

## ***YOUNG ADULT SHOOTINGS: A FAITH COMMUNITY RESPONSE***

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Answers to questions raised by the tragic July 2012 Cinema Shooting in Aurora, Colorado, by a student drop-out, need to look well beyond condemnation of senseless incidents of random violence, the need for gun control and explanations of why bad things happen to good people. We extend our sympathy to victims and the families of victims. One cannot fully comprehend such horrific loss.

There is a connection between several horrible shootings that have occurred. Young adults have committed mass shootings in Arizona, at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, and several other settings. Each of these involved a shooter who was a mentally ill young adult, who either was a college student or recent drop out at the time of killing. This article focuses on shifts occurring in college settings and what a faith community can do to respond. We seek to understand the cultural context in which shootings are increasing.

In this global culture, young adults are in trouble. Taking action and making changes are appropriate responses. As an 18 year veteran of campus ministry, I implore faith communities to see the bigger picture of what is happening to our young adults and what we can do to make a difference. Faith community actions and a coordinated response of our nation to the pressures faced by young adults are now imperative.

No one can bring back life as we used to know it or magically take away the benchmark that determined life before and after the cinema shooting event. We can hope that in the future, times will be better, especially for our young people. This document explores what is happening for them and how people of faith can help.

### ***Young Adults on Campuses Caught in a Sea of Change***

Gigantic changes are sweeping across our university campuses with students who are experiencing losses, pressures, and mental illness in epidemic proportions. The general public has not yet caught on to the repercussions and the impact that societal changes are making.

1. ***Cutbacks to services related to college and universities because of economic downturn.*** With larger classes it is hard for teachers to know students personally. Counseling and other helping services have been cut. Not only are budgets being cut but the numbers that counselors are having to see are in many cases doubled from what it was in the 90s. A student needing immediate help may not get it. Typically when students show signs of trouble, they fall below radar and people are too busy to help. People who need services and don't have the means need advocates and bridges for their recovery.

2. ***Students are experiencing more episodes and symptoms of mental illness.*** This is the fastest growing demographic group on campus. One in four students experience depression to the point of not being able to get out of bed.<sup>1</sup> Students need more knowledge of mental health awareness. Parents and responsible adults need to have more face to face time with students.
3. ***Competition is greater.*** Students are under increasing pressure to perform. There is more competition for admission to programs. With human knowledge exploding exponentially, cultural changes mean that from the time students enter elementary school, they experience stress and pressure to learn and perform. More people are going to university and college than ever before. With the cutback of services and more students on campus, mental health issues are going unnoticed. Constant threat of not performing wears on mental and emotional health. Students experience anxiety. Without support to help a student put competition in perspective, anxiety increases and inhibits healthy choices.
4. ***College students are suffering in the bad economy.*** Students are having a hard time paying increasing university costs that provide fewer services. For students that come from an economic disadvantage, extreme hardship forces students to make decisions that increase risk. Students may choose between eating or paying for gas. Some face a choice between paying tuition and living out of their car, or keeping their room, giving up their dreams of getting out of poverty, and dropping out of school. Those who are the first in their family to be in college may have to cope by themselves if there is no family member or friend who understands the pressures and changes they face.
5. ***Crucial mental health issues emerge during young adult years.*** Some mental health conditions don't show up in earlier years but become evident with young adults. Some mental health illnesses don't emerge until young adult years.

Young adults may begin to experience personality changes and not be self-aware or want to tell their parents. Some don't want to see a counselor for fear of being stereotyped or because they worry that mental health issues will prevent them from being successful in school or in their careers. In another scenario, young adults may be put on helpful medicines and then decide that, by putting mind over matter, they can quit taking medications and handle problems themselves. Isolated and without sympathetic and understanding adults around, young adults may not take care of themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kadison, M.D. and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005),1.

6. ***Concern for liability gets in the way of helping students who drastically need immediate help.*** Students who show signs of mental illness may exhibit bizarre behavior. A responsible student may begin staying up at night, not study, or may not pay their housing bill. The college acts to protect its financial interests. The school may drop the student from classes or from a program and let them go. The student is considered an adult, and the school gives out no information, even to parents, because of privacy laws. Parents or family members may not know what has happened or that anything has changed. Many times students undergoing these changes don't have the resources or the mental capabilities to call home or find help. Without anyone even being aware of what has happened, this problem now belongs to the community.
7. ***Privacy laws must be updated.*** With fresh awareness of human development, young adults, and how mental illness emerges among young adults, our schools, prisons, and community institutions need to provide services to help with diagnosis, intervention, and support. Sometimes it takes a team of resource people to put the picture together to update a diagnosis or to provide services for young adults.
8. ***Young adult factors that break down student development.*** Alcohol and drug use is an epidemic on university campuses. Students are pressured to binge drink and to take drugs that can lead to psychotic breaks. Sexual experience, sexual abuse, and rape are prevalent. These issues have side effects that can interfere with maturation and development. Student services and education about these issues outside the classroom need to be provided even in a budget slashing economy.

