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Why White Adolescent Males Kill in School

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Abstract:

Juvenile violence was at one time thought of as something that minority groups had to deal with. Guns were primarily being used in gangs, and in the slums of large cities. However, in recent years we have seen a surge of upward movement in the amount of white male adolescents using guns, especially in the school system. These killing rampages have become all too familiar news, but that does not lead us to why they are occurring.

Mainly this problem is happening in white, middle-class neighborhoods. Parents, classmates, teachers, school administration, and the community all play large parts of this picture. If the cards happen to fall the wrong way all of these elements will contribute in one way or another to the teen becoming a killer.

There are many jumping off places to where this problem can begin. Children are being raised on television and in a world of violence. It seems as though everything around them is violent in nature; television, computer and video games, movies, song lyrics. These things are encompassing their world, and as they grow up they are learning that these are the ways in which to solve problems. Other aspects of this problem seem to be a breakdown in the family structure, possibly having extreme anger towards their peers and those around them, being severely depressed, or occasionally it may begin with thoughts of being homosexual.

In any of these cases, there can be an intervention before it reaches the point where the teen thinks that he must kill to solve the problem. In some cases it may not be altering the person himself but the environment that he lives in. Many times it is outside forces that drive him to the breaking point. I intend to show why this happens and how it can be prevented.

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Introduction

In recent years, primarily the last 3, there has been an uprising of white male adolescents going on shooting rampages in their schools. To many this is quite a shock due to the overwhelming stereotype that white middle-class neighborhoods and teens are safe from this kind of violence; that is simply not the case. I originally intended to research juvenile gun violence, but came to the conclusion that my research would primarily entail researching gang violence which is something completely different from white male teens killing. For one, teens in gangs have had a very different upbringing that white teens have.

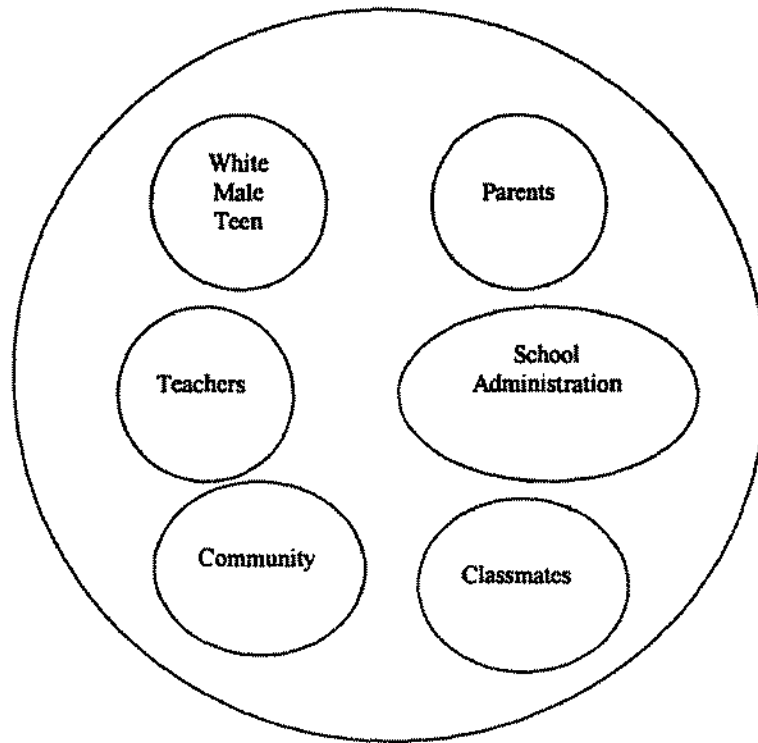
Teens in gangs tend to be minorities and living in the slums or "ghettos" of large urban cities. The towns in which these white teens are killing in seem to overwhelmingly be suburbs of large cities. The two areas have very different socialization processes, the gangs primarily from where they live and the lifestyles of those around them are largely poor and have a history of gang membership, drug use, and violence(May, 1999, p.5). These white teens, as I have said, come from suburbs of large cities. They are brought up in a completely different way. All their lives these white males have had money, from what has been published there was no history of family violence, and they were not in an area of high poverty and crime rates. So it is important, then to realize that although both youths are killing they are for very separate reasons.

