



# A CRACK OPENS IN THE FALSE NARRATIVE ON GUN VIOLENCE



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*The youth movement against gun violence in America opens doors to a more constructive narrative that advances both gun violence prevention and the promotion of mental health.*

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This Saturday, half a million people are expected to join the March for Our Lives<sup>1</sup> event in Washington, D.C. to demand comprehensive gun safety legislation. More than 700 “sister marches” are planned across the United States. Media coverage will no doubt be intense.

Will it make a difference?

I pray that it will. Because the protests that have taken place<sup>2</sup> since the school shooting last month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, offer an unprecedented opportunity to shift the gun violence narrative in the United States in a more constructive direction.

## Narrative designed to protect the status quo

For years, the corporate gun lobby evoked America’s core value of freedom to fend off proposals to control guns. But with polls showing that 66 percent of Americans<sup>3</sup> support more-stringent gun laws, the corporate gun lobby needed a diversion. And the lobby found it in the increasing incidence of mass shootings. It reframed gun violence in that context, placing blame for the problem on mental illness<sup>4</sup> and pivoting away from gun policy.

In reality, mass shootings represent a fraction of gun violence. According to an online database, 471 people have

been killed and 1,573 people have been injured<sup>5</sup> in mass shootings in the nearly 10 months since May of last year. By comparison, an estimated 71,712 people were killed or injured by guns<sup>6</sup> (not including self-inflicted injuries or deaths) during the same 10 months. In other words, three percent of gun violence injuries or deaths occurred during mass shootings, while 97 percent did not.

But, as I wrote last year,<sup>7</sup> facts never pose much of a problem for those willing to spread false narratives to protect the status quo—in this case, the entrenched power of the corporate gun lobby.

In the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, the false narrative played out in a very predictable manner: Expressions of shock and sadness accompanied preemptive labeling of mental illness in the shooter, followed by assertions that it was “too soon” to talk about changes in gun policy.

The narrative might have continued in this way, with advocates for mental health correcting the record (just as they did after mass shootings in Las Vegas, Nevada, Newtown, Connecticut, and elsewhere), all the while falling deeper into the trap of trying to counter a false narrative from within the false narrative. It’s hard to fault mental health advocates for trying, since attention to mental health is seldom as sharp as in the aftermath of a mass shooting. But, as UC Berkeley Professor Emeritus George Lakoff wrote in a tweet on March 1, “When you repeat a false narrative for any reason (even to criticize it), you spread it and strengthen it.”<sup>8</sup>

1 [marchforourlives.com](http://marchforourlives.com)

2 [www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/school-walkout.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/school-walkout.html)

3 [time.com/5167216/americans-gun-control-support-poll-2018/](http://time.com/5167216/americans-gun-control-support-poll-2018/)

4 [ssir.org/articles/entry/changing\\_the\\_false\\_narrative\\_that\\_conflates\\_gun\\_violence\\_and\\_mental\\_illness](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/changing_the_false_narrative_that_conflates_gun_violence_and_mental_illness)

5 [www.massshootingtracker.org/data/2018](http://www.massshootingtracker.org/data/2018)

6 [www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics](http://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics)

7 [ssir.org/articles/entry/changing\\_the\\_false\\_narrative\\_that\\_conflates\\_gun\\_violence\\_and\\_mental\\_illness](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/changing_the_false_narrative_that_conflates_gun_violence_and_mental_illness)

8 [twitter.com/GeorgeLakoff/status/96911016228271287](https://twitter.com/GeorgeLakoff/status/96911016228271287)

## A crack appears

Then something remarkable happened: Along came a group of students from Parkland, Florida. And just as they were getting warmed up in drawing attention to gun policy in response to the mass shooting they had experienced, students from St. Sabina Academy and North Lawndale College Prep in Chicago opened their eyes to the wider reality of gun violence.

On March 3, the Chicago students sat down in Florida with their peers from Stoneman Douglas High School in a meeting arranged by Arne Duncan (the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and the US Secretary of Education under President Obama) and Father Michael Pfleger of St. Sabina Parish in Chicago.

After the meeting, Emma Gonzáles, a senior at Stoneman Douglas High School tweeted, “People of color in inner-cities and everywhere have been dealing with this for a despicably long time, and the media cycles just don’t cover the violence the way they did here.”<sup>9</sup>

In one tweet, she had cracked the issue wide open: The terrible consequences of exposure to gun violence; the implicit (if not explicit) racism in focusing on victims of mass shootings (who are mostly white), while paying little attention to people of color who experience that trauma every day; and the hypocrisy of concern masking a status quo determined to do nothing.

