



Understanding Youth and Radicalizing Firearms Narratives To Build a Safer Future

By Aaron Flanagan

The epidemic of gun violence in the United States injects pain and trauma into communities every day. Consider K-12 schools, for example. Researchers at Everytown for Gun Safety have found: “Every year, more than 3,500 children and teens⁵⁷ are shot and killed, and 15,000 more are shot and injured⁵⁸. An estimated 3 million children⁵⁹ in the U.S. are exposed to shootings per year.” But such statistics only scratch the surface of rippling harms felt across families and communities.

Polarizing political schisms in our country have opened another dimension of danger. Published in the wake of the white supremacist attack on Black

community members in Buffalo, New York, polling by SPLC and Tulchin Research found that while levels of support for threats and violence generally do not differ substantially among partisans, 44% of Americans agreed that the “U.S. seems headed toward a civil war in the near future.” Online and offline, young people find themselves vulnerable to manipulative rhetoric related to firearms and gun violence. These firearm narratives are often premised on rigid, regressive gender roles and stoke

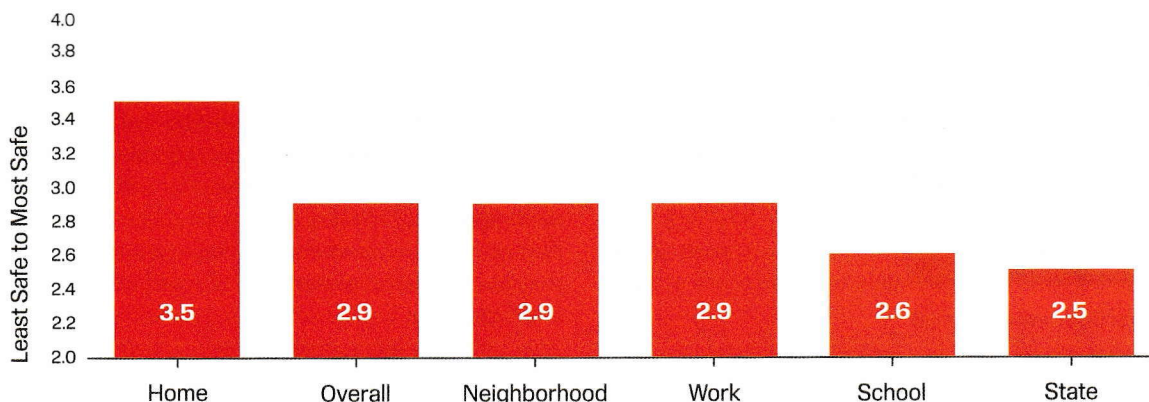
Pictured Above: Jennifer Hoppe, Senior Director of National Programs at Everytown for Gun Safety

Feelings of Safety Among Young Adults in the U.S.

How safe do you feel in your...

Average scores based on a 0-4 scale.

Safety scores with lower than the average of 2.92 indicate lower feelings of personal safety.



Source: SPLC/Everytown/PERIL survey used a sample recruited from the NORC AmeriSpeak Panel and supplemented using online survey platform Lucid. The survey is based on a nationally representative, weighted sample of 4,156 participants aged 14-30. Portions of the sample were recruited in-person. The survey fielding period was from September 16, 2022 – October 13, 2022.

racist fears about the need for protection to appeal more to young white men and boys.

“Youth have always been a vulnerable population for both radicalization and mobilization to violence,” Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, founding director of the Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Laboratory at American University (PERIL) explains, “in part because they are still figuring out who they are and who they want to be. This means it’s also an ideal time to intervene in ways that build resilience to manipulative propaganda and harmful online content. Parents, caregivers, and the broader network of trusted adults in communities can help build resilience by modeling kindness, empathy, and developing strategies to give youth a sense of control and efficacy in their lives.”

In responding to this critical moment, Everytown, PERIL and SPLC found shared concerns. Together, in the winter of 2021, we launched an innovative project to identify and study these radicalizing narratives related to firearms. With that research, our objective is to produce safe, effective resources designed to inoculate young people against such harm and manipulation.

At the project midpoint we’ve concluded a groundbreaking survey of over 4,100 young people between the ages of 14 and 30 (due out late Spring). Our findings from this nationally representative sample address knowledge gaps regarding young

people’s attitudes and will serve as the scientific foundation for our resources to come. In January 2023, we spoke to our strategic partners at Everytown and PERIL about these findings, what they found most concerning and hopeful, and about existing and future solutions to help safeguard our communities against these dangerous narratives.

Why was it important to conduct this groundbreaking survey? What results do you feel others urgently need to understand?

Everytown: Too often discussions about extremism, racism and misogyny leave out gun violence, despite the crucial role that guns play in violent extremism. Guns have become the leading cause of death for kids and teens in this country, and yet there is very little research of this quality and depth on youth attitudes toward firearms. This study provides us with critical information on how young people view and think about guns, which will in turn allow us to better understand the steps we can take to potentially disrupt the nexus between extremism and gun violence and to educate young people about guns and gun culture.

PERIL: Gun violence is both a cause and an outcome of radicalization to violent extremism. The trauma, precarity and general state of fear produced

How easy or difficult is it for you to access a gun?

