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# Masculinity, mental illness and guns: A lethal equation?

By Michael Kimmel, Special to CNN  
December 19, 2012 -- Updated 2113 GMT (0513 HKT)

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After the Newtown tragedy, sociologist Michael Kimmel asks what drives angry young men to mass murder.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Sociologist Michael Kimmel wonders why young men are targeting strangers for revenge

Other factors vary, he says, but shooters are almost always male and very often white

Kimmel contends that a culture of violence linked with masculinity fuels the events

**Editor's note:** Michael Kimmel is distinguished professor of sociology at SUNY Stony Brook. His new book "Angry White Men" will be published next year.

(CNN) -- For the past few days, Americans have been weeping together and wringing our hands once again at the senseless tragedy of a mass murder inside a school. The horrific scene in Newtown, Connecticut, is now seared permanently in our collective conscience, as we search for answers. We'll look at the photograph of Adam Lanza and ask over and over again how he could have come to such a deadly crossroads.

We still know nothing about his motives, only the devastating carnage he wrought. And yet we've already heard from experts who talk about mental illness, Asperger's syndrome, depression, and autism. The chorus of gun boosters has defensively chimed in about how gun control would not have prevented this.

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee offered the theory that since "we have systematically removed God from our schools, should we be so surprised that schools would become a place of carnage?" (As if those heathen children deserved it?)

Thinking twice about violent video games

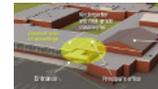
All the while, we continue to miss other crucial variables -- even though they are staring right back at us when we look at that photograph. Adam Lanza was a middle class white guy.

If the shooter were black and the school urban, we'd hear about the culture of poverty; about how inner-city life breeds crime and

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### Timeline: Tragedy unfolds



Details continue to emerge about what precisely happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Here is a timeline of events that compiles the latest reporting.

### Remembering the victims



An interactive tribute to the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

### NRA to speak on massacre

December 22, 2012 -- Updated 0012 GMT (0812 HKT)



After keeping relatively quiet for a week, the National Rifle Association will comment on the shooting.

### Parents defend right to keep guns in the home

December 21, 2012 -- Updated 1717 GMT (0117 HKT)



Growing up in Louisiana and Texas in the home of a part-time deputy sheriff, guns were a constant presence in Robin's childhood.

### First-responders recount initial chaos

December 19, 2012 -- Updated 1517 GMT (2317 HKT)

violence; perhaps even some theories about a purported tendency among blacks towards violence.

As we've seen in the past week, it's not only those living on the fringes of society who express anger through gun violence.

Yet the obvious fact that Lanza -- and nearly all the recent mass murderers who targeted non-work settings -- were middle class white boys seems to barely register. Look again at the pictures of Jared Lee Loughner (Tucson), James Eagan Holmes (Aurora) and Wade Michael Page (Oak Creek) -- a few of the mass killers of the past couple of years. (Yes, the case of Seung-Hui Cho, the perpetrator at Virginia Tech, the worst school shooting in our history, stands out as the exception. And worth discussing.)

[Opinion: Get serious about mental health care](#)

Why are angry young men setting out to kill entire crowds of strangers?

Motivations are hard to pin down, but gender is the single most obvious and intractable variable when it comes to violence in America. Men and boys are responsible for 95% of all violent crimes in this country. "Male criminal participation in serious crimes at any age greatly exceeds that of females, regardless of source of data, crime type, level of involvement, or measure of participation" is how the National Academy of Sciences summed up the extant research.

How does masculinity figure into this? From an early age, boys learn that violence is not only an acceptable form of conflict resolution, but one that is admired. However the belief that violence is an inherently male characteristic is a fallacy. Most boys don't carry weapons, and almost all don't kill: are they not boys? Boys learn it.

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They learn it from their fathers. 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.

In talking to more than 400 young men for my book, "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men," I heard over and over again what they learn about violence. They learn that if they are crossed, they have the manly obligation to fight back. They learn that they are entitled to feel like a real man, and that they have the right to annihilate anyone who challenges that sense of entitlement.

[Opinion: How a boy becomes a killer](#)

This sense of entitlement is part of the package deal of American manhood -- the culture that doesn't start the fight, as Margaret Mead pointed out in her analysis of American military history, but retaliates far out of proportion to the initial grievance. They learn that "aggrieved entitlement" is a legitimate justification for violent explosion.

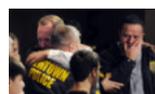
The easy availability of guns is another crucial variable. After the terrible [school shooting in Dunblane, Scotland](#), in 1996, Great Britain enacted several laws that effectively made owning handguns illegal in that country. The murder rate in the U.S. is more than three times higher than Britain.

And yes, 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. In 2011, more than 80% of all homicides among boys aged 15 to 19 were firearm related.

We need a conversation about gun control laws. And far more sweeping -- and necessary -- is a national meditation on how our ideals of manhood became so entangled with violence.

[In school shootings, patterns and warning signs](#)

It's also worth discussing why so many of these young mass murderers are white. Surely boys of color have that same need to



Amid the chaos that first-responder Ray Corbo witnessed on Friday, there is one image that he will never forget.

### Child shooting victims open up

December 20, 2012 -- Updated 1502 GMT (2302 HKT)



In many ways, Josh Stepakoff's childhood came to an abrupt halt at 10:49 a.m. on August 10, 1999.

### Teacher's boyfriend remembers his love

December 20, 2012 -- Updated 1440 GMT (2240 HKT)



When Lauren Rousseau's boyfriend wakes up, he can smell her perfume.

