



Utah's Challenge to Do the Write Thing:

2026 State and National
Finalist Writings

**DO THE
WRITETHING**
HELP STOP THE VIOLENCE



Utah State Board of Education

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Table of Contents

2026 DO THE WRITE THING VIP JUDGES.....	3
UTAH'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CHALLENGE TO DO THE WRITE THING.....	4
The Importance of the Do the Write Thing Challenge	4
How the Campaign Works	5
NATIONAL FINALIST.....	7
Andre Ramos	7
NATIONAL RUNNERS-UP.....	11
Amanda Mariano	12
Malachi Murrah.....	16
Adele Noorda.....	21
STATE FINALISTS	23
Miranda Austin	24
Matthew Bakker	26
Leah Batchelor.....	28
Brooklyn Billman.....	31
Miles Bohorquez	35
Natalaine Burnett.....	36
Annabelle Cox.....	39
Eliza Johnson.....	41
Acelynn Louangsithideth	44
Brielle McOmie	46
Brooklyn Mills	48
Olivia Mutchler	50
Leo Nugent.....	53
Maaheen Osman.....	54
Jack (John) Parry.....	57
Tristan Penrod.....	59

UTAH'S CHALLENGE TO DO THE WRITE THING

Mayreen Pinto61
Noah Ransom63
Quinn Ryskamp64
Harper Spencer66
UTAH'S DO THE WRITE THING ORGANIZING COMMITTEE71
UTAH STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION PREVENTION STAFF72

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UTAH'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CHALLENGE TO

Do the Write Thing

The Importance of the Do the Write Thing Challenge

The Do the Write Thing (DtWT) Challenge plays a key role in Utah's long-term strategy to end youth violence. These student writings make powerful proposals on how adults and community members can interrupt the causes of youth violence.

Utah's *DtWT Challenge* works in cooperation with the National Campaign to Stop Violence. The first step to end youth violence is to talk about it. The *DtWT Challenge* makes this initial step possible by creating a platform for youth, giving them a voice about how violence affects their lives and how it can be prevented. The program empowers young people in Utah and around the country to make a personal, written commitment to combat youth violence in their communities. The program works because it targets youth violence in the communities where violence takes place, then recognizes that the same communities hold the greatest power to create lasting solutions.

Utah's *DtWT Challenge* is sponsored locally by the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and managed by the DtWT Committee, and USBE's Prevention Team and School Safety and Student Services Section. In collaboration with families, educators, and communities, the USBE Prevention Team works to identify and decrease risk factors, increase protective factors, and provide students with equitable access to resources in a safe environment that will help them thrive. This collective effort aims to foster student well-being and success across all stages of life.

Prevention staff support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in implementing a student-focused, evidence-informed, data-driven approach for all prevention work, to promote the knowledge and skills necessary for success in life and meaningful engagement with their community.

Through a protective factors approach, Prevention Programs provide resources and supports to reduce the risks of absenteeism, bullying, child abuse, gangs, human trafficking, school dropout, substance use, and suicide. In collaboration with community partners and other stakeholders, these supports are built on a foundation of family engagement, trauma informed care, and restorative practices.

How the Campaign Works

The DtWT Committee sent information to all Utah school district superintendents, middle school principals, and teachers encouraging them to involve their 7th and 8th grade students in the DtWT Challenge. Teachers can find suggestions on how to tie the DtWT Challenge into course work on the [USBE DtWT webpage](#). Students can research youth violence as part of a history class, write a poem as part of an English class, or even consider youth violence from a social science perspective.

Following a classroom discussion about youth violence, students are asked to write answers to three questions:

1. How has youth violence affected my life?
2. What are the causes of youth violence?
3. What can my community and I do to reduce youth violence?

School districts reported that close to 2,000 students participated in classroom discussions, over 1,200 students prepared writings, and 261 students wrote and submitted writings about youth violence for review. College students from the University of Utah and USBE's Student Support Department staff participated in the first round of judging, selecting the top two writings per school. The VIP Judges had the difficult task of selecting a national finalist, an "Ambassador for Peace," along with three runners up.

Utah's National Finalist, or "Ambassador for Peace," will participate with other Ambassadors at the *DtWT* National Recognition Ceremony in Washington D.C. this July. The Ambassador will meet with members of Utah's Congressional delegation to discuss the problem of youth violence and will attend a reception hosted by the Ambassador to the United States for the State of Kuwait. Finally, a book containing the students' writings will be placed in the Library of Congress. Congratulations to all students who took the DtWT Challenge to do something about youth violence!

The USBE's Prevention Team and the DtWT Organizing Committee thank the following for their generous support:

Brent and Bonnie Jean Beesley Foundation, Wheeler Foundation, Kuwait-America Foundation, Marriott International, National Campaign to Stop Violence, Southwest Airlines, Utah State Board of Education, and University of Utah.

***Format for the following writings may have been altered slightly when inserted for this booklet. The DtWT Committee did their best to keep the original format whenever possible.

National Finalist

Andre Ramos

8th Grade - Roy Junior High

Teacher: Maria Georgiou

Youth Violence

*Dread was the thunderstorm in my system
Splintering my soul apart
like how it cracks the midnight purple sky
Isolating me from my brother*

How Youth Violence Affected Me

I could pick up the sounds of anxiety and alarm crying from the other room. I could distinguish the abundant tears left on the sheets, the source of it all, bloodshot eyes glaring with anguish. I was a powerless toddler. Scrutinizing the eyes of the one who I adored the most, my older brother. "I can't play right now" he said, his voice muffled, submerged in hopelessness. I couldn't understand the copious amounts of pain he was in. The dictators of it all, were only half asleep on the opposite side of the hall. The morning felt corrupt with the sounds of weeping still echoing like a screech in a cave, a sense of impending doom was pulsating throughout our fractured home. Dreary nights turned blind, black eyes. Wailing, raining, it never changed. Even the oppressors were against each other, roaring and shrieking profanity at one another. One hazy morning, my brother decided that it had been enough. He resorted to distance, pushing his deadly loved ones away from him. Leaving an empty depression of what I was once able to feel from my brother, this left me feeling a tangible trench. I could still detect fragments of love scattered throughout my household but there were pieces missing for the full picture. Leaving our home was probably the best option for him, especially with how much agony he was experiencing. It still hurts and you can still see that he is distant to this day but our parents have gone through many different counseling sessions and therapies that have helped them have a better relationship with us, their kids. Me and my brother have grown closer and have an amazing relationship now, he also has gotten closer with my parents after a while of him being alone. Abuse was putting stress on the bond that my family had that was struggling to survive. My brother left with scars of both mental and physical abuse.

What Is Youth Violence?

The textbook definition for youth violence is, “the intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by young people ages 10-24” (cdc.gov 1). However I would personally say that it's more like unnecessary violence inflicted upon adolescents that results in both the aggressor(s) and the victim(s) not receiving any values nor benefits. Youth violence is a turmoil that causes many lives to be disfigured. There are many different types of acts that can be considered as youth violence, a few examples are peer pressure, gang influence, bullying, cyber bullying, etc. These incidents can happen in schools, suburban areas, and even in your own home where kids tend to feel more safe, due to cyber bullying.

The Causes Of Youth Violence

A few causes of youth violence might include: parental and guardian related conflicts, peer pressure and herd behavior starts overwhelming the individual, the final cause would be any type of abuse like sexual, physical, emotional, and digital assaults. Residency related incidents can incite aggressive acts from adolescents due to the fact that it causes pent up anger that presents a way to relieve that is to reflect that on their peers, it can also be caused by deep rooted trauma that stems from negligence that began during early childhood development. A developing child's peers can have a lot of influence on how they act and can force the recipient into following the actions of those around them and conform because they don't want to seem like an outsider and not fit in which is a child's last desire. When a child learns about gangs they hear of the fear and respect that they receive that they might believe they are deprived of which leaves a positive outlook on the child's point of view on gangs. This might lead to the child joining a gang when they're older. These gangs can force the young adult to do something they would regret later on in their life that would be irreversible.

How To Reduce Youth Violence

In order to reduce youth violence you need to have stability. Stability is the most vital necessity for someone that is growing. Another need is to have a sense of belonging where it is most needed like in their house, school, and communities. When a child is feeling left out most of the time they are hanging around the wrong group of people

with different interests. It is also extremely important to be able to have trusted adults and peers to be able to fall on when it's needed. When they are in an unstable environment they may feel the unnecessary need to retaliate against others, if someone feels as though they are being undermined they feel insignificant which leads to frustration and anxiety. It is crucial to bring light to any effort no matter how miserable the moment may seem. Be the one who is there when it is in need. Be the one that someone can look back delightfully upon and to appreciate the stability, security, and significance that you have given them to grow and become the person that they are or are striving to be. Youth violence often starts in the home, with the damages lingering for multiple victims, often permanent. The damage is often experienced by those around. Family support and awareness is important for preventing youth violence, and support is key for recovery.

National Runners-Up

Amanda Mariano

8th Grade – Summit Academy Independence

Teacher: Debra Wallace

Malachi Murrah

8th Grade – Roy Junior High School

Teacher: Dustin Flores

Adele Noorda

8th Grade – Roy Junior High School

Teacher: Dustin Flores

Amanda Mariano

8th Grade – Summit Academy Independence

Teacher: Debra Wallace

SPEAK UP! Our Actions Make a DIFFERENCE

How Has Youth Violence Affected My Life?

