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Rage in America: Why is this Happening?

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Rage in America has become commonplace. Mass killings are now an everyday occurrence: During 2022, there were 647 mass shootings (in each, at least four victims were killed).<sup>1</sup> This means that mass murders have been occurring in our country during the past year at an average rate of nearly *two a day*. Many of these killings take place in schools, some in churches, others in shopping malls, stores, and post offices, others in hospitals or in businesses—wherever groups of people are likely to be found. At the same time, the U.S. rate of homicides (in which one to three victims are killed) recently reached its highest peak since the 1990s.

Road rage, too, has now become common and pervasive. Airline rage occurs daily. Inner-city shootings have become so frequent, cities find it hard to track their numbers. The incidence of hate crimes has skyrocketed, as have violent incidents of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. America has become so venomously politically divided, political rage, too, is now widespread. All of these expressions of rage take the form of violent and destructive behavior that often leaves innocent victims dead or injured and others traumatized.

Many Americans do not realize that the extreme incidence and prevalence of rage-driven aggression and destructiveness in the United States is without parallel in any other industrialized country in the world. At the present time, mass killings alone are occurring in this country at a rate some *seven times greater* than in any other high income country (Fowler et al. 2021, 1).

This is, and should be, a disturbing picture. The situation we face in America calls for an explanation why this is happening.

Most of us have become numb to the frequency of these expressions of intense anger and frustration, uncontrollable resentment and the decision to lash out. We simply watch and feel we can do nothing as these emotions snowball and accumulate in intensity until they take the form of raw, open, and violent rage.

Why is this happening? And why is this happening on such a wide scale, so frequently, so often involving innocent people, and, time and again, young children?

As a species, we have an almost unlimited capacity to become used to things, and we have become habituated to the bad news—that today, once again, children are killed at a school, bystanders at a celebration are bombed or run over, drivers exchange blows or bullets, airline passengers attack one another or the flight crew, and even the police upon whom we depend to prevent these things are targeted and shot. Politicians whose views some people hate are hounded, threatened with violence, and some are attacked, badly injured, or killed.

But there has been almost complete silence in answer to the question “Why is this happening?” Should we be surprised and disappointed by our utter failure to understand what is going on?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>, accessed 01/20/2023.

On the one hand, silence succeeds in answering that question just by leaving it behind, by ignoring and dismissing it, by resigning ourselves with a sigh, “this is just the way things are now,” and we shake our heads in sad dismay. On the other hand, however, as long as we have no clear answer, we’re unable to learn what we need in order to help us intelligently confront and reduce the continuing outpouring of rage.

In spite of increasingly frequent outbreaks of anger, violence, and murder, have we systematically studied *why* individual perpetrators feel as they do—and from this information have we reached any generally applicable conclusions? We may sometimes learn a few personal details about their lives, disappointments, and circumstances which may have raised that person’s level of anger until he or she lashed out in violence. But the information that we get is always local, individual, and situational. We fail to come to terms with what is happening on a large scale. We still have no comprehensive understanding why this is occurring.

I have studied human behavior and its underlying psychology for more than half a century. During this time, I have reluctantly been forced to recognize strong and deeply rooted reasons why “the bigger picture” of our species so often eludes and is even avoided by the majority of people. Very often it’s because of the beliefs people *prefer to have*. The beliefs they want and choose to believe *limit* what they’re *willing* to think, consider, or accept.<sup>2</sup> And nearly everybody is like this. It’s a rare person who does not have a set of closely guarded cherished beliefs, and an even rarer person who is able to step back from his or her preferred beliefs, put them emotionally at arm’s length, and consider things with an unprejudiced mind, without selective prejudice.

I mention these limitations that come from our allegiance to our preferred beliefs for a reason. The reason is that a great many people will not *like* the answer to the question, “Why has rage become so common—and not only in America, but in other countries as well?”

Unfortunately, for many people the answer will not be likable. But sometimes—if we’re to solve the problem of widespread enraged behavior—we need to summon the resolve and self-control to get over whether we *like* a particular answer to a troubling question.

