

The Impact of School Shootings on American Students: A Research Paper and a Play

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Abstract

Certain events in American history have impacted our nation's culture: Columbine is one. This tragedy took America by surprise in 1999 and continues to influence us in the present day. Columbine exposed many Americans to the threat of school shootings, and subsequent similar attacks have reinforced our concerns.

Gun violence is prevalent in the U.S., and for years people have debated the best method of addressing this issue. People are often confident in their opinions and passionately defend those opinions, especially when faced with opposition. When discussing school shootings, it is important to prioritize the safety of students rather than getting caught in political debates that do nothing to resolve the issue of gun violence in schools.

This thesis, comprised of a research paper and a play, is meant to inform adults of the fearful reality many students face today. By explaining how gun violence and security measures impact students, my hope is that more adults will understand the ways students are suffering. This thesis is meant to advocate for the welfare of young lives and encourage adults to do the same.

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The Impact of School Shootings on American Students

Introduction

American society was changed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the mass shooting of Columbine. Since these attacks, Americans have become more fearful of similar events and have become more aware of the need for security. The experience of growing up in the U.S. for my generation has been very different from previous generations. We grew up witnessing violence on television and within our own communities. We grew up hearing violent attacks could happen anywhere, even in school.

Though it was not the first school shooting nor the first mass shooting, Columbine shaped our nation. Post-Columbine schools use security measures intended to prevent shootings and create strategic plans in case those security measures fail. While it is important to protect students and ensure their safety, there are those that question the current response to these shootings. Researchers, politicians, concerned citizens, teachers, parents, and students alike have increasingly questioned the ability of current security measures to keep students safe. Additionally, there are concerns about what these security measures are doing to students' mental health.

Protecting students is a priority, but if the methods of protecting them are actually making them scared, we should seriously reconsider the effectiveness of those methods before continuing to subject students to them.

The History of School Shootings in the United States

A school shooting occurs when someone injures or kills one or more people with a firearm on school property. School shootings can happen in different ways and for

various reasons. For instance, a shooting may be the result of a violent dispute between a few students. Other times, a student, a former student or employee, or a stranger may go on a rampage shooting, in which they attack anyone they see. It is the latter that is often more violent and more terrifying.

While school shootings have garnered much attention since the 1990s, they are not new phenomena. Violence has occurred within the education system for decades, and this includes gun violence. For the most part, gun violence in the past has involved disputes between a few students; however, there have been documented mass shootings on school property. For instance, the 1966 University of Texas tower shooting resulted in 17 deaths and 31 injuries; the 1974 Olean High School shooting resulted in 3 deaths and 11 injuries; the 1989 Stockton schoolyard shooting resulted in 5 deaths and 32 injuries; the 1998 Westside Middle School shooting resulted in 5 deaths and 10 injuries; the 1998 Thurston High School shooting resulted in 2 deaths and 25 injuries. This list is not comprehensive, but it demonstrates that school shootings have been an issue for decades. The interesting thing is that school shootings were not depicted or viewed as a major problem until April 20, 1999.

On that day, two students at Columbine High School killed 13 people and injured 21 more. Confronted by police, the two attackers killed themselves, ending their bloody massacre. This is the school shooting that awoke a nation and sparked the fearful scramble for safety in schools. Columbine altered the mindset of America.

At that time, Columbine received more television coverage than any similar rampage shooting before it (Mifflin, 1999). For hours, images of armored police, fleeing students, and bloody victims were televised to millions (Jonson, 2017). The coverage

lasted for weeks, and even in the present-day Columbine remains a topic of discussion with “emergent news of another school shooting event” (Muschert & Addington, 2019, p. 362). For instance, just as 9/11 is used in nearly every discussion of terrorism, Columbine is used the same way in school shooting discussions. Because of this major news coverage, millions of Americans were exposed to the violence of this shooting and that exposure lasted for weeks, unlike previous school shootings. Major news coverage has a long-lasting impact that has helped Columbine remain such a salient event in history.

The Columbine shooting also made Americans realize that a school shooting can occur anywhere. Despite the prior occurrence of mass school shootings, the threat of such violence was not considered a problem in all communities, such as suburban, middle-class, largely white areas. To people in these suburban settings, school shootings were a problem in areas typified as violent, such as urban schools (Muschert & Addington, 2019). Columbine occurred in a suburban community, a place previously believed to be safe from such an attack. From then on, the nation realized that an attack like Columbine could happen anywhere, and people could no longer ignore this potential threat to their own communities (Muschert & Addington, 2019).

