HIGH SCHOOL HORROR

What lessons can be learned from American school violence?

by Claudia Wolosin

Last April, two teenage boys walked into their Colorado school armed with guns and bombs. They killed one teacher and 12 fellow students and then killed themselves. It was not the first time American high school students had killed one another. Nor was it the last. It was followed by copycat crimes all over the U.S., though none of the others had as many victims.

Looking for reasons

Naturally, parents, school officials, news announcers, politicians, and even other students, are trying to explain the inexplicable. What makes teens attack their classmates at school? The news media reported that the two Colorado boys belonged to a group called "The Trenchcoat Mafia", whose members wore black raincoats, liked to play video games like Doom, and listened to "Goth" music like Marilyn Manson.

Did the music make them do it? It turned out that "The Trenchcoat Mafia" was the name given to a group of "nerds" by the school's "jocks". The nerds called themselves "The Anachronists" and took pride in being different from the popular All-American jocks, who bullied them almost every day. Did the desire for revenge make them do it? These particular murderers spent a great deal of unsupervised time on their computers and got the recipe for their bombs on the Internet. Did the Net make them do it? Gun control advocates point out the obvious: Once again confused and angry adolescents had easy access to guns. Did the guns make them do it? The answer, it seems to me, is all of the above, and more. American teens grow up in violence.

Culture of violence

Perpetrators of extreme violence don't just appear out of thin air. They are the products of a society that is already prone to violence and that holds this violence in great esteem, judging by the nature of its television programs (including the news), films, and song lyrics. As such, the

widespread publicity for violence transforms it into something that is not only taken for granted but also viewed as a means to an end. Problem-solving and physical violence become confused.

Peer Pressure

Of course, school shootings are not simply the result of too many Bruce Willis films. One of the major causes of shootings and stabbings in high schools, according to the researchers, is peer pressure. The sort of peer pressure that causes one group to exclude an individual or another group. Everyone's worst nightmare is to fall off the socially acceptable branch and end up labeled as a nerd, a geek, wimp, or weirdo. Social outcasts such as these bear the burden of being ridiculed and bullied. Little by little they end up believing that they just aren't good enough. This creates a sense of insecurity and frustration, leading

them to one day retaliate with violence and rage, thereby making their mark on the society that rejected them.

Absentee parents

Then there are the parents who didn't see, or did not want to see, the warning signs of their children's marginality. These parents remained inattentive at a crucial time, too busy with their careers and their own social status. American teenagers increasingly live in their own worlds, ignored by adult society except as target markets. TV programs, films, video games, music fashion and advertising are aimed specifically at young people, who spend most of their time in school, on the streets, in the shopping malls, in front of a screen, anywhere but in the company of caring adults. If parents do not offer love and guidance, and peers do not offer respect, these "losers" may resort to hate crime. But perhaps we should speak

of crimes of solitude, desperation, and ignorance. The Colorado "jocks" didn't believe they were being violent when they bullied the "nerds". And the nerds came to believe that respect and power come only from violence. That sort of ignorance is deadly.

Speakeasy, October, 1999.

Group work

Write down all the reasons given why teenagers kill teenagers.

Look at all the reasons, where do you agree and disagree?

What should be done to improve the situation?