### **We May Not *Want* to Know Why Rage is Happening**

Elsewhere, I’ve directed attention to what I call “*one-way concepts*” (Bartlett 2022). These are concepts that we—proud human species that we are—apply to “lower animals,” but refuse to apply to ourselves. An example of such a one-way concept is parasitism. Parasites, we prefer to think, are all non-human. We believe that species which damage or kill their hosts must always belong to species other than ours. We don’t reflect and ask whether our own species is also a real parasite, whether it has attained the role of a parasite on a global scale, an invasive species that widely and indiscriminately injures and destroys other species in order to sustain itself and multiply. To be willing to apply the concept of parasitism in this way is to be willing to break free from the unquestioned constraint which we place on that one-way concept.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see the author’s “The Human Refusal to Look in the Mirror,” Bartlett (2022).

In a parallel unexamined way, we prefer to believe that psychologically normal people do not lash out in uncontrolled anger, hatred, and violence. We would *like* to believe that perpetrators of mass murder are mentally ill. We therefore engage in *psychoticizing* them. However, with only very few exceptions, the great majority of perpetrators of mass killings do not receive court judgments that found that their behavior occurred “by reason of insanity.” Most are not psychotics; most are psychologically normal people.

Little known to general readers is the similar fact that, thanks to careful and detailed psychiatric studies of Nazi war criminals, we know that the great majority were psychologically normal.

We know that psychologically normal people will, when circumstances are right, obey their leaders and inflict great suffering and loss of life on innocent people.<sup>3</sup> They will also, when they’re sufficiently stressed, lash out in rage and violence. As we shall see, much of the explanation for the epidemic of rage derives from the *kind* of stress they feel.

Psychologically normal people are not only capable of cruelty, aggression, and the killing of others, but they are most often the perpetrators. We need to recognize this reality about psychologically normal human beings, otherwise we find ourselves insisting that the beliefs we hold dear—that psychologically normal people are good, decent, and incapable of harming other innocent people—*must be true*, even though we now have more than ample evidence that this is false. (Readers who need to be convinced will find a massive amount of confirming evidence collected and evaluated from a wide range of disciplines in my book, *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil* (Bartlett 2005).)

So far I’ve mentioned exclusionary one-way concepts and our widespread uncritical acceptance of psychological normality as a standard of good mental health. As we shall see, together these have a central role in explaining America’s continuing epidemic of rage.

### **Recent Fundamental Changes in Human Psychology**

The past 100 years have brought changes to human life on a magnitude that human beings have never in their evolutionary history experienced before. Of the many changes, the increase in the world’s population has been one of the most dramatic. In 1930, the world population was about 2 billion. But by 2011, the human population passed 7 billion, and recently, in just slightly more than a decade, it passed 8 billion.

This extremely rapid rate of increase has brought with it numerous changes that affect the daily lives of the billions of people who now share this planet. The effects of the tremendous increase in the human population have led directly to the global climate crisis we now face, to the extinction already of hundreds of thousands of other species on a devastating scale not seen since our species evolved, the pollution of the air, rivers, and oceans, the destruction of forests, the depletion of natural resources including drinking water and the marine population, and many more. These are changes on a worldwide scale whose effects

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<sup>3</sup> See Bartlett (2005; 2011).

are accelerating and are increasingly being felt directly, dramatically, and painfully by more and more people, as well as by other animals, plants, and microorganisms.

In their daily lives, people experience the effects of the exploding population in very concrete and personal ways. But just how people feel and react to these effects is at present insufficiently understood in terms of their psychological and social consequences. Many of the changes that people experience on a daily basis are very consciously recognized: increased traffic and commuting times; longer lines; lengthier waiting periods for medical and other services; difficulties in finding primary care physicians and accessing medical treatment; increased costs, competition, and scarcities relating to housing, food, products, and drinking water; more densely packed airlines accompanied by travel delays; noise pollution and light pollution at night; acute stress due to the COVID pandemic, whose virulence and spread our population density and ease of travel have exacerbated;<sup>4</sup> and this list is of course far from complete.