Each group has its own socialization process and therefore deserves its own area of study. When looking into this problem it is important to look at what we call a social system, that is, all the contributing entities that cause this type of violence to happen. All of the components have different levels of contribution to the end. They either contribute to the cause of the violence or are affected by it directly. (see Fig. 1) The elements of each groups' social system will be very different as will the effects they have on the particular person or group of people. I have chosen white male adolescents because it is a very new area of study, and due to the social system in which these children were raised, it makes a very interesting topic from a sociological point of view.

Throughout my research there have been many informative articles that I have found, I do choose to reference them in the reference section. I did so for

(Fig.1) Social System Model For White Boys Killing In School

Elements:



Relationships:

Breakdown of the Family
Anger towards those around them
Isolated
Homosexual Outcast
Bombardment with violence
Depression
Suicidal

those who are interested in reading up a bit more on the surrounding issues of white adolescent killings and not the killings themselves, but I did not cite them within the paper (Louv, 1999: Smolkin, 1999: Timms & Anderson, 1999).

Method

I began my research at the San Diego State University library. Beginning in the periodical room I found several newspaper articles and one journal article. Seeing that the current periodicals were going to be of some help but not enough, I found myself at the Social Science Research Laboratory at SDSU. I then began exhaustingly searching the Internet for sources. I found many and proceeded writing my paper from the information I found at both the SDSU library and the SSRL lab. Roland Werner was also a big help in the research process; I received many sources from him as well.

Results

There are many ways to begin analyzing how a W.M.A. (white male adolescent) becomes a school shooter. The first is to examine the social system in which the teen lives. When discussing the social system that surrounds the teen it is important to note that all of the elements will play a part in the final act of shooting, although the degree of each depends on each particular case. (Here if there is no interaction between a certain member of the group, such as the

parents, and there should be I will assume that this is indirect interaction for the purposes of this paper) These elements are the teen himself, his parents, the community that he lives in, the school administrators of the school he attends, as well as the teachers and classmates there. To explain more clearly the role of each element I will discuss in depth what role they play and how they relate to the teen.

To begin with there is the W.M.A. himself; he will be the primary executor of the action, and he will give off strong signals before the shooting begins (Gibbs, 1999, p.1). These signals include many of the common symptoms of depression or in worse cases symptoms of schizophrenia, or other serious mental disorders, violent actions, harmful threats, or a shown interest in killing small animals. Many teens had given verbal threats before the shooting even occurred, perhaps even weeks in advance. Others express an interest in buying guns, or began asking others to buy the guns for them (Glaberson & Goodstein, 2000, p.1-3). More on warning signs will be discussed later on.

This brings us to the second element of the social system, the parents. Parents will have a direct influence on the teen from day one. Often with these school shootings the W.M.A will come from a home where the parents are absent. Unlike many black or hispanic youth offenders, these children live in a suburban neighborhood, but similarly have a lack of parental supervision (Children and Television Violence, 1999). The W.M.A's parents are usually absent because they are at work late hours, and the teen is left to fend for himself, these children are often referred to as latchkey children. Due to this lack

of parental involvement the parents may miss some of the crucial warning signs. The parent also has a responsibility to their child to teach them ways in which to deal with anger and frustration, as well as instill the morals and values that their child will need from then on. They do this by interacting with their children, being role models, helping them with their problems, and essentially being there for their children. If they can not or do not actively participate in their child's life then it can be the largest contributing cause to the W.M.A to becoming a killer.

The teachers and school administration essentially go hand in hand with each other. Although the teachers have far more interaction with the teen than the administration does. There are at least 8 hours of the day where parents are separated from their children. During this time teachers and administrators observe the teens behavior. As I said earlier there are warning signs before the teen commits the act. Often teachers and administrators are the ones who will deal with these warning signs. The teen may be withdrawn, or overly violent at school, they may seem to not fit in, or their peers torment them and nothing is done. These are the things that can be noticed by them and hopefully there would have been an intervention in the teen's life. However, the recent occurrence's show that the teachers did nothing (Jasper, 1999, p. 2).