After Columbine, students and their parents feared their schools were unsafe and unprotected. Just as 9/11 led to increased airport security, Columbine normalized metal detectors, police officers or security guards, surveillance cameras, active-shooter drills, and lockdown procedures in schools. Columbine created a fearful nation, and subsequent tragic shootings like Virginia Tech (32 deaths, 23 injuries), Sandy Hook Elementary (26 deaths, 2 injuries), Parkland (17 deaths, and 17 injuries), and Santa Fe High School (10 deaths, 13 injuries) fuel such fear and continue debates about how best to protect

students. Such debates can revolve around increasing security in schools, but they can also address the effectiveness of current and proposed security measures. The consequences of school shootings are vast and create wounds in American communities, schools, and homes. The need to protect students cannot be argued against. Instead, the current methods of protection need to be discussed. It is important to consider the effectiveness of such methods and their impact on students' wellbeing.

The Consequences of School Shootings

Americans are afraid of mass shootings, both in public and in schools. These crimes violently shock our consciousness and leave us shaken. The question is not “if” another shooting will occur, but rather “when” will it. As people are tragically killed in theaters, grocery stores, concerts, nightclubs, and schools, it is common to question if anywhere is safe. Deadly shootings are always tragic, but those at schools are particularly horrifying, as young lives are cut short.

While it seems like our nation is plagued by an epidemic of mass shootings at schools, statistics show that these crimes are infrequent. Gun violence is a concerning issue in America, but such violence is more likely to happen off campuses (Cornell, 2015). The school shootings that do occur are commonly small, targeted shootings, rather than “indiscriminate slaughter” that makes headlines (Cox & Rich, 2018, para. 17).

Despite the statistical rarity of mass school shootings, they have a tremendous impact on our society. One reason behind this is mass media. Violent crime is considered newsworthy, and it generates eye-catching headlines that draw in readers or viewers (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Heath, Kavanagh, & Thompson, 2001; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). The more violent and tragic the crime, such as a mass school shooting,

the more likely it is to make national news, and the continuous advancement of technology has made the news more accessible through online articles and social media feeds (Intravia, Wolff, Paez, & Gibbs, 2017). While reporting such crimes is important, the amount of attention they receive can unintentionally distort the public's understanding of crime (Altheide, 2009; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Heath et al., 2001; Intravia et al., 2017; Jonson, 2017; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Strafford, 2015) and create a "false perception of imminent danger" (Cornell, 2015, p. 217). Heightened fear makes school shootings appear more prevalent than they actually are, and this fear tends to peak with reports of another shooting (Altheide, 2009).

The rarity of school shootings illustrates that these crimes are not as frequent as public perception would believe; however, these statistics do not delegitimize people's fear. Just because mass school shootings are rare does not mean they are not an issue. This must be said because there are right-wing conspiracy theorists, including QAnon, that deny the occurrence of school shootings. They speculate that Parkland and Sandy Hook never happened and were instead faked for Democrats and Liberals to advance gun control policies. Even some recently elected government officials, such as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, support these conspiracy theories (Porter, 2021).

The denial of school shootings is dangerous, especially as families mourn their murdered children. Sure, it is a small population of people that believe these theories, but a small number of people can cause a lot of damage, especially if they hold positions in government. There are also others who acknowledge school shootings but become hostile towards survivors expressing pro-gun control opinions. This behavior does nothing to

resolve the issue of school shootings and forces young people to become activists for their own right to live.

No matter the frequency of school shootings, they are a major problem in America, just like gun violence in general. Cox and Rich (2018) discuss *The Washington Post's* analysis of gun violence, reporting that since Columbine “more than 187,000 students have been exposed to gun violence at school” (para. 2). Children face the reality that whether they are out in public, in their neighborhood, or at school, someone could shoot them. One victim of gun violence is concerning enough, let alone hundreds of thousands of victims. These shootings show no signs of stopping, especially as the powerful continue to do little or nothing to help the powerless.

The Impact of Gun Violence on Students

Gun violence damages students in potentially life-altering ways. There is the terrible reality that a student may be killed, but even survivors can be forever changed following a shooting. The fear of gun violence, along with witnessing or being the victim of such violence can scar children. Gun violence is so prevalent in the U.S. that it feels unavoidable. It should not be normal to fear being shot anywhere you go, but this is the reality of many students. Fear of crime, or the fear of being victimized, is a common experience, whether it is about non-violent or violent crimes. Students who have never experienced a school shooting can still be very afraid of such a crime. One reason this occurs is media attention on school shootings, as previously discussed. Another reason this occurs is perceived vulnerability.

Perceived vulnerability is a personal assessment of one's own possibility of being victimized. This assessment may be based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and

surroundings. For instance, a woman walking down an empty city street at night may have an increased fear of being sexually assaulted. Heath et al. (2001) explain that students might find similarities between themselves and school shooting victims, which can alter their perception of being victims of the same crime. This perceived vulnerability combined with the volatility of school shootings increases student fear (Schildkraut et al., 2015) and may decrease their quality of life.

