiers of calling him a pedophile, shoved one of them and locked himself in his room.

Mr. Card was taken to a medical treatment facility at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, and from there to a civilian psychiatric hospital in New York, called Four Winds, where he stayed for 14 days.

But the system to treat people who resist getting help on their own is geared toward acute, not long-term, problems. Involuntary stays require an imminent threat of harm and generally last from 72 hours to two weeks.

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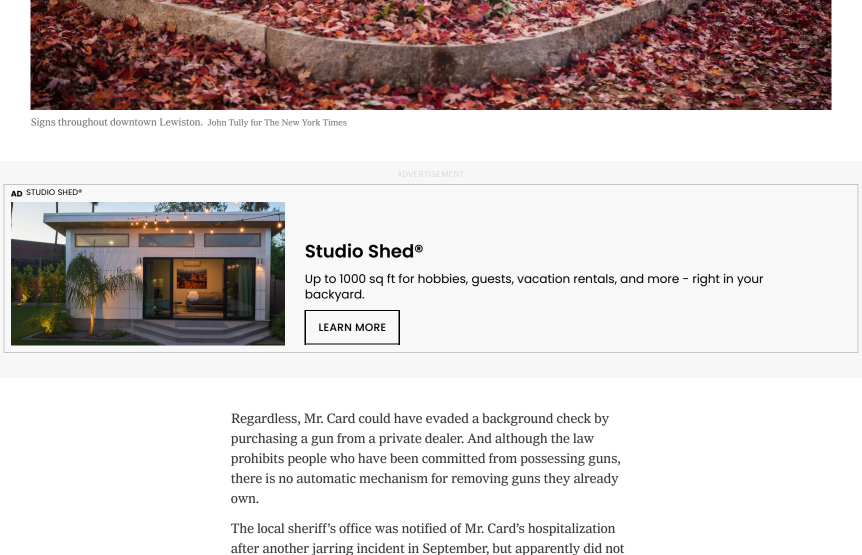
After Mr. Card's discharge from the hospital, the Army directed that he not have access to military weapons or participate in live-fire activities, and declared him to be "non-deployable." Reserve medical personnel made multiple attempts to contact Mr. Card over the next few months, according to a statement from the Army.

The Army's decisions affected only what happened when Mr. Card was on duty. But reservists like him are rarely on duty, so commanders are limited to alerting civilian authorities with whom they may be unfamiliar, said Michael Aschinger, a retired Army Reserve sergeant major.

That left the local police with two legal options. They used neither.

First, an involuntary psychiatric commitment should have made it illegal under federal law for Mr. Card to possess guns. Neither the Army nor the hospital would say whether his stay at Four Winds was forced, but there are several indications that it was, including the fact that just two days after he returned home, he wrote on a gun purchase form that he had been committed. (The form does not specify, but the federal law that question is based on does not apply to voluntary commitment.)

Any involuntary commitment should have been reported to a national database that would have prevented Mr. Card from passing the background check required to buy guns from a licensed dealer. Officials have said that Mr. Card's name was not in the database, and that he purchased guns legally after his hospital stay.



Signs throughout downtown Lewiston. John Tully for The New York Times

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Regardless, Mr. Card could have evaded a background check by purchasing a gun from a private dealer. And although the law prohibits people who have been committed from possessing guns, there is no automatic mechanism for removing guns they already own.

The local sheriff's office was notified of Mr. Card's hospitalization after another jarring incident in September, but apparently did not pursue it as a possible avenue to take away his guns.

By that point, the warning signs could not have been more clear.

During a car ride in mid-September, Mr. Card punched a fellow soldier and threatened to "shoot up" the Army Reserve facility in Saco, Maine, and other places. The soldier texted a superior officer at 2 a.m., according to a copy of the messages obtained by The New York Times, warning him to change the passcode to the unit's gate at their base and be armed in case Mr. Card approached.

"I believe he's messed up in the head," the soldier, identified as Staff Sergeant Hodgson, wrote, adding that he loved Mr. Card "to death" but "I do not know how to help him and he refuses to get help or to continue help."

"I believe he's going to snap and do a mass shooting," he wrote.

A copy of the text message was included in a letter that Kelvin Mote, a first sergeant in the Reserve and a corporal in the Ellsworth Police Department in Maine, sent to the sheriff's office in mid-September, detailing the incidents at annual training, hospitalization and car ride.

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Deputies could have also sought to use Maine's "yellow flag" law, which allows the police to remove someone's guns for up to a year if that person presents "a likelihood of foreseeable harm." The law went into effect in 2020 and has been used 81 times, but never by the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office, according to state records.

All law enforcement officers in the state receive training on how to use the law, which requires them to take the individual into protective custody, arrange a medical evaluation and present the results to a judge.

The law is more burdensome than "red flag" laws in other states, which do not require taking people into custody and evaluating them.

When the Sheriff's Office received the Army report in mid-September, Sgt. Aaron Skolfield went to do a welfare check but did not find Mr. Card.

Instead, Sergeant Skolfield worked with Ryan Card, who said he and his father had come up with a way to secure Mr. Card's weapons.

But it never happened. Ryan said his brother had allowed him to change the code on his gun safe for "a period of time" a few months ago, according to a police affidavit. But Robert Card, it said, still "had access to his firearms prior to the shootings."

John Ismay and Dave Philipps contributed reporting. Kirsten Noyes contributed research.

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