

# manhood and violence: the deadliest equation

By Michael Kimmel

**F**or the next few days, the nation will once again stare at the photograph of a slight, confused-looking teenage boy, trying to understand the unfathomable — how Charles Andrew Williams, age 15, could open fire on his classmates, killing two and wounding 13 other people. We'll stare at those pictures as the explanations begin to pour in from the experts and the pundits alike. We'll hear from psychologists who'll draw elaborate profiles of misfits and loners, of adolescent depression and acting out. Cultural critics will blame a host of problems — violent video games, the Internet, guns. All the while we will continue to miss the point — even though it is staring right back at us: Charles Andrew Williams is a middle-class white boy.

Skeptical? Try a little thought experiment: imagine that all the killers in all the school shootings in recent years — Littleton, Colorado; Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; Springfield, Oregon; and Jonesboro, Arkansas — were all black girls from poor families who lived instead in New Haven, Boston, Chicago, or Newark. I believe we'd now be having a national debate about inner-city poor black girls. The entire focus would be on race, class, and gender.

The media would invent a new term for their behavior, as they did with "wilding" a decade ago after the attack on the Central Park jogger. We'd hear about the culture of poverty; about how life in the city breeds crime and violence; about some natural tendency among

blacks towards violence. Someone would even blame feminism for causing girls to become violent in vain imitation of boys. Yet the obvious fact that all these school killers were all middle-class white boys seems to have escaped everyone's notice. (In these cases, actually, it's unclear that class or race played any part in the shootings. But that's the point: imagine the national reaction if black boys had targeted whites in school shootings. We would assume that race alone explained the tragedy.)

That all these murders were committed by young boys with guns raises not a ripple. We continue to speak about "teen violence," "youth violence," "school violence" without ever noticing the fact that all those "teens" and "youth" are boys. One expert, already consulted about this recent tragedy, equally missed the point. Paul

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Mones, author of a 1991 book, *When a Child Kills*, suggested that the motivation for such deadly violence is that "kids want to vent their anger, their worries, their frustrations, their fantasies." Exactly what "kids" is he talking about?

Gender is the single most obvious and intractable difference when it comes to violence in America. Men and boys are responsible for 95% of all violent crimes in this country. Every day twelve boys and young men commit suicide — seven times the number of girls. Every day eighteen boys and young men die from homicide — ten times the number of girls. From an early age, boys learn that violence is not only an acceptable form of conflict resolution, but one that is admired. Four times more teenage boys than teenage girls think fighting is appropriate when someone cuts into the front of a line. Half of all teenage boys get into a physical fight each year. But what causes the unleashing of such homicidal rage? For the past few months, I have been investigating all school shootings that took place in the United States during the decade of the 1990s, as described in a report released by the FBI this November. All the shooters were boys.

And most described their school days as a relentless gauntlet of bullying, gay-baiting epithets, physical assault and harassment until they "snapped." Their days were spent, apparently, fending off constant criticism of



their masculinity. Reports indicate that Williams, too, was "constantly picked on" by his classmates. In the coming days, we will come to know more about these daily indignities and assaults to which he was subjected. In the meantime, we might again listen to the words of Evan Todd, a 255-pound linebacker on the football team at Columbine High School, a representative of the "jock culture" that Dylan Harris and Eric Klebold found such an interminable torment. "Columbine is a clean, good place, except for those rejects," Todd says. "Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos... If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos" (cited in *Time*, 20 December 1999, p. 50-51).

In most cases, boys learn any number of coping strategies to deal with the daily taunts of their classmates. Some turn inwards, self-medicate with drugs or alcohol, become loners. A large number of teen suicides contain stories of such daily abuse. And, in a very few cases, the anguish of having one's masculinity challenged, ridiculed, denigrated builds until it explodes in a cathartic rage that seeks to destroy the entire world.

The belief that retaliatory violence is manly is not a trait carried on any chromosome, not soldered into the wiring of the right or left hemisphere, not juiced by testosterone. (It is still the case that half the boys don't fight, most don't carry weapons, and almost all don't kill: are they not boys?) Boys learn it. They learn it from their fathers, nearly half of whom own a gun. (Notice that Williams's parents are divorced, but that he lived with his father.) They learn it from a media that glorifies it, from sports heroes who commit felonies and get big contracts, from a culture saturated in images of heroic and redemptive violence. They learn it from each other. And this parallel education is made more lethal in states where gun control laws are most lax, where gun-lobbyists are most powerful. Because all available evidence suggests that all the increases in the headlines of school violence is attributable to guns. Boys have resorted to violence for a long time, but sticks and fists and even the occasional switchblade do not create the bloodbaths of the past few years. Nearly 90% of all homicides among boys aged 15 to 19 are firearm related, and 80% of the victims are boys. If the



rumble in *West Side Story* were to take place today, the death toll would not be just Riff and Bernardo, but all the Sharks and all the Jets — and probably several dozen bystanders.

Some will throw up their hands and sigh that "boys will be boys." In the face of these tragic killings, such resignation is unacceptable. Far more sweeping — and necessary — is a national meditation on how our ideals of manhood became so entangled with violence.

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Make no mistake: Charles Andrew Williams is a real boy. In a sense, he is not deviant, but over-conformist to a definition of masculinity that prescribes violence as a solution. Recall that famous bumper sticker: "I don't get mad; I get even." Until we transform that definition of manhood, this terrible equation of masculinity and violence will add up to an increasing death toll at our nation's schools.

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