

Guns, Violence, and Peace in America: An Essay on the Integral Components of Building a Peaceful Future

This document was originally released as a series of short essays. It has been edited for length and continuity.

In the wake of the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, the need has become apparent to shift the conversation on gun violence in the U.S. as the argument of “gun control” versus “gun rights” has proven inadequate in addressing the complexity of the problem at hand.

Even with the passage of the “Safer Communities Act”, few of the root causes of gun violence have been even tangentially addressed. While the bill implements higher penalties for straw purchases, and makes some other positive changes, it fails to limit the ballooning number of semi-automatic rifles, or prosecute gun manufacturers and lobbyists who seek to profit from each mass shooting and the resulting hysteria.

Gun violence in America is endemic, systemic, and multifaceted, requiring a holistic understanding and approach. We believe that a collective, progressive vision must aim to reduce and eliminate the violence which millions are subjected to on a daily basis, and end the exploitation, alienation, oppression, poverty and competition that fuel violence.

In this essay, we will demonstrate how our peace pillars provide a framework of understanding, and a roadmap to building a world without gun violence. The aim is not only to break down the current crisis but discuss our plans to change the zero-sum conversation about guns and violence.

We must address the systemic violence of poverty, racism, homophobia and misogyny

Those familiar with our work will recognize that we regard racism ([Anti-Racism Pillar](#)) and poverty ([Anti-Poverty - Pillar](#)) as systematic barriers to a peaceful society. While media coverage and public outrage have declined, the ongoing violence against migrants crossing the border, the expansion of ICE detention facilities, and use of Title 42 Expulsions is merely the most recent chapter in a long saga.

As a matter of course, we should begin by addressing the fact that the White House occupant has little bearing on the American culture of violence. Maintaining the status quo of racism and poverty requires individuals and organizations willing to use and tolerate violence as means maintaining political stability.

Native genocide and slavery are the foundation of this ongoing violence of racist organizations, which empower and reinforce the violence meted out against working people, women, BIPOC , and LGBTQ people. Acknowledgement of the history of reactionary vigilantes targeting

oppressed peoples, and their right to self defense in the face of indifference, or active participation by police in this violence, is necessary to building a strong and inclusive movement.

The 2nd Amendment was added to the Bill of Rights as a license for racist vigilante militias — with the overt and covert backing of the United States government — to carry out a reign of terror against Native populations. This has merely fueled the culture and crisis of gun violence, resulting in the reign of terror we are currently experiencing.

It is not possible to separate institutional violence and racism from the social and political character of the United States. The political culture we have inherited need not be our destiny, however, and NH Peace Action is in a prime position to help us work our way out of the punishing results of our tolerance for violence.

To truly begin addressing these issues, we must begin advocating for large-scale investments into robust public education, the elimination of “Divisive Concept Laws”, building up and rebuilding the multitude of neighborhoods of poor, BIPOC, and LGBTQ people that have been abandoned and then persecuted by those in power.

Militarization at All Levels of U.S. Society:

The U.S. was born out of violence against the Native population and the enslavement of African people. It is this history that has formed the basis of our country's politics today. Everything from the weaponization of debt and the use of sanctions, to the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib has its origins in those formative colonial, and expansionary years. While the U.S. military and government have always had a cozy relationship with big business, the revolving door of weapons company executive boardrooms and the halls of military and political power is much more recent. In his farewell speech in 1961, Dwight Eisenhower named this emerging phenomenon as the “Military Industrial Complex”. Since then, the political and cultural influence of Langley, the Pentagon, and weapons manufacturers have only grown larger and more sophisticated and infiltrated many aspects of our daily lives.

We must rein in this Military Industrial Complex that corrupts our politics, endangers our communities, and makes obscene profits from selling machines of death and the promise of security.

We have written elsewhere about the incredible size of the Pentagon budget and Congress's willingness to dole out resources for war while citizens' needs go unmet ([See our pillar on the Pentagon budget here](#)). To minimize this massive allocation at the national level, we must dismantle the legal protections and influence wielded by the gun industry and its lobby. At the local level, we must de-securitize our schools by removing mass surveillance and security checks, de-criminalize students, and remove military recruiters.