Turning a blind eye was a choice, but what if I decided to be brave and make a different choice? Snickers and chuckles rang violently in my ear from behind. The cruel ‘jokes’ made by peers discriminated against and stereotyped those different from them. I felt sick to my stomach having to hear them jeer at groups of people. But this is everyday as a fourteen year old living in this day and age. Discrimination is simply humor. “Why as a society have we normalized demoralizing others as humor?” Is what I am saddened to ask myself almost everyday. In the lunchroom, classrooms, and hallways at school I hear at least one disgusting comment directed towards someone’s outward appearance regularly. As a teen, we usually brush it off, walk away, and go about our day. “It happens everyday, what’s the big deal? I’m not affected.” There are times where I regret biting my tongue and walking away—leaving the bitter taste of regret in my mouth. There are other times where I am proud of myself for being brave. I did not ignore that pang in my heart—I built up courage and did what I knew was right in the moment. In fourth grade, I remember a dear friend of mine running out of the room in tears. That pang in my heart was telling me, “Go, help her.” I slipped out of the classroom, and found her sitting all alone, looking defeated and wounded by a bully’s harsh actions. From that day forward, I knew that I had to be brave no matter what. Ignorance is not the solution. Youth Violence is a growing problem that needs to stop. My way of viewing my seemingly small world around me has been forever changed due to youth violence. You never know who may be struggling if you decide to walk away. The solution starts with us—the youth writing these powerful essays, and those who decide to be brave. After all, we are the future of the world.

What are the Causes of Youth Violence?

John 7:24 from the New Testament states, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgement.” Oftentimes, we decide to make a quick judgement on someone based on their outward appearance. This can involve prejudiced thinking and judging based on stereotypes. Leaving teens and myself to be heavily aware of how we look. As I grew older and started to go to middle school, I felt pressure creeping up on me to start wearing makeup. No one was forcing me to, but I felt insecure about particular features on my face. The acne that would come and go every month, features on my face that didn’t match the unrealistic beauty standards set up by society. But the insecurity that affected me the most was my nose. In sixth grade, I remember a past friend and I working on an assignment together in class. When all of a sudden she asked me, “Why is your nose so flat?” At that time, I had never acknowledged my nose in that way. I just thought of it as what helped me to smell and breath. “Why does my nose look like that?” I thought to myself. I could not tell if she meant it in a genuine way, or if she just wanted to embarrass me. I decided to brush it off as a joke and go through my day as I would normally. But that singular comment would later change how I looked at myself in the mirror. It started with a pink CoverGirl powder compact, meant for my skin to look less oily. The chain reaction started right there at that moment. Lip gloss, lip tint, concealer, and mascara would later follow.

This is what leads me to what I believe is one of the main causes of youth violence, Appearance Based Bullying. Although I did not experience bullying because of how I looked, I could only imagine what others were going through. If I was affected that heavily by one comment, what were other kids my age going through—not being able to look at yourself with confidence and having to deal with belittling comments echoing in your head? Why do we look at people with sunglasses of judgement? Lenses of stereotyping and prejudiced thinking. Sunglasses are used to block out the bright, radiant sun—making the world seem dim and dark. Similar to how by viewing someone based on their looks dims their personality. Which can make us not able to know them as a person. I remember starting only in fourth grade, girls were already worrying about their weight and how they looked. Grabbing and picking at their skin in front of the bathroom mirrors. Being fourteen years old, I have noticed how middle school can harbor an environment full of insecurity and fear. The toll I’ve

seen it take on students is what needs to be put to an end. Appearance Based Bullying can lead to harmful behaviors: anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. It may even lead to eating disorders or suicidal thoughts. By making snide remarks or insulting 'jokes' is youth violence in itself. You are not seeing this person as a person! Only paying attention to how someone looks on the outside is slowly going to make yourself blinded by hatred and prejudice.

Another main cause of youth violence is racism. As children, we learn about racism in history. The teachers try to ingrain in our little minds that racism is bad, we should not engage in it in any way. But why is it that we decide jeering at other races and stereotyping them is humor? Hearing jokes made about different cultures and accents being made fun of is what led me to this topic. As we decide to turn a blind eye to these jokes, we are deliberately participating in a domino effect that I have seen with my own eyes. One joke begins to add up when someone believes racism is humorous. They start to pile on, accents are being made fun and slurs being used lightly are becoming more apparent in daily life. Feeling ashamed because of your skin tone, where you came from, or your culture should not be what someone has to feel. They should be proud of where they come from, and be able to share it without being ridiculed.

Dark humor is what people claim their 'jokes' to be. As a society, we need to learn what is considered harmful and humorous. One joke can affect how someone views a traumatic event that happened to them. Being mindful of what we decide to say and laugh about can help. But when you hear a joke that is offensive or disrespectful, SPEAK UP! There will not be change if we decide to respond by deliberately ignoring what is said.

Youth Violence can also start because of factors that some teens and kids can not control. I remember in elementary school, I would be sat by what some classmates considered the 'bad kids' from time to time. Sometimes they would open up to me about their own experiences and home life. I realized that some kids act out because they feel it is the only way to get what they are deprived of. Though their actions can be harmful, I began to notice the why. Why they decided to do what they did at school. Having a bad home environment or traumatic experiences can affect the way kids and teens behave. These kids could be going through unimaginable events at home. Like I said earlier,

instead of stereotyping, begin to ask yourself the why. See through the dark lenses. Hearing their own experiences and stories also changed the way I saw my peers around me.

What Can I Do to Reduce Youth Violence?

“How am I supposed to put a stop to youth violence? What difference will I make?” There are many teens facing struggles in the darkness—silenced or overcome with fear to speak up. Simply noticing and helping them is already an improvement. Be their advocate, their voice, and stand up for them. You may be that person who keeps them going. Hope. That feeling in your chest, similar to the sun peeking through your bedroom shutters in the morning. Even if it’s just one interaction, it slowly adds up. SPEAK UP! Your actions as a teenager can forever impact someone in their life. In the midst of chaos not only in school and our personal lives, but also around the world we could all use hope. Hope that you’ll get cast in the school play, hope that you’ll make the team, or hope that you’ll ace your final in science. Hope that someone will save you from drowning in life’s thunderous storms and crashing waves. Bullying and taunting adds up, but so does noticing. Noticing that there needs to be a big change. As youth, we can make a difference. We are the future of this world. Wouldn’t it be beautiful to be able to know that kids and teens can go to school without being afraid of getting made of or bullied in the future? Imagine that, which may seem impossible now but I have hope that we can make this dream become reality. Change starts with us. The vicious cycle of youth violence needs to end. Before you laugh at someone for their appearance or where they came from, take your sunglasses off. Don’t let the lenses of stereotypes and prejudice dim their personality. Approach that classmate, be their light in the darkness. Action by action, we can improve the lives of others. It starts with that choice, bite your tongue and walk away, or be brave by speaking up and know that it was worth it. SPEAK UP AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Malachi Murrah

8th Grade – Roy Junior High School

Teacher: Dustin Flores

Youth violence, such an interesting topic to speak about, yet such a sad topic to think about. I love debating people about anything, whether it's politics, or the neighbor next door, but youth violence has always been a hard thing for me to speak about. I was reading some of the essays that people have written to win this challenge, and I'm always at a loss for words. They speak at such an advanced level, and it seems like they're so afflicted by youth violence, while I don't have nearly as many stories. I'm a typical 8th grade boy: short, glasses, a 4.0 student. An 80s bully from a Disney movie would have a field day with me. A quote I've always lived by is "The bigger they come, the harder they fall," a personal favorite of mine by Bob Fitzsimmons. I had always assumed that if I just lived my life the way I was told, nobody would mess with me, and if someone was doing something wrong, they would be brought to justice—boy was I wrong. I was never one to think that the world was all cupcakes and rainbows, but I wasn't prepared for what was yet to come throughout those fateful years; not at all.

Like a predator

They hide

Waiting for the opportunity

To strike...

I was an... adventurous kid; to say the least. The amount of times I'd been close to handshaking with God had surpassed my current age by the time I was 4. Just at the age of 2, I had almost jumped off a cliff in Bryce Canyon National Park because I accidentally dropped a can of Pepsi and it started rolling off the edge. The following years were when it began; the permanent reminders of my mistakes. At age 3, I had an ironic incident—known to many as a famous nursery rhyme—but for me, it's traumatic. When I was younger, one of my famous nursery rhymes was "*Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*" by Eileen Christelow, which as everyone knows, follows 5 little monkeys jumping on a bed, until each and every one of them slowly falls off the bed and injures themselves. The mother then has to call the doctor, to which he tells them to stop jumping on the bed. I remember it clear as day; we were on our way to Disneyland in California, the car filled with me and my family; searching for something to pass the time. The night sky was slowly creeping up on us; my dad drove as fast as he could to get to the nearest hotel. Because me and my siblings had been trying to pass the time on this lengthy drive, we sang my favorite nursery rhyme, "5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed." As we arrived at the hotel, we blitzed to our room; my parents begging for sleep. Unfortunately, as kids typically are, me and my siblings were filled with energy, and decided to jump on the bed. It was fun, really fun—until it wasn't.

"5 little monkeys jumping on the bed!"

"One fell off and broke his head!"

“Mama called the doctor and the doctor said,”
 “NO MORE MONKEYS JUMPING ON THE BED!”

Suddenly, one of my siblings jumped near my portion of the bed, sending me soaring off the bed, onto a night stand. The force was incredible, and on account of my mother, the only thing visible was blood.

Red as crimson,

Sealing my fate

I sit and wait

As heaven opens its gates

My dad rose to action as soon as he heard the screaming. In that moment, there wasn't a single man on earth who could run as fast as he did in those moments. In a trice, I was lying in my dad's arms; blood flickering everywhere as I was conveyed into the car. Laws were broken; prayers were spoken; the speedometer reached its unmitigated limit. All I could hear was the mumbling of my parents, and I am nearly positive that I had seen a light, promising me it wasn't my time to leave yet. As we reached the hospital, I was urged in, and doctors began to operate. I was unconscious, but I recall feeling a serenity, knowing that I was going to live. In the end, the operation was successful, but in its place left a scar, one that's still vigorously present on my face to this day.

