New American

Written by **Selwyn Duke** on January 8, 2023

Preteen Psychopaths: Are Precocious Kid Killers Getting Younger and More Conscienceless?

A six-year-old shoots his teacher in class, a 12-year-old fatally stabs her younger brother just before midnight, a 10-year-old murders his mother because she wouldn't buy him a virtual-reality headset. This is just a sampling of our time's heinous preteen crimes.

All three incidents occurred just recently, too.

Yet are these mere outliers and coincidences? Or do they reflect a troubling trend?

Homicide cases in American juvenile courts [did rise](#) by 35 percent between 2014 and 2018, the Department of Justice informed in a 2020 report. The spike was eyebrow-raising because it coincided with a period during which the incidences of many other types of crime were decreasing. Moreover, an increase was observed in both black inner-city and rural white communities.

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Most of these murders, however, involved teens, many of whom were drug-involved. Yet there's an obvious truth here: Our toxic, morally rotting culture is like polluted air, affecting all — including the youngest among us.

Just consider, for example, that "drug deaths among children ages 10 to 14 more than tripled from 2019 to 2020, according to an analysis done for CNN by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," [reported](#) CNN last February. Even more strikingly, EducationWeek [told us](#) just two weeks later that "rates of suicide among children 5 to 11 have risen on average 15 percent a year from 2013 to 2020." That tender-aged kids would even consider killing themselves can seem incomprehensible.

As for young children killing others, it's only somewhat less incomprehensible but far more headline-grabbing. The aforementioned gun-toting six-year-old [shot his teacher](#), Abby Zwerner, during a classroom altercation Friday at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia. Zwerner suffered a life-threatening injury but is now in stable condition.

The 12-year-old girl who [fatally stabbed her nine-year-old brother](#), on Thursday, lives in Oklahoma and awakened her mom to inform her of what she'd done. The 10-year-old [who killed his mother](#), in Milwaukee, over the virtual reality headset shot her in a premeditated fashion on November 21. And his reaction after the fact? "When he calls, he's just like, 'Make sure all my tablets and laptop and everything of mine is packaged,'" his aunt [told](#) station TMJ4.

Rightfully Shocked, but the Wrong Conclusions

Yet the boy is joined in having askew priorities by some observers. One British mother who's currently residing in Newport News, for example, spoke for many by responding to the teacher shooting with a passionate call for gun control. But considering the Oklahoma stabbing, should we then also demand knife control?

Many points could be made about firearms here. But suffice it to say that in the 1940s and '50s, boys would sometimes carry *guns* openly on *New York City subways* because they had after-school riflery clubs. No one was concerned about school shootings, either. Given this, even if one considers gun control a reasonable stopgap measure, shouldn't it be obvious that something very fundamental has changed in our society these last 65 years?

Whence the Violence?

In a 2019 article, Winston-Salem State University professor of justice studies Jack S. Monell sought to explain rising youth violence. Presenting a passage from Dr. Michael M. Sinclair, an assistant professor of social work at Morgan State University in Baltimore, he related:

> It is not solely psychological or sociologically. Our children are being exposed to gratuitous violence in video games, music, movies and television. Without the support of "effective parents" our youth remain vulnerable to images of violence and are desensitized. They often equate power with violence; additionally they may be exposed to violence in their homes and community. This as many behavioral learning theorists posit, can have an overwhelming effect (traumatic events).

Professor Monell further writes, "In my book, 'Delinquency, Pop Culture and Generation Why', [sic] I also discussed popular culture's influence on young people. Where we are seeing more and more violent games, music, and music videos being created, children at times have a difficult time separating such fantasy from reality. Further, without engaged parents or guardians to offer explanations to these types of influences, children are often left to figure it out alone…."

Of course, some will scoff at such explanations. But note that our problem is, to use a now fashionable term, systemic. As clergyman Fr. George Rutler once put it, "We're not going to understand these problems if we view them as disconnected social accidents; they are all part of a deep cultural malaise." This malaise in reality affects everything, too; "wokeness," for example, which reflects a lack of virtue, is part of it.

