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JOSEPH PERKINS ✓

# Fingers pointing in the wrong direction

Andy Williams spent his Wednesday afternoon in a San Diego County courtroom. The 15-year-old was charged with gunning down two of his classmates at Santana High School and wounding 13 others.

"Why?" asked the teachers who taught him, the police who arrested him, the prosecutors who charged him, and the media horde that covered him.

Jeff Cody spent his Wednesday evening at Dave & Busters, a national "food and entertainment" chain that just opened a San Diego location. It's quite popular with virtual-reality and video game junkies.

So 11-year-old Jeff spent a matter of hours with ersatz weaponry in his hands, gunning down human targets on really cool video games. Like Sega's "L.A. Machine Gun," in which the president of the United States is subject to an armed assault. And Konami's "Silent Scope," in which the player is transmogrified into a sniper.

Between games, the fifth grader pondered whether exposure to violent video games might contribute to school shootings, such as the one up the road at Santana High. "Maybe a little," he responded.

Meanwhile, the "search for answers" in the Santana High shootings continues. Is the boy the product of a dysfunctional family? Does he have a history of mental illness? Is there a substance abuse problem? Was he tired of being bullied?

So far, none of these possibilities has panned out.

His single, divorced dad had not physically abused him or sexually molested him or anything like that. The ninth grader wasn't seeing a shrink, hadn't been previously diagnosed with any mental problems. He wasn't drug or alcohol addled at the time of the shooting. And he had no beef with the kids he randomly shot.

So the school-shootings "experts" have settled on the usual culprit — the gun.

If only there were not so many guns in this country. If only guns were not so easily acquired by kids. If only gun-owning parents kept their weapons locked up. If only there were more gun-control laws.

Well, yes, there are a lot of guns in this country, somewhere between 200 million and 250 million. But Americans have been armed to the teeth since the nation's very Founding. Yet the rash of underage gun

violence, particularly on school campuses, is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Yes, there have been national surveys suggesting that more than half of middle school and high school students know how and where to purchase a firearm.

But most licensed gun dealers are law-abiding business folk, contrary to prevailing myth. If a minor tried to buy a gun from them or tried to get them to commit an obvious felony, they would toss him out on his underaged ear.

No, the accused reportedly "borrowed" his dad's gun, locked away in a cabinet. Apparently, he was determined to get the weapon, locked up or not. And a trigger lock probably would have been no more of a deterrent.

It is hard to imagine any new gun control law that would have prevented the carnage at Santana High. For the problem is not the gun; it is America's culture of violence.

Indeed, America's youth are inured to violence through saturation exposure to violence-laden video games — such as those at Dave & Busters — and movies and television and music.

Before the average American child finishes elementary school, he or she will view 100,000 acts of violence on television, including 8,000 murders.

Then, when they become old enough to go to the movies by

themselves, they are exposed to even more violence. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission issued a report last year finding that movie studios "routinely undercut their own rating restrictions by targeting [the] marketing [of] violent films . . . to young audiences."

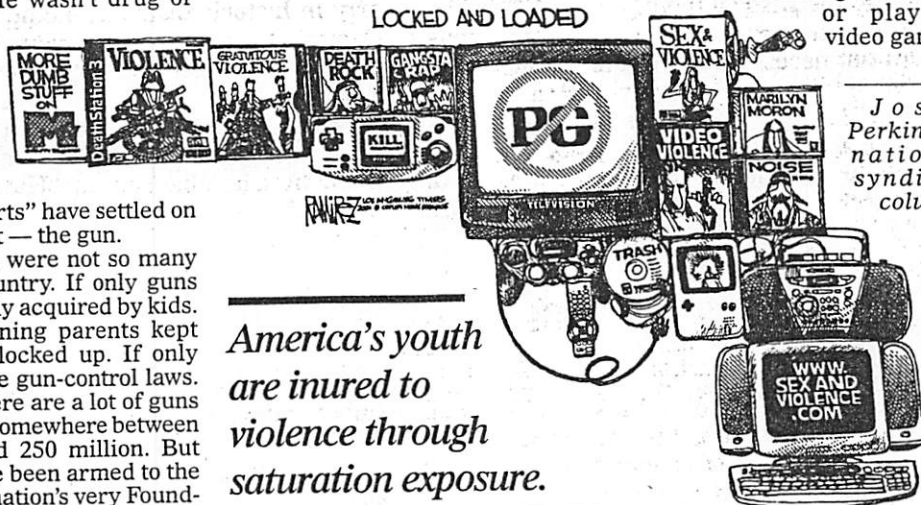
The music industry is no different. When kids go to Wherehouse or Tower Records, they see in-store promotions — sponsored by record companies — for the latest CDs featuring hard core, violence-glorifying lyrics. Record execs insist they behave responsibly because they affix parental warning labels on their violent product.

But parents don't really know what their kids are listening to. And record companies know it. Because parents may hear a cleaned-up version of a certain artist's music on the radio and feel comfortable allowing their youngsters to purchase the artist's CD. But the music store sells the kid the uncensored CD — unbeknownst to their parents — violent lyrics intact.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand how, according to police, the accused shooter could show no obvious signs of being distraught, disturbed or under great emotional stress after blowing away his classmates.

Violence came as naturally to the teen-age shooter as grooving to his Walkman, catching a movie, checking out the tube, or playing a video game.

Joseph Perkins is a nationally syndicated columnist.



*America's youth are inured to violence through saturation exposure.*