

Evan Fitzgerald seemed determined to die a violent death – and on the evening of June 1, he came dangerously close to taking others with him.

Armed with a shotgun he had stolen from a neighbour, the 22-year-old began firing random shots as he walked through the Fairgreen Shopping Centre in Carlow, causing terrified shoppers to flee for their lives.

Fitzgerald had long struggled with his mental health and is believed to have entered a state of acute psychosis in the hours before the attack.

Earlier that day, he visited a friend's home and left a USB stick in a sealed bag taped to their bedroom window, along with a capital letter E written in duct tape. On the device were his thoughts about how – and why – he intended to die violently. He wrote about his past, personal issues and beliefs about how he might die.

It remains unclear whether Fitzgerald wanted to harm others or only himself. Or maybe he hoped he would be shot by gardai. Witnesses say he fired his gun but did not appear to take careful aim.

The shots were fired overhead, as if to frighten rather than kill. In the end, Fitzgerald turned the weapon on himself. He died by suicide, bringing a tragic conclusion to the events of that Sunday.

NO POLITICAL MOTIVATION

Such random incidents are rare, if not unprecedented, in Ireland but over the past decade there have been scores of such incidents across the US and Europe, many resulting in mass killings.

While there is no single profile for perpetrators of these acts, they often share traits: violent nihilism, suicidal ideation, troubled histories, a sense of isolation. In the midst of psychosis, they sometimes want to become celebrated figures online.

Investigators are still trying to determine Fitzgerald's motive. The young man had threatened suicide in the past but he was not ideologically driven. He had not been radicalised online by extremists. There is no evidence to show he consumed violent content online.

Many gunmen such as Fitzgerald behave like terrorists without being politically motivated, according to Anne Speckhard, director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism in Washington.

“This is not politically motivated violence, but it might be called motivated violence. The dynamic is simple. They are people who are mentally unwell and convinced that suicide and killing is a good answer to their life problems. They sometimes want to become a false hero, like you get famous for doing something,” she said.

Young people with mental health difficulties are especially vulnerable to the lure of violence. Speckhard likened Fitzgerald not to violent extremists but to a school shooter, the type of young person

The secret life of

The 22-year-old's shooting spree and suicide raise concerns over mental health, garda tactics and the lure of violence, writes *John Mooney*

Evan Fitzgerald

€2,500 in notes before returning to his friend's car with a Heckler & Koch G3 assault rifle, a Remington pistol, and rounds of ammunition for each gun.

Not long after, their vehicle was intercepted by the emergency response unit near Straffan, Co Kildare. Later that day, officers searched Fitzgerald's home near Kiltegan in Carlow. Inside, they made a startling discovery. He had been making explosives. There was a black powder mixture of potassium nitrate, sulphur and charcoal, as well as a separate mix containing ammonium perchlorate, potassium perchlorate, sulphur and magnalium. The team also recovered ammunition for rifles and handguns, shotgun cartridges, and magazines for an AK-47 rifle, a Tokarev pistol, and another for Makarov pistols, the type used in gangland killings.

His internet history and technology did not reveal much. He had not watched online gore or visited extremist websites. There was no guiding hand propelling him towards violence.

In custody, Fitzgerald freely admitted responsibility for buying the guns, suggesting he just wanted to shoot targets. He said he had stolen the chemicals used to make his explosives, and named a friend as the source of some of the ammunition. However, the detectives could not take his account at face value as some of the ammunition matched types commonly used in gangland shootings.

Fitzgerald and his two friends were charged in connection with the weapons and ammunition found in the car. Fitzgerald would later face additional charges relating to the explosives and other firearms parts and ammunition recovered from his home. Hence the initial court hearing was told that investigations were ongoing into the origin of the firearms.

Gardai initially objected to bail, but it was later granted under strict conditions. Fitzgerald was due to receive a trial date when he died.

WARNING SIGNS MISSED

The intricacies of the operation that led to Fitzgerald's arrest entered the public domain through Alan Kelly, the Labour TD, who was briefed by a garda whistleblower. The officer, who has made a series of protected disclosures about alleged failings at Garda Headquarters, told Kelly about the provenance of the weapons involved in the sting operation.

Kelly has since raised the matter in the Dail and before the Oireachtas justice committee, arguing that Fitzgerald should have been diverted into mental health services rather than arrested and charged.

Michael McDowell, the senator and senior counsel, has also suggested the operation amounted to entrapment.

Few who understand the intricacies of covert policing would agree with criticisms of the garda approach, however.

Roy McComb, former deputy director of the National Crime Agency in Britain who wrote the policy document on controlled deliveries for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said the garda operation was entirely legitimate.

“Controlled deliveries carry risks, but all policing does. This young lad had been trying to buy guns. He just happened to contact law enforcement rather than criminals. It's not entrapment. It would be if someone enticed him out of the blue to commit a crime he had no intention of committing,” McComb said. “The gardai found out about this because he contacted the wrong person. They didn't initiate the crime – they facilitated it for the purposes of ... building a case. That's an entirely legitimate purpose.”

McComb, like others, believes it is dangerously misguided to suggest the gardai should have handled the case differently.

“These investigations tend to unfold in a certain way. If you pause, the person trying to buy weapons may go elsewhere. The gardai were always working against the clock. In covert policing, you're not in charge of every moving part, but from what I've seen, they did all the right things with the right intentions.”

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who acquires guns before threatening and sometimes killing their fellow students for no clear reasons.

“These people are highly dangerous because they see violence as their way out. The authorities in Ireland need to be aware of how these incidents sometimes prompt copycats. There are young vulnerable people who might be inspired to behave like this man,” she said.

AN OBSESSION WITH GUNS

Fitzgerald grew up in Portrushen, a rural community on the Carlow-Wicklow border. He struggled at school with learning disabilities but he was well liked. He was not a loner. The pictures of him at his debs show a smiling, confident-looking young man surrounded by friends. He was much loved by his mother and father. His family declined to contribute to this story.

Fitzgerald had struggled with his mental health for years, but as he grew older and left school, he became more capable, more independent but, ultimately, more dangerous as he had developed a fixation with guns and his own death.

When he left school and began working in steel fabrication, Fitzgerald suddenly found himself able to financially pursue his obsession with guns, which led him to the darknet. The very traits that helped him function – independence, income and ability – gave him the tools to act on his worst impulses. In people fascinated by violence, especially those who feel alienated or unstable, this combination can be volatile.

Fitzgerald first came to the attention of garda intelligence early last year, when investigators were alerted to attempts by an anonymous user to source firearms on darknet marketplaces – online forums often used by criminals to trade in drugs, weapons and stolen data. The forums are among the most heavily monitored by intelligence and police services as they are a rich source of information.

Undercover gardai assumed the role of an underworld gun dealer and began communicating with the individual via a Proton Mail account. The account Fitzgerald used was eventually linked to an Irish internet service provider, which helped investigators trace his identity.

His request for military-grade weapons led garda intelligence to suspect he was being coerced or his identity had been stolen. The exchanges revealed Fitzgerald had a limited understanding of how the darknet worked: he could not pay in bitcoin – the preferred currency in illicit online markets. Instead, he had to improvise. Fitzgerald sent photographs of bundles of cash to the undercover gardai and promised to pay on delivery.

Once his identity was established, garda intelligence began monitoring his actions more closely. But they had no way of knowing his plans or the state of his mental health.

On March 2, Fitzgerald and two friends travelled from their homes to meet what they believed was a criminal willing to sell weapons at a prearranged rendezvous. Fitzgerald handed over more than

INVESTIGATORS PICK APART THE AFTERMATH