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15 years old

Iowa City Community School District

10th grade

The Everyday Nightmare of School Shootings

To understand the severity of death, one must first understand the pain. While it may seem like a simple concept, death is anything but that. The wave of anguish and grief that the word spreads is enough destruction to shatter someone's whole world. It is a concept all of us are all too familiar with—a concept we want nothing more to do with. Yet each year, in the United States, the number of souls taken due to firearms is spiraling. 26 at Sandy Hook, 17 at Parkland, 21 at Robb, 13 at Columbine, and 10 at Santa Fe. These numbers are not just numbers, they were human beings who had ambitions, hopes, dreams, goals, and a future ahead of them that was taken by individuals who committed unthinkable and outrageous acts. Those who are lost dominate headlines and news outlets each year, and community members comfort those affected by the tragedies, but is that enough, and what can we currently do about the problem?

Although protecting the liberty and freedom of fellow Americans is important, the price should not be the lives of innocent children and adults. The second amendment grants civilians the freedom to wield guns, but it does not obscure the government's ability to establish gun control laws. Federal law declares that a person must be 21 or older to purchase a handgun from a licensed gun seller. However, to make that same purchase from an unlicensed gun dealer, they

only have to be 18 or older (“Keeping Our Schools Safe: A Plan for Preventing Mass Shootings and Ending All Gun Violence in American Schools | Everytown Research & Policy”). To add, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives states that shotguns, rifles, and ammunition for such weapons may be sold to individuals 18 or older. Gaps such as these in the law leave schools at a higher risk of gun violence. As reported by Everytown Research & Policy, “most active shooters are school-age and have a connection to the school”. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooter Nikolas Cruz was 19 years old at the time, so he could not have bought a gun from a local gun store, but he was legally able to buy an AR-15 assault-style rifle, the gun he used in the shooting (“Keeping Our Schools Safe: A Plan for Preventing Mass Shootings and Ending All Gun Violence in American Schools | Everytown Research & Policy”). Raising the minimum age requirement to have and purchase guns and ammunition to 21 years of age whether through a licensed or unlicensed sale is an essential integration to keep guns out of the hands of young individuals plotting to harm others. Restricting guns and ammunition from the hands of those under 21 will not completely eliminate school violence, but it could save hundreds of lives, and so can the next solution.

Exploring the many reasons behind those events is the first step towards change. According to a study called “Lethal Violence in Schools” conducted by Alfred University, professionals and social commentators alike agree that revenge is among the top reasons for school shootings. Sandy Hook Elementary shooter Adam Lanza suffered from anorexia and isolated himself three months before the shooting. Referencing a report released by a Connecticut state agency in November 2014, he reportedly had “a fascination for mass violence”, deteriorating mental health, and his “problems were not ignored but misunderstood and mistreated” (“Sandy Hook School Shootings Fast Facts”). A report was then released by the

Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate, directed by the State Child Fatality Review Panel, profiling Lanza's developmental and educational history ("Sandy Hook School Shootings Fast Facts"). It depicted "warning signs" that Lanza showed early on, and "missed opportunities" to help him by his mother, healthcare providers, and the school district as a whole. These facts and more point to Lanza's mental health problems, clouded thinking, and proven prearranged murder plan.

The effects of psychological damage from bullying, childhood mistreatment, and other triggers negatively impact mental health and overall wellbeing. Bullying leaves lingering feelings of isolation, self-hatred, and rejection. Some sink deeper into those feelings and eventually develop depression and anxiety (McGovern Medical School). According to the McGovern Medical School Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, if those symptoms are left untreated, they can progress into Acute Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In some cases, bullying often leaves a trace, turning into anger towards others or themselves. "A sense of aloneness, alienation, and powerlessness set the stage for dramatic repercussions" ("Lethal Violence in Schools | Alfred University"). When that anger is directed towards others, the individual festers a thirst for revenge, often leading to school shootings. Due to the drastic effects that bullying and psychological damage can have on children's lives, schools and districts need to promote social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning is an educational method beyond the core subjects that aims to teach students self-awareness, emotional management, the process of identifying stress, and other crucial life skills ("What Is Social-Emotional Learning?"). It encompasses group activities, discussions, and a safe space for students to share and understand their feelings whilst creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. "Research shows that programs that support students'

development in communicating effectively, negotiating conflict, practicing empathy, understanding their skills and abilities, managing their emotions and behavior, and other social and emotional skills can lead to better academic and life outcomes” (Education Northwest). Schools should also work to dispel the stigma of mental health by spreading awareness and providing students with support lines. They should also emphasize the severe consequences of bullying and urge those around to stand up to the perpetrators. Bullying rates decrease dramatically due to education and proper enforcement. Through such curriculums and methods, empathy and respect are instilled within the school community, leading to a comfortable learning environment.

Preventing bullying and helping students with psychological damage can lead to the elimination of revenge-based thoughts, but what if they have already started planning? Most school shooters have warning signs before the attacks, and violent fantasy writings are an example. Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine High school gunmen, wrote an English paper for class with contents so disturbing the teacher contacted his parents. However, no follow-up was scheduled after. A short while later, Klebold and his friend Eric Harris proceeded to shoot and kill 15 students in total, including themselves. About a year after Klebold’s death, his parents decided to read the paper, and the contents shocked them. Brutal descriptions of a man dressed in all black, murdering children in a school were detailed. Violent fantasy writings such as his English paper were not the only warnings. Other signs included sudden mood swings, irritability, and no motivation in school, all of which did not exist before. A handful of shooters had those signs and more, thus leading to states adopting Extreme Risk Laws. Everytown Research & Policy proclaims that “these laws create a legal process by which law enforcement, family members, and, in some states, educators can petition a court to prevent a person from having

access to firearms when there is evidence that they are at serious risk of harming themselves or others". When an appeal is made with sufficient evidence, a court issues extreme risk protection orders, also known as gun violence restraining orders or red flag orders, while also ensuring a person's rights are followed without endangering public safety. Immediately after an order is issued, the accused must relinquish any guns they possess, and are temporarily forbidden from buying new ones. Since most school shooters show warning signs before attacking, Extreme Risk Laws intervene before the situation escalates by blocking their supply of guns. These laws can also serve minors who can not legally buy or possess guns but have access to them either at home or through other means. Extreme Risk Laws are one of the many gun control laws states should start imposing. A study done in California depicts 21 cases where a "gun violence restraining order, California's name for an extreme risk protection order", was used to prevent potential mass shootings, "including five instances where schools or children were targeted" ("Keeping Our Schools Safe: A Plan for Preventing Mass Shootings and Ending All Gun Violence in American Schools | Everytown Research & Policy"). Overwhelming research and support from The Federal Commission on School Safety have led to a total of 17 states and the District of Columbia passing these laws. Considering all this, Extreme Risk Laws are preventative methods to ensure threats of mass shootings in schools and other public areas are prevented beforehand.

We cannot completely eliminate the threat of gun violence, but we can try. By raising the minimum age requirement to purchase and possess a gun to 21, prioritizing the mental health of students, and passing Extreme Risk Laws, we can decrease the number of school shootings per year, saving the lives of many. The urgency of this issue is imminent, and reacting swiftly is a must.

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