The "[Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act](#)", signed under George Bush means that these gun manufacturers can operate free from the fear of litigation in the event their weapons are used to commit crimes. Each time there is a mass shooting, exploitative media outlets whip people into a frenzy over the possibility of new gun restrictions which has led to massive spikes in sales. In 2008, the firearms industry was valued at \$19.1 billion which more than doubled by 2015, reaching \$49.3 billion, and jumped by an additional 43% to more than [\\$70 billion in 2021](#). This is the same period of time, active shooter incidents have [increased 444%](#).

In 2021, the gun manufacturers representatives in Washington spent \$15,776,760 on [lobbying](#). These corporations know full well that their products are killing people yet continue to cash in on the Pentagon's endless wars abroad, and promote the culture of violence in the U.S. to sell increasing numbers of weapons domestically.

If gun manufacturers' lobbyists are working in Washington to influence support for weaponry in our defense budget, they are also involved in the increasing police and weapons' presence in schools and communities. The Columbine school shooting in 1999 led to the mass introduction of armed police officers, sophisticated surveillance, and metal detectors into schools. By the time of the Parkland, Florida school shooting in 2018, such characteristics had become the norm in high schools across the US.

Majority BIPOC inner city districts paid the steepest price, as the number of arrests of children [skyrocketed](#), fueling the so-called "[school to prison pipeline](#)", an essential aspect of mass incarceration. In addition, new laws and policies were enacted that have been largely ineffectual at stopping school [shootings](#). While there has never been any evidence that schools are in fact more dangerous or violent than the rest of society, this has not stopped companies from cynically exploiting the hysteria generated by non stop media coverage to drive additional weapons sales.

While the police force and security equipment presence in high schools imply a need for safety locally, military recruiters have long been a feature of high school culture and portrayed as a viable option for those not destined for college, trade schools or the job market. In fact, under Section 9528 of the 2001 "No Child Left Behind Act", they have been granted free reign. The Section [mandates](#) that military recruiters be given the same access to students as college recruiters. Similar to the trend of securitization of schools, this policy disproportionately targets urban districts of poor, predominantly BIPOC kids through the "[poverty draft](#)" where kids are lured in with the promise of free college, travel, and career advancement opportunities.

Dislodging the Military Industrial Complex from our country's politics means addressing it at the federal, state, and local levels. At the federal level, it means reducing the obscene military budget, as well as cutting off sources of cultural and political influence. At the state level, it means pushing for bringing in industries that will serve us in the long run such as renewable energy, and reducing the dependence on military contractors in the local labor market. At the local level, it means building strong unions, ending the police control of schools and getting military recruiters out of our neighborhoods and our schools.

Younger generations are already working hard to change our political culture. After the Parkland Shooting, students were able to harness the narrative in a way that hadn't yet been seen. Grassroots movements headed by students and emerging community leaders have been effective in changing the way we talk about violence. They have been at the forefront anti-racist movements, anti-poverty movements, pushing for policy changes, and championing new tactics in response to the problems we all face.

De-militarize, Defund, and Disempower the Police:

Shifting the conversation regarding police and gun violence means addressing the mythology that police keep our communities safe, and moreover that communities are incapable of keeping themselves safe without armed, external actors empowered to enforce "law and order". Beyond their often unnerving presence in schools, streets, and public spaces, the violent, racist nature of policing in this country and its funding stand as major barriers to building a culture of peace. We must begin by breaking down the recent history of police militarization and discuss the growing power of grassroots movements now challenging police violence head on.

Since the mid 1990s, US political culture has displayed a growing trend of militarization. Decades of engaging in and supporting armed conflicts abroad have resulted in a larger stockpile of weapons. Beginning in 1996 with President Clinton's enactment of the [1033 program](#), the Department of Defense has been providing surplus military hardware to Federal and Local police departments. Since then, over 10,000 precincts have been provided with billions of dollars in equipment including rifles, combat vehicles and other gear. Access to these weapons has led to increasingly militarized police tactics, and a "warrior mentality" in which officers begin to see the "people they are supposed to serve as enemies" and communities as [battlefields](#).

Anti-racist movements that have emerged in recent decades have met this targeted oppression with demands for accountability and for redirecting resources into social services. They (and we) recognize that the culture of white supremacy created our current situation, and only the building of an anti-racist culture based on peace and common prosperity can lead us out.

