

Violent juvenile crimes in Japan point to a deeper social crisis

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A series of violent crimes perpetrated by young people in Japan over the last year has generated considerable public discussion and concern. As in other countries, the response in the media and official circles has been to demand harsher penalties and to prosecute young offenders as adults. But a closer look at the cases reveals that these outbursts of violence have their roots in the growing social dislocation in Japan that has left many young people adrift, alienated and in some cases, deeply disturbed.

In mid-August, a 15-year-old boy from Oita, on the southernmost island of Japan, committed a multiple-stabbing murder. His father accused him of spying on a neighbour's 15-year-old granddaughter and after what the boy described as "accusing looks" by the neighbour and his family, he decided to kill them. He waited until the middle of the night, broke into the house, stabbed all six residents then tried to burn the house down. Three of the family died from their injuries. According to neighbours, he had always been a rather quiet, normal boy and had reportedly been the victim of school bullying and extortion.

In May, a 17-year-old youth from Saga near Hiroshima walked out of a mental institution, on a temporary release, and onto a bus. He held a long-bladed knife at the throat of the bus driver and demanded the bus be driven under his instructions. The hijacking lasted 15 hours and involved 21 passengers, including a six-year-old girl. The teenager held the knife at passengers' throats and reportedly took photos of the victims and laughed as they bled. One woman died.

The youth had been hospitalised in March after a knife attack on his mother. Up until this year, he had been an excellent student who graduated from middle school with very good marks. But after nine days at high school, he refused to attend, became reclusive and would rarely leave his home.

On the day of the hijacking another 17-year-old youth turned up at a police station to confess to the murder of an elderly woman. The press sensationalised the boy's alleged statement to police that he "wanted to experience what it would be like to kill someone". But the prosecutors, as reported in the *Asahi Shimbun*, found the motives were more complex and disturbing.

"Since junior high school, the boy resented himself for his

inability to apply himself to studies or sports over any length of time, and eventually began contemplating suicide," they said. "In his third year in senior high school, he decided to sit for qualifying exams to be a fireman, at his father's suggestion. But he had trouble preparing for the exams and his self-resentment grew... the boy made up his mind to kill someone so he would force himself into taking his own life. Until then he had not been able to bring himself to kill himself."

Politicians and the media seized on the hijacking case to insist that the legal system be changed so that the 17-year-old could be charged as an adult. Despite the fact that he had been in a mental institution and has since been diagnosed as having a dissociative disorder, he is to be tried as sane. During the general election in June, politicians seized on these crimes to promote a right wing law-and-order agenda and bury concerns about unemployment, job security, education and other social issues. Now the ruling coalition is pushing for juveniles as young as 14 to face criminal charges "to send a message" to young people.

These crimes cannot, however, be dismissed as isolated incidents carried out by aberrant individuals. Such violent acts, which only began to emerge over the last decade, have deeper social causes. What has shocked many people is that the boys involved were considered sensitive, bright and came from middle class families. Their actions reveal not only their own intense inner turmoil but point to the wider pressures being brought to bear upon an entire generation by profound shifts in the fabric of Japanese society.

Throughout most of the 1990s, Japan has been in economic recession with unemployment hitting record postwar levels. In 1998, the employment rate for university graduates was only 65.6 percent, the lowest in four decades. The economic climate has not only destroyed jobs but the lifelong employment system, which provided financial benefits and security for layers of the middle class and better-off workers. Many young people now face a much more uncertain future with fewer career opportunities and thus even greater pressures from family, friends and society to achieve at school and get a good job with a solid corporation.

Moreover, many young people are disturbed by what they see of the world and feel estranged from the political establishment.

A survey of Japanese youth found just 6 percent were satisfied with the political system and only 2 percent believed that politicians did not lie and cheat. Many of those who reach voting age do not bother voting. At the last elections the abstention rate for young adults was over 50 percent.

The schools have become the focus for many of these social tensions. Pressures on families to provide the best education for their children are not new in Japan. In the past, well-paid, secure jobs came from attending elite universities, which in turn took the students with the highest marks from top senior schools. With good job opportunities drying up, the competition for positions has become even more intense.

Moreover, from the age of 14, parents are obliged to pay for their children's schooling, which can amount to hundreds of thousands of yen a year. Families under this financial burden want to see their child succeed. Those who cannot afford high fees face the shame of having to withdraw their children. While some organisations offer scholarships to talented students, these only increase the pressure on students to succeed.

So much is at stake that many parents send their children to “cram schools” (Juku) to try to improve their chances. More than two million secondary students are enrolled in such institutions, which specialise in intense courses far in advance of the standard curricula for each grade. This is a \$US4.5 billion per year industry in Japan and the number of students involved is growing rapidly.

Under these combined pressures, relations in schools have begun to break down. In 1998, a survey presented to a teachers' union workshop found that 24 percent of teachers had experienced *gakkyu hokai* or “collapsed classes” where they had lost control of their students—a phenomenon that hardly existed a decade ago—and 90 percent feared it could happen at any time. In 1999, the Education Ministry planned to employ 2,000 temporary teachers in elementary schools to help cope with the situation.

Schools have become increasingly violent places. Physical attacks on teachers rose by 20 percent in 1998 and school bullying has become an ingrained part of school life. According to one survey, “68.6 percent of high school students believe school bullying is unavoidable in the nation's modern society in which the weak fall prey to the strong”. Nearly half of those surveyed indicated that they would not intervene to help a fellow student who was being bullied, for fear of being picked on themselves.

All of those involved in the violent crimes this year had been the victims of bullying and felt under enormous pressure from their family and peers. The state of the school system was put under the spotlight three years ago by the first, best known and perhaps still the most shocking, of the murder cases involving juveniles. In 1997, a 14-year-old boy in the city of Kobe killed an 11-year-old child and left the severed head in front of his school with a written note threatening to kill again in order to

exact “revenge against the compulsory education system and the society that created it.”

An article in *Time* magazine explained that he was an ordinary boy from a middle class background, the eldest child of a company executive. His friends in elementary school described him as bright and popular. “But after entering his junior high school, a strict, test-oriented institution, the youth reportedly grew withdrawn and uncommunicative. He was bullied and then became a bully himself. His mother complained to a neighbour last year [in 1996] that her son had returned home from school one day in tears after a teacher had harassed him and instructed other pupils to ignore him,” the article stated.

Trying to explain the demands on young people, a second-year English student from Sophia University wrote the following on the Internet: “[N]owadays most schools put stress on examinations and encourage students to study hard and get high marks at exam. In Japan, where school diplomas count greatly, an ‘exam war’ is one of the most serious problems. It is natural for children to spend their time playing outside with friends and learn how to make good relationships while playing, but in fact they don't have enough time to play with their friends because they have to go to a cram school to prepare for the entrance examination. To make matters worse, children regard their classmates not as friends but as rivals. In such a competitive society, children always feel stress and are afraid of falling behind others in class. Most children study hard not for themselves but to live up to their parents' expectations.”

Of course, not all students lash out in a violent manner. Some excel under the pressure, many manage to get by, and others, who cannot cope, express their difficulties in other ways by quitting or becoming withdrawn. The violence is not always outward. Suicides in all age groups have risen dramatically in the 1990s. Many are committed by young people and some by school students. In 1998, 192 school students took their own lives, the highest number in 14 years.

The latest violent crimes by juveniles are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a far deeper malaise. The social order, driven by the profit motive, has no solutions to the immense, and often complex, problems that it has itself created.



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