Fear of school shootings also occurs with students who have experienced gun violence. Trauma can be caused by being shot or by witnessing someone else being shot (Cox & Rich, 2018). Exposure to this extreme violence can have a myriad of negative effects on students, including absenteeism, poor academic performance, memory lapses, behavioral issues, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Beland & Kim, 2016; Bouffard & Koepfel, 2014; Fisher, Mowen, & Boman, 2018; Moore-Petinak, Waselewski, Patterson, & Chang, 2020; Sharkey, 2010). After a school shooting, a student's symptoms of trauma may surface soon afterwards or years later. Students may be tormented well into adulthood.

It is necessary to protect students from experiencing gun violence. Very few would disagree with this statement, but disagreement does occur during discussions about how best to protect students. To protect students, various security measures and policies have been implemented in schools, but some common methods of security might be ineffective and increase student fear.

The Impact of School Security on Students

In response to highly publicized shootings, such as Columbine and Sandy Hook, schools have faced increased pressures to keep their students safe. The fear of school shootings is so pervasive that it has changed the “culture of education and how kids grow up” (Cox & Rich, 2018, para.4) through the implementation of various security measures. Schools today look different than they did pre-Columbine, and these differences may be impacting student fear.

There are different intentions behind implementing certain security policies. Overall, security is meant to reduce physical and emotional harm to students. To reach this goal, measures are put in place to prevent a school shooting or to reduce the number of victims in a shooting (King, Bracy, Addington, & Muschert, 2019). Some of the easiest policies to implement include keeping classroom doors shut and always locked, locking entrances to the school, and requiring guests to sign in with an ID. Additionally, security cameras are common sights inside and outside of school buildings. These cameras are meant to deter perpetrators from coming into the school or deter students within the school from committing crime. Schools with larger budgets may also install metal detectors to prevent weapons from entering the building.

While it is possible for cameras and metal detectors to prevent a school shooting, this result is never guaranteed. For instance, the use of cameras tends to be reactive, not proactive (King et al., 2019). This means that schools do not necessarily have enough staff to constantly monitor security feed, so rather than prevent a shooting, security feed is more likely to be used as evidence after a shooting. Additionally, it is still possible for a weapon to be brought into a school that uses metal detectors.

These security measures are intended to create a safer school environment, but some scholars have argued they might instead be making students more afraid. The use of security measures implies there is some danger to be protected from. Because of this, the presence of cameras and metal detectors could remind students of the danger they face and increase their fear (Connell, 2018).

Though there is some argument that cameras and metal detectors may increase student fear, this is not well-researched. There are mixed results as some students feel more afraid by security, while others feel protected (Johnson, Bottiani, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2018). The lack of concrete conclusions can partially be attributed to the cultural shift that occurred post-9/11 and post-Columbine. After these attacks, security became a huge priority in public spaces. For people born after 9/11 and Columbine, certain security measures, such as cameras, may feel more commonplace in modern society; therefore, they are less likely to notice or be afraid of security (Connell, 2018).

School Resource Officers (SROs) have been deployed in schools as a form of protection from violence and classroom disruption. SROs are expected to perform a myriad of tasks, such as enforcing school rules, maintaining discipline, patrolling school grounds, educating students and teachers on safety protocols, and mentoring and protecting students (Javdani, 2019; Theriot & Cuellar, 2016; Theriot & Orme, 2016). While the presence of an officer may promote safety within a school, there are concerns about how they may negatively impact students.

Police possess power, and it is concerning when officers wield such power against students. SROs, acting as agents of the school, enforce the law and school rules with the authority to arrest students. These officers have the power to punish students for

disrupting class, possessing a cell phone, breaking dress codes, or violating school rules that are not considered punishable offenses outside of a school (Javdani, 2019).

Additionally, SROs can conduct searches on students more easily than they could as patrol officers on the streets (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). There is the increased risk that SROs can abuse their authority in schools, jeopardizing the rights of students.

In conjunction with the hiring of SROs is the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. The passage of the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 resulted in states mandating the expulsion of students possessing a firearm at school (Cornell, 2015). Over time, some schools have created expansive policies that mandate punishment of students for a wide range of misbehavior, including violent and non-violent actions. Now it is possible a student will receive harsh punishment for “minor disruptive behavior, such as tardiness, absences, noncompliance, and disrespect” (González, 2012, p. 287).

