

What characteristics do school shooters share?

October 19 2017

Boys involved in school shootings often struggle to live up to what they perceive as their school's ideals surrounding masculinity. When socially shunned at school, they develop deep-set grudges against their classmates and teachers. The shooters become increasingly angry, depressed, and more violent in their gendered practice. A shooting rampage is their ultimate performance, says Kathryn Farr of Portland State University in the US. In a study published in Springer's journal *Gender Issues*, she investigated the characteristics shared by 31 school boys involved in 29 mass shootings at American schools between 1995 and 2015.

Farr's analysis suggests that boys' [social status](#) in middle and high [school](#) is determined in great part by peers' acceptance of them as "appropriately masculine." Their guidelines for gender appropriateness are found in a set of Adolescent Insider Masculinity norms that describe [masculinity](#) as the ideal that men are cool, heterosexual and tough, shy away from "sissy stuff" and embrace activities, behavior and mannerisms that are typical of "guys". Falling short of this ideal sets some boys up for school-situated problems and reactions that are typical of adolescents.

Ten of the 31 shooters had a history of serious psychiatric problems, while another ten grew up in extremely abusive households. The remaining eleven boys tended to react explosively and inappropriately to incidents that they perceived as unjustly discrediting them. Twenty-five boys were white and all but one identified as heterosexual.

"Many of the [adolescent](#) shooters had personal troubles that affected their ability to manage their social performances at school," explains Farr. "Moreover, the potential rampage of a boy with severe mental illness and rampage-related risk factors could be especially injurious."

Most were repeatedly and publicly tagged with homosexual and feminized epithets such as being a "homo", a "cry baby" or a "fag". All 31 shooters were made aware of their failings through their classmates' emasculating bullying, rejection by girlfriends, and marginalization in general. Some reported being physically and sexually victimized by their male peers.

According to Farr, the shooters' gender performances at school were typically 'off', either not meeting or exaggerating the Adolescent Insider Masculinity imperatives. They saw the responses they received as undeserved injustices that denied them their masculine entitlements. Most used dramatic displays of masculine bravado to try and show that they were indeed tough and powerful. They, for instance, brought guns to school, or emphasized violent themes in their writings, drawings, and class presentations. Almost all had bragged about their rampage plans. Such behavior violates the moral boundaries of masculinity, and further damaged the boys' already low social status.

Farr believes that schools should teach their students about such shooting incidences, and the possible warning signs that need to be reported. In-school and referral services should be provided. School curriculums should also address adolescent masculinity issues and discussion-based forums about issues of gender should be instigated.

"How often are adolescent boys given the opportunity to talk with one another about masculinity norms and their challenges, including norms embracing violence or the effects of emasculating bullying? Such classroom-based discussions could also help schools identify, provide

and give value to activities that appeal to boys whose interests and skills lie outside the norms of insider masculinity," Farr says.

She warned against unnecessary stigmatizing of troubled adolescents: "Although many boys display at-risk behaviors and attitudes, very few will actually become school shooters."

More information: Kathryn Farr, Adolescent Rampage School Shootings: Responses to Failing Masculinity Performances by Already-Troubled Boys, *Gender Issues* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s12147-017-9203-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-017-9203-z)

Provided by Springer

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