Throughout the years, there were several more occasions in which my life had been threatened from differentiating matters, and all of them, no matter the cause, left a scar on my head. Once I entered school, I thought people would accept me the way I was, because they would think that the scars I had were a sign of my strength, and determination—this was not the case. I was relentlessly bullied by others, just for the scars on my forehead. I told my parents about it, but when they notified the teacher, they just told my parents that I was lying, and that the kids who were bullying me would never do such a thing. I decided then that I would just let it persist until the next school year, then I would be fine since I wouldn't have the same students in my class. It acted as a reality check; my life hadn't been prepared for the treatment I was receiving during this time. The only one who bothered to help me was my sister, who would leave her class to come get the kids to leave me alone (to no prevail) but it at least showed that someone cared about me. Eventually, the bullying got to such an extent that I thought the best thing for me to do was suicide—I'm glad I didn't. I managed to gather some close friends, who would help me when I was being bullied, but as stated in a poem by Luke Shires, titled *Fake Friends Are Temporary-True Friends Are Forever*, “fake friends stab you in the back, true friends stab you in the front.”

The thorns blood red

Sharpening the dread

Left alone in my head

I didn't even have a chance to fight back; my limbs benumbed. They took control of my legs and caused me to trip; the tranquility of the sky being the only thought I had in my mind at the time. Without warning, I recollect feeling a sharp pain in my skull, and everything went dark. The next thing I saw, I was in the nurses office, my hearing a little weary. I was told that I had been tripped on the playground, and my head collided with the ground. I'm pretty sure

that if I had not been picked up by my dad later that day, I would've gone back outside and gotten revenge, worsening the growing problem of youth violence—making me just as bad as them.

“Hey freak.”

“Leave me alone!”

“You should kill yourself, nobody loves you.”

All of this dialogue was a common occurrence back then, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. My only option was to just let it happen, and hope that eventually they would find someone else to share their agony with. I didn't know what to think of it all because I was just a kid; nothing in my life at the time had prepared me for this. When they would talk to me, instead of thinking rationally, my mind would turn red—and I would think about the horrible things I would do to them if the opportunity arose.

If I had realized at the time that the majority of my friends were destined to abandon me at some point in time, maybe it wouldn't have hurt as much, but as previously stated, in third grade, I gained another scar from a dangerous situation: I guess when you aren't normal, you're a celebrity, known either for the best or worst things—and unbeknownst to me, I was the latter. My closest friends stripped the trust straight out of the air, leaving me to the wolves. To this day, I sometimes recall the despicable things that were said to me back then. If it weren't for a friend I met back in third grade, there's a chance I wouldn't even be here today, creating this essay for you all. This friend helped me climb out of this downspiral, and showed me that even when you have abnormalities, you can make the best of them.

Hope and Prayers

Will get me there

Someone's here

Don't be scared

Throughout the following years, I learned that my scars were not a mistake—something that makes me a bad person or different from everyone else. As shown in the quote typically attributed to Fr. Craig Scott, “From every wound there is a scar, and every scar tells a story. A story that says, I survived.” It shows that you shouldn't let others define you, and your stories should be something to share with others, and not a hindrance to be mocked over. Another one of my favorite quotes is by Charles R. Swindoll, an American pastor and author, who said “Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.” I would like to thank the friend I met in third grade—and everyone else along the way—who helped me when I was struggling, and helped reform me into the person I can proudly consider myself today. If any of you have had any worries in the past, or are struggling with something today, I have a quote from my favorite author that I would love to share with you. “Each day means a new twenty-four hours. Each day means everything's possible again. You live in the moment, you die in the moment, you take it all one day at a time” -Marie Lu. This quote is from the book Legend, said by the character Day, and it is my favorite quote of all time. It's angelic words remind me each day that no matter what happens, good or bad, tomorrow is coming, and it's a brand new day, with a brand new twenty-four hours.

How has youth violence affected my life?

Luckily for me, I have not been as affected by youth violence as some of my peers, but that does not mean that it's any less important. The only reason I've been pursuing my goals—and the reason I have the will to keep going— is because of my best friends. From my experience with youth violence, I can confirm that it sucks, and it makes you feel like you're worthless. At one point in my life, I had genuinely considered horrific things like suicide. Although it took me too long to understand, I also thank the people who bullied me, because they taught me that the abnormalities about myself aren't a marking to segregate me from my peers, but a gift that shows the hardships and trials that I survived.

What are the causes of youth violence?

I'm not proud to say it, but I think I have definitive causes of youth violence (because I've been a part of it before), at least in males. From my experience, youth violence is most commonly caused by three reasons: One person starts a "joke," but other people decide to join in, unknowingly making someone feel worse about themselves. The other case is when someone is purposefully mocking another person; it can be unbeknownst to that person what they are actually doing, but they will typically think that they're just messing around, and that the other person is in on it with them. The third reason is that men (and possibly women too, I just don't have enough information on them to give a valid reason) love their pride, and if they feel targeted or are offended by anyone, they are going to try and protect themselves, even if it requires them to put someone down, mock, or harass someone.

**Red like fire,
Their emotions are dire
Men love their pride
As they spew their lies**

What can I do to reduce youth violence?

Unfortunately, I do not think it's possible to fully eradicate youth violence, nor do I think it's possible to heavily reduce youth violence. In a perfect world, where youth violence could be reduced, I would recommend just trying to be a better person. It's okay for you to let go of your pride, and just accept that you're wrong. You shouldn't have to make someone think that they aren't a normal person and that they deserve to die just because they supposedly challenged your dignity. As I was working with my peers on this project, they allowed me to read their essays, and I was dumbfounded at how people treated them—albeit most of it was in the past. My mom always used to tell me that there was too much hate for me to join it, increasing the growing mound of hate in the world, like a blood red personification of hell. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, I'll scroll on Instagram, to find some way that will make me cope with how life is; take the pain away, but that never ends up happening. I'll see a funny video of someone making fun of another, and calmly laugh, increasing my spirits for the next few minutes. Many of you have done the exact thing that I just described, and although none of us are perfect, I would encourage you to: before you laugh at that video, think about whether or not it was funny for the person who was getting bullied. Before you send that reel to one of your best friends, make a joke and call them "gay", or "short", just think how that will affect them beforehand. There have been experiences where one of my

friends calls another “retarded,” thinking it’s just a funny term that nobody would interpret as a derogatory term used to refer to someone with an intellectual disability. In the case that I’m referring to, the person who used the word “retarded” to another, was unaware of the fact that the person they said it to had a sibling with down syndrome. At that moment, I knew that he had said something wrong, but I froze, my mind filled with ice, frozen in place, scared for what the outcome could’ve been—but I’m lucky that I have incredible friends that don’t take things seriously, and instead just gave a reminder that they shouldn’t use that term. So when the opportunity arises for you to be a better person, please choose the option of deescalating the situation, because remember: Each piece of hate that is gathered from someone will be added to that mound, and on the day of judgement, all will be revealed.

Thank you so much for joining me on this incredible journey. The time is currently 11:13 pm, and I’ve spent so much time thinking about what to write in this essay. Each night when I deprive myself of sleep to keep writing this story of my past—whilst listening to Stephen Sanchez of course, I just think of everyone that helped inspire me to write this. This is the longest piece of literature I’ve ever written besides, and for some odd reason I feel like an author; the need to give thanks to all of my friends crossing my mind endlessly. The friend I spoke about in my essay is still with me today, and he still fills me with hope every time we cross paths, whether we talk about books, NAL (National Academic League), or a video game we enjoy. The fact that people will get to hear my story, and learn from it, is an incredible feat—because I’ve never told anybody this story. I can hold my head high now that I’ve finally gotten this dreadful story off my chest, and that it could possibly save someone from experiencing what I did in the future. This tiny story I wrote doesn’t even capture a fraction of the pain that others are experiencing at this very moment, but I hope that someday the world will realize its mistakes and we will progress as a species, leaving that hellish creature that slowly creeps upon us—devouring our thoughts, emotions, and sanity—as a thing of the past.

Adele Noorda

8th Grade – Roy Junior High School

Teacher: Dustin Flores

The Power of Forgiveness

In 2015 an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude devastated Nepal. Its shaking grasp on the country killed almost 9,000 people. Rubble littered the streets and wrecked buildings dotted trashed neighborhoods. In this time of grief and devastation people responded quickly. Local and international help came like a tsunami. Within 72 hours 8,000 people were in action. There were thousands of volunteers and 450 humanitarian organizations. This help save lives. In this disaster, assistance came fast but where is that life-saving help in the crisis we are currently in? Where are the thousands of volunteers saving us from the enemy of mankind, the ongoing pandemic, and the battle for peace against violence? Violence is all of these things but if you look closer at only one act of violence at a time it is just a bad decision. When does a person become “bad” because of a bad decision? Never! There is no such thing as a bad person, only a hurt one. Violence can be forgiven. But that doesn’t mean it’s not serious.

Look at what happened to my brother when he was in 8th grade. There was a boy in my brother's gym class who hated him. The boy tried to trip my brother when he was running, insulted him, and stuff like that. On this particular day it was my brother's turn to serve and the boy wouldn't give my brother the ball so my brother hit it out of his hands. That was it. At lunch the boy asked my brother to fight. My brother said no. Later that day in health class the boy got a question wrong when my brother got one right. Then class ended. After class the boy ambushed my brother, he threw all he had into his fist and sucker-punched my brother. My brother hit the ground and stayed there for 30 seconds. My brother had fist marks where his knuckles had met my brother's temple. My brother had refused to fight him, didn't punch back or anything. The boy was a hurt person who felt like his display of cruelty would solve problems. Maya Angelo said “Hate, it has caused many problems in the world but has not solved one yet”. This quote fits this situation well since that boy disliked my brother so much he felt like the way to solve it was to display violence which just caused more problems for himself.

