

Does 'Damaged Masculinity' Explain the Surge in Gun Sales?

A couple of weeks ago, on the 17-year anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, the *Washington Post* [ran a headline](#): "Damaged masculinity' may help explain Columbine and other mass shootings."

The article, written by Michael Rosenwald, posited that the ostracized-loner persona of the attackers was essentially a fiction created by ringleader Eric Harris that was embraced by the media.

Rosenwald interviewed Peter Langman, a psychologist who studies school shootings, who argued Harris created the persona to hide a more tender, complex, and complicated side.

[Via the Post](#):

[Langman] calls it "damaged masculinity" and he thinks it is overlooked not just in the Columbine case but in many other mass shootings – an important observation considering that most mass shooters are male.

Harris was born with a birth defect in his leg. He also had a chest deformity that required surgeries just before high school. He had a noticeable, sunken chest. His hopes to follow his father into the military – to be a tough guy, a Marine – were likely to be unrealized.

Guns, he reasoned, could give him power and control.

"I am (expletive) armed," he wrote in his journal. "I feel more confident, stronger, more Godlike."

The paradigm, Langman points out, also fits Elliot Rodger, the “kissless virgin” who killed six people near the University of California-Santa Barbara. Rodger wrote about the inadequacy he felt when he compared himself to other young men his age who were going to parties and kissing girls. So he bought a Glock.

“After I picked up the handgun, I brought it back to my room and felt a new sense of power. I was now armed,” he wrote. “Who’s the alpha male now, bitches?”

Now, this thesis does not mean people who purchase or own guns are suffering from some kind of inferiority complex. (Disclosure: I own several guns and even fire them on occasion.) Langman’s comments are confined to a very narrow range of people.

The comments of these shooters bear scrutiny, however. For several years now we’ve been hearing about [the surge](#) in guns sales. Take a look at the graph below, [via the National Shooting Sports Foundation](#), which illustrates the growth of the gun industry since 2008.



Many things, of course, likely are responsible for the sharp growth in gun sales, including growing fears (rational or otherwise) [of impending disaster](#).

It’s worth pointing out, however, that this surge corresponds with a growing angst among white Americans, a class of people evidence suggests is [increasingly feeling ignored](#).

This group makes up at least a segment of what columnist Peggy Noon has [described as “the unprotected”](#) class.

There are the protected and the unprotected. The protected make public policy. The unprotected live in it. The unprotected are starting to push back, powerfully. The

protected are the accomplished, the secure, the successful—those who have power or access to it. They are protected from much of the roughness of the world. More to the point, they are protected from the world they have created.

Is this—call it what you will, “damaged masculinity,” the feeling of losing power or control—what is spurring gun sales? A feeling of anxiousness? A feeling of being unprotected and unheard?

Anyone who has fired a weapon knows it feels, well, *good*—and yes, *empowering*.

So I ask: Are Americans buying guns at a historic clip so they can feel powerful and in control again? Or is there some other prominent social change that better explains this rise?

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[Jon Miltimore](#) is the Senior Editor of [Intellectual Takeout](#).

He is the former Senior Editor of *The History Channel Magazine* and a former Managing Editor at Scout Media.

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