

Testimony of Aalayah Eastmond
Senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School
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United States House Judiciary Committee
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Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Collins, and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share my experience and perspectives on gun violence in America. My name is Aalayah Eastmond. I am a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

While it is an honor to be before you today, it is only because horrific events have compelled me. Next Thursday will mark exactly one year from the day that 17 of my fellow schoolmates and educators were shot and killed, 17 more injured. Thousands more -- like me -- were fortunate to walk away with our lives that day but we will never be free of the terror. Some will carry visible scars, but all of us were scarred emotionally, for the rest of our lives.

I was in my 4th period Holocaust history class. We were presenting our projects on hate groups found on college campuses. I could never have imagined my group partner Nicholas Dworet would've saved my life in moments to come. As we sat at our desks working on our computers after presenting our projects, we began to hear loud pops. When the gunman shot into our classroom, Nicholas Dworet was in front of me. The gunman's bullets hit and killed him and Helena Ramsay. As Nicholas fell, I matched his every movement and hid beneath his lifeless body as bullets riddled my classmates. I thought I was going to die. As I layed there, I begged God to please make it fast.

When the shooter moved to another classroom, I rolled Nicholas off of me and placed his head on his arm so it wouldn't be touching the cold ground. My classmates pulled me behind a filing cabinet where I called my mom and my dad and said what I thought would be my last goodbyes. I told them how much I loved them, and asked that they please tell my brothers the same. I was so petrified that I began hyperventilating. My classmates had to cover my face so the shooter wouldn't hear my cries and come back. I will never forget that day. What I saw. What I did. What I experienced. What happened to my classmates. I will never forget Nicholas Dworet who, in his death, protected me. He saved my life.

The effects of this shooting did not end on February 14th. Days later, our family experienced another tragedy: the stress from the shooting had taken such a toll on my mother's body that she experienced a miscarriage. It is another painful, and permanent, reminder of that day that my family will endure the rest of our lives.

Gun violence ends thousands of American lives every year -- it is a pervasive problem that extends well beyond high profile school shootings. My family knew this pain long before Parkland. Fifteen years ago, in Brooklyn, NY, my uncle Patrick Edwards was shot in the back and killed. He was just 18 and had his whole life ahead of him. I am asking you to give my generation the chance that he never had.

Minority communities bear the heaviest burden of gun violence in this country. We know this as fact. Just a few weeks ago, a report was released showing that the life expectancy for African American men was reduced by four years, on average, because of gun violence. But this report didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. We have communities in this country where gun violence is an everyday occurrence, and the vast majority of those communities are majority minority. We have to do something to stop the gun violence that has become an every day threat in those communities, including stopping the supply of crime guns and we must ensure that there is comprehensive criminal justice reform to address structural inequalities in the system. I am here to tell you a simple truth.

Our gun violence is now such an epidemic that anyone, anywhere, at any time can be affected. Rich or poor, white or black, young or old. All Americans are at risk, and that is an America in which none of us can or should take pride.

Since that horrible day, my classmates and I have been working tirelessly in support of sensible gun laws. I chose to get involved with the Brady Campaign's Team ENOUGH, a group of young people dedicated to strengthening our nation's gun laws and engaging in communities most impacted by everyday gun violence. I am just one of hundreds of thousands of students that came out at the March for Our Lives demanding change. We stand on the shoulders of local organizations and people that have been working on change for decades. We are **all** working to make sure our stories are told and our voices are heard on the most important issue facing our generation. Our demand for sensible reforms crosses party lines, geographies, social classes, and racial divides. We **are** the generation that will end gun violence.

I implore you and your colleagues to pass legislation that will make us all safer by strengthening our nation's gun laws. We must do all we can to avoid the tragedies we see every day in our nation due to gun violence.

Today in America, anyone can go on the internet, answer an ad, or go to a gun show and buy a gun with no background check required. This makes absolutely no sense. I urge you to expand Brady background checks by voting for H.R. 8, legislation requiring background checks for virtually every gun transaction. I know from working with the Brady Campaign that the original background check law passed with bipartisan support. This common sense measure should enjoy similar support from every one of you on this Committee, since well over 90 percent of the public supports taking this action!

The Protection in Lawful Commerce at Arms Act (PLCAA) contributes to gun violence by providing the gun industry with special protections at the expense of victims of gun violence. PLCAA removes incentives for the gun industry to adopt life-saving business practices and instead provides legal cover to irresponsible gun dealers who supply the criminal gun market. This small minority of gun dealers profits from irresponsible and often dangerous business practices with no accountability to their victims. Congress must take immediate action to repeal PLCAA.

Extreme Risk Laws, already passed in several states, help protect people in crisis that pose a danger to themselves or others. These laws allow law enforcement to temporarily remove guns from people in crisis

while also protecting their rights through due process in courts. Congress should pass legislation incentivizing more states to pass these life saving laws and providing funds for implementation and education.

Assault weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines belong on the battlefield, not in our communities. Unfortunately, my classmates and I have seen first-hand the massive carnage that an assault weapon is uniquely capable of causing. Congress should immediately re-institute the assault weapons ban.

Every year thousands of people deemed by law to be too dangerous to access guns get them because of what has become known as the Charleston loophole. Under federal law, if a background check isn't completed in three days, a dealer can legally sell the gun. 90 percent of federal background checks take only a few minutes, but in thousands of cases three days is not enough time to complete a check, as was the case in the tragedy in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, who took nine innocent lives in the deadly church shooting, was sold a gun before law enforcement had time to fully research his disqualifying records. Many individuals who are sold guns before checks are completed are criminals or domestic abusers, and once we figure out guns were sold to these unlawful purchasers, we have to send law enforcement out to get the guns back, which puts them in harm's way. We need to give law enforcement enough time to finish the background check before someone can buy a gun.

Gun violence affects all American communities, but not always equally or in the same way. I especially urge you to address the concerns of those living in our black and brown communities who are disproportionately affected by gun violence.

Rather than listen to special interests, I ask you to listen to the nation's young people and the overwhelming majority of Americans, who have had enough. We have had enough of the gun violence rampant in our schools, in our movie theaters, our places of worship, in nightclubs and restaurants, on our streets, and in our communities. Enough. We have **all** had enough. I hope **you** have had enough too and use the power the people have vested in you to do what is right. We are **all** depending on you. We the people, our **lives** depend on you. It is in your hands.

Thank you.