### Minutes of carnage, lifetime of grief

December 18, 2012 -- Updated 1537 GMT (2337 HKT)



Friday began with the mundane. A chilly December day, Christmas on many residents' minds.

### Teachers were heroes

December 18, 2012 -- Updated 1530 GMT (2330 HKT)



Placing yourself in the path of flying bullets to protect innocents. It's a job description fitting for a soldier or police officer, but not for a school teacher.

### Portrait of a grieving town

December 18, 2012 -- Updated 1519 GMT (2319 HKT)



Ken Henggeler poured his grief into the thing he loved most: carpentry.

### Killer's barber: His mom did the talking

December 19, 2012 -- Updated 1432 GMT (2232 HKT)



Bob Skuba is a whirl of energy. Outspoken, loud and opinionated, he's the embodiment of East Coast bravado.

### Grieving dad remembers daughter

December 17, 2012 -- Updated 1045 GMT (1845 HKT)



Robbie Parker has a message for the family of the gunman who killed his 6-year-old daughter and 19 of her school mates.

### What makes schools safer?

December 17, 2012 -- Updated 1949 GMT (0349 HKT)



Security experts predict what comes next: A strong reaction -- maybe an overreaction -- to school safety. And within months, it'll be back to cuttign security budgets.

### Help for victims

December 21, 2012 -- Updated 1646 GMT (0046 HKT)



Learn how to help the victims and families affected by the Connecticut school shooting tragedy.

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prove their masculinity, and a similar sense of entitlement to annihilate those who threaten it. Perhaps the only difference is that it seems to be nearly the exclusive province of white boys to so dramatically expand the range of their revenge and seek to destroy the entire world, not simply the person or group that committed the supposed offense. Perhaps. It's a conversation worth having.

I am not for a moment suggesting we substitute race or gender for the other proximate causes of this tragedy: lax gun laws, mental illness. I am arguing only that we can never fully understand it, unless we also add these elements to our equation. Without them, the story is entirely about him, the shooter. But the bigger story is also about us.

In the coming weeks, we'll learn more about Adam Lanza, his motives, his particular madness. We'll hear how he "snapped" or that he was seriously mentally ill. We'll try to explain it by setting him apart, by distancing him from the rest of us.

Risk factors among shooters

And we'll continue to miss the point. Not only are those children at Sandy Hook Elementary School our children. Adam Lanza is our child also. Of course, he was mad -- as were Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, and Seung-Hui Cho, Jared Lee Loughner, James Eagan Holmes, and Wade Michael Page -- and the ever-longer list of boys and young men who have exploded in a paroxysm of vengeful violence in recent years. In a sense, they weren't deviants, but over-conformists to norms of masculinity that prescribe violence as a solution. Like real men, they didn't just get mad, they got even. Until we transform that definition of manhood, this terrible equation of masculinity and violence will continue to produce such horrific sums.

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**Mike Knox** • 3 days ago

Wow. Talk about missing the point. Perhaps the point was intended, but masculinity is NOT the problem. In fact, if you look a little closer, a common thread in these middle class white boys is that they had a WOUNDED sense of masculinity. Healthy masculinity protects the innocent. If you vilify masculinity, this problem gets worse, not better.

436 👍 20 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



**Ben Hawkins** > Mike Knox • 3 days ago

This is true.

As we continue to strip out the kinds of education that males thrive on, and things like recess, boys continue to fall behind. At every single point between Kindergarten and any college degree (outside of STEM fields) boys are falling behind more and more every year. To the point that they're 10-20% behind in new college enrollments and drop out more than twice as often as girls.

Then society still expects them to succeed and score comfy jobs and cars, clothes, and an upwardly mobile career to accomplish anything with anyone, especially women.

Give it a Google. Boys are far behind girls at all levels of education and the problem is getting worse every year. We're facing college demographics of 80% female representation in the next few decades and nobody's asking what that means for things like the economy.

161 👍 6 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



**AlRussell** > Ben Hawkins • 3 days ago

The kinds of job skills increasingly in demand today are management abilities, business acumen, communication, social networking... Things women tend to excel at. Physical jobs are on the decline and don't pay enough to support a family anymore. The climate is changing faster than our biology is evolving. It's not a vast conspiracy to rob men of their masculinity. The world is just changing. Regardless, though I think this is a problem for a lot of men, I don't think it applies to this situation. These guys were not "manly" men trapped in a feminized world. If anything, they would have felt disparaged for NOT living up to the masculine ideal.

59 👍 14 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



**Matthew Garrison** > AlRussell • 3 days ago

Ridiculous! Throughout history the overwhelming majority of successful business builders, innovators, and intellectuals have been men. The idea that men can only outdo women at physical jobs flies in the face of readily observable reality. Men still dominate business and still dominate all professions that involve any kind of engineering skills. Those are among the most intellectually challenging jobs out there. Oil field jobs are out there, mining jobs are out there, my city is hiring numerous firefighters. If there is a problem facing men now, it is a lack of respect for what they contribute to society. It is the view that they are disposable and can be kicked out of their homes at will and are not needed by their families for anything but financial support. Men are not stupid, socially retarded, or handicapped in their ability to communicate, manage, or organize. Men have historically managed just about every single major work effort of historical importance, from building railroads and highways, developing all the machinery that the modern world runs on, and sending men to the moon.

129 👍 11 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



**Rachel Cole** > Matthew Garrison • 3 days ago

That is, in part, his point. As equality emerges between race and sex, there is less room for middle class white men to dominate our world. They are given the expectations to do this within a masculinity that is based on a time where white middle class men were dominant.



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