

Students arrested in Wisconsin: why the desperation among young people in the US?

David Walsh
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Three boys, ages 15 and 16, remain in custody in Racine County juvenile detention center in Wisconsin, charged with conspiracy to murder a dozen or more of their classmates, as well as school officials. The three were among five Burlington, Wisconsin high school students detained by police November 15.

Two of the five allegedly dropped out of the plot and were released after questioning. One of these teenagers has insisted in interviews that the conspiring was not for real.

The five youth dress in a distinctive style, call themselves 'Goths' (short for 'Gothics') and are devotees of music groups like Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson. They apparently felt they were picked on because of their looks and tastes in the small town of 9,500, some 30 miles southwest of Milwaukee.

One of the youth told reporters that the plotting was simply a means of getting revenge through fantasy. According to the account he gave *USA Today*, the scheme was fed by 'one boy's anger that he was being sent to a foster home in northern Wisconsin ... The others participated in the discussions 'mostly to make him feel good.'

Burlington police maintain that the group of boys had planned to cut telephone lines, take the assistant principal hostage and then look up the records of their intended victims and track them down. According to the town's police chief, some of the suspects said they planned to remain at the school after the killings and 'force a shootout with police or commit suicide.' Prosecutor Richard Barta also said the teenagers described their plot as a suicide mission.

How real was this alleged conspiracy? It's impossible to say. Given the record of police departments and prosecutors in the US, there is good reason to be skeptical of the police version. One might also make the point that for adolescents as unhappy as these five apparently were, the boundary between fantasy and reality is somewhat tenuous.

Whether or not the plot was genuine, however, the Burlington incident raises many questions, the first being: in what sort of society is such a grisly act not only possible, but, to a certain extent, *anticipated*?

Let us recall the events of the past year or so: last October a 17-year-old student shot and killed two classmates and wounded seven others in Pearl, Mississippi; in December 1997 another high school student opened fire on a prayer circle in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three girls; in March 1998, four students and a teacher died in an ambush, allegedly carried out by two young boys in a suburb of Jonesboro, Arkansas. Two students were shot to death in May at a school in Springfield, Oregon. There were two more attacks at schools in California. In all, sixteen people died and dozens were wounded in attacks by youngsters on fellow students and teachers in the US during the 1997-98 school year.

Each tragedy was followed by a good deal of breast-beating on the part of politicians, newspaper editors and other establishment figures. The most dire pronouncements come from Christian fundamentalists, who attribute the killings to a turn away from God and a general moral decline. The more traditional right-wing ideologues blame several decades of

supposed liberal 'permissiveness' and the absence of individual responsibility. Liberal-minded commentators may point to the prevalence of guns, or to some broader, but inexplicable social process. Oddly, the latter group is often the most complacent, inclined to believe that society as a whole is essentially healthy.

This is the position of Bill Clinton and the Democrats. On August 27 Clinton devoted a speech to the issue and unveiled a national guide on school violence, entitled *Early Warning--Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. (It was on this occasion that Richard W. Riley, Clinton's Secretary of Education, made the remarkable statement that 'Schools remain among the safest places for young people.' It didn't occur to Riley that in a healthy society no one would feel the need to make such an assertion.) In October the President addressed a day-long conference at the White House on the subject. At the latter function, basing himself on a study his administration had commissioned, he asserted that the problem might be smaller than last year's outbreak had led people to believe.

Nonetheless, Clinton told an audience of school administrators and law enforcement officials, 'We know that there are still some schools where children are afraid to go to school. ... What is at the bottom of this and what can we do?' The answer, he suggested, was a better understanding of social problems in the US, not punishment.

In quintessential Clinton fashion, after offering this relatively civilized appraisal, he went on to explain that 'security has to be the top priority' and outlined a \$65 million plan to 'help schools hire and train 2,000 new community police and school resource officers' to develop anti-violence and anti-drug programs.

This is the general approach currently taken to school violence: platitudes, followed by more police measures.

Following the October gathering, Rep. Bill Goodling (R-Pennsylvania), chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, criticized the Democrats for allegedly holding up legislation that would require harsher penalties for juveniles who commit violent crimes. In this spirit the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, following a shooting at a school dance in the town of Edinboro, unanimously passed bills in October toughening penalties for assaulting teachers and providing schools \$80 million to step up security.

The various officially-sanctioned studies on school violence tend to fall into one of these two categories--bromides and truisms, on the one hand; repression and trampling on democratic rights, on the other--or both. A brochure issued jointly by the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, *Raising Children to Resist Violence*, observes sagely that 'Research has shown that violent or aggressive behavior is often learned early in life.' Its 'Suggestions for Dealing With Children,' include 'Give your children consistent love and attention,' 'Show your children appropriate behavior by the way you act,' 'Make sure your children do not have access to guns' and 'Try to keep your children from seeing violence in the home or community.' As 'An Extra Suggestion for Adults,' it advises 'Take care of yourself and your community.' This may

be well-intentioned, but it reminds one sadly of the old joke about the psychiatrist who tells a patient suffering from anxiety that the solution is to relax.

Along with its expressions of concern for the troubled child, *Early Warning-Timely Response*, the guide issued by the Clinton administration, devotes considerable space to the use of undercover agents to combat drug use in schools. It includes sections on 'Proper Selection and Training of Agents,' 'Agent Enrollment in School,' 'The Bust' and 'After the Bust.'