The Moral System's Breakdown

Anglo-Irish philosopher Edmund Burke once noted that society "cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without." Creating that "controlling power … within" must start young, and to this end man has taken great pains to civilize children, who are born little barbarians lacking self-control and mature moral compasses. Some even put it this way: Babies are sociopaths — a state they must outgrow.

Now, historically, a major factor in man's civilizing of children has been religious instruction. Even wiser atheists have noted its utility in this regard. Consider Christianity: A major part of its message is that God not only exists, but He has given us moral law (Truth, objective by definition) and has established consequences for its violation. The latter, the "fear of God," of, ultimately, Hell, is often

scoffed at today; often uttered is, "We should do the right thing because it's the right thing!" Of course, ideally. But basic human psychology points to the punishment prospect's necessity.

Famed psychologist Erik Erikson pointed out, for example, via his eight "[stages of psychosocial development](#)," that a child in an early moral developmental phase *only knows that something is wrong if he gets punished for it*. Note, too, that since some people never mature beyond this point, many adults also need to have fear of consequences (ergo, the criminal/justice system).

Yet it's not just about control by fear, not by a long shot. The God's law message is that morality is *real,* something absolute, objective, nonnegotiable, and beneficial (hence Truth's beauty); in this it's much as with the laws of physics, though being of not the physical but the metaphysical it can more easily be rationalized away. The message is significant because when people believe "morality" is real and bestowed by the Creator of the Universe, they're more apt to assign it credibility and abide by it.

But where are we today? Christianity is in steep decline, as [surveys](#) have [long shown](#). Correlating with this, people have ceased believing in Truth and have descended into moral relativism/nihilism, the notion that what we call morality is just a product of man, a social construct; another way of saying this is that "morality" *doesn't really exist.*

Embracing this lie invites evil. After all, rape, kill, steal? Why not? Who's to say it's wrong? It's all relative — and don't impose your values on me, pal.

In point of fact, this moral nihilism has swept our age. A 2002 Barna Group study [bore this out](#), finding that even back then, only *six percent of teens believed in Truth*. And without it to use as a "moral" yardstick, what did they most commonly fall back on?

Emotion.

Barna found that Americans in general were most likely to make "moral" decisions based on what feels right.

Given this, we can now ask: How are people's emotions, their feelings, being shaped? And *what* is shaping them?

To echo the two aforementioned professors, the popular culture largely does. As I pointed out in "[Why the NRA is Right About Hollywood](#)," a credible 1990s study found that in *every* part of the world, crime rose sharply 15 years after television's introduction — the amount of time it takes for a generation raised on corruptive entertainment fare to reach the peak crime-commission years.

In fact, ex-West Point military psychologist [Lt. Col. David Grossman](#) has pointed out that the forces our children are exposed to through entertainment are *identical to the techniques used to inure soldiers to killing*.

An example: "every time a child plays an interactive point-and-shoot video game, he is learning the exact same conditioned reflex and motor skills … stimulus-response, stimulus-response," said Grossman, that have been inculcated into soldiers to increase riflemen's willingness to shoot exposed enemies.

Now there's the Internet, too, which is like TV — to the nth power.

Apropos to this, ancient Greek philosopher Plato warned millennia ago that (I'm paraphrasing) "as the music of the city changes, its laws inevitably change with it." What do you think he'd say about our entertainment on steroids, today's TV, Internet, and video games?

Obviously, it's hard doing this issue justice in one article. This is a synopsis. But here's what it boils down to, simplified: We're feeding mostly empty vessels — children lacking in virtue and rooted to nothing permanent — into a popular-culture morality meat grinder that fills them with evil and stokes the fires of their passions. It's garbage in, garbage out. And, sometimes, this garbage kills bodies along with souls.