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The Pervasive Violence in Our Schools: Nothing New

Because we were all once school kids ourselves and most of us have had our own kids in school, hardly any of us are without deep emotional reactions to the death and destruction at the Littleton, Colorado, high school last week. The shock at the magnitude of the terror and violence has led to a virtual babble of comments about how it all could have been avoided: We have been told all sorts of implausible things: This outbreak of school violence could have been avoided if only prayer and the bible had been allowed in our public schools, if unusual dress had been prohibited, if all teachers and students had themselves been armed with guns, if music adults did not appreciate had been banned, if only Disney-like movies and video games were allowed, if kids were not allowed on the Internet, if mothers were not allowed to work outside of the home, if none of us lived in suburbia, etc. etc.

From my own experience both as a school kid myself and the parent of school kids, this babble largely misses the only two points I think are important.

The first point is that violence is endemic in our schools; it is an every day affair. Even more important, it is not usually the alienated outsider that is meting out the violence. It is the supposedly well adjusted, mainstream, and dominant cliques. They direct that violence against anyone who they have decided is strange, different, or just not "with it." The violent and threatening mainstream kids are only reflecting their own parents' and the larger society's discomfort with differences and a deep desire for a conformity that the mainstream will lead and dominate.

As these well-adjusted kids pass those they have decided are non-conforming outsiders in the halls or on the sidewalks, they mutter obscene threats, they rabbit punch them, they shoulder them into the lockers or wall, they set up human barriers that amount to threatening gauntlets. For the excluded who do not passively yield, they organize group ambushes in which they heavily outnumber the scum they wish to punish and dominate. A quiet reign of terror operates day-in and day-out in our schools. Because kids are trying to establish their own independence, the victims tell neither their parents nor school officials. They accept the oppression as part of the facts of life in the real world and try to organize themselves into their own cliques for protection and support.

This is not a new phenomenon. It was true, too, in the metropolitan inter-city schools I attended as a kid. It was true to the schools my teenage kids attended here in Montana. High schools are probably the most violent, socially stratified, and prejudiced institutions our children will have to inhabit on a regular basis in their entire lives. When they finally

are able leave those schools, they can begin to make decisions for themselves that bring them a lot more protection and support.

The second important point is that violence and alienation among the young are also not new. I am not sure I can even count the different colorful youth subcultures and groups that have come and gone in my lifetime, beginning with the Teddy Boys of the 40s, the leather-clad toughs of the 50s, the hippies of the 60s and 70s, the punks of the 80s, the grunge, the Goths and the other "alternative" youth groups of the 90s.

When I was in school, back in the early 50's, there was no shortage of organized and disorganized violence among young people. We fought in gangs with our fists as well as with baseball bats, chains, and knives. We made zip guns and small explosive devices.

We rarely hurt each other very seriously. The reason was simple. Peoples' heads are harder than other peoples' hands. Before one can do much serious damage to someone with your fists, your fists are going to be hurting real bad. We did not kill each other because the weapons we had at our disposal would have to have been used intensively over a period of time to achieve that result. In short, we simply did not have the firepower that young people have access to today. As the weapons readily available to young people have increased in firepower, from single-shot zip guns to Saturday-night Specials to automatic pistols to assault weapons, the death toll from young people attacking their peers has steadily risen.

We know that the fire power available to young people has increased. We do not know that young people are more violent or alienated than they used to be. We know how to reduce young people's access to firearms. We do not know how to make the teenage years less alienating and violence prone. In all of the babble about our youth and their parents gone wrong, there is a profound loss of touch with reality. There are simple measures that have proven to be extremely effective in reducing deadly violence that have been adopted by most other developed nations. They all begin with controlling access to deadly weapons. In our culture and politics, that, however, is nearly impossible. So we focus instead on empty moral posturing that ignores both the reality of the mutilating social forces our kids have to deal with daily and the decisions we adults have made about the proliferation of accessible to deadly firepower. In that world of adult make-believe and political and religious posturing, we can be sure that the Littleton, Colorado, explosion of violence will be randomly repeated over and over again in coming years.