

What Do School Shootings and Child Maltreatment Have in Common?

The common thread connecting school shootings and child abuse is the conviction that adult rights are more important than children's lives.

Gun advocates believe that anyone has a right to own any weapon, never mind how many children die as a result.

Child welfare activists on both edges of the political spectrum believe that parents and communities should control children's lives without government "interference", despite empirical evidence that current parent-friendly practices are getting children killed.

Rectifying this will require facing the fact that these groups currently control the political narrative and won't compromise.

That makes this a battle, not a conversation.

To protect children we need an organized campaign to reclaim the political middle. This means for example redoubling our lobbying efforts, and being a voice for children in public forums even if we get shouted down or treated rudely.

Narrative for Podcast

The recent school shooting in Uvalde Texas motivated me to find out if school shooters were more likely to have been abused or neglected as children. I searched the usual research sources and also asked Phil Arkow from The Link Coalition, which does research into the overlap between child maltreatment, animal abuse and domestic violence. He was unaware of any work being done on this topic, and if anyone would know he would be the one. By the way you can find the work of this coalition at simplythelinkcoalition.org.

Phil was aware though of a project here in Minnesota at Hamline University. It's called The Violence Project and it keeps a massive database on mass murders. The data items on child abuse and neglect appear to show little correlation between shooting school children and having experienced maltreatment as a child, but I don't know exactly what data they relied on so this is an open question for me until I know more.

We do know more from extensive research that there is a correlation between school shooters and abusing animals as a child. You may have seen the video that the Uvalde shooter posted of himself with a bag of dead cats.

But even without specific research on whether school shooters were often maltreated as children, I think we can identify a common thread uniting school shootings with the high number of child fatalities from child maltreatment, and that is the overwhelming weight given to the rights of adults even when it is known that they have deadly consequences for children.

That's easy for any of us to see in the case of gun violence. From the polls being frequently featured on the news I understand that a strong majority of Americans overall, and even a majority of NRA members agree that a ban on the types of assault rifles that killed the Uvalde schoolchildren would make common sense, even if that limitation only applies to 18–21-year-olds. But the virtual worship of the 2nd amendment trumps common sense.

It's less easy to see in child welfare but the discussion is similar. As we have reported many times, the context in child welfare is that there are a number of Family Assessment practices, or let's call them by their generic name, Alternative Response, that put children in danger, so I won't go into detail about them now, except to briefly recap that giving advance notice of the initial child protection visit and interviewing children in front of people who are allegedly hurting them gives the adults in a household opportunities to coach and intimidate children so they are not going to say what is happening to them, and so the social worker will be less able to keep them safe. Add to that that although workers get trained in fact-finding there is no requirement to apply that training in any specific protocol, and so again you have a recipe for children continuing to being abused and neglected despite child protection actually getting to them. This is particularly frustrating because before the recent reforms, child protection was only screening in 27 percent of maltreatment reports for a response, now we are responding to 43 percent of those calls, or about 10,000 more children a year, but we still aren't taking the most basic steps to keep them safe.

As with gun violence, we believe that most people oppose these unsafe practices. We don't have any CNN or Quinnipiac polls on this because it's not a widely known area, but I and others have talked with hundreds of people about these practices like these and so far I have been stopped every time in the middle of our explanation. People are incredulous. They often think they misheard me. Once we clear that up they usually say 'what are they thinking?' or "how could they do that to a little kid?"

To take a slight detour, we hope to actually have some hard data on the issue of child fatalities in the next few months because we are doing a project to gather data on children who have been murdered since 2014 by their parents or their parents' domestic partners. One thing that we have recently discovered is that almost twice as many children were killed as were reported in the media, nearly 160 compared to the 87 we found in newspapers and TV stories. We are also looking at the Department of Human Services' guidelines for when cases should not be tracked to Family Assessment, which were published when it started in 2000. We would have used guidelines from more recent publications but they do not have as specific information about which cases should and shouldn't be sent down the alternative track. Using the original guidelines also has the advantage of comparing FA assignments to the stated intent of the program. Not surprisingly we are finding that many if not most cases have multiple indicators that they were inappropriately assigned to FA, and should instead have been investigated.

Returning to our main theme, it's important to remember that there is no empirical foundation for the Alternative Response. There have been two meta-analyses, one in 2013 and one in 2019, that reviewed 75 papers, evaluations and articles on Alternative Response, and they both showed shown that it is less safe than traditional investigations, and it has failed in its primary

goal to engage parents in a more respectful and less coercive way. What these reviews showed is that in AR the uptake of services is quite low.

So how is it that people who oppose limiting access to assault rifles or who don't want to end the practice of interviewing children in front of adults who are hurting them get their way even though public opinion and empirical data are strongly against them? It is because people who are on the edges of society, with opinions far out of the mainstream, are controlling public policy right now, because they control the forums where public policy gets decided. This is hardly an original insight of course, but it's good to remind ourselves how far this has developed and to ask the questions of how this happened and what it would take to change policies and laws that are getting our children killed?

