

Students Demanding Action Against Gun Violence for Different Identities

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HNR 340: Youth, Power, and Social Movements

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November 15, 2022

Introduction

Youth led social movements have been fairly new and started picking up speed during the 1950s and 60s. Many movements have set up their organization to be focused on certain individuals who are affected by the issue. Students Demand Action is an organization that has framed gun violence towards specific identity groups. While it is important that Students Demand Action frames the impact of gun violence for different identity groups, it is challenging for the movement to account for all the factors that are present regarding effects of gun violence on certain identities.

Background

Students Demand Action is a youth-led movement that started in 2016 – just two weeks after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting. With it being a branch off its parent organization Everytown for Gun Safety, youth leaders have created over 500 groups across the country. The Students Demand Action website is full of information on how they started as an organization, personal stories from victims and members of the organization, and solutions on how to combat gun violence.

When first opening the website, the fact that gun violence is the leading cause of death for young people in the United States is one of the first blurbs shown. This demonstrates the gravity of this issue in the country. It also immediately points out that it is the leading cause of death for “young people.” This shows how the organization is looking at the issue of gun violence through a youth frame as they are the ones running the movement. Under the “our approach” tab there are explanations of how Students Demand Action are trying to alleviate gun violence. They mention that they work towards advocating for common-sense gun safety laws, educating peers on gun safety issues and solutions, and registering new voters. This is an

important thing to include because it is the basis of their entire organization. However, you are not able to click on each box for what they are working towards to learn more which is a limitation. The website also contains a “what we do” tab in which they explain that they have turned to social media to uplift the voices of survivors. Social media, as discussed in class, has become a crucial mechanism for youth movements to organize and spread awareness. However, social media does have its flaws such as the increase in misinformation and lack of mobilization and action after posting.

It was also interesting to look at the “who are we” tab to learn more about the leadership within Students Demand Action. Some of the leaders are gun violence survivors or were outraged after the Parkland shooting. Others lived close to Parkland or in an area with high rates of gun violence, so they have felt the effects of shootings in their community. This brings up the point that gun violence does not just impact the victims but the community as a whole.

Elaboration of Selected Theme

The area of focus for this project is how Students Demand Action frames what they are fighting for towards specific identity groups. More specifically, evaluating the importance of reaching out to people of different identities and the challenges that go along with that is important to note. The framing theory emphasizes the importance of a movement creating cultural meanings within the movement. Furthermore, the leaders of the movement frame the issues in certain ways to identify injustices, allocate blame, brainstorm solutions, and motivate the movement for collective action¹. Frames aim to highlight certain points about a subject to connect better to specific audiences. The movement also provides a collective identity for

¹ Entman, Robert M. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

individuals with a collection of different stories of people who have experienced gun violence. Having a collective identity of shared experiences and values connects people and motivates them that they can create change². This tactic is best explained as collective action which captures the meaning and ideas that are in protest inspiring more to join the movement³. Furthermore, this movement falls under the category of a new social movement since it is striving towards making large-scale changes regarding gun law reform and they have everyday networks in which they operate. Since this is such a sensitive and deadly topic that has touched many, there is a lot of emotion riding behind this cause. Moral outrage can lead to people joining a movement so that they can use their anger to make change⁴.

Gun Violence Impact on Black Community

The organization has a tab in their facts section about the impact of guns on the black community. Within that tab, it is explained that Black Americans are ten times more likely to die by gun homicide than white Americans⁵. This demonstrates the disparities between these two racial groups in relation to gun violence. The organization also states the importance to consider community trauma as well. Historical violence and oppression against Black Americans through slavery, predatory housing, and banking practices has set them at a disadvantage to experience gun violence more often⁶. With that, the underinvestment in health care, schools, and housing for also leads to higher rates of gun violence.

² Staggenborg, Suzanne. (2016). "Theories of Social Movements and Collective Action," *Social Movements* Oxford University Press.

³ Staggenborg (n 2)

⁴ Staggenborg (n 2)

⁵ "Students Demand Action." Students Demand Action, August 31, 2022. <https://studentsdemandaction.org/>.

⁶ Students Demand Action (n 5)

As mentioned, there is a deep history to explain the disparities in resources by race in the United States. Gains in income and residential mobility have specifically increased protections for whites compared to Black individuals. These inequities have greatly increased throughout COVID as the social and economic situation has worsened⁷. Thus, it is important to look at personal stories and the community as a whole, which Students Demand Action highlights.

