The male factor

One element looms large in its absence from most media accounts of the problem of gun violence — the inescapable role that gender plays in American violence.

In my research of media coverage of crime, mass shootings and terrorism, I have written about the role that identity (particularly race and religion) plays in determining how violence is framed by the news media. An uncomfortable fact is that violence is an unambiguously gendered issue — according to the U.S. Department of Justice, men comprise nearly 90 percent of those who commit homicide.

A Bureau of Justice Statistics survey published in 2005 reported that men committed nearly 80 percent of non-fatal violent crimes against family. Almost all of those incarcerated for rape or sexual assault are male, and men are far less likely to be victims of sexual assault than women. (The Center for Disease Control estimates that nearly 1 in 5 women, compared to 1 in 71 men, report experiencing sexual assault in their lifetime.)

Mother Jones magazine has a running tally of 73 mass shootings in the United States since 1982, up to and including the one in San Bernardino. It focuses on public shootings that seemed to have an indiscriminate motive in a public place, generally by a lone shooter. Only three of the shooters involved were women.

Is it because men have an inherent biological predisposition toward violence? Or is it linked to cultural scripts about masculinity? In other words, is it nature, or nurture?

Cross-cultural analysis of rates of violence in similarly developed nations rules out the former explanation. America has exponentially higher rates than any other developed nation of almost every kind of gun violence (about 20 times the average for other countries), from suicides to mass shootings. And while men consistently commit more violent crimes globally than women in the aggregate, in few developed countries is the gendered disparity in violence as pronounced as it is in the U.S.

I believe this statistical disparity comes down to two factors. First, a destructive American cultural climate that teaches men and boys, from the youngest ages, to suppress displays of emotion, avoid sensitivity/empathy, and to eschew anything coded as “feminine.” Many studies show that this narrow and destructive vision of masculinity is explicitly and implicitly linked to violence and aggression.

Second, a unique American environment of extraordinarily lax gun legislation, coupled with the highest per-capita rate of gun ownership in the world, magnifies and exacerbates these issues. When guns are cheap, plentiful and easily accessible, violent masculine crime is magnified.

As a scholar and as a mother of three sons, I believe it’s crucial to examine these unspoken cultural assumptions about what it means to be a “man” in the U.S. — and to encourage boys and men to reach beyond the limiting and dangerous rhetoric of hegemonic American masculinity.

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