In terms of how this happened, I would offer the theory that people in the fringe groups that have taken over public policy have been radicalized. I know that is a strong term to use about fellow citizens even if they are fanatical advocates for gun rights or for practices that are putting vulnerable children at risk. I don't hold myself out as an expert in how people get radicalized or what all the signs and symptoms are of that condition. But consider this idea as a reasonable enough hypothesis to ask you to consider it, because just from reading media accounts that we have all seen of for example young men who were radicalized in America or Europe and went to fight for ISIS, it appears there are a few key features. One is that the process of accepting extreme views allows the person the benefits of entering into a small and close community of like-thinking individuals. It's a cure for loneliness, isolation, and lack of meaning in one's life.

Secondly, to stay in that community one has to accept the official doctrine, whatever that may be, without question and without alteration. Members of these sects only talk to one another, or at least only listen to people from their in-group. And that environment even extreme points of view can become normal. Questions and suggestions are not encouraged or allowed. People who do so will be shamed or threatened or ultimately banned from the group. Further, outsiders who do not accept these extreme doctrines are condemned by the in-group in the strongest possible terms. They are going to hell. They are traitors. They are not woke. They are racists. Or whatever is the worst condition to which you can consign nonbelievers.

This situation did not develop overnight. It has been building for a good 40 or 50 years. Sensible moderate people in our country allowed situations to develop such as the enormous income gap between ordinary people and the extremely wealthy, the so-called welfare reform in the 1990s that ended up creating deep poverty for many millions of children particularly in BIPOC communities, the NIMBYism that reduced the supply of affordable housing, allowing huge loan companies to burden our children with unsustainable college debt, and many similar long-term trends. We also allowed school programs to be stripped away so children who couldn't afford it had to pay to play basketball or football, and playing in the band or orchestra or being in the school play or participating in art class was no longer possible because despite our enormous overall wealth, ordinary people were burdened with these school costs and couldn't or wouldn't pay for them anymore. On another note, we now have college professors in some states who can be sued by any citizen who thinks they have taught critical race theory, or said too much about the shame of slavery, or of how we stole land from and broke treaties with Native Americans. Also, we now have serious discussion not about the hard work reforming the police

or child welfare, and holding the people who work in them accountable, but abolishing them. Ordinary people are fully aware that these proposals won't work out well for people who rely on having good police, or for children who need to be protected from violent or dysfunctional adults, but their voices are drowned out by those on the edges of the society. We have allowed all this to happen, insidiously, over many years.

It is totally understandable how this turn of events happened. Most of us have our hands full just living our own lives let alone spending good amounts of time and treasure getting involved in politics. But now we have let things go to the point where restoring our basic democratic rights is going to take activism from the middle. We will have to become more like the patriots of the Revolutionary war.

I am actually recording this podcast sitting in the middle of the Green Mountains in Vermont, where Seth Warner and Ethan Allen established the Green Mountain Boys in 1770. These were resourceful men and women who fought the British using what we might currently call guerrilla tactics, because they knew the mountains the British didn't. They are famous among other things for helping when the battle of Bennington Vermont. Today if you are anywhere near Bennington, you can see from far away and almost any direction the tall Bennington monument commemorating that battle.

That resourcefulness lives on to this day. You may remember Hurricane Sandy, which is called tropical storm Sandy in Vermont because it was no longer a hurricane when it got here by way of New Jersey. But it was devastating nonetheless. The town that I am in was completely surrounded by water for a couple of weeks. The roads were washed away a cemetery down the road from where I met was on a hill that washed out completely sending coffins all over the highway. Houses were stuck at weird angles in the dirt like a Lego toy in a sandbox.

When the storm was over the citizens of Vermont went to the garage is in their pole barns and got out their tractors and backhoes and dump trucks and other heavy equipment and within a matter of three months repaired the roads and got things back to normal. In contrast, in New Jersey, not to denigrate New Jersey, stories two and three years later were about how they still couldn't get contracts letted to do the road repairs. Not to get overly dramatic about it but we could use a bit of the "give me liberty or give me death" attitude that allowed us to win the Revolutionary war.

What this might mean for example is that people who are somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum will have to start doing things such as making sure that local school boards aren't taken over by radicals from the right or the left. We will have to similarly ensure that precinct caucuses or public hearings about housing policy or whatever are not flooded with extremists who shout down anyone with a contrary opinion. Going to such meetings may result in getting yelled at. Worse yet people might get trolled on social media and potentially threatened. One's children might be at risk of getting in the line of fire. Everyone will have to decide for themselves when taking risk does not prudent given their family obligations, but it seems likely that regaining control of moderate practices and policies is not going to be risk-free or pain-free.

So in short where we are now, because we neglected the basic machinery of democracy, is that we have turned what could have been a conversation into a fight. But it will be worth the fight if we can restore our democracy and start once again to keep our children safe.

Rich Gehrman

Executive Director, Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota

6/10/22