

New school shootings in US: social issues once again come to the fore

By Kate Randall
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Until two school shooting incidents last week, a relatively extended period of time had gone by—at least by American standards—without any reported deaths from violence perpetrated by students on school grounds. The last shooting to make national headlines occurred March 30, when a 17-year-old expelled student fatally shot a tenth grader in the parking lot of Lew Wallace High School in Gary, Indiana.

But last Wednesday, January 16, came the report that a failing student had shot to death three people at the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy, Virginia. Then on Friday, a young male student shot and killed his former girlfriend before killing himself at Broward Community College near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Earlier last week, on Tuesday, a student opened fire in a hallway at Martin Luther King Jr. High School in New York City, wounding two students; the apparent motive, a dispute about a girl.

Such violent incidents, tragically, are hardly a new phenomenon in America. The first multiple school shooting took place in March 1998 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, when two children, only 11 and 13 years old, fired at schoolmates and teachers, killing five and wounding fifteen. The most widely publicized incident took place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, when twelve students and one teacher were gunned down by two other students, who then turned the guns on themselves. There have also been numerous cases of shootings at workplaces, in neighborhoods and other public places.

The circumstances that apparently form the background to last week's episodes are all too familiar—poor grades, failed romances, serious personal or psychological problems. A characteristic shared by most of those responsible for such desperate actions is a deep sense of alienation and isolation. That young people in such numbers see no way out must have social significance.

The latest wave of shootings further gives the lie to the argument that “everything changed” on September 11. There is a profound continuity of events both at home and abroad. The conditions in America that, in the final analysis, drive people to extreme and anti-social actions have not gone away; indeed the economic and social difficulties have intensified in the past several months.

Beneath the surface of an America “United” in the war on terrorism, as it is portrayed in the media, simmer unresolved tensions, fueled by a deepening economic downturn. While the public is fed a daily diet in the print and broadcast media of patriotism and war-mongering, growing numbers of the population face deteriorating living conditions. Families are turned upside-down when hopes for new careers are dashed, jobs are lost or retirement savings are wiped out. Seeing these as purely individual problems, certain desperate individuals strike out violently.

More details are sure to be revealed about the circumstances leading up to last week's killings in Grundy, Virginia. But from what is known so far, Peter Odighizuwa appears to be such a severely disturbed individual who saw no way out of his dilemma. A 43-year-old naturalized citizen from Nigeria, “Peter O”, as he was known in Grundy, came to the small Virginian mining town from Chicago with his wife and four sons two years ago. Although he had earned an undergraduate degree in his native country, in Chicago he worked as a cab driver. After visiting the web site of the Appalachian School of Law (ASL) online, he decided to move his family to Grundy in hopes of becoming a lawyer.

The Odighizuwas struggled to make ends meet in their new town. Peter's wife, Abieyuwa, worked at the local hospital, but the family was forced to rely on charity from townspeople and Mrs. Odighizuwa's co-workers for food, clothing and other necessities. The family reportedly moved from apartment to apartment, unable to

keep up with rent payments. One of the shooting victims, L. Anthony Sutin, a dean at the law school, helped Odighizuwa get a car and a loan, according to school colleagues.

Dean Sutin gave Odighizuwa another chance when he flunked out in his first year at ASL. But when he received a notice of dismissal after failing again this year, Odighizuwa became increasingly distraught. Last Wednesday he arrived at the campus to protest his dismissal and demanded to see his grades. After a discussion about his academic standing with Professor Dale Reuben, he walked down the hall to Sutin's office and opened fire at close range with a semiautomatic handgun, killing the dean. He then fatally shot Professor Thomas F. Blackwell. He continued on to the school's lounge where he again opened fire, randomly hitting 33-year-old student Angela Denise Dales, who died later at the hospital. A group of students finally tackled and subdued him, as he kept repeating "I have nowhere to go. I have nowhere to go."

Odighizuwa apparently has serious psychological problems. As he was led into court for his arraignment last Thursday he told reporters: "I was sick, I was sick. I need help." Hiding his face behind his arrest warrant paper, he told the judge: "I was supposed to see my doctor. He was supposed to help me out.... I don't have my medication." Prosecutors charged him with three counts of capital murder, three counts of attempted murder and six charges for use of a firearm in a felony. He faces the death penalty if convicted.

Odighizuwa has been described by fellow students and Grundy residents as moody and abrasive, and although they were shocked by the shootings, many were not surprised that he was the assailant. One student commented: "He was somebody who would snap on you. He had an abrasive attitude. I thought he was going to hurt a student." A retired doctor who arrived on the scene said: "Everybody knows this guy. He is a walking time bomb." Odighizuwa is also facing charges for allegedly hitting his wife, who left him three months ago, taking the couple's four children with her.

The murders have shaken residents of this remote coal town of 1,100 in southwest Virginia. When the Appalachian School of Law opened five years ago, many thought it might breathe life into the depressed community. Coal production has steadily dropped off in the area over the past several decades, and the new school meant an influx of students into the area and sorely needed jobs. But with the new school population came

new problems, which exploded tragically onto the scene last week.

The recent wave of school shootings, along with other developments such as the Enron scandal, demonstrates that irrepressible social issues in the US are once again making themselves felt. Indeed they never went away. While reporting on such events has been somewhat downplayed by the media, taking a back seat to the war in Afghanistan and the "war on terrorism," incidents of school violence in the US since the terror attacks have included the following:

* On November 12, a 17-year old student in Caro, Michigan, a small farming town about 75 miles north of Detroit, smuggled guns into his high school, took two hostages and then killed himself.

* A 15-year-old student at Boston's English High School was spotted with a pistol tucked in his waistband on January 3 by a teacher. The boy ran from the building and was followed by the teacher and a school police officer to a subway station, where police arrested him.

* On January 11 at a high school in Raymond, Mississippi, a town 25 miles southwest of Jackson, a 17-year-old suspended student returned to school and held the principal and assistant principal at gunpoint for about three hours. He released the hostages unharmed after talking with police negotiators.

* In Massachusetts, an alleged plot by five students to carry out a mass shooting at New Bedford High School was foiled when other students came forward with knowledge of the plan. The five teenagers, some of whom say the plot was a hoax, face criminal charges of conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to commit assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, and possession of ammunition.

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