So what caused this hatred? And what causes other violence? I believe he acted this way because he felt insecure. There could be other reasons too like maybe a hard home life or maybe he had been the victim of an act of violence and wanted to transfer that pain to somebody else. He tried to heal by hurting others. But that doesn't work. To forgive is to show love and to show love is to heal. I think the ending of this story demonstrates this really well. The boy was able to apologize and my brother forgave him. They both have moved on from hating each other and now they aren't best or close friends but they still are friends. That moment is lost to time because of the power of forgiveness.

The Oxford dictionary describes “forgive” as “to stop feeling angry with someone who has done something to harm, annoy, or upset you” though that definition is simple, its concept is...not. Every time forgiveness is done it becomes easier to do it again. I have been so lucky to grow up in a home and in a church that cherishes the idea of forgiveness. Some people are not taught this. This is why I think it can be taught in school. With the acronym LAM: Love, Accept, Move on. First is “L” for love. This can be hard, especially to people who treat you or loved ones badly but in truth if we can love everyone we can make the world better. A lot of times our world focuses on if you don’t agree with someone you can’t be friends with them or love them. But to love is not to agree or even to like. Love is more simple and more powerful than either of those. To love is to appreciate, admire, and show empathy to all those around you no matter who it is. That’s why it is the first step in my forgiveness process. First you love the victim, think of 1+ good things about them (especially if you are the victim! Everyone deserves love no matter what!) Then you love the person who made that bad decision. Next is “A” for “accept” by accepting what was done was wrong but still forgiving the wrong doer even if they don’t apologize. The last letter “M” for move on, which is really important because it’s about living your life beyond them and their act of violence. Being able to say “I am ok now, that’s all behind me”. LAM is a window, it goes both ways. If you are the person who can’t live outside your bad decision you have to apologize and forgive yourself as part of accepting. It is the only difference in the LAM process between you and the victim.

As we forgive small acts, it becomes easier to forgive bigger acts. Sometimes forgiveness takes time. Alan Paton says “When a deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive” and he is right. Just like getting sick, some healing takes longer than others. The LAM process is not to force people into forgiving when they aren’t ready but when they have healed as much as they can, it is a process to turn to when they are ready for the next step. I believe in order to stop youth violence everyone has to be able to forgive. So I ask you to help me as we, like the helpers in Nepal, lead the way to bring others to safety. Violence is a problem solved through love.

State Finalists

Miranda Austin
Mt. Nebo Middle School
Teacher: Autumn Walton

Matthew Bakker
Mt. Nebo Middle School
Teacher: Tara McKinnon

Leah Batchelor
Summit Academy Independence
Teacher: Debra Wallace

Brooklyn Billman
Fort Herriman Middle School
Teacher: Ryleigh Osterloh

Miles Bohorquez
Summit Academy Independence
Teacher: Debra Wallace

Natalaine Burnett
Lehi Junior High
Teacher: Chancellor Carter

Annabelle Cox
Bennion Junior High
Teacher: Rebecca Winter

Eliza Johnson
Diamond Fork Middle School
Teacher: Reilly Ryan

Acelynn Louangsithideth
Freedom Preparatory Academy
Teacher: Becca Hardman

Brielle McOmie
Clarke N. Johnsen Junior High
Teacher: Amy Jean LeFevre

Brooklyn Mills
South Ogden Junior High
Teacher: Bethanne Lenhart

Olivia Mutchler
Butler Middle School
Teacher: Anna McNamer

Leo Nugent
Butler Middle School
Teacher: Anna McNamer

Maaheen Osman
Summit Academy Draper
Teacher: Kim Arminen

Jack (John) Parry
Fort Herriman Middle School
Teacher: Ryleigh Osterloh

Tristan Penrod
Sand Ridge Junior High
Teacher: Amy Kendell

Mayreen Pinto
Sand Ridge Junior High
Teacher: Amy Kendell

Noah Ransom
Summit Academy Draper
Teacher: Kim Arminen

Quinn Ryskamp
Diamond Fork Middle School
Teacher: Reilly Ryan

Harper Spencer
Roy Junior High
Teacher: Dustin Flores

Miranda Austin

7th Grade – *Mt. Nebo Middle School*

Teacher: Autumn Walton

"The moment you give up, is the moment you let someone else win," -kobe bryant
Youth violence is a big problem in this age. That's why I've come up with some ideas that could stop the situation.

How has youth violence affected my life

Youth violence has never affected my life, and I'm not saying that I haven't had bullying problems, I just fixed it. One thing bullies don't have in common with me is mental toughness. I liked to think of Kobe Bryant.

People have said he's not the best or he isn't really that good. Most people think Lebron's good. I think that is wrong. For example if you would compare those two there is a big difference between them.

For example Kobe Bryant is mentally tough when he goes on the court he's known as the "black Mamba," which is the most venomous snake. When he moves on the court he dominates; he's like a killer. The difference with Lebron is that he's cocky. No one admits but he is. He doesn't put the work in like Kobe Bryant. I know I have been bullied before but I wouldn't call it bullying. I would call it people who are in my way of success. "I create my own path. It was straight and narrow. I looked at it this way: you were either in my way or out of it," another famous Kobe Bryant quote that helps get past trials and struggles.

Whenever someone makes fun of me because I like softball that drives me to work harder. If the people around me make fun of an opinion just ignore them they want a reaction. And if you do your thing you love more around them they will feel embarrassed that they tried to make fun of you and realize they can't.

The causes of youth violence

Youth violence is often caused by bullying, weapons, and mental damage. Like anxiety or depression. Anxiety and depression to me are just emotions and you can get rid of them. You can start "callusing your mind", a quote from David Goggins.

Callusing your mind is like mental toughness if you have no mental toughness you are weak physically and mentally. Take accountability for things you did. Bullying is often caused by an opinion on which you like or someone is jealous.

Sometimes you need to fix something to make yourself feel better. Most kids who have anxiety or depression get bullied because they are weak inside. That's why you need to not stand up to the bullies but get rid of them for good.

Step one: start ignoring them if they see you don't care. They stop caring about you. Most times when you are bullied it's because of something rude the bullies say. And sometimes it's probably true and you have to take accountability for it. If they call you fat, or something that is probably serious it's probably true so you have to take accountability and get fit, go to the

gym and get healthier. I would recommend a book called "cant hurt me" by david goggins it teaches the guide to mental toughness. David Goggins is the toughest man in the world because he completed navy seal training which is one of the hardest things to do. And more army training. David goggins famous quote "they dont know me son" is actually a way to stop bullying and strengthen your mind. If your mind is saying to not go to the gym that day it is not your mind in your head saying they dont know me son because it tells that voice in your head that it doesn't know you.

How can i reduce youth violence

How i can reduce youth violence is tips on not caring about bullies and jealousy live your life and love your opinions. "I don't stop when I'm tired, I stop when I'm done,"- David Goggins

Matthew Bakker

7th Grade – *Mt. Nebo Middle School*

Teacher: Tara McKinnon

Writing this for the fourth time so far, I do not know if I will end up restarting yet again. I feel I should only submit what I know is truly my best work. Humans, the top of the food chain, and yet, there seems to be millions of “food” chains between different humans, with the strongest overpowering the weak. This is not only something that happens with adults; it is seen with youths as well. There is no reason for there to be ANY “food chains” between humans. We are all part of the same species, and yet we still harass and torment each other, and for what, to feel better than others? To make you think you are superior to all the rest? It is especially an issue with those going through school. It even has its own name because of the issue that has been caused by it. Youth violence, what I am writing this about. I am writing this now to educate all I can about all I know about youth violence.

How is Youth Violence Caused?

Youth violence is something that has plagued humans since about the 1980s. It is one of the most overlooked issues of our time, often thought to be a minor issue. It's not, it has caused many to take a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Most adults seem to label the causes to be simple things like social media, drugs, gangs, etc. I agree that those do all play a part in youth violence, but not its main cause. Then what is the dominant cause of youth violence? I believe the main cause of youth violence to be xenophobia: the fear or dislike of things that are unfamiliar or foreign. Many see those that are not the same as them to be bad and not deserving any respect. This can lead them to bully and harass this person for little to no reason. I say all of this because I have experienced youth violence myself.

How Has Youth Violence Affected My Life?

For a year and some months, I have had various dealings with youth violence myself. I made a personal decision that has seemed unpopular among some of those around me. I am a boy, and I have grown out my hair. I began growing it out at the start of 5th grade, and during that school year, it hadn't grown to an eye catching length. However, this didn't stay true for the grades that were to come. On the first day of school, first period even, someone walked over to me with a casual look on their face before saying “You should cut your hair.” I won't lie, hearing that for the first time, it stung a fair bit, but I thought they would be one of few, if any more, that would cause me problems because of my decision. To my shock, in my very next class, a similar thing happened. Someone else that had been occupied talking to their friends glanced over at me and casually said to me “You're gay.” I began thinking it would be a common occurrence I would have to learn to deal with, and I was partially correct. Over the

coming months it continued happening, increasing in intensity. I repeatedly told teachers and other staff members about my situation, but nothing was done. I began to agree with those that harassed me, and eventually, they began to dwindle until there were only two people left with a seeming hatred towards me. It was not an enjoyable experience whatsoever, but at least some of those that tormented me began to see me as more than an anomaly. Instead, some had become my friends, apologizing for their prior actions. Now that you know how I have experienced youth violence in my life, I would like to share how I believe youth violence can be counteracted.

What is the Cause of Youth Violence?

As I previously stated, youth violence is caused by xenophobia: the fear or dislike of things that are unfamiliar or foreign. There are several things we can do to prevent or end bullying caused by this. The most notable of these however, is to educate all we can of things that could cause others to be bullied or harassed. Another is to exchange their cruelty for kindness, which can confuse them at first, and sometimes help them realize that what they are doing is wrong. A third that is often done by those experiencing bullying is ignoring them, which I do not believe to be a good response, as it can further encourage the oppressor in some cases. Nevertheless, all of these can be used to cease bullying enacted on you or another, but I have shared which I believe to be most effective, and those that are more of a guessing game.

