

Guys with Guns: Toxic Masculinity and America's Gun Violence

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For the better part of our recent and remembered history, America's gun violence – that is to say, its mass shootings and, for lack of a better term, massacres – has been witnessed at the hands of white men. One report indicates that since 1982, 94 mass shootings have been initiated by men; whereas, only two have been identified as initiated by women (Number of mass shootings in the United States between 1982 and February 2018, by shooter's gender, 2018). There is, undoubtedly, a plethora of explanations that may be called upon in an effort to discuss such a tragic statistic; however, considering cultural and social perceptions of masculinity, and its overwhelming presence in American daily life, there exists a necessity to explore the topic of “toxic masculinity” as it relates to the perpetuation of gun violence.

Without question, America has an extended and arguably dangerous manifestation of “violence as masculine” in its culture and history. Our culture has adages and expressions that further press this point— “defend the homeland,” etc. Even in modern times when women have begun to occupy military advertisements (though, this presence is exceptionally limited), masculinity is still set equal with imagery of military-styled men, fashioning semi-automatic firearms. Young boys are taught to “standup for themselves” and fight whenever necessary. I can recall instances of my childhood when boys would fight on the elementary playground, and explain it away through referencing “being a man” and defending yourself. We may certainly review this as a possible side effect of a home-life that was riddled with toxic masculinity and traditional imagery of “male characteristics” (i.e. hunting, militaristic activities, etc.). So, these types of actions – public displays of conceptualized masculinity – have been endorsed by father-figures and, indeed, a nation's content for patriarchy and “maleness.”

In this vein, the following question may be posited: “Does implementing gun control challenge masculinity in America?” If we begin to unpack this question and explore its nuances, we may further understand why this possible implementation threatens and terrifies middle-to-upper class cis white men; in essence, limiting their access to guns and, in turn, the production of gun violence, serves to limit their access to expressions of social and culture-informed masculinity which, in and of itself, is toxic.

Recently, an article in USA Today noted that “guns don't kill people; men and boys kill people” (Dastagir, 2018). This article further attributes such violence to a loss of “male dominance” in society. Though limited, women are receiving some forms of equality in society. The model of “men as breadwinners” is now shifting to be challenged by women as breadwinners, too. This challenge to the traditional model poses threats to the already fragile masculinity of cis-gendered white men. As a result, society watches as expressions of formulaic, arguably stereotypical male behaviors dominate news headlines—in some strange, quasi-defensible sense, they may view this type of violence as a demonstration of their role as “protector.”

The age-old question of “what, then, must we do?” once again finds new relevance in this setting. It is certainly true that not every man in possession of a gun is violent—yet, it is also true

that gender is a relevant, pivotal element of this concern, as well. Though it may be unpopular to hold such an opinion, I submit that a necessity to reevaluate and amend social values of masculinity exists in America. As a society, we must pressure for this change – and begin to demonstrate the fluidity of gender norms and roles within society. Too long have we lingered under the fallacy that gender norms and roles are firm and unyielding. Paralleling violence and masculinity is as futile as comparing cleaning and femininity—these are both social concepts that have inaugurated an era of shifting in recent times. In an effort to reduce such horror and violence as a result of toxic masculinity and gun culture, we must first start by transferring these misguided perceptions of masculinity from a toxic state to a state of health.