Classmates have played an integral part of the motivation behind the act itself when it comes to homosexuality being one of the main contributions to the final act (Jasper, 1999, p.1). Often classmates have ridiculed and outcast the teen if he has shown to be outrightly homosexual or shown homosexual tendencies at school. This of course is not the case with all homosexual

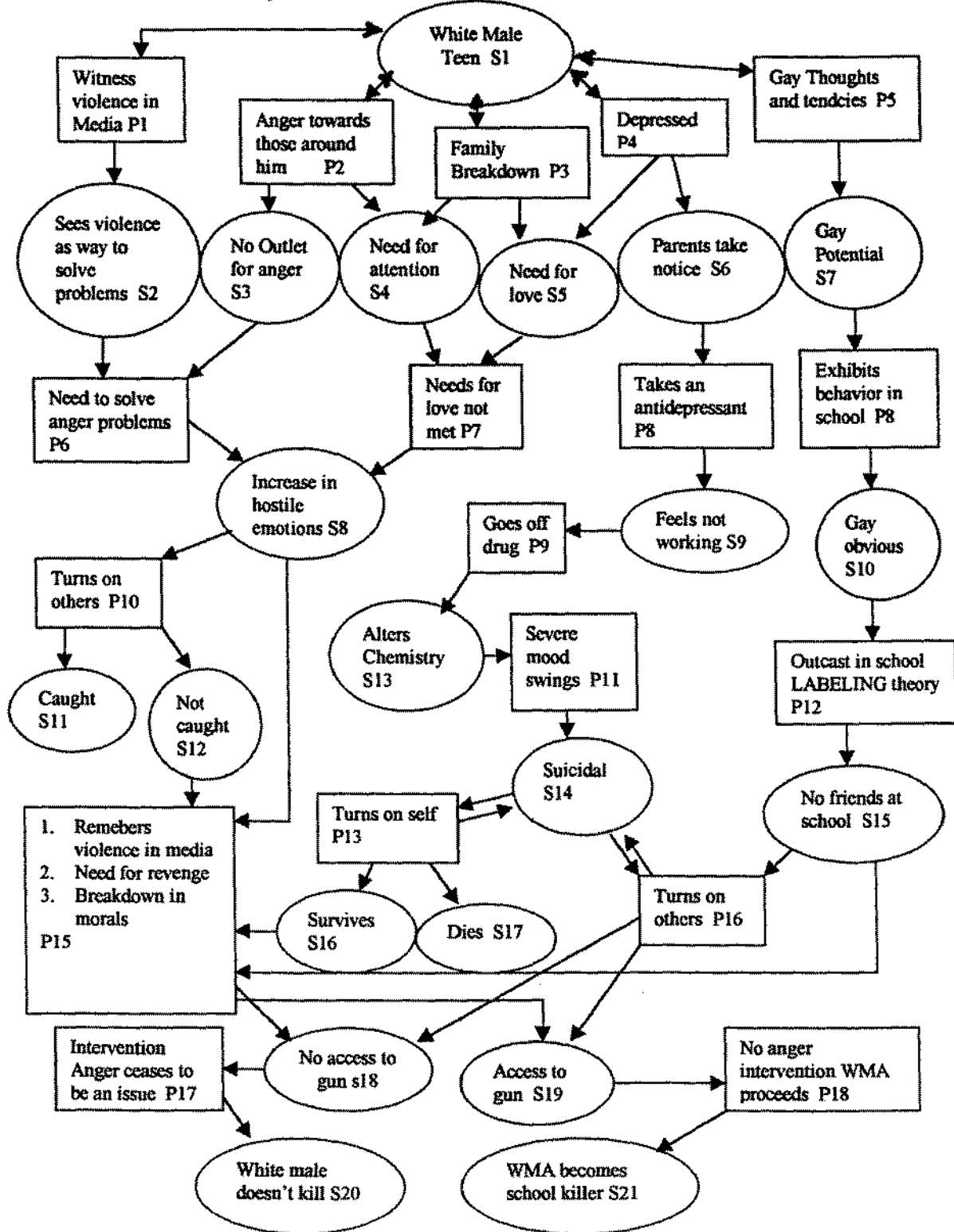
students at all schools, but for those W.M.A who committed a killing rampage at school this tended to be the case.

