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Grief & Resistance: Sociology
December 2021

SPEAK!

Dear Samuel Millers,

I am writing to you in hopes of receiving financial assistance, as I am currently forming an organization called SPEAK!. SPEAK! will be run by volunteers in schools located in urban areas of predominantly Black and Latinx communities where there are known high rates of gun violence. The organization's goal is to give students the space to reflect on the issue of gun violence and the way they are affected by it in their daily lives. Furthermore, SPEAK! Will program participants find ways on how they can combat the mental and emotional challenges they encounter due to the effects that gun violence brings. However, in order for this organization to be successful in its mission, I am seeking your help in financially assisting the organization so it can begin taking effect.

Neighborhood gun violence can greatly disrupt a school environment and heavily affect a student's life. In an article by Bulletpointsproject, it is listed that areas where gun violence occurs individuals may experience “PTSD, hypervigilance, depression, anxiety and substance misuse” (2021). This may apply heavily to individuals who are directly involved; the article also mentions individuals who are not in “direct exposure to violence” can still deal with mental health issues afterwards. These incidents are within their surrounding neighborhood, a place they have to walk through to and from school, which puts them at high risk of facing such an incident or concerned of being in one. Being surrounded by such deadly weapons can greatly impact their academic careers “by disrupting school attendance and retention, damaging the learning environment, and reducing the quality of teaching.” (2021). When

students' do not have the ability to focus on their academics, and teachers are unable to effectively handle the emotions their students deal with, it can further damage the school's learning environment. With evidence to support the dangers of gun violence in neighborhoods affecting students' academic careers, my hope is that SPEAK! can be used as a source for students' to share their feelings.

One example of a risk some students face is as simple as walking to school, which can be a constant fear. This fear can linger even when there are not any specific crimes being committed. A student's mind is focused on whether or not they will be safe on their way to and from school, affecting their mental health. This constant fear commonly leads to the feeling of disenfranchised grief as the mental toll can feel very isolating for a student, especially since gun violence is not a commonly discussed topic. The lack of discussion can also be seen as a contributing factor to the feeling of isolation, since a student may feel that they need to deal with it on their own. In addition, another form of grief students may face is called anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is the distress one may feel at the time coming before the death of a loved one or other impending loss. According to US News, "firearms were the second leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 15 and 24 in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accounting for 17.4 deaths for every 100,000 individuals" (Johnson, 2021). Given the statistics, it is understandable why one may encounter periods of grief. If a gun violence crime is committed nearby and a friend or family member has been affected by it, which can be a likely outcome for these students, they carry the weight of grief without expressing themselves. This weight may not be applied to just the student but to the school community as well. When an entire community deals with an extreme loss or change, it

is known to be collective grief. This leaves the question to be answered, where can students break down their grief and feel comfortable expressing them?

SPEAK! would be a semester-long commitment with an additional session at the end of the year. While students will only meet with staff and volunteer faculty from the organization during their first semester of school for two hours every week, on Friday, there will be one additional four hour session for everyone to gather again to reflect on what they had done during the first semester. The program would have faculty from their school volunteer to join, but only with the students' majority vote on volunteers and faculty would they be allowed to participate. This is to give the students the opportunity to let whoever they feel most comfortable with in. SPEAK! will also ensure that volunteers have been properly trained in adolescent counseling on topics such as grief, mental health, and gun violence. Students will use the first half of their weekly sessions to write where the prompt will guide them to focus on topics surrounding gun violence and their experience. The second half of the session will allow students to share what they feel comfortable sharing; this would occur biweekly. Twice a month, the second half of the session will be used for our volunteers to discuss concepts such as anticipatory grief, collective grief, and disenfranchised grief, where students will be provided with guiding information such as ways they can combat, recognize, and deal with what they are faced with, that can be applied through their daily lives. With biweekly sessions, students' and faculty members can openly discuss what different tactics they feel can help combat the issue of gun violence within their community. These types of focused discussions are what help students' recover the feeling of hope and security by recognizing their own feelings and voicing them out. It will motivate them to work towards opening up on the issue of gun violence at a local level rather than a small group.

Now that I have pitched the idea of my organization and its inspirations, the main concern is financial need. While the program itself is a voluntary program relying heavily on donations, it still needs to start from somewhere. With the financial proceedings you provide for the organization, it will be used to hire professionals in the field of adolescent counseling so our volunteers can be properly trained for when they meet with students and lead their informational sessions. The next part that is highly crucial, are the materials needed for students to actively participate. With your funding, it will be used for accommodations such as drinks, snacks, notebooks, writing utensils, and electronics for students who may have a learning disability. This is to ensure that every student can feel comfortable and capable while participating in the writing activities. Your financial assistance will allow for students to stay in school and feel safe, welcomed, and fed while also contributing to their own mental well-being. Without your financial assistance, it may require schools who do want to partake in this program to use their own funding, which puts them at risk in other areas of work they are focusing on. It may also prevent our volunteers from having proper training in adolescent counseling, making for an unsuccessful program.

I hope through this letter you consider how beneficial this organization can be to students within these neighborhoods. Your financial support will allow for another step to be taken towards student support amid difficult circumstances. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further about this organization, I would be more than happy to do so. My contact information is below.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

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Works Cited

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Study: Youth in Poor Areas More Likely to Die from Gun ...

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