But much less conscious for most of us are the effects of the rapid population increase that influence how we feel about ourselves, how we situate our sense of individual value and worth in a world that is filled more and more with others who also sense, equally indirectly and often without explicit awareness, that the individual person has become little more now than a mere one out of thousands upon millions of others.

We need to recognize and assess these less explicitly recognized changes that have come about as a result of the population tsunami that has overtaken us. To do this, I ask readers to consider evidence drawn from non-human animal studies. For this purpose, we need to counter our deeply entrenched proud ways of thinking that prefer to be *exclusionary*, that *exempt* human beings from the application of much that we've learned about the consequences of overpopulation in other animals.

### **Crowding and Animal Behavior**

Beginning early in the mid-1940s, animal researchers began to study and recognize the effects of crowding on animals. Since then, a multitude of careful scientific studies has taken place. The accumulated evidence they have provided has confirmed that crowding due to overpopulation has severe and often lethal effects on a very wide variety of animals, plants, as well as microorganisms. We can learn from these results, if we are willing.

Numerous species of non-human forms of life, whether they are larger animals and plants or microscopic life forms, are subject to what amounts to built-in forms of self-regulation that serve to control their populations. Such self-regulation when crowding occurs may be active, as when members of a species intentionally kill fellow members, often their young and sick, or it may be passive, as when crowding leads to a precipitous decline in an organism's reproduction, or when resource scarcity severely culls or kills off a population, or when the

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<sup>4</sup> A recent tendency of popular culture has been to attribute America's incidents of violent rage to pandemic-based frustration. However, evidence of the U.S. epidemic of rage in its many forms was already unmistakable many years before COVID-19. Earlier mass killings include Las Vegas Strip and Sutherland Springs, TX (both 2017), Sandy Hook Elementary School, CT (2012), Killen, TX (1991), Oklahoma City (1995), University of Texas (1966), and many others.

size and density of a population pave the way for epidemics of disease and the multiplication of disease variants.

It is worth lingering for a moment on two of the earliest studies of the effects of population density, undertaken by ethologist John B. Calhoun and pathologist-neuroscientist Hudson Hoagland. Their pioneering papers from more than 60 years ago remain relevant: Calhoun published “Population Density and Social Pathology” in 1962, and two years later Hoagland published “Cybernetics of Population Control.” Calhoun’s work became famous around the world for his studies of the pathological effects of crowding among rats. Hoagland recognized the applicability of Calhoun’s studies to the human species, anticipated the crisis of human population growth, and as a result became a major contributor to human birth control research.

Calhoun found that overcrowding produces what he called “*acute stress syndrome*,” a group of psychological and behavioral symptoms that result from heightened activity of the pituitary adrenal system, responsible for the release of hormones when an organism experiences stress. When colonies of rats become crowded, pathological changes in their behavior occur. Among these, Calhoun observed two phenomena that will especially concern us: greatly increased violence among the males and the development of what he called a “*behavioral sink*.”

A behavioral sink forms when the density of a population reaches a point that animals begin to crowd closely together in uncharacteristically large groups. “Eating and other biological activities were ... transformed into social activities in which *the principal satisfaction was interaction with other rats*” (Calhoun 1962, 139, emphasis added). This “*pathological togetherness*” (139) disrupts the animals’ normal patterns of life, exacerbating violence, sexual deviation, and cannibalism among the males, and interfering with the reproductive behavior of females and the adequate care of the young with consequent high infant mortality.

A behavioral sink, in other words, comes about when crowding—and this is surely paradoxical— itself leads to a pronounced need for *increased social togetherness and social interaction* from which the animals derive their main gratifications; this urge for group-togetherness then leads to such social pathological consequences as increased violence and withdrawal of proper care of the young. Calhoun concluded that “... a behavioral sink does act to aggravate all forms of pathology that can be found within a group”(144).

Hudson Hoagland recognized the importance of Calhoun’s research in demonstrating that “serious pathology in a society” occurs as a result of overcrowding (Hoagland 1964, 5). He noted that the killing of *young* members of a species happens frequently among crowded mammals, no matter whether they are rodents, lions, fish, spiders, crabs, or the larvae of many insects. “*In all cases experimentally investigated, the mortality is found to be dependent on population density and to cease below a certain critical population density*” (6, original italics). He also recognized that many overpopulated species engage in migration when they face dwindling resources (5).