The final element to the social system is the community itself. This factor may play a part initially by ignoring the behaviors that could lead to the end result of killing. They are there because they are the ones affected by the shootings, and they have the man power to make the rest of the nation aware of the problem, and can stop it from occurring again (The Associated Press, 2000, p.1-3).

In this social system there are certain relationships, or lack of relationships that occur between the W.M.A and the elements of the social system. There could be a breakdown of the family, he could have extreme and intense anger towards those around him, he may be isolated by everyone in the system, he could be a homosexual outcast as discussed before, he may be bombarded with violence, depression, or suicidal tendencies can also contribute. Most often there will be little pieces of everything that will finally contribute to the shooting.

The second way to look at why a school shooting may occur is to look at the State/Process Dynamic and incorporate that into the picture (see Fig. 2). The State/Process Dynamic is a model that describes what must occur for a teen to become a school shooter. By starting on any given point you may observe the processes in which a teen may go through in order to become a school shooter. Each process may be observed and the end result is shown. The teen must go

**(Fig. 2) State/Process Model
Why White Male Adolescents Kill in School**



through many different processes but not all described in the dynamic must be present for him to become a shooter, often it may be only a few that take place.

Here I will show how the state/process model is reflected in two of the actual school shootings and the similarities between them. Keep in mind that these two cases are virtual textbook for a school shooting to occur, and while other cases have been close to this point, there was virtually no other case that had as many warning factors as these two cases did.

Kip Kinkle, a 14 year old from Springfield, Ore. Went on a shooting rampage on May 21, 1998 injuring 22 students killing 2 as well as his parents. Kinkel while having lots of friends was on an anti-depressant. He felt that it was not working and as pleaded by his attorney went insane and killed his classmates and parents (Dodge, 1999, p.3). This is one way of looking at the depression end of the situation. Often teens, especially those in middle-class neighborhoods, are put on anti-depressants. Now whether this is due to them having the money to do so or because the middle-class seems to have a large percentage of its kids in therapy I should not speculate. What does occur is a change in their brain chemistry, supposedly the child is less depressed and has less mood swings or a chemical imbalance may be subdued. If you revert a child's brain chemistry back to the previous depressed state they may be more prone to having bad judgement based on malfunctions in their brain chemistry when it comes to certain situations (Holinger, 2000, p.1). This was the thought in Kinkel's case.

Along the lines of depression it is also noteworthy to say that there is a fork in the road for the W.M.A. before he becomes a shooter. Often after the teen has been taken off the anti-depressant he can become suicidal. It is here that the fork occurs. On one hand the teen could turn on himself only, or he could turn on others as well. In the Columbine shooting this is what occurred, the teens taking out not only themselves but twelve classmates and one teacher.

There are similarities in this case that should be noted between the Columbine shootings and the Kinkle case. On April 20, 1999 Dylan Kliebold and Eric Harris went on a shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado. They killed 12 students and one teacher before shooting themselves. It is said in Kinkle's case that after he killed several of his classmates and then his parents, he became quite suicidal. So in both cases we have a common theme of suicide. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. Many rampage killers in recent years have been young and have also had some sort of mental disorder that caused them to attempt suicide either concurrently with the murders or directly thereafter (Glaberson & Goodstein, 2000, p. 1-19).

There are however, different points of view as to why teens kill. This brings me to the second process that the W.M.A may go through. Nearly all of the rampage killings have involved the theme of revenge (APA Public Policy Office, 1999, p.4: Dodge, 1999, p. 2: Gibbs, 1999, p.1-5: The Washington Post, 1999, p.1). For those that committed the murders at school this was most often anger towards fellow classmates. Again the Kinkel case and the Columbine shootings are prime examples of this theme.

Kinkle had recently been suspended from school after having a gun on campus. It is likely to say that something additional should have been done on the part of the administration and teachers, but this was discussed earlier in the social system. Kinkle swore revenge and stated that something was going to happen as a result of his being on suspension. He apparently was worried about how his parents would react, as well as disgracing the family name and needed a way to get back at the people that were doing this to him. His family was stated to be one that was very anti-gun despite the father owning two of them, they are also stated to be a family that paid a great deal of attention to their children (Dodge, 1999, p.1). Due to the fact that there was no intervention with Kinkel before the shooting, his anger towards those around him, his need for revenge as well as his unstable mind set began to grow with intensity. Having received the gun from his father as a gift he now had the means for the action and committed the crime. So here we can see that there are three things that went terribly wrong with the Kinkel case in the attempt to prevent a school shooting. One, his mental condition was ignored by his parents, there was an extreme anger/revenge factor that nobody paid attention to, and he had the means to commit the crime.