The purpose of SROs and zero-tolerance policies is to deter future misbehavior and remove so-called “troublemakers” from the school environment, but their use may not be effective. SROs cannot be everywhere at all times, and there is little evidence that they are even an effective deterrent to school shooters (Jonson, 2017). Additionally, zero-tolerance policies fail to deter students from engaging in violent or disruptive behavior (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

While policies differ in each school, the implementation of zero-tolerance policies and hiring SROs has led to the criminalization of student misbehavior. Increased suspensions and expulsions deprive students of learning opportunities. Additionally, this can make students feel unsupported, possibly leading to disengagement at school (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). There are growing concerns that the employment of SROs is

increasing the number of students arrested at school (sometimes for minor offenses) and introduced to the criminal justice system (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). These conditions are referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Cornell, 2015; George, 2015; González, 2012; King et al., 2019; Theriot & Cuellar, 2016), in which increased punishment of student misbehavior is “accelerating student contact with law enforcement” (Skiba, 2014, p. 27). The removal of students from the school environment is concerning, especially since students of color are disproportionately targeted by SROs and zero-tolerance policies (Borum et al., 2010; George, 2015; Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015; Muschert & Addington, 2019; Skiba, 2014; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). These security measures are putting students at risk and are creating distrustful learning environments.

Another common security policy in schools is the use of active-shooter drills, which are designed to train students on how to act during a school shooting. There are various ways these drills are carried out. For instance, some schools use a Run, Hide, Fight model or the ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) model (Blad, 2018; Cox & Rich, 2018; King et al., 2019). These models are meant to teach students that during a shooting, they must decide to evacuate or barricade themselves into a classroom. As a last resort, students may fight the shooter. In preparation for a drill, students and teachers may be instructed to lock the door, turn off the lights, and stay quiet. Other schools may have them practice barricading the door with desks and arming themselves with what they can find.

The major issue with active-shooter drills is they can make students afraid. It is one thing to discuss what to do during a shooting, but to make students act out a shooting for the sake of preparedness is a step too far. There are major concerns these drills are

increasing fear and anxiety among students and may even traumatize them (Cornell, 2015; King et al., 2019; Moore-Petinak et al., 2020; Peterson, Sackrison, & Polland, 2015). This is not difficult to imagine considering schools sometimes do not inform students that what they are experiencing is only a drill, so for a few minutes students may believe there is a shooter in the school. Additionally, some schools try to simulate a real shooting by having mock shooters enter a classroom, and the students must fight back (Cornell, 2015; Garcia-Navarro, Boyd, & Doubek, 2019).

Along with potential psychological effects on students, active-shooter drills are possibly ineffective in protecting students. Little empirical evidence exists in support that these drills prevent against or prepare students for a school shooting (Huskey & Connell, 2020; King et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2015). This is partially because it is difficult to study the effectiveness of drills. Peterson et al. (2015) explain such a study would be unethical and practically impossible, as it would require a shooting to occur at two schools (one that practiced drills and one that did not).

The use of mock shooters is particularly troubling. The idea is to empower students with the ability to defend themselves. This type of training is problematic as it is much easier to “win” against a fake intruder than against someone who is armed to the teeth and capable of killing many. Someone with guns can easily kill students armed with school supplies.

It is understandable for schools to try to prepare students for any scenario, but active-shooter drills place a lot of responsibility on students to save their own lives. Jonson (2017) argues that since the use of other security measures does not guarantee the protection against school shootings, it is imperative to drill students. Jonson goes on to

claim that most of the deaths at Columbine and Sandy Hook resulted from students hiding rather than fleeing or fighting. Jonson is practically blaming children as young as six years old for not fleeing or fighting an armed adult. The deaths of these children are not the fault of their own actions or inactions.

No security measure or policy can guarantee the safety of students, and they could even make students more afraid. The fear caused by school shootings has caused many schools to quickly adopt security measures with little to no empirical evidence that these measures are even effective (King et al., 2019). This is especially concerning as schools with small budgets must choose between investing in security or buying supplies for students. Additionally, there are businesses choosing to profit off fear and school shootings by selling expensive products marketed as being able to protect students. Such products include bulletproof backpacks and whiteboards, reinforced desks, and armored doors.

The responsibility to protect students rests on the back of adults with the power to make a difference, such as politicians and school officials. More research is required to understand the impact various security measures have on students; however, such research is difficult to conduct. Rather than waiting for a shooting to confirm or deny the effectiveness of security, it is preferred to identify and resolve the underlying causes of gun violence. Due to current political inaction, it is still necessary to prepare students for a school shooting but in ways that do not traumatize them.

Alternative Solutions

Based on the profound negative impact some security measures have on students, it is necessary to consider using alternative measures or making improvements to those

currently in use. The main areas of interest include gun laws, threat assessments, and training SROs.

One of the most common debates that surface after a school shooting is that of guns. More recently, pro-gun advocates have campaigned for arming teachers. Supporters of this prospect argue that allowing teachers to carry firearms in a school building would deter a shooting. This relates to the concept of collective security, which is the idea that armed citizens can protect themselves from crime when the police are unable to do so (Kelsay, Wareham, & Smith, 2018). Teachers are not police officers and should not be expected to carry a firearm. Additionally, many school administrators, teachers, and students are opposed to this idea over concerns of student fear (Soboroff, Lovekamp, & Jenkot, 2019).

