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OPINION

Fear and Terror as a Normal Part of School

Sane gun laws needed to prevent shootings

BY DERRICK JOHNSON



Fear at school was something the Little Rock Nine knew all too well. Facing vitriol, racism, and merciless violence, the Little Rock Nine were escorted, for their own safety, by federal troops to their high school classes. For those brave students selected to make the promises of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision a reality, fear and terror were a normal part of the school-day routine.

Decades later, fear and terror still exist in our children's classrooms. Due to the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the politicians that support them, meaningful discourse on the issue of gun control is nearly impossible, and in that silence, school shootings from Sandy Hook to Parkland keep the classroom a battleground, not a place of learning.

Some African American communities know all too well the potential danger associated with everyday activities, as gun violence spills into our communities from various angles. Yet, for the most part, schools have remained safe places for our young people.

Given the disproportionate damage gun violence is having on our communities, the NAACP has advocated for sane, sensible laws, to help eliminate or at least to decrease the damage and death caused by gun violence. Requiring universal background checks on all gun sales and transfers, banning military-style, semi-automatic assault guns, enacting tough, new criminal penalties for straw purchasers and gun traffickers, and allowing the Center for Disease Control to research gun violence as a major public health issue are just a few of the reasonable steps lawmakers could take to stem the tide of gun related deaths in neighborhoods across the nation.

Unfortunately, years of ridiculously easy access to guns and ammunition has yielded an epidemic with deadly consequences for all Americans, but has been particularly fatal for communities of color who are disproportionately impacted. Gun violence is the number one killer of African Americans ages 15 to 34. Though African Americans make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population, we represent nearly 50 percent of all gun homicide victims. Over 80 percent of gun deaths of African Americans are homicides. Roughly speaking, 1 out of every 3 African American males who die between the ages of 15 and 19 is killed by gun violence. African American children and

teens were less than 15 percent of the total child population in 2008 and 2009, but accounted for 45 percent of all child- and teen-related gun deaths. These numbers are tragic and intolerable, but most of all they are preventable.

Critics might call such policy interventions naively ambitious in our current political climate. However, comprehensive, sustainable gun control is achievable. We know this because someone has done it.

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Just look to Australia.

In the past 20 years, Australia has proven that sensible reform can prevail over partisan divides and high rates of gun ownership. In the spring of 1996, Australia faced the deadliest mass shooting in its history when a 28-year-old man opened fire at a tourist resort in Tasmania, killing 35 and wounding 23 with a semi-automatic rifle. Following the massacre, the party in power—the center-right Liberal coalition—surprised the country and world by joining with groups across the political spectrum to implement a radical intervention on gun violence. Over the course of mere months, the Australian government bought and destroyed over half a

million firearms, banned automatic and semiautomatic weapons, created a national firearms registry, and enforced a 28-day waiting period for gun purchases.

The results were both clear and staggering—there has not been a single mass shooting in Australia since 1996. Additionally, data shows that in the ten years following the Tasmanian massacre, gun-related homicides and suicides dropped by 59 percent and

65 percent, respectively. While there is still room for improvement, the immediate and directly correlative impact of Australia's gun control reform demonstrates the potential of policy to promote peace.

Australia's gun control intervention was not achieved without encountering significant opposition. Like America, Australia holds a near fetish-like obsession for rugged individualism, which caused many to resent the government's action and to perceive it as an insult to gun owners and a breach of power. To be fair, a 28-day waiting period on gun purchases hardly fits the image of the reckless, rough-and-tumble

Outback presented by media and movies. But, as President Obama praised in 2015, the Australian people ultimately united in favor of national safety and progress.

Australia's success story is an example for us all. America will remain a deadly nation for our children, its schools caught in the crossfire, unless we insist politicians and the NRA curb their lobbyist efforts and allow the creation of policy that acts in the best interests of public safety. The solution is simple. America needs sane and sensible gun safety laws. The NAACP has spoken out, delivering a loud and clear message, on the most urgent and impactful policies pending, and we will continue to push and monitor federal action on these proposals.

The disproportionate impact on communities of color does make gun control a civil rights issue, but gun violence is a national issue and should be a matter of national concern. It is also a matter of freedom. Without sane gun laws, parents are faced with the daily and ever-present fear of another shooting at their child's school that could have been prevented. All Americans deserve this freedom regardless of skin color, political affiliation, or zip code. This is one freedom that the NAACP is committed to fighting for.

Derrick Johnson is the president and chief executive officer of the NAACP.

Armed Adults Don't Make School Kids Safer: They put them at greater risk

BY KAREN DOLAN

Can we get real about school safety?

Since the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary



School in 2012, there have been at least 239 school shootings in the United States. 438 people were shot and injured in these shootings, and 138 people were killed.

On Valentine's Day of this year, 14 high school students and three faculty members at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas School in Parkland, Florida were gunned down in the hallways and classrooms.

The survivors are demanding that lawmakers take action to get guns out of schools so this carnage might stop.

The National Rifle Association, the Trump administration, and many conservative lawmakers are

answering these demands for fewer guns by calling for... even more guns in schools. Specifically, they want more armed guards, and even armed teachers.

Is that really the answer?

Let's see what the facts tell us: Americans already own about half of all guns in the world, and suffer by far the most gun homicides among developed countries. Breaking it down further, states with more guns have more gun deaths.

All told, we're home to 5 percent of the world's population but 31 percent of the world's mass shooters.

Clearly, guns aren't the answer. But even beyond the weapons, putting more cops in schools has its own risks.

Our public schools already have legions of armed law enforcement officers, euphemistically called

School Resource Officers (SROs), roaming the hallways. As of 2014, at least 30 percent of our public schools had at least one SRO.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had one. And it had two other trained, armed law enforcement officers on the grounds as the massacre was occurring. They neither deterred nor stopped the shooter.

Nationally, we average about five school shootings per month. So while our schools are already teeming with SROs, there's no evidence that this has kept our students safer.

There's plenty of evidence, however, that the presence of SROs hurts our students — especially back, Latino, indigenous, LGBTQ, disabled, and low-income students.

The presence of cops in schools has markedly increased the number of these kids who end up in the juvenile justice system — includ-

ing for minor offenses like graffiti and subjective, childish behavior like "disorderly conduct" and "disobedience."

As of 2014, 43 states and the District of Columbia arrested black students at school at disproportionately high rates. And black students were far more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to attend schools that employ SROs.

This is no small matter. These types of arrests, detentions, and referrals increase the likelihood that children will have further encounters with the criminal legal system, drop out of school, and suffer unemployment later on.

In other words, the presence of armed officers in schools doesn't protect our kids. It puts them at risk.

A better way forward for school safety is to invest in training teachers in social, emotional, and academic development to spot and address trauma and stress —

to see and teach the whole child. And to invest in restorative justice practices that nurture kids while holding them accountable, to help kids move on from small infractions before things escalate.

Our gun-soaked society is a critical piece of the problem, and strong gun control laws can begin to address that. But another critical piece of the problem is a punitive society that targets vulnerable children for non-violent offenses.

Instead of arming schools — which benefits only the NRA and lawmakers who've been bought by them — what our education system needs is resources to support the healthy development of all students.

Then we're getting real about school safety.

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