

Opinion: A 6-year-old shoots his teacher. Now what?



Police investigation underway after 1st grader shot his teacher

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It’s one of those only in America stories: A 6-year-old boy¹ brings a gun to school in his backpack, draws and fires one round into his teacher. Luckily, it seems the teacher, Abby Zwerner², will survive.

But no one – not her, not the boy, not the other students in the Newport News, Virginia, school – can possibly come out of this unscathed. And yet again, those who place gun rights above all other interests offer nothing more than thoughts and prayers, while the rest of us look around, defeated, wondering how it can be that we live in a nation that simply accepts this kind of violence as a routine cost of the “freedom” to own weapons designed to end human life.

America’s insane gun culture and our radically lax gun laws have led us to some dark places. We’ve seen more than a dozen elementary school students gunned down in their classrooms by angry men barely out of high school. Teachers³ must debate whether or not to carry guns to school for protection, as politicians tell them it’s the only way – while refusing to actually do anything to prevent gun violence by scaling back the ease with which Americans can get guns. Mass shootings erupt in movie theaters⁴, nightclubs⁵, grocery stores⁶, malls⁷, hospitals⁸, churches⁹, synagogues¹⁰, concerts¹¹ and public transport¹².

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/us/newport-news-virginia-shooting-monday/index.html>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/06/us/newport-news-virginia-shooting/index.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/us/teachers-guns-schools.html>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/07/us/aurora.shooting/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/20/us/colorado-springs-shooting-gay-nightclub/index.html>

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/28/us/buffalo-tops-grocery-shooting-payton-gendron-plea/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.wisn.com/article/wisconsin-mayfair-mall-mass-shooting-guilty-plea/42420437>

⁸ <https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o1412>

⁹ <https://projects.voanews.com/mass-shootings/english/locations/worship.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>

¹¹ <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/10/us/las-vegas-shooting-cnnphotos/>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/04/12/nyregion/brooklyn-subway-shooting>

This doesn't happen at this scale anywhere else in the world. And the reasons are clear: It's the guns¹³. Americans are not naturally more violent than people anywhere else. But when you add a whole lot of guns to the mix, that violence turns much more deadly much more often.

The story of the 6-year-old, though, is its own kind of tragedy. The perpetrator is a small child, and while we can't know for sure what was going on in his mind, a kid that age is likely not capable of a cold-blooded premeditated killing. Six-year-olds still routinely believe there are monsters in the closet at night and that Santa Claus is real.

They've only recently learned to name colors and may not be able to ride a bike. Their baby teeth are just starting to fall out, and if they've graduated from a car seat, they're still strapped into a booster when they ride in a car. WebMD warns¹⁴,

"Children at this age are still learning about sound, distance, and speed. So keep them away from the street. They don't know yet how dangerous a car or truck can be."

Do we really think a 6-year-old understands how dangerous a gun can be?

This child – practically a baby – has now committed an act that may follow him for the rest of his life. It's difficult to imagine any criminal penalties being leveled, although our country is also an outlier for how often we send children into the criminal justice system¹⁵. Reports indicated that the child was in police custody¹⁶, and the chief of police said in a news conference,

"We have been in contact with our commonwealth attorney and some other entities to help us best get services to this young man."

But a 6-year-old is not a "young man." He's much closer to toddlerhood than the age of majority. He does, undoubtedly, need help to make his way through the trauma he just endured – and inflicted. Making sure he is well and cared for should be the priority in assessing what comes next for him.

And yet a serious wrong was committed. This was not an accident. The question isn't what's wrong with a 6-year-old boy for treating a gun like a toy. The question is what's wrong with the adult who made the gun available to a child – and what kind of responsibility we expect from gun owners.

Gun violence is now the number-one killer of children¹⁷ in the United States. More kids die from being shot than die of cancer or in car accidents. We are the only country among our peaceful economic peers where this is true.

Accidental shootings make up a small proportion of gun deaths¹⁸ in the US. But some percentage of homicides are also the outcome of a person getting their hands on someone else's weapon. We often regard situations where the shooter is a child who didn't intend to kill anyone as "accidental." And yet there's nothing "accidental" about having a deadly weapon in one's home.

¹³ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/why-theres-so-much-gun-violence-in-the-u-s-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

¹⁴ <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/child-at-6-milestones>

¹⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/06/15/throwing-children-in-prison-turns-out-to-be-a-really-bad-idea/>

¹⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/06/us/newport-news-virginia-shooting/index.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/issue-brief/child-and-teen-firearm-mortality-in-the-u-s-and-peer-countries/>

¹⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/03/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>

If a person wants to own a deadly weapon, they should at the very least be responsible for it. That means that an individual who does not appropriately secure their gun to keep it out of the hands of a child should be on the hook if that child kills or injures someone (the Sandy Hook Elementary shooter's mother paid for that mistake with her life¹⁹). These adults who fail to secure their weapons should be on the hook both criminally and civilly.

The same should hold true of the wildly irresponsible parents who give their children guns that are used in school massacres²⁰ or any other shootings, or help them obtain a gun license²¹, allowing them to kill.

A shooting is a predictable result of having a gun in the home. Gun proponents often talk about their rights, but with those rights come responsibilities. And the gun owners who are not responsible – who do not keep their guns locked up, separate from ammunition, in a secure storage system that a child cannot open – should be held liable for their negligence.

When it comes to guns, there are simply no accidents. The presence of a gun itself creates the conditions for deadly violence. If an American wants to create those conditions, the current Supreme Court says that is their right. But they – and not a 6-year-old child – should be held responsible for the outcome.

Further reading :

- ➡ [Opinion: Who is at fault for America's soaring gun violence? Experts weigh in](#)
- ➡ [Hear from grandmother who gave CPR to teacher allegedly shot by 6-year-old student](#)
- ➡ [Opinion: How a bullet fired by a stranger almost killed and forever changed me](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/07/us/connecticut-shootings-fast-facts/index.html>

²⁰ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/oxford-school-shooting-ethan-crumbley-parents.html>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/dec/16/highland-park-shooting-suspect-father-charged-chicago>