Other debates about guns involve pro-gun control advocates, who argue restricting access to guns would help reduce the occurrence of school shootings. Studies on the effects of gun control on preventing school shootings are limited because of the infrequency of these attacks (Gius, 2018). However, there is evidence that suggests assault weapon bans do lessen the number of victims in a shooting (Gius, 2018). Additionally, strict gun laws can decrease the rate of gun-related deaths (Smith & Spiegler, 2020). Though gun control laws by themselves may not eliminate gun violence, they can be used in conjunction with policies that attempt to resolve the underlying causes of shootings. It is necessary to continue to study the relation between different gun control policies and gun violence.

The placement of SROs within schools is shown to negatively impact students. While it would be preferable not to have police in schools, their removal is very unlikely

to happen anytime soon. Because of this, it is important to properly train SROs, who have unique requirements compared to police that patrol the streets, such as the expectation to mentor students. The issue is that there “are no consistent training requirements” of SROs, and their training varies across cities and counties (Theriot & Orme, 2016, p. 131).

The lack of proper training can leave SROs unprepared to protect and serve the schools in which they work. The issue of training goes beyond just SROs, however. Law enforcement agencies need to be reformed. The current policing system prioritizes punishment and viewing citizens as threats. To place officers with that kind of training into schools can cause SROs to choose punishment over mentorship. Additionally, this can make students lose confidence in SROs. For SROs to properly monitor potential safety threats and help prevent a shooting, they need to be able to listen to students and focus on helping them, rather than punishing them. It may also be helpful for schools to invest more in counselors than police (Muschert & Addington, 2019).

Zero-tolerance policies are more likely to harm students than prevent violent behavior. These policies focus on punishing students without considering the causes of their behavior and can make students feel unsupported. Threat assessment is a promising alternative to zero-tolerance policies. Threat assessment is a process of evaluating students making threats to determine which threats are serious and which are not (Cornell, 2015; Cornell, Maeng, Burnette, Jia, Huang, Kanold, Datta, Malone, & Meyer, 2018; King et al., 2019). The goal is to develop a response plan to serious threats that protects potential victims and attempts to resolve the underlying cause of the threat (Cornell et al., 2018; King et al., 2019).

Studies of threat assessment have shown positive impacts on students and the school environment. By prioritizing helping students rather than punishing them, students are more likely to believe school administration wants the best for them. When this happens, students are more likely to seek help and report potential threats (Cornell et al., 2018; Muschert & Addington, 2019). Additionally, the use of threat assessment has helped lessen school suspensions, reduced aggression, and increased feelings of safety (Cornell et al., 2018). Because of this, more schools should consider implementing threat assessment policies rather than zero-tolerance policies.

Conclusion

School shootings are shockingly violent crimes that disturb our nation each time they occur, especially when many victims are involved. Though they are rare, these shootings result in the loss of young lives and traumatize the survivors. This violence has a profoundly negative impact on students and steps must be taken to protect them.

Columbine sparked the scramble to implement school security measures to protect students. Limited research suggests the presence of security can negatively impact students by increasing their fear. Continuing to implement these security measures could be justified, despite student fear, if they protected students and prevented gun violence. Current research is mixed, sometimes indicating some security measures do not have an impact on violence. Because of these results, more research is needed to create a clearer understanding of security and its impact on students, so long as the research can be conducted ethically. Additionally, schools should consider alternative security measures that are empirically supported.

There is no single solution to gun violence in schools. Rather, we must use multiple security measures and policies that have a statistically significant impact on gun violence. Using more than one method would help prevent school shootings and protect students, but discussions on which methods are best can become heated. Adults that can speak up and support students should do so. The protection of students and ensuring their right to live is not a political agenda — it is a necessity.

Generation Columbine

By

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Characters:

JAE: 16, F.

ARIN: 17, M.

CHARLIE: 16, F.

DAMION: 13, M. Scrawny.

KAYLA: 13, F. Short.

EMMA: 5, F.

DAD: 40, M.

OFFICER

REPORTER

STUDENT 1

STUDENT 2

STUDENT 3

STUDENT 4

Time: Now

Setting: For most of the scenes, the stage is empty. In scene 4, there is a couch, a television, and a small dining table with 4 chairs placed around it. The couch faces the audience, and the screen of the TV is not visible. In scene 7, there are several school desks for students to sit in.

SCENE 1

Lights up on JAE.

JAE

“What do you want to be?”
I’m very familiar with this question.
Many of us are, really.
What do I want to be?
What do I hope to be?
My answer has changed
over the years.
At three, I wanted to be a mermaid.
At six, I settled for being a sailor instead.
In middle school, I discovered I get very seasick.
I’m sixteen now and still unsure
of what my dream is.
I’d love to get out of my little town
and explore the world.
I’ll figure out the details someday.