Hoagland was not barred by exclusionist human preferences and so was able to recognize

that these results apply equally to our own species. In acknowledging the applicability of animal studies to the human species, he was not optimistic:

What about man? What can we do about the world population explosion? We could, of course, do nothing and just wait for the stress syndrome or a new virus to do its work.... We can leave the “solution” to some trigger-happy dictator with a suitable stockpile of nuclear weapons, or perhaps we can finally decide on an optimal population for the world and, by education and social pressure, try to see that it is not exceeded (6).

The application of Calhoun’s work to humanity very soon was sidelined and ignored in the face of the insistence by the majority of researchers as well as by the public that we should limit ourselves to optimistic forecasts. Unfortunately, the psychology of human hope shows us that it very often blinds us to reality and stands in the way of effective problem-solving (see Bartlett 2005; 2022).

### **The Human Non-Response to Population Warnings**

In the 1960s, at the time that Calhoun and Hoagland published their research, alarm bells were already beginning to sound over the human “population explosion.” The reality and some of the disastrous consequences of a future enormous human population that would result from the addition of many billions of people were anticipated based on evidence and careful projections; the data attracted the attention of many concerned scientists and was then much in the news. The 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s influential book, *Silent Spring*, was then beginning to influence global environmental concerns. This period of the 60s was immediately followed by the warnings expressed in the 1972 study, *The Limits to Growth*, which pointed to limitations of exponential human reproduction in relation to finite resources.

It was then but a simple step to connect these together and foresee the likely devastating ecological consequences of the growing human mass and its worldwide invasion of ecosystems and the destruction of the organisms that inhabit them.

These twin concerns—first, the urgent need to recognize and limit accelerating human population growth and to recognize the constraints imposed by physical reality, and second, our species’ predictable *ecological pathology*<sup>5</sup>—then were optimistically swept, by most researchers as well as by the public, under the carpet, ignored, and dismissed for many decades.

Three of the principal authors of *The Limits to Growth*, in their 2004 updated book, commented:

It is a sad fact that humanity has largely squandered the past 30 years in futile debates and well-intentioned, but halfhearted, responses to the global ecological challenge. We do not have another 30 years to dither. Much will have to change if the ongoing overshoot is not to be followed by collapse during the twenty-first century (Meadows, Randers, and Meadows 2004, xii).

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<sup>5</sup> On what I have called “human ecological pathology,” see Bartlett (2005; 2006).

The authors sought, in 1972 and then again 32 years later, to throw cold water in our faces to wake us up to the anticipatable crisis resulting from our ballooning population. But their efforts have continued to have little effect in the two decades that have passed since their re-issued warning.

What I have elsewhere called “the human refusal to look in the mirror” (Bartlett 2022) has come to dominate and constrict the scope of concern of both scientific research and public awareness. Uncritical optimism over humanity’s bright future, coupled with controlling economic interests and the Catholic Church’s pro-reproduction mantra, have effectively silenced the population warnings, and the years have gone on passing without the implementation of intelligent planning measures that had the potential to make a significant difference.

*The undeniably strong connection between our expanding human population, on the one hand, and climate change and the worldwide destruction of biodiversity, on the other, continues today to be almost totally ignored. Exclusionary emphasis is placed on the urgency of immediate damage control in the face of the impending crisis due to global warming.*

*The essential, fundamental role of our species’ huge and ecologically invasive population is ignored and seldom even mentioned in discussions of climate change. And yet global warming and habitat and biodiversity destruction are the very evident direct consequences of the size and spread of the human population.*

Moreover, as we shall see, the psychological and social consequences of our already massive human population—consequences that specifically take the form of rage—have been completely ignored.

What the past five decades show us is that concerns over the crushing collective weight of the human population have been pushed from our attention and concern. It is no wonder that we remain unaware of its effects on individual and social psychology, a subject to which we now turn.