The Columbine case closely follows the Kinkel case, in terms of the revenge concept. However there is the added processes of gay thoughts and tendencies and parental neglect and Kliebold and Harris were not on perscriptive drugs. After the Columbine shootings police found tapes that Kliebold and Harris had taped before they went on their killing rampage. These

tapes outline the reasons why they felt they needed to commit this act, but more so give the underlying reasons, the reasons that they don't say seem to be the most important. It is a rare occurrence that one actually sees ahead of time what is going through the mind of a killer. In the Columbine tapes there is much information to support the contention that these boys were crying out for help. They speak of "if only their parents had checked their rooms, if only they had asked more questions" (Gibbs, 1999, p.1-7). This supports the idea that these children were neglected by their parents.

Both of these teens were being constantly harrassed at school, because they walked hand in hand, ate lunch by themselves, and had no other good friends. The two were thought to be gay. And wether they were or not the accusation comes with a label and the two had become stigmatized as gay in school. They were then outcasts, they became suicidal, but here again is revenge and this process is one of the major contributing factors in this case.

I use the Columbine shootings as an example because so many of the state/processes were incorporated into their case. These teens were also raised in an age of extreme media violence. When children are left to fend for themselves due to parentla neglect, they will learn from what surrounds them. In Kliebold and Harris's case this was extreme violence and a world without morals (Espo, 1999, p.A2). Both of their rooms were covered in violent images. Nazi parahenalia, and white supremisism images were common. Violent acts were depicted in posters...the evidence went on and on to support the idea that these

boys wanted to be noticed. They were crying out for help and just were not getting it.

They also speak a great deal about the ways in which people will be made to pay for what they have done to them; especially the jocks. It is noted in other articles that the jocks admitted to harassing the boys repeatedly. So here again is the common theme of revenge, as in the Kinkel case. However this does not seem to be their only motive. These children were outcasts, loners, friends unto themselves. Their biggest wish seemed to be infamy, to be noticed (Gibbs, 1999, p.8)

The final common theme in the Kinkel case as in the Kliebold/ Harris case is the ability to obtain the guns. These children were obviously out of control, however their actions may have been stopped had they not had access to the guns. In the Kliebold/Harris case there is a slight discrepancy in how they obtained their guns. One idea is that the retailer sold them directly to the boys, the other idea is that Harris's former girlfriend may have bought them for them. In the Kinkel case, the boy's family was supposedly anti-gun, but Kinkel was easily able to obtain the weapon (ironically it was bought for him by his father).

Granted I have only looked at 2 of the cases of school shootings, but the same themes underlie many of the others. It is still thought that every case had at least three of the contributing processes at the beginning of the state/process model. In a short paragraph my state/process model may be explained. Keep in mind that this is only one interpretation. You may perceive it how you like but this gives you a jumping off point.

First off we start with a regular everyday teenager. For some reason one of five things can possibly occur. He could be constantly angry at those people around him, he could be feeling like he may possibly be gay and that is making him uncomfortable, his family could be falling apart, he may be depressed, or he may be being constantly be being bombarded with violence in the media. If anyone of these things happens it could possibly be a jumping off point for school shootings, however it would be more likely to occur if more than one of these things happen.

One of the major things that is happening in this model is that in every aspect the child somehow feels angry, or outcast in someway from those people around him. This causes the child to begin finding other ways to try and fit in. Many times he will then be outcast by his schoolmates. The Labeling theory of social problems takes effect here. The child in exchange feels very hostile towards the people around him, especially those at school, and needs an outlet for his anger. When he cannot find that outlet, often, he will remember certain violent actions that he has been witness to, or seen on television, in video games, movies, music, these violent ideas start to trickle in to his brain as a way to solve his problems. If the child has access to a gun then he is all the more likely to become a school shooter. If he doesn't have access to a gun then he most likely will not shoot people.

