

OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Killers in Our Midst

Nearly all mass shooters have been young men alienated from society.

By The Editorial Board

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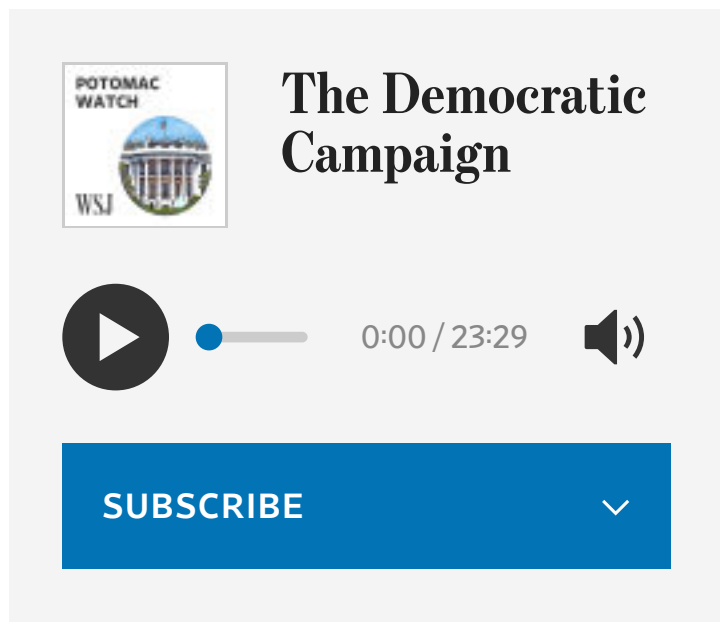
Evidence markers on the site of a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, on Aug. 4. PHOTO: MEGAN JELINGER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton over the weekend are horrifying assaults on peaceful communities by disturbed young men. American politics will try to simplify these events into a debate about guns or political rhetoric, but the common theme of these killings is the social alienation of young men that will be harder to address.

One response to reject is the reflex to blame these shootings on political opponents. Before noon on Sunday we received an email from the Progressive Democrats of America declaring that “we blame President Trump for feeding into the anti-immigrant frenzy and white supremacist violence. Yes, you Mr. President had your finger on that AK-47.”

This is political cynicism. Mass shootings also occurred under Presidents Obama, Bush and Clinton. They occur around the world, if much less frequently, such as in Christchurch, New

Zealand (2019), Australia (2019), and Norway (2011). The twisted motivations are varied and often too convoluted to sort into any clear ideology.



Take the El Paso shooter, who is suspected of writing a manifesto posted on the 8chan website before the rampage. He expressed sympathy for the racial motivations of the Christchurch killer and denounced Hispanic immigration, but he also raged against “unchecked corporations” who support immigration and pollute the land.

This is the rant of someone angry about a society he doesn’t feel a part of and doesn’t comprehend. It is all-too-typical of most of these young male killers who tend to be loners and marinate in notions they absorb in the hours they spend online. They are usually disconnected to family, neighborhood, church, colleagues at work, or anything apart from their online universe.

These men may draw inspiration from one another online, and any communication or common connection needs to be investigated. The FBI says it has made 100 arrests related to domestic terrorism in the last nine months. But blaming all this on one politician or ideology, left or right, without evidence of such a connection is disingenuous and counterproductive.

Yet politicians and other leaders do have a responsibility to condemn and marginalize those who indulge the ugly instincts that infect any human society. That includes the President of the United States. These columns have long warned Mr. Trump about the divisive tone of his public rhetoric. He should separate himself forcefully and consistently from alt-right and white-supremacy voices.

His supporters may be correct that Mr. Trump’s opponents will not reciprocate by pushing back

against the irrational elements on the left. But a President has a special role in the American system even if our politics has elevated the Presidency more than it should. Either Mr. Trump restrains his rhetoric or he will pay a consequential political price. Joe Biden's theme of a return to "decency" and "normalcy" will resonate with even millions of Trump voters if Mr. Trump doesn't change.

One place for leaders to focus, as we've long argued, is mental health. This is a matter of policy more than money. HHS's mental-health division projects mental-health spending from all sources, public and private, will be about \$238 billion in 2020, up from \$147 billion in 2009. Mental health is an "essential" benefit under ObamaCare, and California passed a 1% income-tax surcharge expressly for mental health.

The problem is identifying those with mental illness who are a threat, and then allowing society to intervene to prevent violence. Overwhelming evidence suggests that the de-institutionalization of the seriously mentally ill has had tragic results. Libertarians and mental-health advocates who resist such intervention need to do some soul-searching.

The same goes for those in the gun lobby who claim that denying access to guns from those with a history of mental illness violates individual rights. So-called red-flag laws that let police or family members petition a court to remove firearms from someone who may be a threat might not have stopped the El Paso killer. But the evidence in the states is that the laws have prevented suicides and may prevent other mass shootings. Gun rights need to be protected, but the Second Amendment is not a suicide pact.

Which brings us back to the angry young men. This is the one common element in nearly all mass shootings: 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz in Parkland, Fla.; Chris Harper-Mercer in Oregon's Umpqua Community College; Adam Lanza at Newtown, Conn.; Devin Patrick Kelley in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and the rest. All were deeply troubled and alienated from society in our increasingly atomistic culture.

This is one price we are paying for the decline in what the late sociologist Peter Berger called the "mediating institutions" that help individuals form cultural and social attachments. These are churches, business and social clubs like the Rotary, charitable groups, even bowling leagues, and especially the family. Government programs can never replace these as protectors of troubled young people.

Recognizing this reality is not a counsel of despair to do nothing about mass shootings. But revitalizing these private institutions of social capital is crucial to reversing the cultural decline

at the root of so many of America's ills.

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