

# DAILY NEWS

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

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New York Daily News - April 22, 1999

## Small Towns Breed Teen Killers

It's no accident that a suburban high school in Colorado was the scene of a massacre two days ago.

After years of hearing about the dangers of big-city high schools, Americans are finally waking up to the fact that small-town and suburban schools with their manicured lawns and elaborate sports programs can be incubators for mass murderers.

Just look at the long list of small towns besides Littleton, Colo., that have seen school killings in a little more than two years: Springfield, Ore.; Fayetteville, Tenn.; Pomona, Calif.; Edinboro, Pa.; Jonesboro, Ark.; West Paducah, Ky.; Pearl, Miss., and Bethel, Alaska.

In small-town and suburban America, the high school, along with the shopping mall, is the center of social life for adolescents. There are rarely other venues for kids to hang out, to perform for their peers, to establish their reputations. For kids who cannot make it as athletes or scholars, suburbia has few routes to status and identity.

Urban communities are far more tolerant of marginal kids who cannot make it on the playing fields or in traditional classrooms. Weak students can succeed outside the school in the local neighborhood, on the playground and even in the underground world of music and nightclubs.

Furthermore, New York City teenagers aren't confined to the neighborhood high school. They can choose their public high schools, big and small, near or far from home. New Vision Schools, one of the city's educational successes, offers small high school alternatives for kids with unconventional interests and aspirations.

As Columbia University Prof. Jeffrey Fagan has observed, big cities offer adolescents a multitude of outlets to work through their painful and dangerous teen years.

And for the kids who cannot resist the lure of guns and trouble, big cities are far more active in trying to prevent crime than small-town sheriffs' departments.

For example, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes has been a pioneer in crime prevention and in getting guns off the street. Shortly after taking office, Hynes established a Guns for Sale program in which he used money confiscated from drug dealers to purchase guns from Brooklyn kids. More recently, Hynes established five centers in Brooklyn to help truants meet with social workers and work through their problems so that they can find their way back into school.

Another small-town versus big-city difference: It's hard to imagine how New York City teenagers could stockpile weapons without being detected by friends or family. Real estate is too valuable to be used for gun storage, and most apartment buildings are too crowded for a bomb-making laboratory.

Single-family suburban homes, with their spacious garages and empty attics, offer a rare combination of privacy and space that doesn't exist in urban neighborhoods. Plus, unlike big cities, in the political environment of small-town America, gun possession is not a punishable offense. No wonder the National Rifle Association is having its annual meeting in Denver next week.

Clearly, small-town and suburban high schools demonstrate that it is possible for a school to succeed educationally but to fail to recognize the mental health problems and criminal pathology that can breed in a sterile and socially stratified environment. Big-city schools have lots of problems, but we should be glad that that they don't dominate the everyday lives of urban teenagers.

Certainly, there was something profoundly wrong with the Colorado killers, but when Middle America public schools repeatedly are sites of mass murders, it's time to look more carefully at what has gone wrong with suburban culture.

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