

Barbara Kay: Revisiting the many massive failures of Parkland, one year later

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Last week, mourners and supporters commemorated the first anniversary of a school massacre, especially horrific even by American standards. On Feb. 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz, a former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., wielding an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, murdered 14 students and three staff members during 11 minutes of unchecked havoc. Florida was quick to enact its first significant gun restrictions in many years. The minimum age to buy firearms was raised to 21 from 18, and a three-day wait period was imposed. Would these measures have stopped Cruz? (--image--)

A photo of Meadow Pollack, one of 17 victims in the Feb. 14, 2018, massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, is displayed at a memorial in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 17, 2018.

Gerald Herbert/AP

Meadow Pollack, 18, was one of Cruz's victims. In a January interview with the Wall Street Journal's Tunku Varadarajan, Meadow's father, Andrew, a former rental-market realtor, now a full-time activist, explained why such legislation probably wouldn't have stopped the rampage. Pollack puts half the blame for the carnage on Cruz — he can't bring himself to utter the killer's name, so refers to him with his prison number: 18-1958 — and half on systemic "political correctness" that facilitated dereliction of duty in several gatekeeping institutions tasked with public safety. He sees the primary villain as Robert Runcie, superintendent of Broward County's public schools since 2011. Runcie initiated a program called Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support and Education (Promise). Under Promise, students are assessed exclusively within their schools — that is, no reporting to police — even when dealing with such felonies as drug dealing, sexual assault and bringing weapons to school. (--image--)

Andrew Pollack, centre, father of Parkland massacre victim Meadow Pollack, speaks at a news conference with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, left, on Feb. 13, 2019, in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. DeSantis has ordered a statewide investigation of school safety.

Wilfredo Lee/AP

Runcie took inspiration for Promise from president Barack Obama's concern over the disparity in referrals to police by race. In 2014 Obama issued directives to school boards across the nation to adopt Promise-like guidelines or risk losing federal funding (the policy was later rescinded by President Donald Trump). With no reporting, the school's data looked great. But, since high-risk students had no criminal records, they could legally buy guns. Under Promise, violent students were not expelled; rather, amongst other remedial in-house strategies, they could attend "healing circles." In his forthcoming book, Pollack writes: "His entire life, 18-1958 was practically screaming, 'if you ignore me, I could become a mass murderer.'" His entire life, 18-1958 was practically screaming, 'if you ignore me, I could become a mass murderer.' (--image--)

The litany of Cruz's anti-social behaviours facilitated by this policy makes painful reading. In middle school Cruz had to be supervised at all times to prevent violent outbursts. He carved swastikas into his desk. He threw hard objects at other students, injuring some. He brought to school and flaunted dead animals. He threatened to shoot up the school (read that again slowly). He wrote "KILL" in his notebooks and rambled on about guns. He brought knives to school, and once, a backpack full of bullets. The school forbade him thenceforth to wear a backpack. Pollack reasonably asks, "If he's too dangerous to wear a backpack, why isn't he too dangerous to be in class with kids like my daughter?" Broward law

enforcement was equally delusional. Sheriff Scott Israel (subsequently removed from office) also wanted to reduce juvenile arrests, so permitted Cruz to maintain a clean record, even though deputies were called to his home 45 times during Cruz's middle and high school years. (What could the magic number have been to start a record?) One of those calls was placed because "he'd punched his mother so hard in the mouth that she'd needed to get a new set of teeth."(--image--)

Nikolas Cruz is escorted into a courtroom for a status hearing at the Broward Courthouse in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Jan. 16, 2019. His case has yet to go to trial.

John McCall/South Florida Sun-Sentinel/AP

Who else to blame? How about Henderson Behavioral Health, Broward's mental-health provider. They allowed Cruz to "earn" a pellet gun for good behaviour, which he subsequently used to shoot at neighbourhood children and pets. In spite of his mother's pleadings, Henderson would not institutionalize Cruz. As he got older, she called them desperately, repeatedly, but according to their records, they only suggested he be engaged in "coping skills such as reading magazines, watching TV, fishing and spending time with pets." Pollack has sued them for wrongful death. In spite of his mother's pleadings, Henderson would not institutionalize Cruz (--image--)

(--image--)

Pollack has also sued Scot Peterson, the armed deputy who kept himself safe behind a pillar for 45 minutes instead of entering the school. (FBI stats indicate "shooters either give up or kill themselves when confronted with a weapon.") Pollack sees Peterson's inaction as the very embodiment of the forces that failed his daughter. Peterson's lawyer moved to dismiss the lawsuit on the grounds that Peterson "didn't have the duty" to try to save the kids. An incredulous judge ruled the lawsuit could proceed. Peterson retired with a \$100,000 annual pension. Pollack told Varadarajan, "Parkland was the most avoidable mass shooting in American history. 18-1958 was never going to be a model citizen, but it truly took a village to raise him into a school shooter." Pollack had never been political before; now he's an activist warmly embraced by the president, and millions of others. His message is simple: too much political correctness and progressive approaches to handling severe mental illness can be fatal. That message is resonating — and no wonder. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](#) Barbara Kay: The euthanasia slippery slope is here Barbara Kay: A joke is all in the delivery (do you hear me, son?) Barbara Kay: Svend Robinson's return set to boost Israel hate in the NDP