

Chapter 66

Collective Pain: Youth of Color Facing the Aftermath of Mass School Shootings

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ABSTRACT

Mass school shootings are infrequent and involve predominantly White perpetrators and victims; yet, they elicit intense social reactions without acknowledging race. In contrast, shootings in cities are frequent, affecting the lives of people of color. Connecting both, this chapter explores how youth of color experience mass school shootings and whether the gun-control movement incorporates their needs. Specifically, 114 youth of color participated in an interview (2013/2015), involving a socio-spatial exploration of their segregated metropolitan area near Newtown, Connecticut, where a young White man killed 26 students and staff members (2012). Furthermore, this exploration involved unobtrusive observation of Connecticut's March for Our Lives (2018). Youth of color were concerned with gun violence in relation to police brutality, crime, and mass school shootings. Those in predominantly White cities experienced the collective pain mass school shootings produce. In contrast, the predominantly White gun-control movement hardly acknowledged youth of color.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7464-8.ch066

INTRODUCTION

It was 9:30 A.M. on Friday, December 14, 2012, when a young-White man walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, with an automatic rifle (AR-15) and killed 20 students, 6 staff members, and himself. It was later found that the perpetrator had a complicated relationship with his mother, had been bullied and isolated at school, had suffered from mental illness, and could not accept his mother's decision to move, leading him to plan and carry out the attack (Blum & Jaworski, 2016; Bonanno & Levenson, 2014). Jackson¹, 15, an African-American boy, who resided in a nearby city and attended school in a neighboring suburb, stated, "I was shocked, 'cause they were little kids. But then again, that's not the first time it happened, like Columbine."² Gun violence hits here, there, and everywhere, so."

Although general violence is declining (Fox & DeLateur, 2014), gun violence is one of the top five leading causes of death in the United States of America (US) (Santilli et al., 2017). Killing 88 individuals a day, gun violence is concentrated in low socio-economic communities with Black individuals, on average, having heard gunshots more than once and having had a family member or close friend killed more than any other racial group (Santilli et al., 2017). In contrast, 10 mass shootings occur per year, on average, but media's heightened coverage increases the public's perception to the epidemic (Elsass, Schildkraut & Stafford, 2016). The odds that a child will die in school are "no greater than one in a million" (Culley, Conkling, Emshoff, Blakely & Gorman, 2006, p. 218) making the "nation's schools... amongst the safest places for children" (Pittaro, 2007, p.2). Yet, the US surpasses other industrialized nations in mass shooting and related casualties, and mass-school shootings leave students, teachers, and families to face the aftermath (Fast, 2003; Hagman, 2017; Lemieux, 2014; Nurmi, 2012).

Past research on mass-school shootings focused on the causes, including the factors that turn individuals into perpetrators and schools into targets (Bradford & Wilson, 2013; Malkki, 2014). Only recently have scholars begun to explore the aftermath of mass-school shootings, especially its impact on communities, youth, schools, and policy (Altheide, 2002; Hagman, 2017; Muschert, 2007; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). Moreover, gun violence is socio-spatially rooted, especially impactful for children, and a racial phenomenon (Elsass, Schildkraut & Stafford, 2016; Shuffelton, 2015; Xu & Griffiths, 2017). Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how students in Connecticut experienced the aftermath of the mass-school shooting in Sandy Hook Elementary School (hereafter MSS'26³).

More precisely, how youth of color, who resided and attended schools in segregated communities that vary in proximity to Newtown, perceive and experience gun violence, including MSS'26, and how Connecticut's *March for Our Lives* dealt with the concerns of youth of color. To address this research question, we conducted interviews with 114 boys and girls of color (2013 & 2015) and engaged in unobtrusive observation at Connecticut's *March for Our Lives* (2018). The grounded thematic analysis suggests that youth of color are concerned with gun violence in relation to police brutality, street crime, and MSS'26. Youth of color residing and attending schools in the suburbs expressed a deep concern for MSS'26 and engaged in the gun control debate. The predominantly-White gun control movement, however, only marginally incorporated their concerns. Before discussing the results, it is important to root this study in prior research.

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