



## STILL UNSAFE IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS

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*Editor's Note: NEJRSP is committed to publishing voices from throughout our community, and throughout our systemic hierarchies*

My name is Olivia Damas. I'm 15 years old and I will be entering my sophomore year of high school.

According to the Washington Post, there have been 311,000 students who have been exposed to school shootings since Columbine in 1999 (St. George, 2022). In my 15 years of life, there have been 251 school shootings in the United States. According to analysis, black students make up 16.6% of the student population; however they experience school shootings at twice that rate (33%). Not only am I a student who's concerned about their safety, but also I have to remain cognizant that as a student of color, my risk of exposure to gun violence in school significantly increases.

For 40+ hours a week and 180 days in the school year, I, like thousands of other students in the U.S., remain fearful about going to school.

I'm afraid. That is not okay.

The night I received news about the tragic shooting of 19 innocent kids and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, I cried and mourned the precious lives lost before agonizing over how this horror of a massacre could happen yet again. I was so petrified that I tried to fake a stomachache so I wouldn't have to go to school the next day. Maybe the stomachache wasn't so fake after all, however, because for the next few weeks my stomach was in pain from the overload of anxiety I had for the eight hours of a school day. I didn't even want to participate in afternoon activities or sports because it meant being in the building longer than what was absolutely necessary. To me, even one minute in a school facility could be the difference between life or death.

After Uvalde, the entire direction of the remainder of the school year was shifted. A part of me wished we could go back to the online learning we had during the COVID pandemic. At least then safety would be guaranteed.

There were several occasions where I jumped or screamed at the sound of a loud noise during class, petrified that the “school shooter drill” training we received would be put to use. The hypervigilance I held felt like a toxic combination of déjà vu and PTSD, and it was exhausting. My grades started to drop because I couldn’t fully focus in class, and even school itself didn’t feel real, but more like a simulation in which we were being prepared for an ambush attack. The threat came in from everywhere: strangers, classmates, the non-bulletproof glass of doors and windows, and even the time outside campus. I felt trapped.

To add fire to fury, the school bus in my area had to be stopped during mid-afternoon drop off because a student’s hit-list got exposed.

Now that school shootings have been executed so many times and in so many different ways, I think people are starting to see that mass murder as an option. A last resort maybe, but an option nonetheless. I’ve even heard “jokes” about it on my own school campus. People say things like, “You should wear red tomorrow,” or even say to just not come to school the next day at all.

Just like that, education and safety were snatched in a flash. Even during my summer camp at a boarding school, a student had to be sent home for bringing a gun and threatening someone with it.

Instead of English class, I was in a corner holding my friend’s hand and holding my breath as we were squished against a corner where the shooter wouldn’t see us. I distinctly remember thinking two main things:

- 1) “This is not normal.”
- 2) “This should not be happening.”

I felt the need to remind myself not to get comfortable with the situation because comfortability wouldn’t bring change. To run a drill is to train for a particular reaction in a situation. A fire drill is designed to help people survive in the event of a fire, but not necessarily how to prevent a fire. An active shooter drill is to prepare us to protect ourselves when a shooter enters our school with an assault rifle that was specifically designed for mass killings. Trying to reassure students that they will be safer by practicing the active shooter drill is like you asking me to believe that we can remove all the water from the ocean floor with a cotton swab.

Before Uvalde, I had hoped that by the time my two-year-old sister was in high school like me, shootings would cease completely and she would be safe. Now that even elementary schools can’t be trusted, my concerns for her starting preschool have skyrocketed.

I know I'm not alone in my concerns over our safety; however, I often feel helpless and unheard by the larger groups who are capable of making lasting changes. Instead of focusing on a reactive response, how about we start looking at ways to prevent further shootings?

I encourage parents, educators, community members, and everyone who comes in contact with a youth to be attentive. Listen to the needs of the children, care for them, attend to them, and seek help for them. After all, it does take a village to raise a child. Let's support each other so we can have a safer world for all.

#### References

St. George, D. (2022, June 28). School shootings rose to highest number in 20 years, federal data says. *The Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/06/28/school-shootings-crime-report/>