

In My City

February 14: My professor rushes into class, telling us that there has been a school shooting in Florida, and I get alerted on my phone that there are 17 confirmed casualties, 16 wounded in Parkland, Florida.

Since then, I attended March For Our Lives in Washington, DC, in March, and before that, I attended National Walkout Day in my city. As my peers and I marched to the state house that day, two of them stopped and looked at each other. "Do you hear that?" one of them said, and the other just smiled. I stared at them, puzzled, and continued walking, until I heard it, too: a mass of students, marching and shouting, "Ain't no power like the power of people cause the power of people don't stop!" We joined the group in our march to the state house. There I heard students and people my age talk about police gun violence and talk about the gun violence that occurs in my own neighborhood. Only a month after tragedy, I hadn't yet digested the incident and what it meant. I knew I felt myriad emotions, but I didn't really think about how this was affecting me or anyone else around me. I just knew something had to change, without knowing exactly *what* had to change, and since then I've had a lot to consider.

- On January 1, a 23-year-old man was shot inside of a house on Unit Street in Providence.
- On January 15, a 19-year-old boy was shot in Providence Place Mall.
- On Sunday, January 21, there was a drive-by shooting on Broad Street.
- On Monday, a 33-year-old man was shot in the leg on Manton Avenue.
- On Tuesday, a man was shot and killed on Michigan Avenue.
- On Wednesday, there was a shooting on Sayles and Harriet Streets in South Providence.
- On Wednesday night, a 15-year-old boy was shot in the face off Cranston Street.

I had heard of none of these incidents, and the majority of them took place in the same neighborhood where I live and go to school. Providence Police Chief Col. Hugh Clements reported that in January alone, there were nine shootings in Providence, two resulting in death, all of which had been quickly swept away by the media. One shooting gets lost in another, then vanishes. Why is it that no one cares about these neighborhoods and the people in them? Why is it that when someone is shot in these communities - all of which are urban or predominantly black - there is no uproar? Is this because the victims are seen as nothing more than a product of their environment - an environment that no one - except the people living there - cares about? Is this because of the neighborhood's demographic? I don't have the answers to these questions, but I do know that gun violence happens every day, and it seems that gun reform is only mentioned when it's happening in suburban, primarily white, neighborhoods.

On our way to March For Our Lives, I told my principal, "I hope they do this right." She asked me what I meant, and I said "I hope that they acknowledge that this didn't start with Parkland, that black and brown kids have been victims of and fighting against gun violence for years."

March For Our Lives brought many people of color to talk about the way their lives have been affected by gun violence. They had young people of color from all around the country come to the march to speak. Jaclyn Corin, a survivor of the Parkland shooting, acknowledged in her speech that their affluence and privilege is what got them so far in their activism, which is why they are sharing the stage "today and forever with those who have always stared down the barrel of a gun." As I marched, and I listened to the words that my fellow marchers had to say, I thought to myself, "They did this right." They included voices and stories from people all over and acknowledged their privilege. But now, as I

sit and reflect two months later, I'm not sure what I think.

Eleven percent of Marjory Stoneman Douglas' student body is black, yet the face of the tragedy doesn't show this. The *NeverAgainMSD* organization doesn't include a single black member. This prompted a few black students who attend Stoneman Douglas to call a press conference to ensure that their peers are practicing what they preach about inclusivity and respecting all narratives. "We feel like people within the movement definitely addressed racial disparity, but haven't adequately taken action to counteract that racial disparity," said Tyah-Amoy Roberts. Mei-Ling Ho-Shing, another black student, talks of how, after addressing this issue with them, Emma Gonzalez reached out and invited her to meetings, yet never followed up with a time or location. It seems as though the leaders of the movement got so caught up in the bigger picture that they failed to realize change starts in your own backyard. "They've been saying but they haven't been doing," said Roberts.

In addition, some students fear that their concerns aren't the same as those of their white counterparts. While some students may take comfort from having more police in schools, others may not. "Black students will face most of the consequences of an over-militarized, predominately white school," said Kai, a black student at Stoneman Douglas. After February 14, police presence has increased at Stoneman Douglas.

"Youth activism didn't start with Parkland... The Black Lives Matter movement has been addressing this topic since the murder of Trayvon Martin, since 2012," said students at the Stoneman Douglas press conference. The abuse of guns by the police force also has been unaddressed in this movement. The gun control laws that are being pushed need to include gun abuse and the voices of the people affected by it. Despite Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives intersecting and having the same end goals, one is getting more attention and support than the other. One narrative and only one part of the problem is being discussed.

After hearing the kids in my city speak of the unaddressed gun violence that happens every day and hearing the black kids of Parkland speak of being affected not only by school shootings, but by gun violence within their community and by the police, I began to see faults. I began to re-evaluate March For Our Lives and what the organizers of *NeverAgainMSD* was asking for and who was asking. Gun violence that happens on a large scale is most talked about in this conversation, but not the violence that happens every day or the gun violence being committed by police.

The people at the forefront of *NeverAgainMSD* don't experience this type of everyday violence, and although they brought speakers in from other states, they forgot to include the voices of those from surrounding neighborhoods. They forgot to include the voices of people who have been victims of gun violence by police. Most importantly, they forgot about the ones that they see every day at school; the ones who were also affected by this tragedy, and other forms of gun violence, more often than the leaders of this movement are. "It hurts, because they went all the way to Chicago to hear these voices when we're right here," said Ho-Shing at the student press conference.

The movement is lacking black people. It's lacking voices of those who are constant victims of gun violence - in their neighborhoods, schools, and at the hands of police. And because it lacks those voices, the problem in their communities will continue to be swept under the rug and won't be the acknowledged in this conversation.

I'm not trying to chastise *NeverAgainMSD* or what they are working for, I'm simply pointing out that there are areas of improvement in this mission to achieve gun reform. I'm acknowledging that black

folks and other people of color who have been talking, marching and protesting for gun violence and control for years aren't being heard the way the Parkland students, or more specifically the non-black Parkland students, are. The conversation, whether initiated by black/POC or white/non-black people is the same. A march, whether being conducted by NeverAgainMSD or Black Lives Matter is asking for the same thing, just by different people. They both deserve to get the same attention and all of the voices deserve to be heard.