Leah Batchelor

8th Grade – Summit Academy Independence

Teacher: Debra Wallace

Youth Violence- The damage you don't see

Youth violence does not always start with a fight at school or a headline on the news. No, it can begin quietly, in places where no one is looking, little mustard seeds that grow long before a child has words for what is happening to them, and by the time they do, they've been taught that love is nothing but manipulation and violence.

My mother comes from a large family. She is ninth out of thirteen children, raised in a home full of loving siblings, safety and parents that adored them. But even in loving, secure homes, violence can leave scars that may never fully disappear. Her youngest sister, who I will call Lily, entered the family already wounded. At just four months old, she was taken from an abusive home and placed into foster care. Despite the support she received, she was faced challenges no child should ever have to face

When Lily was just four and my mom was ten, their father died suddenly of a heart attack. The loss devastated the entire family. But for Lily, it was the second source of safety that was taken from her. She had now known the loss of two fathers at the young age of four years old. Despite this, she grew up loved, protected, and surrounded by people who tried their best, but trauma does not disappear just because someone wants it to, even with all the love in the world. As Lily grew older, the signs started to become even clearer. She struggled in ways her siblings didn't. She always seemed just slightly out of step with the world. By the time she reached her teenage years, she was more of the black sheep in the family. Not because she didn't matter, but because pain had shaped her into someone constantly searching for safety, even when it came at a high cost. Violence teaches lessons early. It teaches fear. It teaches children to feel like they have to constantly be in survival mode even when they are safe. It teaches them to accept what they shouldn't. It shows them that safety isn't real and that they can't count on life to be what they deserve it to be, even when they try their very best in the only way they know how to. It turns the

world against them before they even knew they had to fight.

As an adult, Lily found herself in abusive relationships, one after the other, despite her loved ones trying to help her and give her the help she desperately needed. Each time she tried to leave, the violence and manipulation grew worse. When she became a mother, fear followed her everywhere. Every time her baby went with his father, she was terrified for her baby's safety.

Terrified that her fears would catch up to her and eventually become her reality

And one day, they did. Nobody could have dreamt of the nightmare that would follow this young mother. She was barely able to figure out her own life, and now had to figure out how to protect her baby's life from an unstable man.

While she was at work, Lily got a phone call that no mother should ever have to sit through. Her five-month-old baby had been rushed to the hospital. His father had deliberately shot him. Lily arrived in time to hold her baby boy in her arms, to say goodbye to her child who was perfectly happy and healthy just hours before. He died in the hospital shortly after he arrived, despite the best efforts of the doctors. His own father, The person who killed him, the man who was supposed to protect and love him more than anything, had betrayed him and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

This is youth violence. This is abuse. This is addiction and trauma. This is terror on a human level. This is not right. This can be prevented.

It doesn't always begin with violence. It can begin years earlier, in a home where a baby was hurt before she could understand what safety was. It branches out quietly, seeping into relationships and causing a creeping sense of fear until the dam breaks into something irreversible.

This is how youth violence affects lives. It destroys more than one person. It weaves through families, passing from childhood into adulthood and shaping what is supposed to be a loving home into a place of fear. It steals a person's sense of safety and breaks it into tiny pieces. The feeling of trust and safety can not be replaced. Once it is broken, it can never truly be fixed.

I believe youth violence often begins in the home. When children do not feel safe, seen, or valued, they search for belonging wherever they can find it. Sometimes that search leads them straight

back into harm. If we want to reduce youth violence, we must protect children early. We must listen when something feels wrong. We must take violence, abuse and bullying seriously before it turns into tragedy.

The most dangerous violence is the kind people don't see. And by the time people finally listen and start to see what is really happening, it is already too late. And that is why we cannot afford to ignore it.

Brooklyn Billman

8th Grade – Fort Herriman Middle School

Teacher: Ryleigh Osterloh

What Better Time Than Now?

Violence is a word people think they understand - until they don't. So what is it? When some people think of violence, they might think of their favorite cop show. Or their brother's video game. They might think of the news. So you might think violence is fighting, right? Well, it could be. It's also so much more than that. Violence isn't just physical. It's mental and verbal as well. It's mean words to the new person at school. It's laughing at someone's clothes because your friends are. It's neglecting someone. It's tearing someone down.

You might think I'm too young to understand violence. And maybe I don't. 10 year old me didn't. 11, 12, even old 13 year old me didn't. Until a few days ago when our teacher sat down and talked to us. Her eyes were downcast, and we could tell that she was disappointed. She said, "I'm going to say something you've probably heard before. But I want you to think about what it really means." And I did think about what that really meant. I had heard that word before. And I realized that just because it was a word used a lot, didn't mean it wasn't a word without importance. Just like adding and subtracting to most is an easy thing to do. It's something they grew up doing. Time or familiarity doesn't take away from something, if anything it adds to it.

So now you might be wondering, what does this have to do with violence? Violence for some is something that is just there. And so that's why now, I chose to write this essay. I choose to write this because understanding itself is a benefit. Because I decided that everything and everyone deserves to be understood.

When thinking about writing this essay, I have thought about how violence is in my life. And I have thought about how lucky I am to live in a home that is safe, and have friends who love and care about me. I am not saying that violence has eluded me, for that is simply not true. Nor am I claiming that violence only happens to certain people. I truly believe that violence affects those who commit it, those who are the victims of it, and those who bear witness to it. Many eyes have seen things that one should not see. And many people have lived with things they should not.

I myself have seen violence in my daily life. Not at extreme levels, thankfully, but rather ones that are daily occurrences. Like the fights in the school cafeteria. The mean girl on my Disney Channel tv show. The girl walking home alone because no one has thought to talk to her.

You may now be thinking, wow, this girl sure doesn't know what true violence is. I'm not going to deny it, but that doesn't mean it's true. I've heard stories of far worse things happening to people. Like school shootings, brawls, and harassment. Just because I haven't experienced the worst forms of violence doesn't mean I haven't been affected by it. I am. Seeing these things happen makes me wonder who will be next. Maybe me. Maybe my friend or sibling. Maybe my next door neighbor. And it makes everyone live in constant fear of what is to come. People may be laughing at that girl one day or videoing a fight the next, and then before they know it, they are the ones who are getting laughed at. And it keeps me on edge. How can people live in a world where no one is safe? Where people believe that they are safe.

I see what's happening. I know people have gotten hurt. But people want to believe the world is perfect. And perhaps that is the most dangerous thing of all. Knowing what is happening but not doing anything about it. So yeah, maybe I haven't experienced violence for myself. And yeah, maybe I don't know exactly what it is like. But it still affects me. I still live in fear of myself and my loved ones. I still fear when people are bullying someone that I could be next. I still fear that I care too much for my own sake. Though what can you do, when you are a little, naive, afraid 13 year old girl, with no voice? I am still affected by this thing we call violence, but no one seems to care if it is not a huge act. They don't seem to realize that the little things are perhaps the ones that affect people most. Perhaps the silent ones are the ones with the most hurt. And perhaps the ones who have gone through way more than you have, are the ones who laugh it off because they don't want you to know that they are hurting.

If this is the case, why do people do violence? Why do people hurt someone for the sake of it? Why does someone laugh at someone else because their friends are? Violence is something that lives in us. Just like you need your heart to live, violence needs you to survive. Violence isn't alive - but it lives inside people. When you strip down humanity to its barest point, you'll find violence. So when someone humiliates you, what do you do? For some you'll let them continue to do so. For others you will sit there silently seething, silently hating, and then sometimes, that's when the violence comes out. And so what do you do? You lash out, maybe throw a punch, or maybe a hurtful word. And you might feel better for a minute because you felt like you were in control. Like you made the decision. Yet what if, really, the violence did. What if maybe, you let the violence control you. And what if maybe, the real you wouldn't do such a thing.

And I think that violence lives off your emotions. Your feelings. They feed off of them, especially the more negative ones. When you are angry, embarrassed, hurt, afraid, stressed, or jealous, the violence feeds off it like a fire feeds off of its fuel. And it grows. And grows and grows. Until, one day a kid has a broken nose because of you. A girl whimpers when she sees you. Your friend keeps their head down whenever you walk past. All because you gave in. And I'm not saying you are weak. You are not. I am not saying you are a villain. You are not. I am simply saying that violence happened through you not because of you.

Violence is not created, it is simply always there. Growing and growing, like the stubborn weeds in your garden. Except I believe this weed cannot be picked. That doesn't mean we are powerless. For there is, I am saying that violence is a force of nature that can't be destroyed. So now you may be thinking, what can we do about it then? And so even though I'd rather be in the confines of my own home than confront this truth, I have to ask myself, what better time than now? Why do we run away from things that are uncomfortable to us? Why do we stay away from things that seem hard? So even though I am away from home, I still chose to write. Even though I'd rather be anywhere than here, I choose to not run away. I choose to do something. Anything. We need to think of violence like this. Yes, violence is an uncomfortable, scary, thing. That doesn't mean we have to run away from it. That doesn't mean we have to ignore reality. Because violence IS reality, only some of us just don't want to accept reality. The only way to stop violence is to acknowledge that it is there. It is happening. It does live in people.

People tend to want to ignore the bad things. Like when you need to mow the lawn but you don't want to get up. You just pretend that it doesn't need mowing. Or if you miss a day of school, you just pretend you don't have to make anything up. And you ignore it. And you don't do anything about it. You know it's happening, it's there, you just pretend like nothing is wrong. Like nothing has to be done. But I know for a fact, that you CHOSE not to mow your lawn. You CHOSE not to do your assignments. You had a choice. And maybe instead you should choose TO mow your lawn. TO do your assignments. And the same applies to violence. Just knowing it's happening doesn't matter. Doing something about it does.

