# The Oxford High School shooting: What lessons are to be drawn?

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A grim scene, all too familiar in American life, occurred Tuesday afternoon as 15-year-old sophomore Ethan Crumbley carried out a mass shooting at Oxford High School in a suburban community on the outer edges of the Detroit, Michigan Metro region. Yet another school was turned into a killing field as four young lives were snuffed out. It was the 29th and deadliest school shooting this year, according to a database maintained by *Education Week*.

According to police, Crumbley emerged from a bathroom into a hallway just before 1:00 p.m. and fired more than two dozen times at his classmates at close range, killing four students and wounding seven others, including a teacher. He used a semi-automatic handgun that had been purchased by his father, James Crumbley, 45, just four days prior. Crumbley still had 18 live rounds on him when he was confronted and detained by police approximately five minutes after he began his attack.

The young teenager has been charged as an adult and faces four counts of first-degree murder, one charge of terrorism causing death, seven counts of assault with intent to murder and 12 counts of possession of a firearm in the commission of a felony. The charges carry a maximum penalty of life in prison without parole.

While the first of more than 30 shots were ringing out, students and teachers responded as they and their peers at thousands of schools across the country have been trained to do in such situations, by bolting and barricading classroom doors, moving away from windows and fleeing to safety at the first opportunity.

One video posted on social media shows students fearing for their lives as someone identified later as a plainclothes officer but whom they presumed to be the shooter, pounded on the door telling them to open up. They responded by jumping out a ground floor window and running to safety.

Like so many other school shootings, investigators have determined that there had been many warning signs that an eruption of violence was imminent. Some students had stayed home Tuesday, fearing an attack after hearing rumors of a possible shooting and seeing a countdown clock posted on social media.

Crumbley had met with administrators Monday, and his parents had been called into the school Tuesday morning, just a few hours before the rampage, for a meeting with their son and school staff to discuss concerns about his “behavior in the classroom.” Police investigators reported that they had discovered a journal in Crumbley’s backpack where the teen expressed his desire to carry out a massacre. They also found that he had posted pictures of the gun with a target on social media and two videos where he outlined his plan.

Students, teachers and parents throughout the area have been profoundly shaken by the tragedy and remain on edge. School districts across the Metro Detroit region began announcing late Wednesday plans to call off classes on Thursday. At least 15 districts, many of which reported similar threats of violence at schools in their districts, closed their doors Thursday morning.

School shootings have become a phenomena in the United States over more than two decades, with the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado, marking a major turning point. In that horrific incident, 12th grade students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 12 of their fellow students and one teacher before committing suicide.

Countless tragedies, filled with bloody scenes of dead children and youth are conjured when one uses the term “school shooting”: Virginia Tech (2007), Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (2012) and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (2018), to name a few.

Last year saw a sharp drop in school shootings, with just 10 incidents recorded by *Education Week*, but this was only due to the fact that most were closed for much of the year, and children were learning remotely online. With the reopening enforced by President Joe Biden and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, the phenomenon has returned with force, surpassing the 24 shootings recorded in 2019.

As is always the case, amidst the voluminous comments from political figures and articles in the media, one can read nothing that attempts to explain the deeper social and political causes of the epidemic of school shootings.

“We must continue to pray and hope for the additional students and teacher who have been injured, and for the students who are in shock right now,” Democratic

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Representative Elissa Slotkin wrote on Twitter. “They will somehow have to make sense of one of their peers doing this to them.”

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard, speaking at a media briefing Tuesday night, painted a grim picture of an unstoppable spectre that haunts the country, randomly taking the lives of children. “If you remember many, many years ago we used to have students climb under the desk because of the potential threat of a nuclear attack,” Bouchard remarked. “Well, there’s a very different threat, and we have to train to it [sic] and be prepared to it [sic]. This kind of thing can happen anywhere, and sadly it happened even in a sweet, quiet community like Oxford. It can visit itself anywhere in America, no one is immune.”

After every mass shooting, there is the inevitable litany of trite explanations—individual psychology, access to guns, violent video games—that provide ready-made “solutions.” Nothing is ever learned, or examined, by the politicians or the pundits.

While there is much that is still unknown about the particular circumstances behind the shooting in Oxford, Michigan, what has come out reveals something of the social and political reality that forms its backdrop. In 2016, Crumbley’s mother, Jennifer Crumbley, a realtor, wrote an open letter to incoming President Donald Trump, whom she voted for. In her confused and desperate letter, Crumbley describes her family’s economic existence, as part of the American lower middle class.

“I am 38 years old. I have a family. My husband and I both work full time jobs. I have watched our insurance premiums double. I cannot afford to buy into this Obamacare. For my family its over $600 a month with deductibles. We bust our ass Mr. Trump. I pay taxes, my husband pays his child support, I donate to charities. We are good fucking Americans that cannot get ahead.

“My husband suffered a stroke and a broken back and we were with just my income. Do you know how hard it is to support a family on only $40,000 a year? I couldn’t qualify for State Aid. I made to much.”

She concluded, “I have high hopes you will shut down Big Pharma, make health care affordable for me and my MIDDLE CLASS family again,” she wrote. The world Ms. Crumbley describes is a world of perpetual economic anxiety and desperation. But with this is mixed backwardness, cultural poverty and historical ignorance that Trump and his movement feeds on. Nor should one discount the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse and the glorification of his example by the right-wing media, which took place just two weeks before the shooting at Oxford High School.

Ethan Crumbley has committed a horrible crime. He has shattered lives, destroyed families and snuffed out futures. But to call him a monster, to try this 15-year-old as an adult and to add on a charge of terrorism for good measure satisfies nothing more than a desire for revenge. A child who commits such a crime at such a young age suffers from a deep psychological pathology but one that has been exacerbated by the sickness of society.

In April 1999, in the aftermath of the Columbine massacre, the *World Socialist Web Site* called attention to the social, political and ideological framework of the shooting. “The concentration on individual warning signs,” we wrote, “will be of little help in preventing future tragedies.”

> Attention should be focused, rather, on the social warning signs, that is, the indications and indices of social and political dysfunction which create the climate that produces events like the Columbine HS massacre. Vital indicators of impending disaster might include: growing polarization between wealth and poverty; atomization of working people and the suppression of their class identity; the glorification of militarism and war; the absence of serious social commentary and political debate; the debased state of popular culture; the worship of the stock exchange; the unrestrained celebration of individual success and personal wealth; the denigration of the ideals of social progress and equality.

The more than two decades since Columbine have seen an enormous intensification of all of these underlying processes: skyrocketing social inequality, the glorification of militarism, the promotion of xenophobia and, to top it all off, a pandemic that has killed 800,000 Americans. Is it a surprise that the society that regularly produces such mass shootings—more than any other country—has the highest death rate from COVID-19? In Michigan alone, 200 people are dying every day. In the United States, life is exceptionally cheap.

The growing mood of resistance in the working class, however, will bring with it a radical change in the political, intellectual and, indeed, moral climate of the country.

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