The most recent of these movements took place in 2020, when the Black Lives Matter Protests erupted. The call to "Defund the Police" became a central demand of these protests with activists calling for the end of racist terror, and for resources to be redirected to social services. The movement did succeed in securing murder convictions for the murders of George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, and indictments for Elijah McClain's murder, but some racist vigilantes such as Kyle Rittenhouse escaped justice, and cities have clung tenaciously to their police budgets.

According to an analysis by the [Vera Institute](#) of 72 major cities across the U.S., an average of 29% of the city's budget is spent on Police with some cities spending upwards of 70%. Not only has this not changed since the uprisings, in some instances, cities have increased their [budgets](#). This has highlighted just how entrenched the institution of policing is within our society. Just recently, President Biden announced his "[Safer America Plan](#)" which will allocate \$35 billion

for the hiring of an additional 100,000 police officers nationwide at a time when [inequality](#) is at a record high and over half a million people are [homeless](#). This shows that it is not simply legal authority, money, numbers, or strength of arms that give police their power. It is the mythology that they are necessary, and are there to protect us. While this challenge is daunting, it also highlights courses of action. Movements aimed at building safe communities must not only address budgets and armaments but expose the very notion that police reduce crime a farce.

To further highlight this, it is important to point out that the majority of calls police respond to are directly related to issues of poverty, such as petty theft, or the criminalization of poverty where selling loose cigarettes or loitering are reported as disturbances of the peace, or [vagrancy](#). This directly conflicts with popular media, where police are portrayed as brave protectors dealing with impossible situations daily. This contradiction becomes even starker when looking at the nature of police involved murders, which most often begin with responses to calls reporting no crime, or a non-violent [offenses](#). This means that involving the police can directly determine if someone lives, dies, or ends up incarcerated and proves that substituting an omnipresent police force for robust social services is simply unsustainable.

But there are sustainable solutions to these issues. Safety and dignity depend on violence prevention which starts with better housing and social services including mental health support. There must be conflict resolution models implemented for when issues do arise, and a trauma informed justice system based on restorative methods. Ultimately we must be working towards a culture and society that centers human needs above profits, war making, and punitive measures.

Building Strong, Resilient Communities

We must closely examine what building strong communities can do to contend with the issue of gun violence in our country and how they serve as the foundation of a culture of peace. Ending gun violence in the United States is not simply a matter of passing legislation, or electing the right representatives. It requires that regular people — students, workers, Black, Latino, Native, and LGBTQ+ communities band together and reshape society from the ground up. Stronger and more united communities come about when we as a society invest in employment, strong unions, education, housing and health care instead of weapons as the foundation for peace and security. As we are all discovering, peace is not simply a lack of open conflict, it is the result of concerted efforts based on respect, human and civil rights, and solidarity.

Large portions of the US are already prepared for change. Nearly 70% of Democratic voters and over 50% of Republican voters want stricter [legislation](#). But this is not enough. At present, 20 million assault rifles and 393 million guns in [total](#) are circulating throughout the U.S population. But the majority of firearms rest with only 3% of the [population](#), and ownership is skewed overwhelmingly white. This uneven concentration of ownership highlights the issue of simply resting on the efficacy of gun control because middle-class white suburban students are not targeted by law enforcement in the ways that BIPOC communities are.

In this context, background checks mean that communities more often targeted by the police—BIPOC, poor, and LGBTQ+ communities— would be even more susceptible to violence as an extension of increased scrutiny with background checks. In addition, background checks alone would stop very few school shooters, few of whom had criminal records despite their history of violent rhetoric and tendencies.

A more effective approach that has been popularized in recent years would be to use existing frameworks, such as requirements for purchasing automobiles, and training to drive them. These could be extended to firearms' training and licensing without infringing on the right to self-defense and would provide a roadmap for more even access and rigorous safety training. The NRA has grown significantly because it offers such training as a service to its members, but its reactionary political influence and near-monopoly on civilian training must be challenged.

Similarly, raising the minimum age to purchase assault rifles to match the requirement for handguns is a sensible measure and one that the public is familiar with since it applies in other situations such as the purchase of tobacco, or alcohol, etc. Additionally, community storage facilities would bridge the gap between the right to self defense and public safety. In other countries such as Cuba, where almost all citizens have firearms training, weapons are stored safely, and maintained should a crisis emerge. As a result, gun violence and mass shootings are practically non-existent.

