

No Guns, No Glory?

I read your editorial with appreciation this morning. In my practice, I have worked with adolescents and young adults for more than 30 years, so the fact that many mass shooters are so young has caught my attention.

Of course, there is never just one cause for such horrific actions. But it seems to me that there are two recurring themes in these situations: (1) many shooters are socially isolated and (2) in our culture, the use of guns is glorified as a representation of power and a source of satisfaction. Here are my thoughts on each:

1. Shooters are often loners who exhibit behavior that is deviant or in some way socially unacceptable; this varies from public masturbation or the voicing of scary thoughts and ideas to simply exhibiting social awkwardness. When the lonely, shunned child has access to powerful, multiple-shot weapons, this is a setup for a shooting.

Perhaps society inadvertently causes harm by forcing classroom integration. About 30 years ago, with the hope to normalize abnormal social interactions and to help students understand and accept those who are different from them, schools began to mainstream students with serious learning difficulties, including students with mental illnesses. These children lost their “group,” their classroom community of those similar to themselves. They are still assigned personalized curricula and work one-on-one with special education teachers, but they do not have much of a peer group anymore. These students are put with a group of students—normal kids—that frequently rejects them.

Part of the problem has to do with the demonization of the term “normal”; it is now politically incorrect to designate a student as normal or not, despite the persistence of the bell-shaped curve. If normal, nonviolent behavior is desired, we need to be able to name abnormal behaviors as such.

Parents, understandably, want this type

of social integration for their child. But when these students are bullied throughout the day, it takes a toll. We, as parents or providers, may not fully recognize how children experience this bullying, and those affected may not be able to describe it. They then withdraw, not finding anyone to share their feelings and experiences with, to cope. Some of these kids live as loners in school, and around ages 16 to 25, this lifestyle can become intolerable. They may become depressed from the emotional pain, seek revenge, and wish to die.

The desire to die—and to get lots of attention from it—is recognized in many adolescents. Lonely, troubled teens imagine what others will say about them when they are dead, and think of themselves looking down from heaven or somewhere, watching the grief and surprise overtake their peers.

To take out others with themselves makes dying less of a lonely act. Killing themselves and either people they hate or someone they love, to keep them company in the afterlife or to make sure they both suffer together, both make some sense. And both are tragic.

We need to better identify these lonely teens and help them find a friend. They

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need regular social interaction and monitoring by the same people daily. Red flags often exist. If they are depressed, more intense care and monitoring are needed.

2. The glorification of guns stems from the need of every civilization for warriors to protect them from invaders. Soldiers, war, and weapons of destruction thus become known—to young men, in particular—because there is a need for youth to join the military and train, even if just for a few years. We honor brave soldiers who die in

the line of duty.

Some of these men develop expertise in the use of military machine guns—rapid-fire weapons that can kill many people from afar in minutes. They may wish to continue using their skills upon separating from the military; they want military-grade guns at home. This makes sense, for they mastered and practiced this skill for years and can handle guns safely.

➤ **Prevention [of mass shootings] will require a willingness to see and react to troubled people—before the police need to be called for a crime.**

Gun shows allow the purchase of military-grade weapons fairly easily in many states. In the right hands, no problem. But our laws about guns are minimal and do not check to ensure that the buyer is one of these healthy, normal, skilled men.

This accessibility is compounded with the popularity of violent video games among teens and young adults, which often involve shooting animated characters and animals in realistic scenarios. There is apparently a sense of adventure, satisfaction, and power that comes from this.

The desire to hunt in the real world, with real weapons, for a heightened sense of accomplishment or power as a follow-up to this fantastical activity seems a normal progression of behavior. Shooting ranges, wild animal hunting farms, and deer hunting in autumn are usual and customary ways to fulfill this desire. Families in western New York, where I live, often teach their sons and

daughters to use a gun starting at age 12 and take them on annual hunting trips. This is not a problem.

When a teen or young person becomes despondent and lonely, the feelings of power and satisfaction from hunting or killing something can act as an antidote to the negative feelings. If anger or jealousy are part of the problem, the weapon can be turned on the perceived source of those feelings. The shooters in these devastating massacres seem to be able to use their chosen weapon competently. Where does this familiarity come from? Often, the weapon was accessible in their own home.

Teens and young adults with depression or feelings of loneliness, anger, or jealousy should be evaluated for access to weapons, and for their knowledge of use of these weapons, as part of the care plan. Parents and other adults should be queried and warned to keep weapons away from them until their mood has stabilized. There is reluctance to do this in our society. Health care and law enforcement professionals need to put out public announcements that give this warning to everyone.

Alone, these two ideas I've outlined will not prevent all mass shootings. But a more rapid reaction to the red flags of loneliness, mood changes, and social changes in a young person, and seeking to change that dynamic, might reduce the prevalence. Public health is at stake, and prevention will require a willingness to see and react to troubled people—before the police need to be called for a crime.

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