### **The Psychological Complexities of Crowding**

The solution of a complex problem seldom yields to a simple solution. Human beings are, as most of us believe, a great deal more psychologically complex than non-human animals. Our individual psychologies are complex, our social psychology is complex, the world we have created has an interwoven and interactive dynamic of a complexity that has yet even to be adequately modeled from a purely mathematical standpoint. Human psychological consequences of crowding can therefore be expected to be a good deal more difficult to identify and understand than those of non-human animals.<sup>6</sup> But despite the added layers and

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<sup>6</sup> A note to readers who have an interest in epistemology: Whenever in this paper I refer to the “results” or “consequences” of population crowding, I do not have in view a conventional notion of causality, but rather what I have elsewhere called “functional dependencies.” For a detailed analysis of commonly used causal notions and the need to replace them with an understanding of functional relations, see Bartlett (2021: Chap. 23, esp. 23.3, and *passim*).



dimensions of complexity, there are evident applicable parallels which the responses of other species to population crowding make clear.

I have already mentioned a few of the experienced effects of the increased human population that people find immediately noticeable and stressful:

1. Changes that people experience very consciously on a daily basis, among them:

Increased traffic, commuting time, longer lines, increased waiting times in ER and urgent care, decreased availability of medical and other services, increased competition for housing and goods, multiple forms of scarcity, travel congestion, increased pollution in its many forms, and, in the past several years, the numerous stressful consequences of the COVID pandemic, whose spread was spurred by the ease of travel and interaction of our existing billions.

2. Effects of crowding that greatly influence how we feel about ourselves, effects upon the individual's sense of personal worth within a population of many billions.

In addition to these factors, the early results of animal research by Calhoun and others have yet to form part of our general understanding of the psychological and social effects of our population, which since his time has nearly tripled. A number of these results have not been appreciated for the light they throw on the phenomenon of human rage which concerns us here.

3. The propensity of people when subjected to conditions of crowding to feel a powerful urge for "togetherness."

*This group response*—increasingly observed as the human population has doubled and then doubled again over the course of only a single lifetime—*has not previously been understood as a reaction to the magnitude of our population increase.* But a clear human correlate of the "behavioral sink" observed by Calhoun is to be found in the pronounced need and indeed hunger for increased social togetherness and social interaction sought especially by young people throughout the world, as we'll see in more detail. Moreover, and in much the same way, it is not difficult to recognize how the pathological drive for group togetherness itself supports and fosters an inward-focused politics of populism.

Calhoun called the intensified group clustering of people "*pathological togetherness*" because it disrupts an organism's routine and healthy functioning: In human beings, it brings about a misplaced emphasis and pathologically restricted attention and concern for what other group members think of the individual, what they say about one another, how many people "like" or "follow" the individual—who then judges and rates his or her own personal worth in these terms. Heightened psychological sensitivity to the opinions and evaluations of others becomes tantamount.

4. Behavioral, emotional, and ideological conformity are implicitly and subtly encouraged and also actively promoted, while failures to conform are punished.

Individuals and members of their groups are urged by group pressure to conform to the expectations, interests, values, and tastes of the group in which the individual seeks for the group's validation. Children especially copy one another's behavior, but this is true of adults as well. Pathological togetherness leads directly to conformity and resulting copy-cat behavior.

5. Many people have a need and strong urge to stand out from the crowd, to be recognized by one's favored group as an individual who is special in some way.

American society enshrines celebrity and notoriety, and our media are complicit in giving mass killings and other incidents of violence front-page prominence in the news. The publicity this offers is a pathological route sought after in particular by many enraged young people hungry for group recognition.

In efforts to compensate for a sense of individual devaluation in the midst of our growing human mass, many people, especially the young, have gravitated to social media in which the number of their "followers" gets tallied and the number of "likes" their postings receive is scored. We see a parallel phenomenon in their older counterparts in science and higher education who obsess over the "impact factors" that quantify the popularity of their scientific and scholarly publications, which then are often automatically equated with their importance. The emotional mania of tallying such personal and professional "merit points" has become endemic and destructive.<sup>7</sup>

6. The pathological urge for the comfort and validation of togetherness in valued groups brings with it attendant stress and anxiety.

