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From Where I Sit: A Cocktail for Violence

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A cocktail for violence

Campus lifestyles and easy access to guns can create the perfect storm, say Deborah D. Rogers and Howard P. Segal

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University of Texas engineering student Charles Whitman had no problem purchasing guns and ammunition even though several psychiatrists had diagnosed him as mentally ill. He would use the weapons to kill 14 people and wound 32 others in an attack from the university's tower in August 1966.

Fast-forward to another mass murder committed by a student, this time at Virginia Tech in 2007. Although he had been diagnosed with such severe mental problems that a court had ordered him to undergo psychiatric treatment, Seung-Hui Cho had no difficulty buying semi-automatic guns. Comparing himself to Jesus, he took these weapons to campus, where he killed 32 people and wounded 17 others before committing suicide.

Although the massacre at a cinema in Aurora, Colorado, in 2012 took place off campus, it is probably no coincidence that the gunman, James Holmes, was a 24-year-old graduate student at the University of Colorado. Even though he had admitted his fantasies about mass murder to a psychiatrist, he was able to buy

semi-automatic rifles at sporting goods stores and to purchase 6,000 rounds of ammunition online.

His lawyers acknowledged that he was “in the throes of a psychotic episode” during the bloodbath.

Less spectacular deadly shootings are increasingly common on US campuses. But perhaps we should not be surprised. The age of students, the campus lifestyle and easy access to guns all come together to create the perfect storm.

The age of onset of some severe psychiatric conditions is adolescence and early adulthood – the years typically spent at college. This is confirmed by the latest edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the *DSM-5*), the authoritative source for psychiatric diagnoses in the US. According to the *DSM-5*, especially for males, the psychotic features of schizophrenia start emerging in the late teens. The peak age of onset of initial full-blown psychotic episodes, which may include hallucinations, delusions, incoherence and chaotic behaviour, is the early to mid-twenties.

Bipolar disorder also typically emerges between the mid-teens and mid-twenties. Not the ideal time for those who are most vulnerable to leave the support of their family, friends and community to go to college.

University life may be especially conducive to mental illness since heavy drinking, partying, drugs, promiscuity and sleep deprivation are common. The turbulent behaviour of some students may be symptomatic of severe psychiatric disorders. Yet it is accepted – if not expected and encouraged – in permissive academic culture. In the “real world” and in the workplace, this conduct would be more readily recognised for what it is.

Pressure to do well academically and to fit in socially may also “trigger” mental illness. And “trigger” is surely the word, given Americans’ easy access to guns. Supported by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects the right of individuals “to keep and bear arms”, the gun culture contributes to the body count. Countries with restrictive access to guns see fewer incidents of campus violence.

Of course, universities are not the only American settings conducive to mass shootings. So many post office workers have killed colleagues that “going postal” is a slang term for flipping out. Perhaps we should coin another phrase for US campuses: “going academic”.

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<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/a-cocktail-for-violence/2012785.article>