The sheer number of rampage killings committed by males under the age of 22 is steadily rising in our country, most of them having been committed in only the last few years. One can see that the sheer age and the number that the

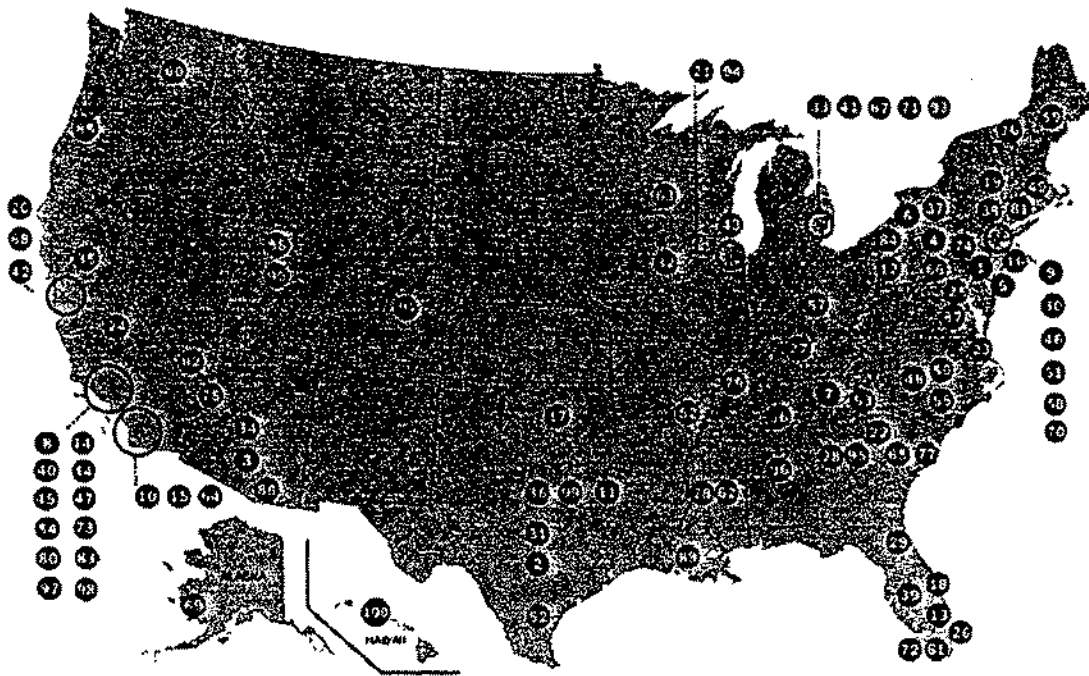
teens are killing is increasing (see Fig. 3). Although it is not a direct measure of how many of these crimes were actually committed by W.M.A. I should note that the homicide victimization rate for 14-17 year-olds increased almost 150% from 1985 to 1993, and since I continue to study until the teens are 19, the 18-24 year-olds experienced the highest homicide victimization rates, a change from the late 1970's when 25-34 year-olds had the highest rates(see Fig. 4) We can also look at the rates for homicidal offenders the offending rates for children under age 14. They changed little since 1985, however 18-24 year-olds have historically had the highest offending rates and their rates have doubled from 1985 to 1993. Our target population of 14-17 seems to be in the worst shape which calls for the most help. The homicide offending rates of 14-17 year-olds exploded after 1985 (see Fig. 5)

What all this information will tell you is that there is a drastic need for help for these teens. I have discussed the reasons why this is happening, but it is important to realize that it will only continue to get worse if nothing is done and no intervention occurs in these young adolescents life.