Noticing that your friend is a little more angry than they usually are. Noticing that someone got teased at lunch. And then going up to that friend and asking them if they are okay. Asking them if someone did something bad to them. And then helping them realize that they might not be okay. They are, however, in control of themselves. They are allowed to feel what they are feeling. That it is not a weakness. It's a superpower. And going up to the girl who got teased and being a friend. Because those who are most lonely, are the ones who end up most alone. They are the ones who don't always know what they are feeling. They are the ones who might lash out because they seek that companionship. They seek something they don't have. And this causes violence. You doing violence causes violence. The best way to prevent violence is to notice it. Acknowledge that it is reality. Try to notice others. Those hurting and those who seek to hurt. Not everyone is understood. And you might not be able to understand them. But just being someone to them, helps them know that they are not alone. They do not need to fight to belong. And they don't have to be embarrassed by what they are feeling. Rather, they can feel and control. **THEY ARE IN CONTROL.**

And violence is a messy thing that stains the hands of many. It stains people's hearts, souls, and minds. And some people aren't just hurt - they are

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Us being stained does not make us *worthless*. It does not make us *troubled, weak, or bad*. Instead it makes us strong. Us being stained saves others from the same fate. Us knowing this mess called violence helps others to know it too. And us realizing the stained hands of others, helps the world notice them too.

As the saying goes, heavy is the head that wears the crown. We all bear the burden that comes with responsibility. We all do. But taking some of that load from others? Maybe it only lightens yours. Violence is a heavy thing. But knowing someone is there for you? Willing to care for you? Stand by you? Maybe that's all it takes.

Maybe the world won't change overnight. But that girl you saw get teased? She now feels loved. And that friend you saw was angry? They now know it's okay to feel. Julia Abigail Fletcher Carney once said, "Little drops of water make the mighty ocean." Small things can become big. So don't be afraid. You may be a little, naive, afraid 13 year old like me. You may be young. You may feel unheard. I did too. But your voice matters. So speak up - because violence is real, and there is no better time than now.

Miles Bohorquez

8th Grade – Summit Academy Independence

Teacher: Debra Wallace

Youth violence is always a difficult topic to discuss. However it's important that we address it. So today I will discuss the following questions, How has youth violence affected my life, What are the causes of youth violence, and what can I do to reduce youth violence.

I don't have any personal experiences with youth violence. However I can imagine how hard it could be to be bullied or made fun of. I have diabetes so I can imagine how hard it would be if I was bullied for it.

I believe some of the causes of youth violence are abusive parents, bad home situations, peer pressure, being bullied before, wanting to feel powerful, and self doubt. When thinking about this question I thought that people who were previously bullied, they might resent people for not helping them so they want to show them what they felt. I also thought of peer pressure, like when they say "it was just a joke" or "I didn't mean it". As well as scaring you into submission. As well as self doubt, if they feel like they are invisible or don't matter. They want to feel seen or heard.

When thinking of how I can reduce youth violence I thought of different scenarios and what I can do to help. I think a big part is to not discriminate for race or gender. When we see bullying we should step in and stop it then tell a trusted adult to help the victim and the perpetrator. I said this because he might need help and we can stop him from bullying. Another way is to make people feel seen and appreciated. Finally I can not bully and try to persuade other people to not bully.

In conclusion there are multiple ways that people become bullies, but there are more ways to prevent that. So we need to band together to stop youth violence.

Natalaine Burnett

7th Grade – Lehi Junior High

Teacher: Chancellor Carter

Why do my friends hate me
Every cruel word makes us crumble
Better is what i need to be
I try to speak up but I just fumble
It's more than words
It's stabs to the heart
Teens gossip like birds
It tears us apart
People spreading personal lies
Why don't you hear their cries
Bullies are having a tough time too
They struggle with jealousy
They want to hide what they're going through
We all say words so carelessly
Its the new generations fault
Many adults say
This insult is their default
As our happiness starts to slip away
I am my worst enemy
Stressing over everything
Bullying hurts teens mentally
We can help, just do something

Everyone says we are overreacting
Why do I not look like her
But our tears are just compacting
I just want to be prettier
What future job do i want
I have to decide, or I have no direction
All we do is taunt
Anxiety has turned into a contagious infection
We learn every day that bullying is not okay
Everyone says they are just joking but the cut goes deeper
The string holding us together is starting to fray
Teen violence follows us like a grim reaper
No one likes me
A thought that follows every teen
Why can't I feel free
Each depressed thought goes unseen
We need to ask if they're okay
Maybe if we all work together
Let's make teen violence go away
What if we can save teens forever
We need to share our happiness
All of us need to take a stand
Make sure people know we are there
Everyone needs to lend a hand
I promise you that someone will care

The smallest things matter

A smile or a wave

You never know when a heart is about to shatter

We need to be brave

I will do better someday

That day is now

Adults push our ideas away

Well we will stand for that no longer

We will quiet the voices bringing us down

It is time to stand taller

I will help everyone with a frown

Stereotypes will come to an end

Our voices will not wrinkle or bend

The day is now

Annabelle Cox*8th Grade – Bennion Junior High*Teacher: Rebecca Winter

Physically, I haven't been touched by youth violence, but it's not always physical. Words are more powerful than you could possibly imagine. Just a couple of words can make you think differently about yourself and really bump down your self-esteem. Sometimes my friends and family tease me, as a joke, of course, but sometimes certain things are said that you can't forget. I usually let it roll off me, but every once in a while if someone says just the right word or phrase, or if they step on a nerve or a sensitive spot, my heart drops and I get sad and mad. You can forgive, but you can't forget. I need to remind myself when I tease my friends, there is a line you shouldn't cross, and you need to know where that line is. A friend of mine was insulted one time. Maybe a funny, little joke to the person who said it, but to my friend, it hurt. A *lot*. After that I could tell how it affected their self-esteem. Words are powerful. Don't take them for granted.

In my history class, we do this thing called Tuesday Newsday, where we debate about a variety of topics. Sometimes silly things, like "Are Video Games a Sport?" And sometimes more serious things, like, "Should We Allow Corporal Punishment in Schools?" Whatever the topic, the point of Tuesday Newsday was that we practiced civil debating. One day we were in the middle of a debate, and the class was really getting into it. Our teacher said something along the lines of how he loved that we were arguing like civil people, and how it's good to know this skill, because some adults don't. I think if everybody argued like this, and really considered the other point of view, it would decrease the amount of violence there is in the world. Of course, you can't just snap your fingers and suddenly everyone is civil and considerate. But you have a choice. Use it wisely. Communication is key to preventing youth violence.

I've always been confused as to *why* some people resort to violence. It doesn't help, it just turns into more violence. Why go through all that pain to just have it lead to more pain and more violence? It hurts people. *Real* people with *real* feelings. There isn't just one cause of youth violence. It completely depends on the person and the situation. As I have been looking for an answer to this question, a lot of the answers I found revolved around bullying. According to <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/bullying>, "People who bully often have low self-esteem." It could also be something happening at home, or maybe someone is bullying them. It reminded me of a saying I heard once. Every bully has a bully.

Everybody is going through something, and sometimes their coping mechanism is violence. Whether that's verbal or physical, that depends on the person, but I do know that we all have a tendency to hide our feelings. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson once said, "We all go through

the sludge, and depression never discriminates. Took me a long time to realize it, but the key is to not be afraid to open up...You're not alone." Keeping in our anger or sadness or depression seems fine until it turns into something ugly. I've seen this happen, because it's happened to me. A long time ago I had something on my mind that was really troubling me. I procrastinated telling my parents, and one night I had a panic attack and freaked out, as that implies. I was crying and was very overwhelmed, but when I finally got up the courage to talk to my parents, I felt *amazing*. After we finished talking about it, I had this really incredible feeling, like a weight was being lifted. I don't know what would've happened if I hadn't talked to them about it, but it wouldn't have been good.

When I was in sixth grade, I was in a theater class, where we performed a bunch of little skits that we wrote. As my teacher was explaining how this class would work, she talked to us about supporting each other, and how important that is. To prove how important it is, she told us a story about some students she had. One of the students she had was not very popular, and a lot of people didn't like him. Another student was the opposite, everyone loved him and he was super popular. The unpopular student decided he was going to kill himself because of how things were going. His last day at school, the popular kid was walking in the halls with his friends, and they passed the unpopular kid. His friends started to make fun of him, when the popular student stepped in and said: Don't say that about my friend.

That one little comment saved a life that day. The student was going to kill himself *that day*. All it takes is a friend. A parent, sibling, cousin, grandparent, counselor, you name it. Be that person that chooses kindness.

I want to share some lyrics from a song from an amazing musical Dear Evan Hansen. I recommend listening to the full song, You Will be Found!

Even when the dark comes crashing through
 When you need a friend to carry you
 And when you're broken on the ground
 You will be found

So let the sun come streamin' in
 'Cause you'll reach up and you'll rise again
 Lift your head and look around
 You will be found

I hope that everyone has someone they can trust and talk to. And I also hope that you are willing to *be* that person that someone can talk to and just be there for, because it could very well save a life. I know I am willing to be that person that listens.

Eliza Johnson

7th Grade – Diamond Fork Middle School

Teacher: Reilly Ryan

Violence can Lead To Love?

Hi! My name is Eliza Johnson. I am almost thirteen and I am writing about teen violence. Now I have not had a lot of teen violence happen to me. So, what gives? An inexperienced 12-year-old writing about teen violence. Well, I can tell you, I want to stop it. Why? Well because I care, I see kids bullied every day. I have also seen kids physically hurt by someone else. Sometimes I stand up for the person and sometimes I hide or run away, but it

is time we all stepped up for each other. It takes every inch of my courage to do this. There is someone at my school who I will keep the person unknown. Well last year I watched this girl get bullied until she was crying on the floor. I looked at this person that was bullying and asked “Why? Why would you do something like that?” I just remember the three words she said. “Cause it's funny.”. Funny. Funny. Does anything that has to do with bullying or violence seem funny to you? I helped up this girl and walked with her. This person was starting to feel useless. I reminded them of their worth. I knew this girl was important. Everyone is.