JAE moves to the side but remains in view. As others enter, she listens and reacts to what they say, but they do not see her.

ARIN enters. He carries a textbook and reads it with a confused look on his face. ARIN looks up from the book.

ARIN

I want to be a painter. I’d move to a big city and capture every inch of it. I’ll show others how I see the world.

ARIN looks back down at his textbook, still confused.

But right now, I need to pass physics.

As ARIN exits, he bumps into KAYLA and DAMION.

KAYLA

I’m not sure what I want to be, but being a jockey always sounded fun.

You're definitely short enough.

DAMION

Shut up.

KAYLA

KAYLA pushes DAMION'S shoulder.

I know I want to be like my dad.

DAMION

The accountant? No offense to him, but that sounds boring.

KAYLA

No, my other dad.

DAMION

Oh, yeah. Being a firefighter suits you better.

KAYLA

KAYLA gestures to his scrawny frame. DAMION rolls his eyes at her.

Shut up.

DAMION

DAMION and KAYLA exit.

EMMA runs in with CHARLIE lagging behind.

Slow down, would ya?

CHARLIE

EMMA stops running and poses with fists on her hips.

I want to be a superhero.

EMMA

You can't be a superhero.

CHARLIE
(Chuckles.)

EMMA
Why not?

CHARLIE
Cuz they don't exist.

EMMA
Then I'll be the first one. What about you?

CHARLIE reaches EMMA.
CHARLIE sweeps her up, and
EMMA now sits on CHARLIE'S
shoulders.

CHARLIE
I want to be a pilot.

CHARLIE runs around. EMMA
raises her arms, pretending to be an
airplane. They both exit.

JAE
We've all got different dreams.
They might change over time,
but we eventually figure things out.
The key is to figure it out
before it's too late.

Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 2

Lights up.

CHARLIE

It isn't enough that nearly every day
we go to school and at some point
wonder to ourselves if today is the day
we lose our lives.
It isn't enough that I wonder
if my parents will be okay
if I died today.
It isn't enough I don't feel safe
anywhere I go,
including my own school.
Then there's those drills --
the "code red" or the
"active-shooter" drills.
I know they are meant to keep us safe
by teaching us how to act
in case of an emergency,
but they also remind us of
what could happen.
They remind us we aren't safe.

KAYLA enters.

KAYLA

I know the statistics.
Mass school shootings don't happen often.
This doesn't negate my fear.
This doesn't make me feel safe.
These shootings are unpredictable.
They might not happen frequently,
but they do happen.
And you don't know when or where
the next one will be.

CHARLIE

Some consider these drills
to be a necessary evil.
Sure, they might make us scared,
but at least they make us safe.
But do they?
They don't prevent shootings.
They're meant to lessen casualties

if one does occur.

KAYLA

Administration sometimes goes too far.
They won't tell us
it's just a drill.
In the middle of class,
or during class exchange as everyone
floods the halls,
the intercom crackles on
and we hear those dreaded words.

CHARLIE

We scramble into the nearest room and
teachers pull students out of the hall.
It's possible we don't know the teacher
or the other students in the room,
but there's the collective understanding
we might die together.

KAYLA

There's a checklist of things to do
during a code red.
Get in a room.

CHARLIE

Lock the door.

KAYLA

If the door has a window, cover it.

CHARLIE

Turn off the lights.

KAYLA

Shut the blinds.

CHARLIE

Hide. Make yourself as small as possible.

KAYLA

Be quiet as a mouse.

CHARLIE

Don't hide where you could be shot through the door.

KAYLA

Don't call anyone, not even your parents.
That way if someone calls 911, the lines won't be busy.

CHARLIE

They don't always tell us
it's just a drill.
So, for a few minutes
we sit in silent agony,
waiting to hear gunshots.
Thankfully, they never come
this time.

KAYLA

We eventually realize
we're safe.
It's only a drill.
But for those precious few minutes
a lot of us believe
today is the day.

CHARLIE

Some schools are worse than others.
They make students
simulate a real shooting.
An actor pretends to shoot students,
who must play dead.
An actor enters the classroom
and students must learn to
defend themselves.

KAYLA

During a shooting,
how can a room full of teenagers
or children
arm themselves with books, staplers, or scissors
and hope to survive
against a man with a gun?
Children should not fend for themselves.

Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 3

Lights up on KAYLA, DAMION,
and four other students.

KAYLA

Bad things happen
every day.
It's almost expected at this point.
New day, new tragedy.

STUDENT 1

What was that?

KAYLA

As observers, it's hard to not feel
hopeless
or powerless
or scared.

DAMION

Get the lights.

KAYLA

A part of you hopes
you'll always be safe.

STUDENT 2

The door — shut the door.

KAYLA

You have an idea of what it would be like
to live through such tragedy.