We increasingly see confirmation of this in the rising incidence of depression and anxiety among the young, and in the rate of suicide among teens, which is often linked to online bullying.

7. Increased violent behavior, especially among young males, but not limited to them.

Evidence of this increasing violence is strong and inescapable: We see it on many fronts, ranging from unmanageable violent conduct in schools, physical and cyber-bullying, school and other mass killings, racial and ethnic attacks and murder, inner-city shootings, violent demonstrations, rioting, destruction of public and private property, and the many other displays of rage.

8. The young especially are targeted in mass shootings in schools.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this mania, see Bartlett (2018).

Here, the lessons learned from crowding among non-human animals are especially relevant, for it is the regular and widespread behavior among other species under conditions of crowding for the young to be killed, and often cannibalized.

9. As has been observed repeatedly in animal populations, increased population density and ease of interaction among members provide the ideal growth medium for the transmission and epidemic spread of disease.

As we have witnessed with the acute stress from the global COVID pandemic, frustrated and enraged behavior is often the result.

10. Increased migration pressures to escape from conditions that result from high population densities, including resource scarcity, lack of educational and job opportunities, economic impoverishment, ethnic and religious persecution, etc.

Here again we recognize the same consequence of crowding that is observed in animal studies: When overpopulated species confront a deteriorating ecosystem, they are often driven to migrate. As human population overgrowth occurs in many parts of the world, migration pressures and acute stress build, impelling more and more people to migrate to other countries, where their growing numbers, in turn, then produce further population stress and its consequence in the form of rage.

These ten categories of emotional response and behavior have their unmistakable common denominator in the human population explosion, in the multiple dimensions and forms of crowding which the human population increase has led to, many of which do not consist purely in overt physical crowding.

Unlike Calhoun's rat observations, what we see in this human-focused view are psychological and social manifestations of and responses to forms of crowding that are complex, interrelated, and seldom recognized because most are not purely instances of physical crowding.

It is important to emphasize this point: The psychology that has led to rage in America as well as in other countries is not a simple and direct expression of mere *physical* crowding; to believe this would be to overlook both the intricacy and the subtle dynamics of the psychological and social consequences of our present massive population.

### **Violent Rage in America: Why Here More than Elsewhere?**

The United States has come to be an extreme outlier among the countries of the world when judged by this country's astronomical incidence and prevalence of mass killings coupled with violence of other kinds. We need to take note of specific factors *other than crowding* that have added their weight to place America at the top of societies experiencing mass killings and violent behavior. Here are some of those other specific factors:

American society has *given permission to violence* and made it easily possible for people to obtain guns to carry it out. This has happened in part because of America's comparatively recent frontier gun-based history, in part because the government has assured Americans of their constitutional right to own guns, in part because Americans continue to embrace violence in their favorite forms of entertainment, and, most recently, in part because many Americans accept and approve of the violent policies and behavior of leaders they admire and choose.

In addition, family life in this country has taken a major hit, thanks in great part to the psychological consequences of the "behavioral sink" offered by social media and the promotion of the social addiction of pathological togetherness, coupled with the resulting bowing to conformity among the young. Family life, good parenting, and mentally healthy conditions for raising a family have all deteriorated as the young gravitate away from their families to seek acceptance and validation from their peers, and as parents attempt to cope with the changed demands, challenges, and frustrations due to population increase. More is involved in the failure of American family life than can be included here. But, in parallel with non-human animals who experience crowding, care of the young suffers severely.

Other countries today are unfortunately also experiencing an explosive increase in violent behavior. But not even close to the scale seen in the United States. Nonetheless, most of the populated-based psychological stressors described in the preceding section apply to other countries. And *all have a common denominator in the extremely rapid increase in the human population.*

The specific factors that lead the U.S. to stand out in its degree of violence, when judged principally by this country's incidence of mass killings, are relatively few in number. To recap, they include: a long national history that has accepted gun violence, laws that protect gun ownership and easy access to gun purchases, a society-wide celebrity esteem for those who successfully settle conflicts by violent means, the entertainment preference of American audiences for violent films, video games, and music, and the respect and admiration many Americans have come to bestow on those political leaders who represent aggressive, confrontational, no-nonsense, for-this-country-alone-above-all-others policies.