Students are at a higher risk when they have minimal economic resources, busy self-absorbed parents, feel isolated, or have ethnic or cultural issues with the college culture. Each semester female students have the highest risk of being sexually assaulted in the first six weeks. Bullying occurs in residential living quarters and in student programming. Young adults still need supervision, confidentiality, and opportunities to move past their problems without being shamed.

9. ***Students feel alone.*** Isolation is a huge detrimental issue for young adults, even if they are surrounded by young adults, and technology may be a contributing factor. Enormous numbers of students are communicating with each other via internet but not through ordinary social interaction. Warning signs of distress are missed. More and more students are not taking time for in-depth personal relationships and checking in with those who care. Since there is never enough time to do all the required study and work, much less reflecting on and discovering oneself, the social part of life gets narrowed. Even sex has been separated from truly taking the time to know the other person. Emotional health frays in isolation.

10. ***With increasing mental health problems and economic pressures, irrational, risky, and harmful behavior increases.***

Many adults know that young adults think that they won't die, even if they undertake risky behaviors. Fewer adults are aware that the second leading cause of death among young adults is suicide. So as pressures increase, whether young adults feel shame, failure, disappointment in themselves, or abuse at the hands of others, they become vulnerable. Young adults may become more impulsive, fearful, or out of balance. When the emotions snap, so can behaviors.

***This is an opportunity for faith communities to wake up and learn about young adults!*** Faith communities can step up to help. When we understand our campus ministries and young adult ministries alongside the needs of young adults, it makes little sense to cut back and more sense to expand this vital mission outreach.

Do we really understand young adults? Do we understand the sources of their pain and anger? Most young adults need the decade of their twenties to mature. Half of all college students are not able to find employment in their field when they graduate. If they do, they are likely to have seven different jobs over their career and not be covered by job-related health insurance or pension benefits. Our young people are having a hard time finding ways of coping. Coping helps with anxiety, stress, relationship building, and happiness. When one is at a loss to be able to cope, all other things seem dismal.

Young adults may be sexually experienced but impoverished when it comes to dealing with conflict or building relationships based on common value systems. Young adults today know little about cooking and good nutrition. Due to obesity and stress, most will not live as long as their parents. Young adults may tend to associate religion with attending boring church services, but many are hungry for spiritual development and eager for opportunities to participate in community service. They may not be asking questions about religious dogmas or rituals and what it means to orient their life in relationship to God, but many are asking about the meaning of war, how to put together part time jobs to make meaningful work, and how to pay off their debts.

***How can we help young adults?***

Because there are few young people in church, church leaders forget to think about them, their concerns and needs. Yet when our culture gets into trouble and people can't find recourse, they want to turn to religious places for help. Prayers in worship can be oriented to address the concerns, pains, fears, sorrows and needs of young people who are inundated with experiences of

loss. Young adult life milestones can be celebrated. Young adult leaders can be welcomed even when they initiate changes.

Congregations with few financial resources can learn how to use inexpensive forms of digital communication. They can build relationships by doing things together with young adults and by enabling young adults to meet other like-minded young adults.

***It is essential for members of faith communities to build relationships with young people.*** This will involve moving beyond ordinary cultural habits and economic comfort zones to be present in new ways in new places. Young adults may be more comfortable in a coffee shop than a sanctuary. They may be speaking different languages and living or working with people who are strangers to a congregation. Pressure, shame, and judgment put up barriers to mentoring and relationships. For young adults, relationships are important. God works through relationships.

Faith communities have an opportunity to build relational communities where young people can feel that they belong and where they can participate in rituals that shape, guide, and provide routine and discipline for one's life. It is routine that helps a young adult know where to go when something traumatic happens.

Faith communities can aid and support young adults who are questioning their identity. Who am I? Why am I here? What good can I do for the community and the world? ***It takes a community of relationships to raise a young adult.***

***Five things that faith communities can do for congregational living for those who are experiencing mental health issues:***

1. Work through sacred texts that present mental health as culturally taboo. Lift up mental health issues and help those realize that mental health is like any other health issue.
2. Build communities with your young adults. Even if they are away, stay connected. Drop notes, gift cards, and cards to remind them of their importance to you and your care for them.
3. Engage in worship experiences that involve awareness, healing, or prayers for those that have mental health struggles. Remind each other that we all are a part of the faith community.
4. Bring experts in the field and have discussions about mental health concerns. The more people know, the more helpful they can be.
5. Young people need to know that no matter what they are loved. All people need to know and be given opportunity to be in community.

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