STUDENT 3

Did you lock it?

STUDENT 1
(whispers)

Shh.

STUDENT 3
(frantic)

Is it locked?

KAYLA

Whatever you imagine,
the reality is so much worse.

STUDENT 4

No, don't!

The students scream. KAYLA covers her ears, shuts her eyes, and drops to the ground, curling into a ball. STUDENT 1 backs away, STUDENT 2 grabs for STUDENT 3, STUDENT 4 falls. DAMION freezes in place. One by one, the lights on the students go dark, until KAYLA is the only one left.

After a few moments, KAYLA opens her eyes. She slowly stands up. KAYLA looks down at her shaking hands. She wipes them on her clothes.

KAYLA

I can't get their blood off my hands.
I can't get the images
of their bodies
out of my head.
I had to leave them behind.
Bad things happen
every day,
but some are so tragic
they hurt to talk about.

KAYLA loses her composure and cries. She sinks to her knees. As her grief consumes her, the lights go out.

End of Scene

SCENE 4

Lights up on a table with four chairs around it. Several feet away is a couch and a TV. CHARLIE enters and tosses her backpack onto one of the chairs.

I'm home!

CHARLIE

JOHN enters, wearing a cooking apron and holding a pan.

Dinner's almost ready. Mom said to get started without her.

JOHN

Another late shift?

CHARLIE

Mm-hmm...Hey, where's Emma?

JOHN

In the yard. She spotted some flowers.

CHARLIE

JOHN chuckles as he exits.

EMMA enters with a spring in her step. She wears a dirty soccer uniform, and her small hands clasp a bundle of dandelions.

Daddy, I found flowers!

EMMA

CHARLIE moves away from the table and sits on the couch. She turns on the TV. The noise coming from the TV is unintelligible.

JOHN enters carrying a small vase. He puts it on the table and helps EMMA place the dandelions in the vase.

EMMA

Perfect.

JOHN

Go wash up for dinner. You're filthy.

EMMA exits. The sound from the TV becomes clear, and a news reporter can be heard.

REPORTER

If you look behind me, you'll see that dozens of police vehicles have surrounded the school.

JOHN moves to stand behind the couch.

JOHN

What's happened?

CHARLIE

Looks like a shooting.

As JOHN and CHARLIE watch the news report, EMMA enters unnoticed. She stops and watches too.

REPORTER

Shortly after two o'clock, a gunman entered the school and opened fire on students in their classrooms.

JOHN

Jesus.

REPORTER

At this moment, we don't know how many have been injured.

EMMA

Is somebody hurt?

CHARLIE and JOHN both jump as they now notice EMMA. CHARLIE quickly turns the TV off.

JOHN
No, no. They'll be fine, honey.

EMMA
What happened?

CHARLIE
Nothing, just —

JOHN
Hey, do you wanna help finish cooking dinner?

EMMA
Oh, um, sure.

EMMA and JOHN exit. When they leave, CHARLIE looks at the turned-off TV and runs a tired hand over her face. Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 5

Lights up on KAYLA.

KAYLA

What to call it?
“Crime” isn’t a strong enough word.
This is a tragedy.
It is despicable.
It is vicious.
I can’t find all the words.
How do I describe
what took my friend away?
My sorrow is overwhelming,
but so is my anger.
I turn on the TV,
and there’s his face.
I must hear his name.
He killed Damion, yet
I have to hear
how “good” of a kid he really is.
They don’t talk about Damion
or the others.
To outsiders,
this is a bullet point
on an growing list
of disasters.
But for me,
I can’t sleep
because all I see is
my classmates’ blood.
I replay it over and over again
and wonder why the bullets missed me.
I don’t deserve to be the one
left behind.
These thoughts never leave me
thanks to the kid
behind the gun.
But sure,
He’s “good” at heart.

Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 6

Lights up. CHARLIE enters.

CHARLIE

Sometimes,
no,
frequently
I think about what I would do
during a shooting.
I look around the room
and find the safest hiding spot
or what could be used as a weapon.

EMMA enters and stands near
CHARLIE. A police siren wails, and
EMMA watches the vehicle go past.
After it passes, EMMA tugs on
CHARLIE'S sleeve.

EMMA

Charlie? Was there a bad man at your school?

CHARLIE

A bad man?

EMMA

The one on TV last night.

CHARLIE

Oh no, that wasn't my school.

EMMA

What if a bad man comes to mine?

CHARLIE

Hey, hey, that's not going to happen, alright? I promise.

EMMA

But what if it does? How do I stay safe?

CHARLIE sighs, readying herself to
speak.

CHARLIE

Run if you can.

Hide if you can't.
Always stay quiet.

EMMA

What if the bad man tries to get in the room?

CHARLIE

Hide or help barricade the door.

EMMA

What if he gets in?

