

New round of US shootings claims young lives

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A series of disturbing and violent incidents involving teenagers and deadly weapons over the past week once again points to mounting social tensions in the US and deep-seated alienation among young people. The communities shaken by these incidents include urban and suburban areas, as well as small-town America.

Such events have occurred periodically in the years since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. But with each new eruption, the authorities and the media reveal their inability to provide any serious explanation for either the specific incidents or the general phenomenon of young people resorting to homicidal and, in many cases, suicidal violence.

Each outburst is met with disbelief and treated simply as a law-enforcement problem, replete with new calls for more police and beefed-up security.

In Crandon, Wisconsin on October 7, 20-year-old Tyler Peterson, a Crandon High School graduate and sheriff's deputy, shot and killed six people who had gathered at a friend's apartment for pizza.

Peterson arrived at the apartment at around 2:30 a.m. He began an argument with his former girlfriend that became heated and she demanded he leave. He returned minutes later armed with an AR-15 rifle and proceeded to gun down six people and wound another before he was shot and killed by police.

All of the victims were either students or graduates of Crandon High School. Crandon, a small community of about 2,000 in northeastern Wisconsin, is known in the region as a vacation destination for hunting, fishing and snowmobiling, and is also the home of the Crandon International Off-Road Raceway.

Funerals began Friday for the victims, who included: Bradley Schultz, 20, a criminal justice major at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Lindsey Stahl, a 14-year-old freshman and animal rights activist; Jordanne Murray, 18, Peterson's former girlfriend; Aaron Smith, 20, who worked casually as a construction worker; Lianna Thomas, 18, who left behind a twin sister; and Katrina McCorkle, 18, a senior and longtime friend of Jordanne Murray.

The town is a state of shock following the shootings. Charlie Neitzel, 21, the only one at the party to survive the shooting, sustained extensive gunshot wounds. It is too early to know the long-term effects of his injuries. Charlie's aunt told the press that he is "devastated" and "mourning the loss of many of his closest friends."

In a statement earlier this week, the shooter's family apologized and said, "We are struggling to respond like most of you. We do not know what we should do. Like you, many of us are asking why and looking for answers."

Just three days later, on October 10 in Cleveland, Ohio, Asa Coon, 14, entered a downtown high school and went on a shooting rampage, wounding two students and two teachers before taking his own life.

The young man, a new student at SuccessTech Academy, an alternative high school for gifted and troubled teens, had a long history of family and mental health problems. According to court records, he had spent time in two juvenile facilities and was suspended from another school last year for attempting to harm a student.

A report by a Cortland County, New York social worker in 1997, when Asa Coon was three, said that he lived with his family in a garbage-strewn home. According to the caseworker, his older brothers threatened neighbors with knives, rocks and a fake bomb.

When Asa was four years old, his mother, Lori Looney, was found guilty of neglect by the county juvenile court. His father was not involved with the family.

In 2005, Asa admitted in juvenile court that he had punched his mother in the eye and yelled obscenities at her. He was ordered to attend weekly counseling sessions, perform community service and attend anger management classes. He was never able to attend the anger management classes because, at age 11-12, authorities said he was too young.

According to the email correspondence between caseworkers who treated him, he "made a suicidal statement" and was given medication to treat depression and hyperactivity. Reporting on a home visit, a court officer noted that Asa was "polite and well mannered."

After Asa slapped his mother in 2006, a court magistrate ordered psychological testing and family therapy. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reported that he was eventually placed in an interim shelter, where he attempted suicide.

The family's troubles persisted. The Monday before he opened fire at SuccessTech Academy, Asa's older brother Stephen, 19, was arrested in connection with an armed robbery. The day after the shooting, on Thursday, Stephen Coon was arrested again for a parole violation.

Christina Burns, a volunteer at one of the schools Asa Coon attended, said he was an intelligent student who was prone to mood swings and was unable to concentrate. She was angry that no one reached out to him.

"This all could have been prevented if he had the proper intervention," she said. "That child was tormented from his classmates every single day. Everybody's making him out to be a devil, a demon, but nobody knows what was going on with this kid."

He eventually ended up in a downtown detention center, and then a mental hospital, where it was determined he might suffer from bipolar disease. He was eventually enrolled in SuccessTech, a predominantly black school in downtown Cleveland.