Overcoming the culture of violence in the U.S will require breaking out of the mindset of reliance on legislation, members of the two entrenched parties, and the media that provides them cover. Even as the House passes its assault weapons ban this week, most major media networks have already characterized the bill as “doomed to fail” or “sure to be defeated” in the Senate. Even when tasked with the most basic reforms, we can expect failure from both parties.

It has become apparent to the younger generations that neither entrenched party will act in the best interests of the masses of people. While older folks may lament the lack of electoral participation among young Americans, their participation in grassroots campaigns and innovative tactics regarding problems we all face can not be overlooked. They are rejecting the premature hand wringing of the media establishment and they refuse to accept that we all must live this way. We should learn from their tactics of nonviolent direct action, [conflict resolution](#) and their moves to build a [better world](#).

Conflict Resolution

Mutual Aid organizations are becoming commonplace across the country. These organizations are helping to prevent survival crime by operating free stores where people experiencing houselessness or other forms of social and economic strife can get basic goods and connect with the community. Young artists, musicians, and organizers are creating positive spaces where people can go to learn, connect, and build a culture of hope and peace as a counterweight to the doom and gloom so often portrayed in the media.

Violence interruption organizations such as [“Youth Advocate”](#) are intervening in neighborhoods to stop violence before it starts. They have been doing this work successfully for years, but have typically been ignored because they do not fit the narrative of “Black-on-Black crime,” and because their empowerment would diminish the role of the police. The work of violence interruption, conflict resolution, and social programs should be fully funded as a national priority. In fact, the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) has become quite vocal on the subject of gun violence recently. These groups, and thousands of individuals, are having many successes despite the odds, and should be studied as well as supported.

A Better World

Conflicts born of scarcity and human need are surmountable. But building strong, resilient, and empowered communities cannot be truly accomplished without addressing gentrification. For years throughout New Hampshire, and the country, we have been seeing luxury developments replacing lower income neighborhoods. The displacement of poor, predominantly BIPOC folks to make way for luxury apartments and trendy downtown areas is billed as “revitalization” or “redevelopment”, but is a feature of the same system of violence, exploitation, and white supremacy that floods our communities with guns. This system commodifies the basic necessity that is housing, and places the pursuit of profit above the people’s need for healthy, accessible, affordable housing. Banks, investment firms, and wealthy landlords are allowed to manage the supply of housing in order to maximize their profits. When the ability of people to pay their rent is hampered, as during the COVID - 19 pandemic, housing owners will evict their tenants to make room for those who can pay or hold that property empty and increase rent at other locations to maintain their level of profit. This situation has left a national average of [33 empty](#) homes for each of the over [500,000](#) people without a place to stay each night. Here in NH, that ratio is 74 open units for every person experiencing houselessness.

We can begin to address gentrification by organizing tenants and houseless unions capable of standing up to evictions, campsite displacements, and major rent [hikes](#). We can also build mutual aid networks, and open warming centers for houseless folks. The next step is to merge this struggle with organizations capable of coordinating the fight to pass local referendums for more community control over development, and the expansion of federal housing [programs](#). Finally, leveraging this collective power to build a system that puts people above profits, and centers basic human needs as a foundation will be necessary to directly take on the issues of gun violence, gentrification, and build a culture of peace.

Conclusion

Building a peaceful society will not be easy, but everyone has a part to play. Over the course of this essay, we’ve have outlined the growing trend of militarization of U.S society as reflected in the Pentagon budget, the increasing resemblance of police to soldiers and their growing presence in our schools and communities. We’ve discussed the need to build intersectional movements and the growing grassroots resistance networks that are already confronting the parallel issues of poverty, racism, and militarism.

We've highlighted the inadequacy of the "gun rights vs gun control" narrative and discussed alternatives that would address access and safety more equitably. We've argued that strong communities are the basis of a culture of peace, that we must stand in solidarity with all oppressed people struggling for liberation, and that system level change is necessary in order to achieve strong communities.

It is the responsibility of every person to work together to build a better future, and the seeds of this future are already planted. We must all dare to invent a future without gun violence and we look forward to creating it with you.

Thank you for all that you do to help keep the movement for peace strong and growing,

The team at NH Peace Action.