Discussion/Conclusion

As we read through the morning paper, sipping our hot coffee, it is becoming more and more common that we see another school shooting. They are most commonly being committed by white, middle-class, suburban, and adolescents. I have examined the reasons for why this is occurring and can now

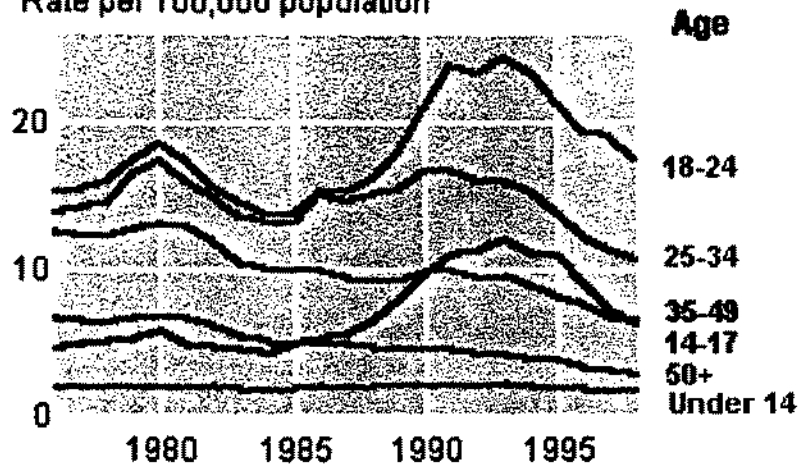
(Fig. 3) A View of Rampage Killers Across the Country



Source: The New York Times National News. (2000) A View of Rampage Killers Across the Country. The New York Times on the Web [Online], 7 paragraphs. Available:
http://64.4.8.250:80/cgi-bin/linkrd?_lang=&lah=f9b22093845dbc39d10ef0842f9b49b1&lat=958410912&hm___action=http%3a%2f%2fwww%2enytimes%2ecom%2flibrary%2fnational%2f040900shoot%2dmap%2html

Homicide victimization by age, 1976-98

Rate per 100,000 population



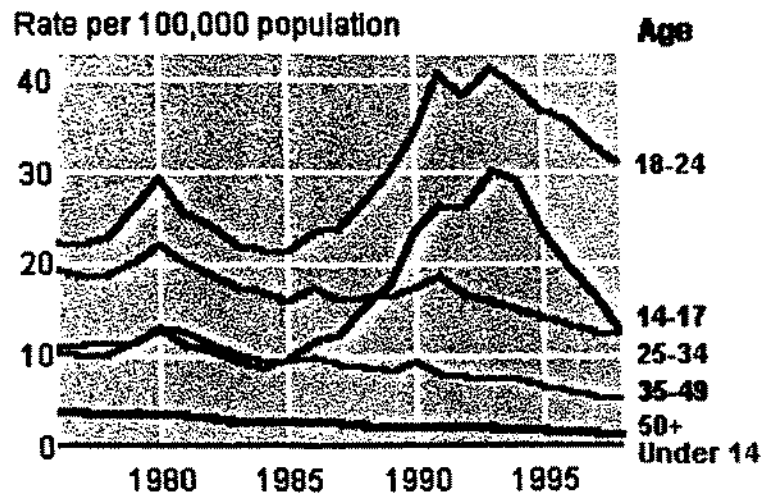
(Fig. 4) Homicide Victimization Trends in U.S. by Age

Source: Fox, J.A. & Zawitz, M.W. (2000). Homicide trends in the United States.

National Bureau of Justice Statistics [Online], 90 paragraphs. Available:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm>

Homicide offending by age, 1976-98



(Fig. 5) Homicide Offenders in the U.S. by Age

Source: Fox, J.A. & Zawitz, M.W. (2000). Homicide trends in the United States.

National Bureau of Justice Statistics [Online], 90 paragraphs. Available:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm>

begin to speak about what to do in the future. Neglect was a big issue because stemming from it we have revenge. These teens are being neglected in many invisible ways, especially by their parents. I explained that there is not one case where there was not a warning sign first. In the Kinkel case he had been suspended for fighting, threatening students, and bringing a gun to school. In the Columbine case there was overwhelming evidence that these kids were being neglected. Their rooms were filled with violence and racist supremisism, the were isolated at school, and then there were the tapes.

In every case there was a cry for help. The problem has become that people are very focused on themselves, and where they are going. But it is time that the community pulls together and begin to recognize the symptoms and reacting to them in a quick manner rather than putting these kids off until they kill.

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Abstract

Sage McCollister is a junior currently attending San Diego State University. Planning on becoming a child advocacy lawyer, he interest was peaked when she began hearing about these teens in trouble in the U.S. It is her goal to pinpoint the problem and eventually to put an end to this problem, or at least to help those teens who are on the path towards it.