

American epidemic

Experience, Human Nature



In modern times, nobody who reads the newspapers or watches television can avoid the chilling fate that our country faces. School violence is a rapidly growing trend in America, and it seems to be there is nothing we can do to stop it. The offenders are from all races and social classes. They range from the high school hero to the high school dropout. It often seems the only thing they have in common is an utter disregard for their own life and the lives of others.

In the following accounts, taken straight from American headlines, harrowing events fit for blockbuster fiction prove that our country is becoming victim to a new criminal: youthful rage. In generations past, the high school rebel was the boy all the girls wanted and all the boys wanted to be. He was the one in the leather jacket who went to class only to make snide remarks, drove too fast, and talked too slow. Jump forward to the end of the twentieth century, and the high school rebel is the boy who students ignore, the one who sits in the back of the classroom and never talks, wears all black and keeps to himself.

He is the last student anyone would fear, but probably the most dangerous. He doesn't want to take advantage of those who are smaller than him, but wants to seek vengeance on those who have hurt him, basically everyone. He, in fact, is sometimes a she. Of course, offenders can't be classified into one group. Many times it is the last person you would ever imagine. That is the way it happened for Chester Jackson, a Detroit high school football star. Chester was a seventeen-year-old hero, a senior who had reached godlike status due to his work for the school football team.

But if you ask his high school friends of their memories of Chester, they will not remember him running down the football field, but running down the hall, trying to save his own life. Like so many students, Chester found it amusing to tease the underclassmen. Particularly a fourteen-year-old freshman boy that was unable to defend himself when Chester and his friends pushed him in his own locker and secured the combination lock for three consecutive classes. That was the event they say made the boy snap.

He brought a gun to school the next day, and even with all of his football training, Chester could not run fast enough to save his own life. He was the first student ever killed in a Michigan high school. Unfortunately, Chester's story is not an isolated incident. School shootings are now a common occurrence. A place that used to be considered a safe haven is now turning into a death trap. Where lockers and drinking fountains used to be found there are now metal detectors and armed guards. Detroit high schools have expelled fifteen students since Chester's murder inspired them to install metal detectors.

Each of the students was carrying a loaded gun. Chester's death also resulted in the now nation wide Barron Assessment and Counseling Center, a program designed to encourage youths to exchange their weapons for books. Marva Collins, principal of a Chicago Public School, sees the starting of these groups as bittersweet. " (These) Centers are extremely helpful, and have the right idea in mind, but how many children are going to have to die before our nation sits up and pays attention. Will mine be the next? " In

1994, children under 18 were 244% more likely to be killed by guns than they were in 1986.

Gun owners of all ages state that their number one reason for owning a handgun is protection from criminals, yet they are 43 times as likely to kill a friend or family member than they are a criminal. In the 1980's it appeared that teen pregnancy was going to be the downfall of American society, but as Marion Wright Edelman, president of the children's advocacy group puts it, "The crisis of children having children has been eclipsed by the greater crisis of children killing children." Between 1979 and 1993, guns killed more than 60,000 children, a figure greater than the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War.

Also, a child in the United States is 15 times as likely to die as a result of gunfire than is a child in war-torn Northern Ireland. The statistics only succeed in proving what is becoming incredibly obvious; guns have become the clearest evidence of a growing despair among many American teenagers. As one young man puts it, "That's just the way it is. Guns are just a part of growing up these days. You fire a gun and you can just feel the power. It's like yeah." Who is to blame for the newest American trend? Are parents not paying enough attention to their children?

Are schools not educating students on proper anger management? These are both possibilities, but 6 out of 10 people agree: the problem lies in the media. It seems that you cannot attend a movie these days without having to prepare yourself for some degree of violence. Even "family" movies (those with a G or PG rating) are not immune to it. Television shows are

nearly as bad, police dramas run nearly every night during prime time on major networks, exposing millions of young children to things they are not ready to see.

The new wave of gangster rap shows young men boasting of killings and beatings, and the people of our country are proving to the corporations that offer these products one major thing; violence sells. Tommy Matola, president of a major music corporation states " the things that (these) young men are speaking of are things that they grew up around, that millions of children are still growing up around. Society owes them for exposing a problem that may threaten our national security. " Even a typical cartoon show averages 41 acts of violence each hour, with an attempted murder every 2 minutes.

Many parents want the Government to regulate what is available for children to see, but many maintain that it is not their responsibility. As Barry Lynn of the American Civil Liberties Union put it, " If you cannot persuade persons to reject what you consider to be exploitive or unhealthy, do not ask the government to impose your will on those same persons. " Lately, as youth violence has been more scrutinized by the public, many new laws have come into effect. The debate over what to do with juvenile offenders is one that will never be solved, but can be compromised to come up with a good solution.

Currently, offenders who appear in juvenile court do not receive a criminal record. Therefore, when a child appears in front of a new judge, he will have no way of knowing how many times the child has convicted the same crime. The law of dismissing children from a criminal record was designed to

protect them from stigma and prejudice, but more often there are negative results received not by the child, but by their victim. States have experimented with such things as punishing parents for crimes their children commit, and many have begun to charge children accused of major crimes as adults.

However, none of these laws have been threatening enough, as fourteen-year-old Arthur Bates has proven. Arthur spent many of his early years in mental facilities, but after it was decided that nobody could help him he was sent home to his mother. One day Arthur chose a house at random and planned on robbing it. Once he got in he realized the owner of the home, Lillian Piper, was asleep inside. Arthur proceeded to rape and kill Miss Piper, and then have a bowl of ice cream from her freezer and drive off in her Cadillac. About an hour later police, to whom he immediately confessed, stopped him.

He then told them, " You can" t do anything to me. I just fourteen. " He was sentenced to seven months in reform school. To many, trying children as adults is the only fit punishment, but it has not been as helpful as its proponents had hoped. Usually, when these children are sent to adult institutions, they are sexually molested and taught new crimes. When the child leaves the institution, which many call their " crime school," the child is now more dangerous than he ever had been. There have been many " crime camps," instituted with juvenile offenders in mind, as well.

At these camps, young offenders take part in " skills streaming" where they learn new ways to deal with real life situations. Whether any of these options

really work is really in the eye of the public, and they cannot seem to agree. As Los Angeles police detective Robert Contreras puts it, " These kids are getting away with murder. They have no respect for anything and joke that in jail they" ll at least get three square meals a day. " Obviously, it is going to take more than one person to stop what is being called an American epidemic.

Every parent, every child, every teacher, and every citizen is going to have to stand up and help achieve a solution. As of now, the students committing these crimes are not only literally getting away with murder but also being glamorized. Maryanne Britain, a Texas student, points out " I cannot name one of the students that was killed in Colorado, but I know the whole biography of the killers. What sense does that make? " Miss Britain has pointed out something that many of us don" t realize, in our country often times the offenders are mistaken as the victim.

We lose sight of the crime at hand and try to blame the problem on society instead of the killers. We are all faced with the same graphic truth, and many of us are able to make it through life without killing anyone. Alone, we cannot accomplish much, but if we stand up to offenders as a nation, we can save the fate that we are now facing. All it will take to save the lives of our generation and many to come is everyone working together. That is when we will take our country back and truly make a difference. Perhaps teamwork can be the nations next epidemic.