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We're Raising a Generation That Views Mass Murder as Normal

There was no mass shooting in Times Square on Tuesday evening, but thousands of people feared for their lives.

By [Peter Dreier](#)

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New York Police Department officers securing Times Square ahead of festivities on December 31, 2018. (Reuters / Jeenah Moon)

On Tuesday night my 22-year-old daughter, Sarah, posted a short comment on her Facebook page:

I was at a show in Times Square tonight and we were held in the theatre on lockdown because there was talk of a potential shooter. Turns out it was a motorcycle that backfired and led people to thinking they were gun shots. With everything going on in this country of course we all assumed the worst. I'm so sick of seeing these headlines weekly. I'm glad everyone is okay and safe but this shouldn't be something we have to fear day to day.

Sarah was chaperoning 11 teenagers who take acting, singing, and dance lessons at a Los Angeles–area nonprofit and were on an excursion to attend Broadway shows and meet with actors and directors. Her group was about to leave the Longacre Theatre, where they had seen the musical *The Prom*, when Times Square exploded in chaos. What she didn't know at the time was that terrified tourists and residents also sought refuge in other theaters and stores. Gideon Glick tweeted that he and his fellow actors in *To Kill a Mockingbird* fled the Shubert Theatre stage as the audience began screaming and people from outside “tried to storm our theater for safety.”

When Sarah phoned me an hour later, she reminded me that teens of this generation have lived their entire lives in the shadow of mass shootings and deaths—at shopping malls, churches and synagogues, movie theaters, schools, outdoor music and food festivals, and other public places.

Most of the kids on the trip are 15 or 16 years old. Which means they were 8 or 9 in 2012 when a killer murdered 27 children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut and another man killed 12 people in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater; 12 when a white supremacist killed

nine people at an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015; 13 when a man murdered 49 people at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016; and 14 when a man killed 58 people at a Las Vegas music festival in 2017. In the past two weeks alone, they've seen footage on television or cell phones of mass killings in Gilroy, California (three killed, 15 others injured); Dayton, Ohio (nine killed, 27 injured); and El Paso (22 killed, 24 wounded).

Since the Sandy Hook massacre, in the United States there have been at least 2,178 mass shootings—defined by the Gun Violence Archive as indiscriminate rampages in public places that kill or wound four or more people—resulting in at least 2,458 people killed and 9,119 wounded.

Yet even this understates the level of gun violence. Mass shootings get the most media attention, but they are a sliver of America's gun problem, which includes domestic violence, gang killings, and accidental shootings. Last year witnessed 57,383 episodes of gun violence that resulted in 14,771 deaths and 28,236 injuries, according to the Gun Violence Archive. Among the victims were 669 children 11 or under and 2,850 ages 12 to 17. This year so far, 8,963 people—including 2,233 under 18—have died in gun-related episodes. Mass shootings account for 112 of the victims of this year's epidemic of gun violence. (These numbers exclude gun-related suicides.)

This generation of American teenagers has been traumatized by regular occurrences of mass murder. That is why the students with my daughter on Tuesday night were so frightened. Sarah had to steel herself not to panic so she could help calm the youngsters in her custody.

Around the world, young people confront war, hunger, displacement, rape, and other traumatizing experiences. But the impact of gun violence is uniquely devastating. The victims of America's plague of gun violence include not only the dead and injured and their families and friends but also the rest of society. The collateral damage is the prospect of an entire generation living with the fear that anyone can be the target of random violence. We have normalized massive child trauma because we have allowed racists and psychopaths to easily obtain guns, including military-style assault weapons.

Even though a significant majority of Americans support tougher gun laws, their voices have been drowned out by the National Rifle Association. A new *USA Today*/Ipsos survey found that 67 percent of Americans—including 79 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans—said the Senate should pass the House bill to tighten background checks. A new *Politico* survey found that 70 percent of voters—including 55 percent of Republicans—support a ban on assault-style weapons.