There are so many words in the dictionary you know. So many kind words and mean words. Just so many, but why out of all the words do we have to say the mean ones. Do you know the phrase “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”? Well, that is not necessarily accurate. Words cut deep. Words can make wounds and can heal them. I have been called things that offend me to the point of crying in my bed at night. I still hate those words today. At the end of the day, we are left with two choices. 1. To back down and let them get the best of you or 2. Fight it. However, there are also two ways to go down fighting it. You could fight the fire with fire and make it worse or fight it with water and put it out. Being rude to the person back makes you just as guilty as the person bullying you. Try to help this person. You don't know what they are going through. I had a girl bully me in 4th and 5th grade and I would get so mad at her. Until one day I found out from one of her friends that her parents were getting a divorce. I could not start to imagine how hard that is.

When we try to walk a mile in someone else's shoes we learn things about that person. Violence affects my life because it makes me sad and upset. Which does not seem like a lot but the National Library of Medicine states “Acts of violence account for an estimated 1.43 million deaths worldwide annually. While violence can occur in many contexts, individual acts of aggression account for most instances. “. That is what makes me sad. 1.43 million people have died because of acts of violence. That is 1.43 million people to many. But, why? Why does this happen? Britannica states “...violence results from a combination of factors, including those originating in the violent person’s social or cultural environment...”. There have been so many murders that have had a bad or violent past. Edmund Kemper was a murderer and when he was a kid he experienced severe emotional and physical abuse.

In my English class we just finished reading a book called “Touching Spirit Bear”. A boy named Cole Mathewes steals some stuff from a hardware store and a boy named Peter Driscall reports him. Cole ends up finding out who told, and smashes Peter's head into the sidewalk giving him permanent brain damage. Later in the book you find out that Cole's dad abused him. That is all Cole’s dad grew up knowing. Then that was all Cole grew up knowing. So yes, our social environment can lead to actions. They could be good or bad. If you grew up with an abusive family, then that could be something you think is a good thing. If you grew up with a kind family who taught you good things you learn those things.

Did you know that Violence can lead to love?

I have been talking to a few people about Teen Violence and trying to understand their point of view. There are lots of people that when they hear the word Violence, they think of words like-

1. War
2. Injury
3. Aggression
4. Assault
5. Murderousness

Teen Violence has consequences not just physically, but mentally to. Most of these words do remind me of violence, but not many people have thought of another word. Love. Now why love? What does love have to do with violence? In so many circumstances violence can bring people together. For example, 9/11. 9/11 created a powerful, brief, wave of national unity bringing Americans together through shared grief. I had a friend whose grandma had died. This friend's family was not necessarily the closest with each other, but after their family became so much closer. Now they are closer than they have ever been. That has happened with my family. My great grandma died. She was close to me. We loved her birthday letters, and when she died our family was in so much sorrow, but that is what brought us together. That is what is beautiful.

Closing

Now back to fixing teen violence. It depends on where we are focusing. In school we could implement prevention programs or provide mentorship. As a community we can do so many things together. We can collaborate with health, business, and community partners. We can also provide people like counselors and therapists. How can you help? Try to make someone's day better. SMILE! Give someone a compliment! Keep your head up. With these I hope we can change not only schools and families but change America for the better.

Acelynn Louangsithideth

8th Grade – Freedom Preparatory Academy

Teacher: Becca Hardman

Is there an end?

I always wondered if there ever was an end to this. All the yelling. There really wasn't ever physical, just verbal. Why did it feel like everything was my fault? Maybe this would've never happened if I wasn't born. Then I wouldn't have parents that only stay together because of me. My parents just live together for one reason and that's because of me. But I feel like they cause me more pain staying together for me than being apart.

I I'm in 8th grade but I'm more mature than most of my family. Not even just my parents, everyone aunts, uncles and cousins. I'm younger yet I know better than to act like that. No one tells you how hard it is to have emotionally immature parents who can't control themselves.

Every family event, everywhere, even in public. It's not just emotionally draining, it's embarrassing. One time I was going to a Christmas party and my mom and my aunt just started to fight. I remember being so scared I ran downstairs into the bathroom and called one of my closest friends who has similar problems to me and I just started to bawl my eyes out. This was my first panic attack I've experienced and it was horrible. I was shaking for hours and no one was there. Not because they didn't want to help me but I didn't want them to see me cry.

I've never liked crying in front of people because I didn't want them to worry about me. But this time it felt like I just needed someone there to talk to. Calling my friend felt like the right thing to do and I'm so glad I had someone to talk to. He talked to me though everything telling me it was all going to be okay. He said this one specific thing to me and it stuck with me forever. He told me it wasn't my fault and none of this was. This might seem like a normal sentence but for me this was so freeing. For someone to finally say it isn't my fault. My whole life I have blamed myself for everything and for someone to tell me it's all going to be okay. He reminded me that God was always there for me which gave me a great reminder to be strong.

Youth Violence has affected my life in many ways in the bad and in the good. It has shown me how people can react in many ways. It has brought trauma in my life but it has shown me I can overcome hard challenges. I'm not alone. I have people who love and support me who are here with me every step of the way. Knowing I'm not alone has helped me realize that even when hardship comes I can overcome it. I've been through multiple scary situations in my life but I'm doing amazing thanking God everyday for waking me up and being by my side.

The causes of youth violence can be from family. People in your home can influence your life and how you feel emotionally and physically. Same with people. People can influence you in bad ways sometimes. Your environment matters. It affects who you are as a person. This can lead to many cases of youth violence.

To reduce youth violence I can speak up about experiences. We all can. We can speak up about how youth violence has affected us and how we can overcome it. We can stand up. Inspire others to be strong. No matter how hard it is and no matter what people influence us to do you can overcome it. Sharing my story hopefully can help others grow and learn they can get through many hardships.

Brielle McOmie

7th Grade – Clarke N. Johnsen Junior High

Teacher: Amy Jean LeFevre

How long must we wait...?

How long must we wait for this world full of ignorant people to see that children are not “objects to be seen and not heard”? Children are people with voices and ideas that happen to be younger. Children are people with supporters and opposers. Children are people with fears and emotions. Children are people, imperfect as ever, people who are dying because of this evil called youth violence. Most could probably guess or come to their own conclusion about what youth violence is only by the name, but if not, hopefully I can portray to those reading this what I think true youth violence is. The first question I was inquired about was, “How has youth violence affected my life?” I was confused at first because I thought, foolishly, that youth violence had never been a big issue in my twelve years here on this earth, but then I started diverting more energy into finding those instances in my life where I was deeply harmed or affected by this corrupt system of violence. The more I found the more that appeared. For me it's the small things that can dig the deepest scars. Like my brother dropping out in his third grade year due to a toxic teacher and violent classmates or me getting sent to the principal's office for an act of violence committed against me. But one that hurt the most personally was being bullied for having acne in the 4th grade. A few years ago I was very self conscious about my acne. It was relatively new and I thought it was grotesque and unnatural. It only supported the hatred associated with it when two young girls I had grown to trust and perhaps even qualify as friends started calling me ugly and gross for something on my body that I did not have the power to change and did not need to change. I told my teacher but she brushed me off saying they were only teasing. I felt ignored and unheard. So I started using makeup and it turned into an obsession, trying to cover up the uniqueness of me just for the validation of a few little girls that I have since forgotten the names of. Because I thought having the friendship and support of those two girls was more important than my own voice. That little thing turned into an insecurity that I still somewhat carry because of a teacher ignoring me when I went to her for trust and support. Hoping for help with this violence. Many people may tell you that thicker skin will protect you but thicker skin did not stop hatred and disdain from entering my ears while the person I was told to trust turned a blind eye. I know there are many more tragic cases of violence many ending in the victim taking their own life or having it taken by another and I feel truly sorry for anyone experiencing something like that. This was just something small that took a truly unnecessary and hurtful role in my life. Another very important question that I've yet to answer is, “What are the causes of youth violence?” What is behind these acts of evil committed against these sometimes helpless people, driving them to feel worthless and in a sad number of cases take

their own lives? There are countless cases of youth violence just as there are countless causes of youth violence. Some being abuse, physically or emotionally, abandonment, trust issues, anger issues, which is something I've always struggled with or simply feeling like abnormality is wrong, which most times is being taught to them by close friends or family members. Sometimes these already deep wounds of sadness or anger made upon someone's soul can push people to believe that they must make others feel the same. But I don't and will never feel that this is an excuse for the many sadnesses and suicides that are caused by this toxicity. The hundreds and possibly thousands of cases of suicide have led me to think that by now there could have been some way to keep some, if not all, of those names off of that dismal yet terrifyingly long list. One way that I think is perhaps the easiest and sometimes the most effective is simply passing kind words to others. Do not be the one to push that child off the edge. Be the one to pull them back. Have them think about that compliment or kindness you shared instead what it feels like to die. Have them think of how you stood up and cared instead of laughing while they suffered. And to the adults reading this, listen to the children. When we care enough to alert you it is important to us, but don't try to just see it from the victims point of view. Punish what needs to be punished, but help those desperate for help, show sympathy when sympathy is in need. Show you really care about our future because our future is yours. As you might have noticed whilst reading this essay, there are many words I would use to describe youth violence only a few of which I have already implemented throughout this essay but one I have yet to utilize that is perhaps the most suitable of which is "Plague". Like a plague you can not simply turn your back and hope it sorts itself out because by the time you turn back there may not be time to fix it. Because it is growing and growing and hurting mankind, taking lives and splitting families. So please, for the children who deemed themselves unworthy or bad for this world, who even took themselves out of it, do not feed this plague known as youth violence, fight it.

Brooklyn Mills

8th Grade – South Ogden Junior High

Teacher: Bethanne Lenhart

Wishes are glorified bits of jealousy.

I wish.

I wish.

I wish.

Each wish changes you.

It breaks you.

Be the beautiful you.

Fire can melt glass.

Fire can ruin glass.