### **What this Explanation of Rage in America is and What it is Not**

I've written this paper for several reasons:

First, because I am gravely concerned about the extreme frequency and severity of violent behavior that is occurring especially in this country.

Second, because it is shocking that there does not exist a public outcry for a comprehensive understanding of why this country is so badly afflicted with violence of all kinds, more than any other industrialized country in the world. This sad state of ignorance about our country's crisis of violence, and our willingness to ignore that ignorance, is unacceptable and needs to be remedied.

Third, I'm convinced there is an important place for *competent individual clinical judgment* when we face questions like the one considered in this paper. A century ago, it would have been

unnecessary to explain what individual clinical judgment means, but today it has become necessary: Clinical judgment in the traditional sense in which I intend it is an expression of a clinician's reflective, critical judgment based on years of training, experience, careful observation, and a reflective assessment of diagnostic judgments which that individual has reached in his or her past experience.

Individual clinical judgment in this sense was long relied upon in medicine, and there it referred to the essential ability of a clinician to diagnose medical disorders. Clinical judgment in this meaning has very largely been superseded by diagnostic algorithms applied to laboratory test data. The individual clinician now depends primarily and often wholly on these, and because of that dependency, has come to consider his or her individual clinical judgment in its traditional sense to no longer be reliable or entirely respectable due to the fallibility of individual judgment.

In this paper, I use the term 'clinical' in the conventional sense as it applies to clinical psychology in which the cognitive processes and behavior of individuals are studied through observation and sometimes by experimentation. Most clinical work in psychology focuses on individuals, and there it combines diagnosis with treatment designed to result in improvements of some kind. Social psychology similarly is often observation-based with a focus on diagnosing social-psychological problems, and is sometimes undertaken in ways that can identify treatments or interventions capable of leading to desired changes.

In both contexts, 'clinical judgment' is the appropriate term to use because in both contexts there is a need for a clinician's individual judgment based on observations that are capable of identifying a valid diagnosis that can lead to the recommendation of effective remedies.

To be sure, individual judgment is fallible. And equally sure it is that objective laboratory test findings, when processed by mainstream, widely validated, and accepted diagnostic algorithms, remove a significant weight of personal responsibility as well as legal liability from the shoulders of the individual clinician.

Perhaps unfortunately (and perhaps not), not all diagnostic questions can be answered by recourse to laboratory or experimental findings, and not for all questions do there exist recipe-book-algorithms designed to answer them. An important place remains for individual clinical judgment when there is no other way forward. This is the case with the complex and far-reaching question considered in this paper, "Why is there so much rage in America (and in the rest of the world)?"

Given the absence of laboratory and experimental results and validated diagnostic algorithms that apply to society-wide outbreaks of rage, a question of this kind requires a clinical ability to synthesize observations, judge relevance, and recognize patterns where such patterns have been missed by others, patterns that often have been overlooked, overshadowed, or dismissed because they don't satisfy what other researchers prefer to believe, or because they conflict with interests in which others are emotionally or financially invested.

There are still relatively few researchers in this now immensely populated world of ours who combine many decades of experience and observation about our species' psychological and conceptual propensities to engage in aggressive and destructive thought and behavior. Such

researchers still form a fairly small group, among whom I am but one. Psychological, social, and cognitive observations, and the conclusions I have drawn from these form the basis for the clinical judgment expressed here. The diagnostic judgment involved belongs to the study of individual and social psychology.

The answer to the question which I've given in this paper is intended to be only partial, for there are other relevant factors a short publication of this kind is forced to exclude. And like many explanations based on evidence, it is important to recognize that fundamentally the answer I have given expresses a hypothesis, one which can be confirmed or disconfirmed by observing whether future increases or decreases in the psychological and social conditions of crowding are correlated with increases or decreases in America's rage. To accomplish this will clearly require the passage of a good deal of time.

