

Republican Perspective

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It Won't Be an Easy Fix

In late December 2017, an unarmed man was shot dead in the doorway of his Wichita home by police. There had been a 911 call from a man claiming to have shot and killed his father. The caller claimed he was holding a gun on his mother and sister, and had doused the house with gasoline.

The call had been made by a man in Los Angeles, allegedly because of a dispute with a Wichita resident over a video game. It was a hoax call, designed to send a SWAT team to the home of his video-gaming opponent as a prank. He got the address wrong, and the police arrived instead at a neighboring home where they killed the homeowner---who they thought had murdered his father and was about to torch the house with his mother and sister inside.

I had never before heard the term “swatting,” which means to make a hoax call for emergency services (police, fire, SWAT) to harass the resident at an address where there is no emergency. It has become common enough that in 2008 the FBI labeled it “swatting.”

Swatting is emblematic of behaviors which have arisen in the past couple of decades and which are particularly cruel, often random, often anonymous, and show a shocking disregard for the lives or dignity of others. Here are some examples.

Laser attacks which seek to temporarily blind airline pilots on takeoff or landing. On one day in 2009 a dozen planes were attacked at Sea-Tac Airport.

Freeway overpass attacks, where bricks or large rocks are dropped onto windshields of cars below.

Sniper attacks on multiple randomly chosen victims---the D.C. sniper in 2002; Ohio in 2003; West Virginia also 2003; and Phoenix 2015.

Disruption of military funerals by Westboro Baptist Church, ongoing since 2005.

The Knockout Game, in which an unsuspecting stranger is sucker-punched. A nearby accomplice of the assailant films the assault and the video appears on the internet. This seems to have started in 2009.

Bumfights, in which teenagers goad homeless people into fighting or performing stunts for cash or alcohol. There is a series of videos, starting in 2002.

There are other examples. But what do these behaviors tell us?

These behaviors are characterized by cruelty, randomness, or disregard for the personal worth of others. Such attacks appear to have become more prevalent. They have certainly become more brazen. In fact, filming your anti-social behavior for all to see seems like the very definition of brazen.

Masses of teenagers invade a commuter train to assault and rob the passengers. Or they invade and loot a high-end store or even an entire mall. I'll bet they didn't do that when you were a kid.

The source of these behavioral changes may originate in the disintegration of family structure, or in chaotic and dysfunctional schools, or in the steadily waning number of Americans who regularly attend church. In addition, the military draft provided a great civilizer of young men---but the draft is an institution now half a century gone from American life.

Regardless of the root cause or group of causes, these behaviors point to a societal change that will be very difficult to correct.