

The Tumbler Ridge mass shooting: An indictment of social and political life in Canada

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On Tuesday, 18-year-old Jesse van Rootselaar shot and killed eight people in Tumbler Ridge, a small municipality in the northeast of British Columbia, before turning the gun on herself. The death toll of nine is one of the highest ever in a school shooting in Canada.

The shooter fatally wounded her mother, 39, and stepbrother, 11, at the family home, before travelling about 2 kilometres (1.25 miles) to Tumbler Ridge Secondary School. She then opened fire on students and educators, killing five students, four aged 12 and one aged 13, and a 39-year-old educator. Two people, including a 12-year-old child, are in serious condition in hospital, while a further 25 people have been treated for non-life-threatening injuries.

Van Rootselaar was by all accounts a solitary figure, who had long shown an interest in firearms and hunting. The police confiscated firearms from the family home in 2024, apparently after one or more incidents where threats were made, but they were returned after their adult owner petitioned for their release. That this was done by the authorities is all the more inexplicable in light of the fact that Van Rootselaar had repeatedly suffered serious mental health issues and was treated in a psychiatric facility for a time.

Born as a male, Van Rootselaar began transitioning six years ago. Her family background appears to have been characterized by precarious living conditions. A 2015 court order compelling Van Rootselaar's mother, Jennifer Strang, to allow her children to have contact with their father described the family's lifestyle as "nomadic." Whether immediate social pressures played a role in Van Rootselaar's deadly outburst remains unclear.

The shooting has shaken the local community, which has a population of little over 2,000 people. It was built in the early 1980s as part of a coal mining development project. It remained heavily dependent on resource extraction into the 21st century but since the mines closed has increasingly emerged as a tourist destination and a place for retirement. The deaths of so many young children has evoked particular horror. The plight of those directly impacted naturally prompts feelings of great sympathy.

It is quite another matter, however, with the sanctimonious

declarations of shock and mourning from the political establishment and mainstream media, who would like everyone to believe that what occurred in Tumbler Ridge came like a bolt from the blue in an otherwise harmonious, pacific Canadian society. Official statements to this effect were issued in Parliament by all five parties, from the governing Liberals to the opposition Conservatives, separatist Bloc Quebecois, the New Democrats and Greens.

"What happened has left our nation in shock," intoned Prime Minister Mark Carney. "We will get through this. We will learn from this, but right now it's a time to come together as Canadians always do in these terrible situations." He cancelled a planned trip to the Munich Security Conference and announced flags on Parliament Hill would fly at half mast for a week.

Carney, the rest of the political establishment and media talking heads may not want to admit it publicly, but Tuesday's sudden outburst of violence is a product of social and political life in Canada. This is underscored by the regularity of mass casualty events over the past decade, as illustrated by this partial list beginning in 2016.

- January 22, 2016: Four people were killed in La Loche, Saskatchewan, when a teenage gunman fatally shot two relatives at home, before killing another two people at La Loche Community School.
- January 29, 2017: An Islamophobic lone gunman went on a shooting spree during evening prayers at the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City, claiming the lives of six worshippers.
- April 23, 2018: A 25-year-old man drove a van into passers-by on the sidewalk of Yonge Street in Toronto, killing 11.
- July 22, 2018: A lone gunman shot and killed two people on Danforth Street, Toronto, before being shot to death in a police intervention.
- April 18-19, 2020: A 51-year-old man dressed as a police officer launched a 12-hour shooting spree across several rural communities north of Halifax, Nova Scotia, killing 22 people.
- June 6, 2021: In another hate crime, a 20-year-old male driver killed four members of a Muslim family in London,

Ontario, ploughing into them at a crossing with his pickup.

- September 4, 2022: Two assailants fatally stabbed 10 people on the James Smith Cree First Nation and nearby communities in Saskatchewan.

- December 18, 2022: A gunman shot and killed five neighbours at a condo building in Vaughan, Ontario.