For the present, we are forced to rely on the standard provided by the *cogency* of a diagnostic explanation: specifically, whether it successfully connects the dots, whether it offers us a clear, unified understanding we did not have before, and whether it provides us with intelligent guidance for our future behavior.

As I commented earlier, not everyone is open to—or even wishes to have—an understanding of “the big picture.” I am acutely aware of the willfulness and even recalcitrance on the part of many of those whose beliefs are challenged, who will then reject and repudiate results that are incompatible with their preferred beliefs. It is principally to those comparatively few who are capable of questioning what they like to believe, and to those who have already come to recognize some of the fundamental facts I've reviewed, that this paper is addressed.

### **To Summarize this Explanation of Rage in America**

The enormous and exceedingly rapid multiplication of the human population during the past century has worldwide psychological consequences due to the interplay of multiple factors. An explanation of rage in America involves many of these as well as additional conditions that are specific and unique to this country. Taken together, the following is what we have learned to explain the many forms of rage we are experiencing in the United States:

- The majority of enraged perpetrators of violence in this country are psychologically normal; they are not psychotic or diagnosably mentally ill.
- Their violence is a psychological and behavioral consequence of little-recognized conditions of crowding brought about by the massive increase in the human population during the past century.
- These directly as well as indirectly felt conditions of crowding lead to acute stress that can take the form of anxiety, depression, aggression against others or against the self through suicide, and outpourings of rage.

- The conditions of population crowding result in social pathologies that impel the young to seek out pathological togetherness and personal validation by their groups.
- Our society gives preeminent attention to celebrity and notoriety, while our media are complicit in providing mass killers with front-page recognition. Among young people who are emotionally starved for group attention, some seek out this pathological route to be noticed and validated.
- The overwhelming emotional need for the approval by the group is magnified by obsession with the electronic technologies which have come to dominate and control the individual's attention, time, interest, and concern, and which very efficiently and swiftly link together group members.
- Immersion in electronic media through which the needs of pathological togetherness can be met leads to increased conformity to the expectations, interests, values, and tastes of the group in which the individual seeks for group validation.
- The present huge size of the closely interconnected human population encourages the epidemic spread of disease, which often brings with it frustration and enraged behavior.
- The immense expansion of the world's population is increasingly leading in many areas of the world to resource scarcity and lack of opportunities, while often exacerbating discriminatory persecution of ethnic and religious groups; these conditions also produce acute stress that lead to rage, and increasingly drive people to attempt to migrate to countries they believe offer more favorable conditions.
- In the United States, as we have seen, psychological, social, and political conditions specific to this country have been set in place that support and encourage violence, often through the use of guns, thanks to this country's gun-based legacy; these are conditions that lower the social and political barriers to the uninhibited discharge and outpouring of rage.

## The Takeaway

Despite concentrated attention which 50 years ago was drawn both to the predictable results of human population growth and to its devastating ecological consequences, the *central role* of unconstrained human reproduction has played virtually no place in the recent frenzy of too-long-delayed discussions and efforts to effect environmental and climate damage control. Instead, what we see are actions which have been set in motion only when the immediacy of pain of a long-anticipated crisis is actually upon us.

The *fundamental and key role* of our massive and invasive population in producing the climate crisis is a topic *systematically avoided* by even most climate scientists, as well as by politicians

and the public. *The topic has become taboo*: It disturbs what most of us *want* to believe and are *unwilling* to question. We would rather ignore it. “The world was made for the human race: Simply be fruitful and multiply.”

The existence of this taboo makes it all-the-more-difficult for us to recognize that the *present* human population size is *already* so massive that the syndrome of acute stress due to varied and complex psychological and physical conditions of crowding is leading to the many virulent outbreaks of rage mentioned in this paper.

The explanation of rage in America offered here is the expression of individual clinical judgment. If that judgment is correct, as the size of the human population continues to increase—and even should its growth rate level off, as some hope—it is to be expected that acute population stress will increase, and along with it, so also should we expect continued outpourings of rage.

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