A document written jointly by the National Association of Attorneys General and the National School Boards Association, 'Legal and Policy Issues in Curbing Violence in Schools,' dispenses in large part with liberal hand-wringing. The paper discusses the legal and constitutional implications of a variety of intrusive measures, including 'Strip Searches,' 'Metal Detector Searches,' 'Locker Searches,' "Sniff" [canine] Searches and 'Use of Cameras.'

The repressive character of the official response does not mean the problem of violence in the schools is not a genuine one. Teachers, school officials and parents have legitimate concerns about their own safety and the safety of their students and children. An estimated one million children, grades 6 through 12, bring a gun to school each year; 29 percent of high school boys are estimated to possess or have access to guns of some sort. In one study, twenty percent of all high school students reported that they had carried a weapon (gun, knife or club) during the thirty days preceding the survey; during the twelve months preceding the survey, 8.4 percent of all students had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.

But the seriousness of the problem should impel any thinking person to look beyond the superficial and sensational approach of the media and consider its sources.

The atmosphere in the schools mirrors conditions within society at large. Many inner-city public schools--neglected, physically decaying, starved for funds, overcrowded--are in an advanced, nearly terminal state of decline. Prison-like conditions already prevail. Each student is treated like a potential criminal, walking through metal detectors to enter school, passing by armed guards once inside.

Most of the recent shootings, however, have taken place in suburban or semi-rural communities. Pearl is a suburb of Jackson, Mississippi; the Arkansas shooting took place in a suburb of Jonesboro. One news piece on the Burlington, Wisconsin incident begins 'Even in this pleasant, out-of-the-way town...'

The implied question--how could such a thing happen here?--simply underscores how distant the media and the upper echelons of society are from the reality of American life. Millions live in a condition of economic insecurity unprecedented in the post-Depression era. The strong currents of anxiety and dissatisfaction are transmitted to the young, the most sensitive layer of the population.

Beyond the economic realm, there is the psychological and moral state of society. Whatever else it may have produced, the era of free-market worship has had a significant impact on the social climate in the US.

The attempt to make financial success the principal or sole measure of human worth, and the concerted effort to purge society of elemental feelings of solidarity, altruism and sympathy for the sufferings of others have had their effect. Many accept the degradation of human values, the coldness and estrangement in human relations as the natural and inevitable state of affairs. (However tentative their plans may have been, the five boys in Burlington apparently did discuss those students they wanted to eliminate. They were looking for a painless, fast-acting solution to their difficulties. Is this so untypical of the approach taken to any number of problems in America? Political parties, businesses and media outlets all have their 'hit lists.' Media commentators and politicians talk glibly about eliminating foreign foes of the US government.)

One thing is certain: great numbers of young people are deeply unhappy in the US. Figures on teenage suicide are one indicator. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people, after motor vehicle accidents and unintentional injury. From 1952 to 1992 the incidence of suicide among adolescents and young adults *tripled*. In 1995, 337 youngsters *10 to 14* killed themselves, and the rate of suicide for those under fourteen is increasing. One young person (primarily white males) killed himself every hour and 42 minutes in 1995. Among the young there are an estimated 100-200 attempts for every successful suicide.

An alarming number of adolescents find life so bleak in America that they seriously consider taking their own lives or the lives of others. A youth who goes on a killing rampage--like the student in Springfield, Oregon who told his captors, 'Kill me! Just kill me now!!--is, in effect, murdering himself. These mass shootings are all 'suicide missions' in one way or another.

Only a relatively small number of the most psychologically vulnerable explode into violence, but they must emerge from a far larger body of youth who can make no sense of themselves and the world around them, who feel they have nothing to look forward to. The emptiness of life when it is simply directed to the accumulation of wealth may make itself felt more deeply, in a certain sense, in communities that are not the most impoverished.

The political establishment cannot admit the widespread existence of these sentiments within the younger generation. It is too much of an indictment. Unable and unwilling to respond in a sympathetic manner to the cries for help coming from the youth, the politicians and self-ordained moralists reply with laws and police and prisons. Whether or not the teenagers in Burlington were fantasizing or not, apparently no one involved has suggested that, above all, they need psychiatric help. No, a hearing next month will determine whether they are to be tried as adults, as the prosecution is requesting, thereby empowering the courts to impose far lengthier sentences.

The trial of Luke Woodham, the Mississippi teenager who shot and killed the two girls in Pearl, was a fairly barbaric spectacle. On June 12 of this year a jury in Hattiesburg rejected an insanity defense for Woodham, who is obviously disturbed, after only five hours deliberation, and found him guilty of two counts of murder and seven counts of aggravated assault. The judge immediately sentenced the 17-year-old to two consecutive life sentences and seven 20-year sentences.

As a final note. CNN did a piece on a working class high school in Reading, Pennsylvania at which a variety of security measures were imposed following the Edinboro shooting. The report notes that violent incidents are down, but then adds: 'The more secure surroundings please Reading High School Principal Donald Anticoli. Still, his wish list is different than the state's. 'If we could have smaller class sizes, more computers, more extracurricular activities, then [students] would feel more a part of the school and have greater success,' he told CNN.'

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