Asa Coon, who was white, stood out in his habitual outfit of black clothes and a trench coat, with an empty gun belt strapped to his leg. LaToya Sparks, 15, told the *New York Times*, “He was chubby and short, and he was the only kid in school who dressed like a Goth.”

Fellow students reported that he was an atheist and a follower of rocker Marilyn Manson. A schoolmate told CNN that the Monday before the shootings he was beaten up after saying “F— God” during an argument. He was suspended for three days.

“When he got suspended, he said, ‘I got something for y’all,’” a schoolmate told CNN. “I thought he was just playing, because he, like, said that all the time. But I see that he was for real.”

Asa Coon’s uncle, Larry Looney, said his nephew was upset about the suspension, and that teachers and administrators wouldn’t listen to his side of the story regarding the fight. Looney told the Associated Press that Asa had been bullied all his life and was excited to be accepted into SuccessTech, which specializes in technology and entrepreneurship. “He really had high hopes because he knew ... this was his best chance, this was the safest type of environment,” Looney said.

Local authorities and the media have made much of the fact that Asa Coon was able to enter the school building on the day of the shootings without his weapons being detected, walking past an armed security guard. The school board has portable metal detectors that are randomly moved from school to the school, but none was present at SuccessTech that day.

Asa went to a fourth-floor bathroom, changed clothes, took weapons out of a duffel bag and emerged to begin his rampage. Despite the existence of 26 security cameras, he was able to walk down a school hallway and start shooting. Students ran screaming and hid under tables and in closets.

When Asa saw police arrive he shot himself behind the ear with a .38-caliber shell loaded with pellets. Next to his body, police found two revolvers—.22 caliber and .38 caliber, with ammunition for each—and three folding knives.

Appearing on ABC’s “Nightline,” one of the teachers wounded in the shootings, David Kachadourian, was pressed by interviewer Martin Bashir on the issue of school security: “There’s no metal detector at the entrance to the school and we understand that parents have been campaigning for additional security for some time. Does it suggest that security hasn’t really been a high enough priority?”

The teacher answered, “I would say that this kind of situation is so out of the normal, so totally unexpected and unexpected, that it’s not something that anybody would have foreseen.”

Kachadourian had a more perceptive interpretation of the tragic incident and Asa Coon’s outburst. “It’s really, really sad to think that he had so much pain and so much anger that he just felt like he could do nothing else,” he said. “There’s a lot of pain in the world. There’s a lot of suffering by kids and a lot of it is invisible or barely visible—as a teacher, it’s really scary to think about how much pain there is out there that we don’t know about.”

He added, “It’s scary to think about kids who are carrying so much pain around and what they have to live with and what they have to endure, and you worry about them a lot.”

What is the source of this pain and suffering? Young people growing up in America today live under conditions of exploding social inequality. Funds are cut for social programs and jobs and wages are slashed. This finds reflection in working families overwhelmed by economic problems that can translate into domestic violence or neglect, both physical and emotional. Families fragment.

At the same time, youth are witness to a ruling establishment that—while worshipping the accumulation of wealth for the few—promotes militarism in a worldwide “war on terror” and the resulting death and human misery. At home, civil liberties are attacked as both big business parties pass legislation authorizing domestic spying and deep inroads into basic democratic rights.

This atmosphere breeds violence and disorientation.

In another disturbing incident this week involving teenagers and guns, a 14-year-old boy in a Philadelphia suburb was arrested Friday morning for planning what authorities referred to as a “Columbine-type” shooting at a local high school. Police were alerted by another boy who had been approached by the youth to participate in the plot.

A search Wednesday of the boy’s home in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania turned up a 9mm semiautomatic rifle, about 30 air-powered guns, seven hand grenades, swords, knives, a bomb-making book, videos of the Columbine attack, and a hand-painted Nazi flag. The arsenal was in clear view in the boy’s bedroom. The boy said two .22-caliber weapons were also stored at a friend’s house.

The teenager has been charged as a juvenile with solicitation to commit terror and other counts. The judge also ordered that he undergo psychiatric and educational achievement evaluations.

His mother, Michele Crossey, 46, has also been charged with six criminal counts in connection with buying her son bomb-making equipment and firearms, including two rifles and a handgun. The charges against her include unlawful transfer of a firearm, possession of a firearm by a minor, corruption of a minor and endangering the welfare of a child.



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