

Growing up too soon

Juvenile offenders should not be tried as adults



LORI ROBISON is a senior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

The murderer said he was sorry. He said he didn't mean to kill those five people on that fateful day in Arkansas. He pleaded with his father to take him home. He cried for his mother to come and rescue him from the consequences of his actions.

Surely, he knew this could not be. Surely, even a mentally imbalanced killer realizes the futility of crying to his parents in the hope that they can unlock the jail cell doors and welcome him back to Mom's baked apple pie.

Surely, he guessed that it would be a long, long time before he would ever be free again.

But the killer's statements betrayed the depth of the naiveté lodged firmly in his 13-year-old brain.

This wasn't a case of shoplifting or spray painting graffiti on walls. Mitchell Johnson and his accomplice Andrew Golden weren't sitting in this locked facility because they got caught passing notes in class. This was the big time.

This was, if you'll excuse the term, REALITY, the kind you can't switch channels on or take a break from to refill your popcorn box.

And they certainly seemed, at first glance, to have understood the gravity of what they were planning to do that day in Jonesboro, Ark.

Classmates would recall Johnson saying he had "a lot of killing to do" and was upset about being jilted by a girl at school.

The two boys had enough presence of mind to lure their victims out into an open ambush with a false fire alarm. They had the wherewithal to have a getaway vehicle gassed up and ready to go, packed with pistols and rifles and hundreds of rounds of ammunition, according to the town's police.

And now, we want justice. Justice for the little girls whose lives ended so brutally that day. Justice for the teacher who used her body as a shield to protect a child from the gunfire raining down on them. Justice for the 10 wounded.

And justice, as well, perhaps, for making us all feel a little less secure in an already insecure world.

I'm not going to bother you with a tirade on how stricter gun control would have prevented the tragedy in Arkansas.

Nor will I bother trying to reason out how a stricter law on the books in Nebraska "may" have resulted in the sixth grader at Rousseau Elementary in Lincoln NOT having access to a gun and getting suspended last week for carrying it into school.

I won't do that because, at the heart of it all, more gun regulations and stricter laws won't save this nation's young people from the insanity of late 20th century reality.

A reality that glorifies, even capitalizes on, violence — on television, in movies, magazines and music.

A reality that builds up "in-your-face" heroes who aren't held responsible for their actions at the same level as the rest of us. A reality that has succeeded in permeating the minds of 8-year-olds so extensively that many are now obsessively aware of such non-childlike concerns as a few grams of body fat.

In this real world, a new computer game joined the ranks last week of countless others in trying to outdo the

body count — with glazed-eyed players assuming roles of "gangstas" and "super bitches" to commit various felonies on their way up the mob ladder.

Players must hijack cars, shoot and drive over cops, engage in pimping and drug smuggling, murder and rob banks. The game has an adult rating, but the dissipation of the line between tragedy and entertainment continues, as does the shock value of such images, and our kids know it.

In this real world, a 13-year-old in Fairfax, Va., was convicted in late March of attempting to run a prostitution ring at Langston Hughes Middle School.

He told police last week he was known as "Mr. Pimp" by some of his classmates. The girls paid \$10 each to be a part of his sex club. At least one

Now, it is a fact that this man's job is to paint a human face on his client and that Johnson should be afraid. And it also may be a fact that many find it difficult to feel any semblance of compassion for this child or his accomplice for deeds that, at best, can only be described as "twisted" at worst, "evil."

And in response, many politicians and community leaders have risen to the sad occasion in Arkansas with promises to lower the ages young offenders can be prosecuted for adult crimes, as if it were the very lack of such legislation that resulted in this terrible crime.

In the last six years, almost all states have lowered adult ages for crimes and expanded the types of crimes that could send a kid to an adult prison. The ages for adult criminal status range from state to state with 22 allowing adult

old adult and to the same consequences?

I defy parents anywhere to declare that their 11- or 13-year-old is an adult. After all, as much as some in the political and judicial systems would hate to admit it, these are kids. They are not little versions of adults, with adult ways of viewing the world and weighing choices, even though they may think they are.

And how young do we take this adult legal status? At what point do we stop throwing these children away to the lost cause of our so-called adult "rehabilitation" system and the quick but ineffective fix of getting them off the streets for a few years while they learn to be better criminals — at age 10? How about 8?

Why have a separation of status at all (some states are already contemplat-

deep-down psychological problem presents itself. These weren't individuals who turned bad after years of abuse and negative outlooks. These were kids with a twisted sense of reality.