A strong aspect that Students Demand Action focuses on is personal stories of individuals within the Black community who have been impacted by gun violence. One story that was mentioned was that of an individual who grew up in the crack era of Philadelphia and the height of gun violence in the city⁸. He explained that many people in his community died from gun use and he didn't believe that he would live past 21 years old. Another story was that of a 12-year-old boy who watched his friend get shot. He explained how this forced him not to care about childhood things and grow up quicker. This is a common narrative within the Black community since exposure to gun violence as a child is so common. This exposure can lead to anger, withdrawal, poor school performance, anxiety, and sleep issues⁹. Thus, these individuals are more likely to commit violent acts as a sense of safety.

With that, individuals in the Black community often feel trapped in the biases of others. So, they search for themselves in gangs and try to create a persona of someone to be feared. This leads to more abusive relationships including violence as it is seen as the norm¹⁰. Similarly, this internalized racism leads to aggressive behaviors as they are continuously viewed as

⁷ Kravitz-Wirtz, Nicole, Angela Bruns, Amanda J. Aubel, Xiaoya Zhang, and Shani A. Buggs. "Inequities in Community Exposure to Deadly Gun Violence by Race/Ethnicity, Poverty, and Neighborhood Disadvantage among Youth in Large US Cities." *Journal of Urban Health* 99, no. 4 (2022): 610–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-022-00656-0>.

⁸ Students Demand Action (n 5)

⁹ Students Demand Action (n 5)

¹⁰ Students Demand Action (n 5)

underachievers and thugs¹¹. The trauma of survivors of gun violence affects them emotionally too. Everyday feelings of being scared or overwhelmed is common for the individual and community too. Trauma from gun violence also leads to people being less likely to intervene when they see violence happening. Adults on the streets are less likely to contribute to a safer community which heightens the violence going on¹². Sharing personal stories and trauma unites communities through shared narratives.

To create a community, Black women have turned to Twitter to create a forum challenging the mainstream narrative about their race¹³. Black women are often portrayed in media as “fast-tailed” meaning that they are overly eager or sexually promiscuous¹⁴. With that, Black women are more likely to be in abusive relationships that involve sexual assault. Twitter is used as a resource to amplify, connect, and nurture these marginalized voices who have experienced assault¹⁵. Different hashtags on Twitter such as #youoksis and #sayhername are both means of remembering women of color who have been victims of violence and continues the conversation on harassment of Black women¹⁶. Using Twitter to create a community within the greater Black community is crucial. This connects to how Students Demand Action aims to amplify voices of the Black community on their personal stories of gun violence affecting them.

¹¹ Hemenway, David, and Matthew Miller. “Public Health Approach to the Prevention of Gun Violence.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 368, no. 21 (2013): 2033–35. <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmsb1302631>.

¹² Students Demand Action (n 5)

¹³ “Visions of Black Feminism: #Fasttailedgirls, #YOUOKSIS, #Sayhername.” *#HashtagActivism*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10858.003.0006>.

¹⁴ Visions of Black Feminism (n 12)

¹⁵ Visions of Black Feminism (n 12)

¹⁶ Visions of Black Feminism (n 12)

Students Demand Action also includes the important fact that young Black men are 21 times more likely to be shot or killed by police than white individuals¹⁷. The intricacies of the prison system and the privatization of prisons has affected the Black community. The inmates are forced to perform jobs in prison and guards encourage them to fight and place bets on who they think will win. When an inmate is released, they are given next to no resources to take control of their life again¹⁸. Hogan similarly discusses this as he goes into the intricacies of racial disparities of the prison system for sentencing for crack vs powder cocaine offenses. He mentions that while both are the same drug in different forms, Black individuals are more likely to use crack since it is cheaper, and crack has a higher sentencing¹⁹. These specifics are not mentioned by Students Demand Action but are crucial to include because it gives a greater picture of why criminalization and police interaction should not be the main solution to gun violence.

Mass incarceration of Blacks has created a strong lack of trust within the leading to more violence within the community. This further impacts these individuals' performance in school, so they are at a higher risk of dropping out. Hogan, similar to Students Demand Action, proposes promoting government budgets that reinvest in communities instead of incarceration of Blacks²⁰.

