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Trends. Tragedies of School Shootings in the United States: A Matter of Experts

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In the aftermath of students shooting students, faculty, and staff in the United States--e.g., the Littleton, Colorado shootings--come the inevitable and solemn opining of the "experts." Yet these emperors of social trends and child psychology should be viewed as the usual suspects.

"America refuses to recognize that there are millions of teens and children with psychological illnesses," pontificates one. This assumes that the shooters often can be accurately characterized as being psychologically ill--a dubious premise given that immoral, antisocial, and hurtful behaviors are too facilely typed as stemming from illness. "If we were able to get teachers to receive even basic tips from professionals...we might go a long way to preventing violence....", bemoans another. This assumes that there is adequate predictive validity between specific behavioral and intrapsychic signs--or other indicators--and later violence and substance use. Yet social scientists are notoriously ineffectual in predicting specific episodes of violence. "Parents have to be willing to....accept expressions of anger at home, whether they are tantrums or inappropriate language," declares yet another. This again assumes a supporting data base that, unfortunately, is lacking. Moreover, an equally compelling logic might be that not accepting expressions of anger at home might decrease the probability that expressions of anger--including killing people--would occur anywhere. "It is clear that these youths were having significant problems," intones a psychiatrist who has published a book on violence in schools. Sure. Yet data suggest most youths who have significant problems do not shoot up their schools. And other "experts" are casting causal ascriptions involving violent video games, television shows, families in which both parents work (or both don't), families that don't contain two biological parents or just two parents, the absence of dress codes, and the plethora of and easy access to formidable firearms and explosives in contrast to the "good old days" of chains, baseball bats, knives, and zip guns.

The "experts" are the usual suspects. In their haste to weigh in on the need for expert advice and intervention, they jettison the need for personal responsibility. In their haste to reinforce their social positions as arbiters in tragedy they nurture the delusion that everyone is a victim. In their haste to provide commentary they catastrophize the severity and frequency of tragedy in neighborhoods that would be the envy of much of the rest of the world--a world that must contend with the institutionalization of child and adolescent violence such as the atrocities of war, human rights, and economic exploitation. While attempting to satisfy needs for self-aggrandizement and financial security, the "experts" are contributing to social narcissism, amorality, ethical drift, and a relativism that defies investment in one's own agency. The experts--round up the usual suspects. (Astor, R.A. (1998). Moral reasoning about school violence: Informational assumptions about harm within school subcontexts. *Educational Psychologist*, 33, 207-221; Astor, R.A., et al. (1997). Perceptions of school violence as a problem and reports of violent events: A national survey of school social workers. *Social Work*, 42, 55-68; Baker, J.A. (1998). Are we missing the forest for the trees? Considering the social context of school violence. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36, 29-44; Bronner, E. (April 22, 1999). Experts urge swift action to fight depression and anger. *The New York Times*, p. A21; Chisholm, J.F. (1998). Understanding violence in the school: Moral and psychological factors. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 7, 137-157; Cooper, J.L. (1998). An alternative solution to school violence. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*,

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