These boys didn't commit their horrible crimes simply because they knew they were too young to be tried as adults. The thought may or may not have crept into their minds, but they didn't point these guns at their classmates and take their lives simply because Arkansas had no adult status law on the books for them.

Anyone who believes that is overestimating the comprehensive abilities of a kid's mind, and underestimating a child's capacity for fantasy.

Make no mistake, the suffering these kids and kids like them cause is immense. The victims' parents never imagined that morning when they kissed their kids goodbye it would be for the last time. Their lives and the lives of the townspeople will never be the same.

But are we really to believe that any of us or our children will be made safer somehow by transforming these KIDS who kill to adult status? Are we to believe that such measures would have had a preventative effect on these obviously disturbed young, incomplete minds contemplating murder? Can the murderous intent of childish innocence (or ignorance) truly be governed the same way as the mind of an adult?

A professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock told reporters that "it's crises like (Jonesboro) that set public policy."

However, this case and cases like them are not the norm. They don't even make up an iota of the overall juvenile crime rate, which according to the Justice Department dropped for the second year in a row by 9.2 percent.

These kids exist on a different mental plateau than other children who may get angry, may even get enraged, but would never take that extra step toward actual murder.

For these boys the key term was "immediate gratification," and their whole preparation and method of attack seemed a little too much like a sequel to some grade B shoot-'em-up flick.

A study from the University of Nevada found juveniles sent to jail are twice as likely to commit another crime and three times more likely to commit a violent crime than those sent to psychiatric and character-building facilities. Is throwing these disturbed kids to the hardened criminals really the best answer our society can muster?

Something obviously went terribly wrong with Johnson and Golden. Somewhere along the line, perhaps, these boys received a message that guns equaled power over others and, more importantly, that power over others was THE answer to their problems.

The increases in the kinds of crimes kids are engaging in is indicative of a larger ignorance on the part of many in our culture. A larger unspoken consensus has come to infect some of our children, as it was bound to do, with the belief that respect is dead and power reigns supreme.

That intimidation is the end and a gun is the means to get a point across, and to hell with respect for others.

That's the philosophy behind "Mr. Pimp," the philosophy behind that Rousseau sixth-grader showing off his weapon of destruction, the philosophy behind getting even with classmates by killing them.

The old saying says that it takes a village to raise a child. Perhaps some of our children being given destructive messages are taking them too much to heart. That's sometimes part of being a child.

But having the village solve the problem by forcing grown-up status onto incomplete psyches is only going to result in making angry, confused and resentful adults.

And what village will claim responsibility for them then?



MATT HANEY/DN

said the boy threatened her when she refused to join. One 12-year-old girl is currently facing charges of helping to recruit others.

The boy's lawyer, John Keats, said his client's crimes were based in fantasy.

"I think these kids watch too much television," he said.

He may have a point. But as tempting as it can be to isolate a single cause for our woes, television and video games, like any other form of societal expression, are a reflection of the times we live in and the changing priorities of a shell-shocked late 20th-century populace.

Tom Furth, Johnson's attorney, said his client was "a very, very scared and frightened little boy" and not the embodiment of evil he's been made out to be.

prosecution for children 14 years old, five at age 13 and two at age 12.

Three states, including Wisconsin, allow children to be prosecuted as adults at age 10, and the rest have no minimum age set at all for such prosecution.

Moreover, Congress is currently contemplating two regulations concerning the issue. One would allow prosecutors, not judges, to decide whether to try kids as adults.

The other proposition would give \$1.5 billion in grants to states that toughen guidelines to make prosecuting juveniles as adults more routine and less discretionary.

But am I the only one out there who shudders at the thought of society making it increasingly easier to hold 10- to 14-year-old children up to the same standard of responsibility as a 40-year-

ing it)? Why not throw a 6-year-old who gets angry enough to beat his brother to death away until he's 21, only to spend the remaining years of his youth behind penitentiary bars?

Obviously, Johnson and Golden should not and will not be allowed to go free after what they've done.

Part of growing up is learning to take responsibility for one's actions. But judging them and others like them on an adult scale of responsibility would probably do more harm than good.

We don't allow children to partake in the adult worlds of alcohol, pornography or war (and for good reason); why should the level of criminal consequences be an exception?

Because when seemingly healthy, happy children kill other children where they stand, a much more serious