- October 23, 2023: Four people were killed when a gunman opened fire at various locations in Saint-Ste. Marie, Ontario. He was subsequently shot dead by police.

- April 26, 2025: Eleven people at a Philippine street festival in Vancouver were killed when a lone attacker rammed his SUV into the crowd.

To the extent that the ruling class can portray events like the Tumbler Ridge shooting as a singular act of brutality with little or no connection to broader social life, it is chiefly because compared to the neighbouring United States, the level of gun violence and other armed attacks in Canada is relatively low. However, acts of violence in Canada, in line with an international trend, have risen sharply over the past decade. The number of homicides per 100,000 people, a benchmark figure when studying social violence, rose from 1.47 in 2014 to 1.98 in 2023, making Canada the country with the highest homicide rate per head of population in the G7 after the United States, which recorded a homicide rate of 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2023.

The social and political influences on specific violent acts are often complex and indirect, but the broader picture tells a clear story. Canada is an aggressive imperialist power that has been at war almost continuously since 2001. Military operations in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Ukraine, as well as the government's active support for the Gaza genocide, have made barbaric violence a part of everyday life.

The other side of the coin is that social programs and public services, like healthcare and mental health supports, have been slashed to the bone to pay for bloated military budgets and make tax cuts for big business and the rich, and this process is intensifying under Carney. The dearth of mental health supports in large cities as well as rural areas is well documented, leaving many of the most vulnerable to suffer and creating the conditions in which a tiny handful of the most disoriented can snap, with catastrophic consequences.

The gulf between rich and poor has grown, with a few dozen billionaires dominating social life (Oxfam Canada counted 65 in January 2025 with a combined wealth of \$496.7 billion). Meanwhile, the Daily Bread Food Bank estimates that 10 million Canadians, about a quarter of the population, live in food insecure households. These repugnant levels of social inequality are enforced by increasingly authoritarian forms of rule, expressed in the virtual banning of the right to strike and promotion of the most reactionary far-right forces. This is coupled with the systematic suppression of the class struggle by the state- and corporate-aligned trade unions and the official "left," which works to obscure class divisions and channel

social tensions by incessantly promoting of identity politics.

Social life has undergone a dramatic brutalization. Homelessness, mass drug addiction, police violence and renovictions (renovation evictions) at one pole, and the flaunting of wealth, privilege and social backwardness at the other sum up Canadian capitalism in 2026. By 9:23 a.m. on January 2, 2026 Canada's top 100 CEOs had "earned" more than the average worker will in the entire year, meaning they rake in 240 times the average wage.

These interrelated developments create conditions in which far-right political forces can and do effectively present themselves to many young, disoriented people as the only real alternative. Their promotion of anti-democratic and dictatorial political views, personal responsibility for one's fate, the readiness to trample on all legal and societal restraints to get one's way, and the systematic incitement of religious, ethnic, and other divisions provide ideological fuel for the periodic explosions of individual violence that are a feature of Canadian life.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that many of the perpetrators in the mass casualties listed above, including the Quebec City mosque shooter, the Nova Scotia gunman and the vehicle drivers in Toronto and London, exhibited a combination of far-right radicalization and mental health problems.

There is a very direct connection between the propagandizing of Canada's far right and the Tumbler Ridge shooting. Nothing is yet known about Van Rootselaar's political views, but it is hard to believe that her mental health issues were not exacerbated by the hate-filled tirades from far-right political forces against the LGBTQ community. Tumbler Ridge is close to the border with Alberta, where the far-right United Conservative Party government recently rammed through laws prohibiting doctors from providing transgender people with certain types of treatment and barring trans young people from accessing gender-related medical care.

Predictably, far-right "influencers" online have erupted following the shooting with foul denunciations of trans people as inherently more violent than the average person. Tara Armstrong, who was elected to the British Columbia legislature as a Conservative and now sits as an independent, responded to the shooting by denouncing "an epidemic of transgender violence spreading across the West." She continued, "This epidemic of violence will continue until we change our society's response to transgender ideology."



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