CHARLIE and EMMA freeze.
DAMION enters. CHARLIE and
EMMA are unaware of DAMION.

DAMION

That's the hardest question.
"What do I do?"
It's a scenario that plays out
in a lot of students' minds.
We are not fantasizing.
We are preparing.
What if our teacher is shot?
Or a classmate, a friend?
How do I press a wound or tie a tourniquet?
What if I'm shot?
That preparation can go out the window, though,
as soon as the shooting starts.
In school, we're taught "run, hide, fight."
It's what we can do in a shooting.
They don't teach "freeze."
They don't prepare you for the fact that
some people freeze, unable to move because of
fear.

EMMA and CHARLIE unfreeze.

EMMA

Charlie, what should I do?

CHARLIE

I—I don't know.

DAMION

You don't know how you'll react
until it happens to you.
But by then, it might be too late.

Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 7

Lights up on ARIN. He stands alone. Behind him is a high school classroom with multiple students sitting in desks.

ARIN

Every time the fire alarm would go off at school
my friends and I wondered about the “what if...”
What if there isn’t a fire?
What if this isn’t even a drill?
What if a shooter pulled the alarm
to lure us out?
We would ask these questions and laugh
as if it were a joke —
it wasn’t a joke.
We laughed to cope with the very real possibility
that someday,
somewhere,
someone intent on killing students
would set a trap with the fire alarm.
We stopped laughing the day this
possibility became a reality.
During the Parkland shooting,
the killer pulled the fire alarm
before killing 17 people
and injuring 17 more.
Now the sound of a fire alarm
feels much more sinister.

A fire alarm begins blaring in the background. The students look at each other nervously, but no one moves.

ARIN

Students are taught to immediately stand and follow their teacher
as soon as the fire alarm goes off.
Things have changed.
Now, more students and teachers are aware
that what happened at Parkland
may happen in their own school.
We bear through the piercing screech of the alarm,
listening for gunfire.
It isn’t until we hear

other students in the hallway
that we realize it must be safe.

The fire alarm fades away. It is
replaced by the sound of people
walking and talking. The students in
the classroom stand and exit.

ARIN

A fire alarm used to represent just that —
evacuate in case of fire.
But there's so much more to it now.
I don't fear the threat of a fire in my school;
I fear the person who pulled that alarm.

ARIN exits. Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 8

Lights up. Several people stand behind yellow crime scene tape and watch what is happening beyond the tape. An OFFICER stands in front of them, making sure no one gets past. CHARLIE runs over.

CHARLIE
Please! I need to get through.

OFFICER
First responders only.

CHARLIE
My sister's here. I need to find her.

CHARLIE moves against the tape, and the OFFICER nudges her back.

OFFICER
I'm sorry. You'll have to wait.

A phone rings. CHARLIE brings out her phone and answers it.

CHARLIE
Mom? Mom!...It's blocked off...I—I don't know.

(CHARLIE begins crying.)

I haven't seen her.

A small group of children enter. They scan the area, confused and unsure where to go. Among them is EMMA.

CHARLIE
Oh my god! I see her — she's okay. Emma!

EMMA looks over and spots CHARLIE. EMMA seems frozen in place. CHARLIE puts away her phone, pushes past the cop, and runs

to her sister. She embraces EMMA, lifting her off the ground into her arms.

CHARLIE

You're okay. You're okay.

EMMA cries into CHARLIE'S shoulder.

EMMA

The bad man came. You promised he wouldn't.

CHARLIE

I know. I'm so sorry, Emma.

Still holding EMMA, CHARLIE sinks to her knees. The two sisters desperately cling to each other. Lights out.

End of Scene

SCENE 9

Lights up on JAE.

JAE

I know I said
we've all got different dreams.
That's still true,
but I also think a lot of us
have the same dream.
I think everyone
deep down
wants to change the world.
I know that's what every
youthful, hopeful
person says.
But it's less that we
want to change the world
and more that we
need to change it.
Look at the world around us.
It is broken.
We all know it, but we choose
to ignore it because that's easier
than facing reality.
I'm not always hopeful.
I lose my hope that people will
do the right thing.
I lose my hope that we'll all
be okay.
My generation has inherited a world
that is in shambles.
Often it feels like we're at a tipping point,
and it's up to my generation
to push everyone away
from the edge.
It feels like those with the power
to make a difference
are also the ones
doing nothing.
I grew up in this broken world,
and I've felt the need to fix it
for most of my life.
I should be worrying about
my next test,
getting my license,

or asking out my crush.
My main worry in life should not be
getting shot.
When we try to make a difference,
when we speak up for ourselves,
we are dismissed.
It feels like no one
will listen to us.
Will you listen when I die?
When a child you know dies?
You should be listening
well before that.
We are tired and
we are scared.
But we are still fighting for change.
I beg of you,
Help us.

Lights out.

End of Play

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