■ Under 18 ■ Aged 18-30

Very/Somewhat Easy

24.5%

46.9%

Neither Easy Nor Difficult

21.0%

28.5%

Very/Somewhat Difficult

54.4%

24.7%

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by a society overflowing with weapons produces so many of the key conditions that help to prime young people for radicalization to political violence. At the same time, we see how chronic structural injustices like white supremacy and patriarchy are themselves motivators for the spread of gun ownership and gun violence. This is a dynamic that we have to understand better, especially as it affects young people who are the most vulnerable to it.

A range of our partnership's survey findings demonstrate that a majority of youth and younger people feel unsafe in their schools. Given our findings about the fear, worry and trauma related to gun violence that young people live with, what are the long-term effects on the mental health of young people having to live with such negativity?

PERIL: It can't be overstated how damaging it is to young people to live with this kind of mental distress. Watching repeated mass shootings covered in the news and on social media can engender feelings of fear, hypervigilance and hopelessness. Students and young people are responding rationally

to the very real threat of violence in their schools, in their local shopping centers and in their neighborhoods. On average, youth know at least one person who has been injured or killed by guns, over 25% of young people in our study have been in a live active shooter lockdown, and 69% have been trained in how to mitigate these threats and protect themselves via active shooter drills. These experiences can lead to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic distress and a general sense that they are not safe in their state, in their school and in public. Seeing adults in their lives and politicians in their government ignoring or failing to adequately respond to these threats can lead young people to conclude that they are not safe now and that this will not change any time soon.

Which public places are youth and younger people feeling most at-risk for gun violence, and what policies do you think would best support them in mitigating these feelings of fear?

Everytown: Gun violence occurs in public and private places, and young people are at-risk of gun violence in their schools, malls, movie theaters, houses of worship, in the community and in their homes. School shootings make up a small proportion of overall gun violence but have an outsized effect on feelings of safety due to the seemingly random nature and persistent threat. The data shows how common-sense solutions can create healthy, positive school climates while reducing the risk of gun violence. School shooters are nearly always students or recent former students who showed warning signs that were observed ahead of time and accessed an unsecured firearm from the home of a family or friend. Positive school climates, tools for identifying students in crisis and developing student-centered intervention plans and ensuring guns in the home are securely stored can stop school shootings before they start. Proposals such as adding more police in schools, arming teachers, intense active shooter drills and "zero tolerance" discipline policies have not been shown to make schools safer and can actually cause harm to students of color or those with disabilities. The data shows we can meet student fear with healthy, evidence-informed solutions.

What role can adults play in spearheading conversations about responsible gun ownership, the risks associated with unsecured guns and

secure firearm storage in an effort to normalize gun safety as part of American culture?

Everytown: Data shows that secure gun storage is a proven way to reduce unintentional shootings and gun suicide among youth (which is on the rise), as well as reducing the number of guns in schools. Yet, an estimated 54% of gun owners do not lock up all of their guns. Storing guns so that they are inaccessible to kids—and any other unauthorized person—is one of the most important things a gun owner can do in the interest of safety. And whether or not one owns a gun, all adults can help to destigmatize conversations about gun safety and secure firearm storage. Simply asking friends or family members about how their guns are stored and encouraging others to practice secure storage can go a long way to reducing youth access to guns. Adults should feel empowered to have thoughtful, pragmatic conversations about the importance of securely storing firearms so that they are not accessible to kids and unauthorized people.

In our survey, we tested the “Male Supremacy Scale” developed by Dr. Pasha Dashtgard of PERIL and the “Racial Resentment Scale.” What was most concerning about the findings as they correlate to radicalizing narratives regarding ownership of firearms?

PERIL: There is a clear and intentional connection being made between gun ownership and masculinity by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other pro-gun entities/institutions. Pro-gun organizations prey on the insecurities of boys and men who wish to affirm and display their manliness by suggesting that purchasing guns and participating in “gun culture” will grant you status as a tough, strong, real, “Alpha” man. When you combine this with the way boys and men are socialized to be “independent” (i.e. isolated, lonely and with less friends/a smaller social network than their female counterparts) and the stigma around men seeking and receiving mental health support when they are struggling, you can then begin to make sense of the shocking/tragic relationship between masculinity and gun-related suicides.

Our partnership has come together to deliver safe, effective solutions and your respective organizations work every day to help prevent violence in communities and schools across the

country. What about our findings gives you the most hope?

Everytown: There was a wide consensus among the young people interviewed for this study that gun violence is a serious problem and that gun laws can make a difference. Evidence shows that policies like background checks, assault weapons ban, extreme-risk laws, violence intervention programs, etc. can reduce gun violence. These results demonstrate that young people are aware of how serious an issue this is and that there are solutions to this crisis, which make us hopeful that young people will support commonsense solutions such as those outlined above.

PERIL: The problem of gun violence and the power of pro-gun propaganda can feel overwhelming. But this work shows that those things can be analyzed, and their key elements can be addressed in a conscious, intentional manner. This work shows that we must treat the legitimate fears of violence and victimization, which young people wrongly believe guns will solve. But this work also shows how fear can grow out of racial and gender stereotypes, which are illegitimate and need to be corrected. It’s crucial to disentangle the legitimate and illegitimate concerns that lead young people to see guns as a solution, and this work gives us hope that can be done. ●

Resources for Countering Firearm Narratives and Supporting Young People



Everytown: Armed Extremism

everytown.org/issues/armed-extremism



Impact of Gun Violence on Children & Teens Fact Sheet

everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens



Everytown: Action Recommendations

everytown.org/actions



PERIL Research

perilresearch.com



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