

A decade after the Charleston massacre, the white supremacist threat has only grown

Richard M. Perloff

The faces — the smiles, the warmth exuding from their eyes, the promises of youth, only to be upended by a killer's bullets — can move you to tears.

Looking at the pictures of the nine Black people murdered by the avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., almost 10 years ago, on June 17, 2015, a sense of unremitting sadness takes hold.

Taking the measure of this massacre a decade later, one feels almost helpless discovering that anti-social white supremacist acts have increased over the past decade. But feeling hopeless won't solve the problem. We need to approach this challenge differently than condemning men for spouting hate.

Instead, we need to take a fresher perspective by understanding that the continued violence perpetrated by white supremacists can sometimes be rooted in what scholar Richard V. Reeves calls "the male malaise."

The malaise is exemplified by dramatic gender gaps in education (far more girls graduating high school and college than boys), and work (proportionately fewer men than women are employed), as well as by "dislocated dads," a rise in the number of fathers who no longer fulfill their primary family role as provider, a result of their inability to serve as breadwinner, a core component of traditional male identity.

Feeling displaced, isolated, and unwanted, men who face these economic and social misfortunes have turned increasingly to drugs, crime, and in a small but disturbing number of cases, white supremacist groups to gain a compensatory sense of personal significance central to their self-esteem.

As recent work and new research documents, these groups provide men with a sense of purpose, importance, and renewed self-respect, albeit directed in a dysfunctional direction.

Former white supremacists say they experienced a new sense of community

where "you get a pat on the back for everything you do."

They also felt a sense of emotional intensity, of "really being alive." Unfortunately, the adrenalin rush these men experienced came from street fights and the romance of fighting for their side.

We need to adapt William James' adage that society needs "the moral equivalent of war" to help men tempted by white supremacy find ways to channel their destructive impulses into constructive activities.

First, former white supremacists could strategically direct messages to current members of supremacist groups, explaining why they quit, and suggest that men could gain the emotional intensity they crave from extreme sporting activities like cave diving, rock climbing, and hang gliding, all offering the high of an adrenalin rush they find so intoxicating.

A second suggestion might seem at first counterintuitive, but it has psychological promise. Government could require or fund a pro-social activity — a year of community service — that could provide the sense of importance that men obtain from supremacist groups. Given these guys' distrust of national government, it would be best to put them to work on local projects in communities with which they identify.

A year of community service, working with others building bridges or refurbishing neighborhood roads, could offer a gratifying sense of purpose and belonging. Placing men in contact with volunteers from different ethnic groups, working on common projects, could reduce prejudice over time, as research strongly suggests.

White supremacy is not an easy enemy to fight, but when you return to the faces in those pictures — those nine adults killed and mourned forever — you realize we owe it to them to do something beneficent and good. Channeling the needs of supremacists into kindness is a start.

Perloff is a distinguished professor of communication, psychology and political science at the Levin College of Public Affairs and Education at Cleveland State University.