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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The American Way

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Pittsburgh

Late in the afternoon on Good Friday, in a cold, steady rain, a gray-haired 60-year-old woman sat shivering and praying on a stone step outside of 1016 Fairfield St., which is where the terrible shooting had occurred. She read from a prayer book and from time to time would take a drag on a soggy Newport cigarette. A candle flickered beside her as she prayed.

Police officers in a squad car a half-block away were keeping a close eye on the woman and the house with the boarded-up windows behind her.

Reluctant to talk at first, the woman eventually whispered, “I’m the grandmother of the kid that killed those cops.” She said her name was Catherine Scott and that she was praying for her grandson, Richard Poplawski, who is 22 and being held in the Allegheny County Jail, and for the three officers he is accused of gunning down: Stephen Mayhle, who was 29; Paul Sciallo II, 37; and Eric Kelly, 41.

The officers were killed a week and a half ago as they responded to a disturbance at the house. Police said they were met there by Poplawski, who was wearing a bulletproof vest and was armed with a variety of weapons, including an AK-47 assault rifle.

“My grandson did a terrible thing,” said Ms. Scott. “There is no mercy for what he did.”

Mercy or not, there is no end to the trauma and heartbreak caused by these horrifying, blood-drenched eruptions of gun violence, which are as common to the American scene as changes in the weather.

On the same day that the three Pittsburgh cops were murdered, a 34-year-old man in Graham, Wash., James Harrison, shot his five children to death and then killed himself. The children were identified by police as Maxine, 16, Samantha, 14, Jamie, 11, Heather, 8, and James, 7.

Just a day earlier, a man in Binghamton, N.Y., invaded a civic association and shot 17 people, 13 of them fatally, and then killed himself. On April 7, three days after the shootings in Pittsburgh and Graham, Wash., a man with a handgun in Priceville, Ala., murdered his wife, their 16-year-old daughter, his sister, and his sister’s 11-year-old son, before killing himself.

More? There’s always more. Four police officers in Oakland, Calif. — Dan Sakai, 35, Mark Dunakin, 40, John Hege, 41, and Ervin Romans, 43 — were shot to death last month by a 27-year-old parolee who was then shot to death by the police.

This is the American way. Since Sept. 11, 2001, when the country's attention understandably turned to terrorism, nearly 120,000 Americans have been killed in nonterror homicides, most of them committed with guns. Think about it — 120,000 dead. That's nearly 25 times the number of Americans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For the most part, we pay no attention to this relentless carnage. The idea of doing something meaningful about the insane number of guns in circulation is a nonstarter. So what if eight kids are shot to death every day in America. So what if someone is killed by a gun every 17 minutes.

The goal of the National Rifle Association and a host of so-called conservative lawmakers is to get ever more guns into the hands of ever more people. Texas is one of a number of states considering bills to allow concealed guns on college campuses.

Supporters argue, among other things, that it will enable students and professors to defend themselves against mass murderers, like the deranged gunman who killed 32 people at Virginia Tech two years ago.

They'd like guns to be as ubiquitous as laptops or cellphones. One Texas lawmaker referred to unarmed people on campuses as "sitting ducks."

The police department in Pittsburgh has been convulsed with grief over the loss of the three officers. Hardened detectives walked around with stunned looks on their faces and tears in their eyes.

"They all had families," said Detective Antonio Ciummo, a father of four. "It's hard to describe the kind of pain their families are going through. And the rest of our families. They're upset. They're sad. They're scared. They know it could happen to anyone."

The front page of The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review carried a large photo of Officer Mayhle's sad and frightened 6-year-old daughter, Jennifer. She was clutching a rose and a teddy bear in a police officer's uniform. There was also a photo of Officer Kelly's widow, Marena, her eyes looking skyward, as if searching.

Murderous gunfire claims many more victims than those who are actually felled by the bullets. But all the expressions of horror at the violence and pity for the dead and those who loved them ring hollow in a society that is neither mature nor civilized enough to do anything about it.

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