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Can we stop mass shootings if we won't talk about the crisis of America's young men?

Will Bunch

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Killers in Atlanta, Boulder had little in common — except they are 21-year-old men, the age when many of their peers are adrift. Will U.S. talk about this?

In many ways, the young gunmen who shattered families and broke the hearts of metro Atlanta and Boulder, Colorado, in separate, high-profile killing sprees represented very different variations on the American story.

In the sprawling exurbs north of Atlanta, the alleged March 16 mass killer of eight people — six of them women of Asian descent who worked in spas — grew up deeply connected to the fundamentalist Christian church, who seemingly was unable to reconcile his years of Sunday school with the pornography he frequently watched, fueling his belief — apparently endorsed by his religious parents — that he had a sex addiction.

Raised in Arvada, Colorado, a sprawling, affluent suburb of Denver, the man police took into custody on Monday for gunning down 10 people inside a supermarket, including the first police officer who responded, is the child of immigrants from Syria who came to the United States in 2002 at age 3 and who, as he grew, complained he was the victim of bullying over his Islamic name and heritage, according to family members who said he suffered from increasing paranoia.

But what strikes me about America's two newest mass murderers are the things they had in common. In both cases, their life stories seem to trail off and become increasingly vague after they graduated from high school. There's evidence that both young men spent a lot of time on their computer — the Georgia gunman with his porn habit and the Boulder shooter posting some of his grievances on social media accounts that have been taken down. It was insanely easy for them to walk into a gun store and buy their weapons of mass destruction. And stating the obvious — even if it's an obvious we don't like to discuss much — they were both young men.

From left, community organizer Tam Nguyen, Buddhist leader Ni Su Thich Nu Nhu Nhu and Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer, join in prayer as part of a multi-faith gathering during a vigil honoring the victims of the Atlanta-area spa shootings in Garden Grove, Calif. Read more Allen J. Schaben

In fact, the killers in Georgia and in Colorado were both 21 years old. That's the exact same age as the gunman who entered an El Paso Walmart in 2018 with the goal of shooting people of Mexican descent, killing 23. The perpetrator of 2012's Newtown, Connecticut, slaughter of 27

people, mostly 1st-graders and kindergartners, was 20. Similar to the ages of the mass murderers at Tucson (22), Virginia Tech (23), Dayton (24), and Aurora (25).

You've probably noticed that I haven't used the names of the gunmen. An increasing number of journalists — like CNN's Anderson Cooper — share that policy, and for good reason. No one wants to glorify the perpetrators of mass slaughter — and possibly inspire copycat killers in the process. And after the heartbreak of mass shootings happening again and again (and only in America), the instinct to instead elevate the tragic stories of their innocent victims is a good, proper and moral one.

But we also need to acknowledge a risk in walking the tightrope of endlessly covering tragedies like Atlanta and Boulder while minimizing any broader discussion of who stands behind these assault weapons. In the race to our familiar everyday political battle stations, are we ignoring an obvious crisis of among America's young men — one that occasionally erupts in mass shootings but more frequently plays out in opioid abuse, or rising suicide rates, or other forms of anti-social behavior? Is there a way to justifiably avoid any empathy for individuals who turn their grievances into senseless violence, yet compassionately look at a better way for their generation that appears increasingly adrift, in order to stop the next 21-year-old ticking time bomb?

I've watched the news coverage over the last week and a half, and beyond profiling the victims it falls largely into two categories. Both are necessary conversations. The first is about gun control, in a nation with more guns than people, with such easy access to buy human killing machines like the AR-15-style weapons used in Atlanta and Boulder. The second involves seeing these incidents through our complex lenses of race, or ethnicity, or religion. Progressives and others amplified the details of the Atlanta killing to call overdue attention to the spike in violence toward people of Asian descent during the pandemic, while the brand of right-wing media that usually downplays mass shootings perked up upon learning the Boulder gunman is a Muslim.