Gun Violence Impact on LGBTQ+ and Latinx Community

While Students Demand Action has the most information that frames gun violence within the Black community, they also mention the impact on the Latinx and LGBTQ+ communities

¹⁷ Students Demand Action (n 5)

¹⁸ Schlosser, Eric. "The Prison-Industrial Complex," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1998. (p. 63-77).
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>

¹⁹ Hogan, Wesley C. *On the Freedom Side: How Five Decades of Youth Activists Have Remixed American History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

²⁰ Hogan (n 18)

due to hate crimes. There are about 10,300 hate crimes in the United States per year and guns are used in about 28 of those hate crimes each day²¹. While the organization mentions hate crimes, they focus more on Latinx in relation to gun violence and little on the LGBTQ+ community. Gun owners are predominately white, conservative, married, heterosexual and cisgender men²². Similar to Black individuals, LGBTQ+ people may not trust police interactions against homophobic violence due to the opposite demographic, so these individuals are as likely to use guns in self-defense as Black individuals are²³.

One of the stories presented by Students Demand Action describes how three Latinx girls felt motivated to start a no gun podcast²⁴. This platform has allowed them to share their viewpoints on current events and gun violence legislation. Amplifying the voices of marginalized groups is crucial to get their perspective heard.

There has been an influx of Latinx individuals moving to the United States from Puerto Rico due to an increase in the cost of living. With that, in Puerto Rico there is institutionalized homophobia. This is exemplified by the protest that was held in Puerto Rico against same-sex marriage²⁵. The culture of the Latinx community and their opinions of LGBTQ+ individuals is important to consider in relation to gun violence.

Students Demand Action further provides a story of an individual who is Latinx and queer. She explains how the Pulse nightclub shooting made her scared to embrace her identity

²¹ Students Demand Action (n 5)

²² Combs, Thatcher Phoenix. "Queers with Guns? against the LGBT Grain." *Sociological Perspectives* 65, no. 1 (2021): 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214211021122>.

²³ Combs, Thatcher Phoenix (n 20)

²⁴ Students Demand Action (n 5)

²⁵ Kalish Blair, Zachary Shane. "The Pulse Nightclub Shooting: Connecting Militarism, Neoliberalism, and Multiculturalism to Understand Violence." *North American Dialogue* 19, no. 2 (2016): 102–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nad.12049>.

and come out to her family²⁶. Black trans and queer women experience the most gun violence against them, so this is a common story for these individuals. That is why it is important to recognize LGBTQ+ individuals and their struggles with gun violence too.

Challenges

While this movement is inspirational in many ways and seems to be successfully well-run, there are some challenges that they face with trying to advocate for a variety of different identities. It is hard to advocate for all identities, so it is common that certain groups of people are not mentioned. Thus, those groups are less likely to join the movement as they are not represented. It is hard to advocate for a certain identity if no one in the movement is that identity. There is a need to recruit an extremely diverse group of people to share their stories and experiences which is tough. Another limitation of the website and movement is that not everyone has a sense of the impact of gun violence. It could be interesting for the organization to reach out to members in the community to get a sense of what they think is the impact vs what it really is to get them to join the movement.

Another drawback on the movement is that I had to specifically search “Latinx” and “LGBTQ+” in the search box to get access to personal stories from members of these communities. This was a surprise since the website frames the issue towards impacting identities differently, but they do not make it easy to find resources on the impacts on identities differently.

Solutions

Students Demand Action successfully states many solutions towards gun violence prevention. One of their solutions is to add background checks to all gun sales. As of right now, there is no requirement for background checks for guns sold by unlicensed sellers who sell guns

²⁶ Students Demand Action (n 5)

at gun shows or online²⁷. The organization further points out that background checks have blocked more than 4 million sales to people prohibited by law from having guns²⁸. This is crucial to point out to prove that background checks make actual change, so implementing more of them would have a significant outcome.

Another solution proposed by the organization is to amplify the voices of young Black individuals. Amplifying their voices helps train them to advocate for policies that could prevent gun violence in the long run. Another crucial aspect regarding a solution for Black individuals is investing in basic needs and programs to reduce violence overall. One aspect of this involves more mental health resources. More specifically, the website mentions prolonged exposure, cognitive processing therapy, and trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy as resources²⁹. This type of therapy would help these individuals learn less violent responses to conflict and reinforces that there is no shame in seeking help.

However, the organization does mention that there are barriers for Blacks to receive mental health services. There is a lack of health insurance or convenient access to services and a lack of trust that mental health professionals can relate to their experiences³⁰. This is due to the history of oppression against Black individuals in the country which has impacted them emotionally and economically. This oppression is accounted for by the organization as they mention increasing economic opportunities by creating more jobs. Jobs give meaning and routine to one's life and is important in getting them out of the mantra that violence is the only answer³¹. While this was important for the organization to point out, it is easier said than done. They fail to explain how to create more jobs so there isn't a specific plan set.