The consequences of gun violence on those who fall victim to it—or live each day in fear of it—are both well documented and profound, particularly on children and youth. According to a paper<sup>10</sup> co-authored by Loyola University Chicago Psychology Professor James Garbarino, “Children exposed to gun violence may experience negative short- and long-term psychological effects, including anger, withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, and desensitization to violence.”

Including gun violence as an adverse childhood experience<sup>11</sup> (ACE) is not new—Garbarino’s paper was published 17 years ago. And there have been campaigns over the years to educate parents about gun safety in the home to prevent children from accidentally harming themselves or others,



including the National Shooting Sports Foundation’s Project ChildSafe.<sup>12</sup> Prevention advocates have also employed the right to be safe from gun violence in the past. But, surprisingly, the impact of exposure to gun violence on children and youth has never been used broadly as the foundation for a new narrative about gun violence.

The racial justice implications of gun violence represent another angle that prevention advocates have not fully leveraged, which is remarkable considering the tremendous imbalance in the impact of gun violence depending on race. According to The Statistics Portal, 56 percent of victims of mass shootings in the United States from 1982 through February 2018 were white, while 16 percent were black.<sup>13</sup> Contrast that with the Brookings Institution’s 2015 report showing that black men in the United States are twice as likely to be killed by a gun than white men.<sup>14</sup> Children and youth of color are also much more affected by gun violence than their white peers. One study of Chicago elementary school children found that 25 percent of black children reported witnessing a person shot.<sup>15</sup>

The tweet by Emma Gonzáles and the March for Our Lives reflect an opportunity that has thus far eluded advocates: to reframe the narrative about gun violence by drawing on the well-documented science about the profound and lasting effects of exposure to trauma—including ACEs, and the social and racial justice implications of gun violence.

<sup>12</sup> [www.projectchildsafesafe.org/](http://www.projectchildsafesafe.org/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-race/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-race/)

<sup>14</sup> [www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/12/15/guns-and-race-the-different-worlds-of-black-and-white-americans/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/12/15/guns-and-race-the-different-worlds-of-black-and-white-americans/)

<sup>15</sup> [www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/09\\_03\\_2.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/09_03_2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [twitter.com/Emma4Change/status/970300516084301824](https://twitter.com/Emma4Change/status/970300516084301824)

<sup>10</sup> [www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/12\\_02\\_05.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/12_02_05.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/)

## What it will take

Ultimately, the March for Our Lives will carry the movement and the opportunity it represents only so far. Given the layers and complexity and tension between organizations and agencies focused on mental health and gun violence, it will take a collaborative and sustained effort, manifested in the shared ownership of a united message that does not yet exist, and to which neither sector has committed.

It will also take a willingness to think outside the box. Previous efforts to reframe gun violence as a public health crisis, for example, succeeded in galvanizing the public health field. But, the reframe was never destined to energize the general public. The impassioned and authentic first-person advocacy of youth across the United States post-Parkland provides a unique (and probably all-too-fleeting) opportunity to build on the foundation of the public health framing in ways that more effectively (and sustainably) accomplish that objective.

Of course, advancing a new narrative about gun violence is only one piece of the puzzle; the other imperative is to advance a new narrative about mental health. After all, decoupling mental illness from the narrative about gun violence will not automatically increase the public's understanding of—or our policymakers' investment in—mental health promotion, intervention, and treatment.

And while America's youth might be pointing the way toward a more constructive narrative on gun violence, there is no spontaneous grassroots movement in the offing to do anything similar on mental health. Yes, there are many organizations actively trying to change the narrative on mental health, but therein lies the problem: Without a single unified narrative, these disparate and sometimes competing frames run the risk of further confusing the issue rather than helping to clarify it.

Until the mental health sector can develop—and broadly and consistently apply—a new values-based narrative, advocates will continue to scramble for funding crumbs while playing defense—defense against a narrative that discriminates against people with a lived experience of mental illness and discourages them from seeking the treatment they might need.

Will any organization or collaboration stand up to drive the effort required? Will other organizations join it? Will any funder (public or private) step up to pay for it?

As the hackneyed journalistic closing would suggest, “Time will tell.”

For now, America's youth are pointing the way, one tweet and one step at a time. Will we follow?



## About the Author



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Kevin has worked as a journalist, a congressional aide, and a communication strategist and spokesperson for a national nonprofit organization, giving him deep experience in framing narratives on a wide range of issues. He is a principal in Metropolitan Group, a certified B Corp that crafts strategic and creative consulting services to help social purpose organizations build a just and sustainable world.



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