But while there may be more than one gun for every Americans, the fact that the Americans using them for wanton mass slaughter are young men in their 20s was rarely mentioned. Yet the problem is well-known to researchers. Eric Madfis, a criminal justice professor at the University of Washington-Tacoma, has been researching U.S. mass killings for a dozen years, and what he finds again and again is what he calls a white male grievance culture. He and other experts have found that years of simmering rage over life failures — in romance, or lack of a career, or from factors like bullying — cause some men to act out to reassert their masculinity in a warped, violent fashion.

“The age bracket tends to be young men — high school students or shortly thereafter — or in middle age,” Madfis told me in a phone interview the day after the rampage in Boulder. “Both are crucial transitions where people have to evaluate where their life is, and where it's going.” He noted that women tend to internalize blame for life struggles — thus resulting in problems like self-harm, but very few female mass shooters — while men are much more likely to externalize their issues and look for someone to blame.

Madfis said it may not be a coincidence that mass shootings in America started to spike in the 1970s — correlating closely with the end of an era when (especially white) men without a college education could still easily find a factory-type job with decent wages — but that more research is needed. Yet the increasing number of these mass-casualty events — while most likely

to generate wall-to-wall news coverage — is hardly the only warning sign that young American men are in severe crisis in the 2020s.

One year ago this month (and unfortunately lost in the birth of a pandemic), the married Princeton academics Anne Case and Angus Deaton released their book, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. It unveiled their research showing that premature death from drug overdoses, suicide or alcoholism — which had been rising generally among the working class, especially whites, since the 1990s — was now spiking among younger men, but specifically those who hadn't attended college and had no access to the higher-paying “knowledge economy.”

Hollis Wright collects her thoughts as she becomes emotional in front of the Gold Spa, where multiple people were killed in last week's shooting, in Atlanta. John Spink / John.Spink@ajc.com

Instead, there's growing evidence that millions of young men are atomized and alienated — living with parents, working in seemingly dead-end “McJobs” in the service sector like Amazon-type warehouses, if at all, and spending an inordinate amount of time online watching videos or playing games and unconnected to any real community. From 2008 to 2019, the number of men under 30 reporting they hadn't had sex in the previous year nearly tripled, to 28%. Experts found a correlation between sexlessness and lack of participation in the labor force.

It's hard to talk about these things without running them through the blender of our national reckonings over sexism and racism. We have to acknowledge that a lot of “white male grievance culture” is rooted in morally unacceptable ideas — viewing women as sex objects, or seeing job entitlement as an extension of white supremacy. But can we squelch those ideas while bringing more opportunity and hope to young men who seem lost after high school, who could metastasize into mass shooters if society does nothing at all?

In researching this column, I found our refusal to delve deeper into the crisis of young American men leads to awkward and stilted conversations around mass shootings, with writers on all sides reluctant to stray from their core ideologies. On the right, the libertarian Cato Institute's Trevor Burrus points out rightly that America has more mass shootings than any other nation and notes the problem has largely arisen since 1968, the year of the first federal gun-control law, but only uses that as an excuse to slam gun laws, not to look at other factors. The Washington Post's Monica Hesse wrote in 2019 that, “We need to talk about why mass shooters are almost always men” — but more as a slam-dunk for feminism than real talk about solving the issue she's raised.

Madfis, the criminal-justice expert, says better research and a more-informed conversation about the mental-health problems or emotional stresses of young men could lead to better strategies and more resources to deal with them. He's right to argue that the notion that men must react to disappointments with violence is not cast in stone.

I've been working over the last year on a book (to be published, God willing, in 2022) about the messy intersection between the American way of college and our bitter and divided politics. It's clear that the nation needs new strategies not only to help the college-bound pay for their education (and to eliminate past debts) but also to provide new opportunity and structure for the nearly two-thirds who aren't now getting a four-year degree. These can include a massive upgrade of community college but also job training or internship opportunities for late teens who aren't motivated by a classroom, and national-civilian-service gap years — yes, perhaps

mandatory — after high school to promise growth yet also bring together kids from siloed communities.

Can the United States afford to do these things? When the alternative is rising rates of drug abuse and overdose, more suicides, political divisions like those that boiled over in the January 6 insurrection, and mass shootings at ridiculously regular intervals, how can we afford not to try? But we can't try until we're honest about digging deeper, all the way to the roots of the problem.