²⁷ Students Demand Action (n 5)

²⁸ Students Demand Action (n 5)

²⁹ Students Demand Action (n 5)

³⁰ Students Demand Action (n 5)

³¹ Students Demand Action (n 5)

Another important solution in relation to the Black is to hold police accountable. The organization points towards having a legal means of barring unnecessary police use of force which would require police to stop law enforcement abuse. There needs to be more transparency about use-of-force procedures and policies so it is easier to pinpoint when the use of force was unnecessary. It is also imperative to build positive community-police relationships through procedural justice³². However, the organization does not go further into how to create a better relationship which is a limitation.

Students Demand Action also pointed towards community-based violence intervention programs as a solution. This would be a more localized approach for individuals at highest risk of being in a shooting and possibly healing from trauma³³. This again reinforces that gun violence doesn't only affect those who are present during the shooting, but its effects ripple out to the entire community. Along with that, improving the community holds a strong importance. Students Demand Action describes this as crime prevention through environmental design meaning fixing abandoned buildings, planting flowers in parks, cleaning vacant lots, and lighting unsafe spaces³⁴. This solution was not mentioned in other scholarly sources I read but is of great importance. If the community looks more put together and safe, there is a lesser chance of violence overall.

Students Demand Action also focuses their solutions on hate crimes. Most hate crimes are counted as misdemeanors, but misdemeanors are not considered a high enough offense under federal law to stop people from getting guns. These individuals are still able to pass a background check and get a gun. To solve this, Students Demand Action proposes adding

³² Students Demand Action (n 5)

³³ Students Demand Action (n 5)

³⁴ Students Demand Action (n 5)

misdemeanors to state gun laws. Furthermore, they are fighting for the Disarm Hate Act which would amend federal law to include violent misdemeanors considered a hate crime in background checks for guns. The organization urges for more extreme risk laws which would allow a person to get a court order to temporarily remove guns from a dangerous situation if there are evident warning signs. These are strong solutions that are framed towards hate crimes that affect certain identity groups but not any one identity specifically.

The United States has the most guns, but the weakest gun laws with higher rates of gun homicide, gun suicide and accidental gun death. Different solutions from scholarly sources propose that gun manufacturers produce guns with unique serial numbers that cannot be easily destroyed and new pistols with ballistic fingerprinting. This would reduce the likelihood that criminals could be able to use a stolen gun. Another solution mentioned is that guns need to be childproof so if they are dropped, they won't go off accidentally³⁵. I think it is interesting that these solutions were not mentioned by Students Demand Action. However, the organization proposed solutions that are more specific towards certain groups and communities rather than safety features of the guns themselves.

On the other hand, scholarly sources presented solutions for identities that are similar to those presented by Students Demand Action. A stress is put on understanding the underlying root causes of gun violence to support the Black community³⁶. Also, implementing community programs to improve Black youth's self-image and provide them with a mentor is crucial. This focus on self-expression also leads to sharing of experiences and their expressions of trauma

³⁵ Bailey, Annette, Renee Bailey, Divine Velasco, and Michelle Jubin. "Race, Trauma, and Gun Violence: A Case for Public Health." In *Gun Violence and Gun Control: Critical Engagements*, edited by Annette Bailey, Thomas S. Harrison, and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich, 115–36. Demeter Press, 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2ndwxcg.10>.

³⁶ Hemenway, David, and Matthew Miller (n 10)

related to emotions³⁷. This presents the viewpoint of the Students Demand Action community programs to amplify the self-image of Black youth as a way to prevent future gun violence.

Broader Significance

Students Demand Action is working towards changing the way gun violence is viewed in the common narrative by recognizing its effects on different identities in different ways. The topic of social movements framing their issue towards specific identity groups reveals that social movements are ever-changing and becoming more specific. They work together with the community members in order to strengthen their network and include real stories of these identity groups. Framing issues for certain groups is crucial, as shown by Students Demand Action, since impacts are different for different groups due to historical and social factors. To be an effective social movement, it is important to have a place where there is a community within the movement. This makes individuals more comfortable and gives them a collective identity and safe space to share personal experiences. Overall, social movements are powerful in enacting change, and it all starts with one individual wanting to make a change.

³⁷ Hemenway, David, and Matthew Miller (n 10)

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