The NRA is responsible for the United States' having the weakest gun laws and the highest gun death rate of any modern democracy. But fewer than 5 percent of gun owners are NRA members. According to a 2017 Pew Research poll, 77 percent of gun owners—and 52 percent of NRA members—support criminal background checks. The NRA's influence comes from a small but vocal number of extremist members in key states, backed by campaign donations funded by gun manufacturers.

After each mass killing, people come together to express their sympathy for the victims, anger at the senseless violence, and determination to bring about change. Each time, their hopes are raised—and then dashed when Congress fails to act, cowed by the NRA.

But that scenario has begun to change since Trump took office. More Americans acknowledge that thoughts and prayers and candlelight vigils are not enough.

We may be at a turning point. Last year, after a former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killed 17 students with a semiautomatic rifle, the student survivors mobilized a campaign that pushed the state legislature to raise the legal age for owning a rifle from 18 to 21, with a three-day wait after purchase. The students also catalyzed a nationwide movement to increase voter turnout, especially among young people, in last November's elections.

A growing number of candidates elected to Congress last year supported stronger gun laws. One was Lucy McBath, an African American woman who defeated an incumbent Republican in a district in Atlanta's suburbs once represented by Newt Gingrich, where 61 percent of residents are white. McBath became a gun control activist in 2012 after her 17-year-old son, Jordan, was killed at a Florida gas station. She decided to run for Congress after the Parkland shooting.

In the past year, the NRA has been weakened by growing scrutiny of its finances, political influence peddling, and ties with Russian operatives. The organization has been shaken by allegations of exorbitant spending by top executives and

charges that at least 18 board members profited from NRA contracts. CEO Wayne LaPierre, who is paid over \$1 million a year, used his NRA expense account to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on clothes at a Beverly Hills boutique and take luxury vacations.

The Washington Post uncovered a LaPierre scheme to have the NRA purchase a \$6 million mansion in Dallas for him because, ironically, he worried about his security after the Parkland shooting. Right-wing talk show host Oliver North was ousted as NRA president in April after LaPierre disclosed that North was about to collect millions of dollars in a deal with the NRA's former PR firm. In June top lobbyist Chris Cox resigned amid accusations of participating in an extortion scheme to expel LaPierre.

The attorneys general of New York State and Washington, DC, are investigating the NRA's foundation for violating nonprofit charity laws. House Democrats have initiated probes into whether Russian operatives illegally channeled funds from the NRA into Trump's campaign.

The NRA is \$10.8 million in debt and has cut funding for such core functions as gun training and political advocacy, frozen its employee pension plan, and obtained a \$28 million credit line against its lavish Virginia headquarters.

LaPierre, the NRA's top official since 1991, who maneuvered the organization into a close alliance with white supremacists and other extremists, has been less visible in the past year. Several board members recently resigned over concerns about his mismanagement and reckless spending. Many rank-and-file members have quit over the organization's misguided leadership and extremism.

For decades, the NRA outmuscled gun control groups, which have operated on shoestring budgets. Today the NRA faces rising opposition from groups funded by billionaire and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and led by former representative Gabby Giffords, herself a victim of gun violence.

The combination of a weakened NRA; the recent shootings in Gilroy, Dayton, and El Paso; and better-funded advocacy groups guarantees that gun control will emerge as a major issue in the 2020 races. If the Democrats win the White House, Senate, and House, we can expect progress on gun safety. If Trump—a close NRA ally—is defeated, even some Republicans in Congress may feel pressure to support reasonable gun laws. But this will happen only if we turn outrage into political activism.

There was no mass shooting in Times Square on Tuesday evening. But the fact that thousands of people, including some California teenagers, feared for their lives in response to a false alarm tells us that something is very wrong with our society. Our children are counting on us to stop the deadly gun violence that is destroying the nation's soul and their futures. **N**

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