



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2026 National High School Essay Contest \$100 Winner

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A New Mythology

The first time I saw a fan edit of a school shooter, I didn't realize what I was looking at. It had the same polished, almost loving quality as any fan edit of a public figure - filters, music, quick cuts. I watched it twice before I searched the name in the caption.

He was a mass killer.

You don't even have to look for this kind of content. It finds you. It shows up between makeup tutorials and homework tips. That was my introduction to a corner of the internet that most adults have never seen and most teenagers know exactly where to find. It is called the true crime community, or TCC, and within it, school shooters are given fan pages, nicknames, and the kind of devoted attention usually reserved for celebrities. Some members do not just admire them. They want to become them.

In 2026, two teenage girls were arrested for planning to kill a classmate because one believed it would "bring back" the Sandy Hook shooter.* They treated the arrest like a joke.

I grew up doing lockdown drills. I have watched breaking news alerts about school shootings appear on my phone so many times that I have learned to keep scrolling. Normalization isn't acceptance. It's exhaustion. And in that exhaustion, horror blurred into fascination, and fascination into worship.

Dr. Michael North, who lost his five-year-old daughter in the 1996 Dunblane Primary School massacre in Scotland, said something I have not been able to stop thinking about: "The idea of having armed guards and 'lockdown drills' never crossed our

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minds." Britain banned civilian handgun ownership after Dunblane. There has not been a school shooting there since. Britain changed its laws. America changed its expectations. There is no British TCC because the shootings never accumulated enough to become a culture.

When a country refuses to act, the violence doesn't stay in the headlines. It seeps into the culture and shapes the imagination of the next generation. For some, the shooter stops being a threat and starts becoming an identity - something to emulate, to resurrect, to perform for a mugshot. Dr. North resisted drawing his campaign into debates about mental health as a distraction from gun availability. He's right. But the psychological damage of living inside a country that has never adequately responded is now feeding the cycle forward. The grief is producing new perpetrators.

Britain chose their children. They made that choice once, and it held. America has not yet made it. And while we wait, a generation is not just surviving gun violence. Some of them are beginning to worship it.

That is what happens when a country teaches its children how to hide, but never how to hope.

* ABC News coverage of the January 2026 Florida case. <https://abcnews.com/US/florida-teens-charged-alleged-murder-plot-laughing-patrol/story?id=131000052>