Fire can make glass beautiful.

Don't let the fire ruin you.

Let the fire make you beautiful.

Be the beautiful you.

Don't worry what those others might think.

Worry what *you* think.

For there is no one quite so special as you.

Be the beautiful you.

To me, youth violence isn't just physical. Marks from physical violence go away. They will heal. Emotional and mental violence stick with you. They slice deep. Sorry doesn't fix anything. Sorry only means that you won't do it again. But how can you believe that? To me youth violence is every rude look. It is every rude joke. It is every time someone says something behind your back. It is every time someone leaves you out. It is every time someone ignores you. It is the feeling that you need to be perfect or just like someone else.

How could someone do that to you? They might want to fit in. They might be jealous of you or another. They might have pure rage for anything and everything that comes in their path. They might not realize how much they're hurting you. They might be treated that same way at home. That is what is so sad. This whole thing is a never ending cycle. You can end it. You can be that one person that has enough courage, enough kindness.

I know how it feels. To feel like you're in the shadows. I know what it's like to feel like no one sees you. I know how it feels to be ignored. I know what it's like to dream of being someone else.

In 7th grade I felt very left out. I felt lonely. I felt almost invisible. The lunch table I sat at didn't bother saying a word to me. My dance team left me out of conversations and went to

places without me. I would try and try to be the best I could be. I would try to start the conversation. I would try to seem as good and popular as them. It didn't quite work. Which made me think, *Am I weird? Is there something wrong with me? Do they not like me? Do I need to try harder? Do I need to be better?*

I've compared myself to others countless times. I've wished I was them. I've wished I had their hair. I've wished I had their life. I've wished I was as good of a dancer as them. I've wished I had their body. I've wished I was as popular as them. I've envied and dreamed.

I've seen people make unkind jokes about others. Those jokes aren't funny. Their friends will laugh but do they agree with putting others down? Does the person making the joke feel it's okay? Or do they just want to fit in? Of course the person who made the joke doesn't say it directly to the person. That way the person won't even know. Incorrect. The person will most likely find out. And that almost hurts more. Other times the joke isn't meant to harm. It's placed in a conversation casually. But it crosses a line. It breaks a small piece of you. It's happened to me. You'll laugh it off in the moment but it hurts so hard later.

These are the things that make you cry in the shower. The things that make you lose a little piece of what's truly you. These are the things that make people harm themselves or another. The things that cause people to consider if it would be better to be dead. The little things add up. They tear you apart.

So how do you fight back? How do you cope? You can't fight fire with fire. Two wrongs don't make a right. So then what can you do? Be you! Have confidence in who you are. Just like rude looks can put someone down, smiles can bring someone up. Smiles are contagious. They bring light to a dreary day. Smile. It may not seem like much, but trust me, it is. "A warm smile is the universal language of kindness." -William Arthur Ward. Find those people that will smile back. Find those people who will accept who you really are. Don't find those people that make you feel you are not good enough. You will be able to find people who will accept you for you. Because you are worth it. You are amazing. Stop comparing yourself to others. You'll never be them so why waste your time envying them? Who knows if they have problems of their own buried deep inside? What if they envy you? Like in "The Outsiders" by S.E. Hinton, the main character, Ponyboy, is jealous of the Socs. Turns out the Socs have a whole other set of problems that Ponyboy couldn't even imagine. Their problems are just different.

Be a friend. Be brave. Be kind. Mother Teresa once said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." Sometimes we fight so hard to fit in that we lose ourselves in the battle. Don't lose yourself. If others think you're weird, who cares? The definition of weird is suggesting something supernatural. That doesn't sound so bad, does it? The rough times will become good. Each and every bit of glass will become breathtaking.

Together, we can change this scary world, one act of kindness at a time.

Olivia Mutchler

7th Grade – Butler Middle School

Teacher: Anna McNamer

Left Behind: How Youth Violence Affects More Than Just the Body

Have you ever felt as if everyone and everything is out to get you? Well, you are not alone. Over 800 kids are affected by youth violence every day. I am going to tell you how youth violence has affected my life, where I am confronted with youth violence, what the causes of youth violence are, and what you and I can do to prevent youth violence. Even though youth violence seems like a massive problem that is unsolvable, you can still make a difference.

I have not been affected by youth violence very much, but I have one memory that sticks out above all else. I had a friend, bestie actually, and we were attached at the hip since fourth grade. She was bullied, family stuff was really heavy and hard on her, and I was with her till the end. She was with me through all of my family trauma as well. She was my ride or die. Until she wasn't. We had just moved up to middle school, and we started out eating lunch, just the two of us. It was fun, but also we wanted a friend group.

Throughout the first couple weeks of that school year, there were people that have gotten kicked out of their friend group, justly and unjustly both. They had come and joined us for lunch. This is what we called the "fall out friend group." This was a great group of girls. After a couple of lunches like this, my bestie started eating lunch with this crazy toxic group of girls. Of course, I didn't know that they were so bad until hanging out with them for a while. After about a year, the friend group started becoming the kingdom of drama. I was always on both sides of the problems, but I was also very tired of having to do this every single week.

Around halloween time in 7th grade, the drama hit its peak. The head of this friend group didn't like me very much, and she lived in my neighborhood. She was throwing this big halloween party, and everyone was invited, except for me. My bestie was invited, and some of my closest friends were too. I asked her if I could at least trick or treat with them, and she said "Sure, we'll call

you when you should walk over.” So I invited a friend to come over and trick or treat with us when we got called down to.

We had been waiting for hours, and it was 7pm, and we had still not heard from them. We had called them multiple times throughout the night, and they claimed to be still at the party. Rachel, my stepmom, had begun to catch on, so she said to go out trick or treating to get a head start. We made our way to the hostess house in our neighborhood. We saw her parents, and they said that they had been trick or treating for *hours*. Me and my friend looked at each other and we freaked out. We called everyone until someone picked up, and we asked them why they didn't call us when they went trick or treating. They said that they didn't want the friend I had invited over. They hadn't said anything about that and decided to just go without us, leaving us in the dirt. This was heartbreaking to me, and my other friend. We met up in the neighborhood and they gave excuse after excuse. I could tell that they were lying, and so could my friend. My parents were also listening, and they were going full papa and mama bear. They called me multiple times in the process of meeting my friends in the neighborhood. Eventually, I gave up trying to get an actual explanation out of them. They were obviously fake.

Later, I called my bestie, the mastermind of the whole plan and asked her why she would do that. She tried to gaslight and manipulate me into thinking that it was my fault and she was totally innocent. I wasn't having it. I told my dad, and he went full papa bear. I had never seen my dad like that before. He said that they could go die in a hole, which made me laugh.

At school on Monday, I confronted my “bestie” and she tried to gaslight me again. This was maddening. Later that day, she and another one of my friends texted me how horrible of a friend I am and that I was the manipulator. I was done with them. Still, to this day, I don't really talk with them, only a few friends have apologized but still have some tension between us.

Now we are moving on to what the causes of youth violence are. Usually youth violence is committed by people from ages 10-24. According to Horizon treatment services, “The types of relationships that youth have with their parents and others can also be predictive of violence among young individuals.” This shows that there are many reasons for the causes of youth violence.

According to Horizon treatment services, “It includes fighting, bullying, threats, sexual assault, homicide, and gang-related violence.” This shows that horrible things come out of family problems and other toxic relationships that can lead to youth violence.

There are also many ways to prevent youth violence. According to Horizon treatment services, “Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, have been shown to have a large effect on future violence victimization and perpetration.” This shows that there are still ways to help children that struggle with youth violence. According to Horizon treatment services, “Violence can begin early in childhood. Choosing early education, such as a quality preschool with a high level of parental involvement, can set your child up for success in the long run.” This shows that there are also ways to prevent and help kids that could potentially struggle with youth violence.

In conclusion, even though youth violence seems like a massive problem that is unsolvable, you can still make a difference. I know how hard it can be to be that person to step in and try to chill out whatever type of youth violence is going on. I also know how easy it is to just step back and watch youth violence go down, especially if it is someone you don't know. There are lots of causes and effects of youth violence, and remember, you are not alone in whatever situation you are in!

Leo Nugent

7th Grade - Butler Middle School

Teacher: Anna McNamer

Youth violence & video games.

Youth violence is usually caused by violent things like video games. I play a lot of video games, some violent too and they do make me a little angry. Lots of kids have access to violent video games, these violent video games cause aggression, knowledge of violent things, and violent words.

I know that youth violence has affected my life a little bit, making me mad at my brother or other people. But this is just anger on others because I'm upset. Most violent games show people dying or blood or death, this shows kids violence that makes them aggressive. And sometimes this aggression leads to violence or bullying at school.

Whenever I play my games I am usually confronted with youth violence which is at my house. I say this because whenever I play games, most people like to hurt others with their words if they do bad in the game or if they make someone upset. They also like to make fun of them or bully them in-game and rarely in real life too.

If you couldn't tell already this is about violent video games and video games associated with youth violence. Now even if a game doesn't have violent features it has others too. One of these features that causes youth violence is voice chat. Voice chat is a feature that allows other people to talk to each other. Most kids have a mic or headset to access voicechat. Inside of voicechat lots of people think it's cool or normal to swear or even sometimes say a racial slurs. This may show kids that some swears are ok to say and they will say them at school and bully kids with swears making more kids think that it is ok to swear and kids attack other kids with these words causing youth violence.

I think that youth violence in video games could be fixed by trying to reach out to game developers about making violent games less accessible or writing an article to parents about making gaming stricter. Another solution would be parents talking to kids to just block or mute these toxic people or not giving them a headset with a microphone.

All in all I think that gaming should be more strict with their rules to stop kids from gaining access to violent video games or voice chat. Because when kids hear or see these things they think that it's ok or normal to cause youth violence at schools, homes or other public places.

Maaheen Osman

8th Grade – Summit Academy Draper

Teacher: Kim Arminen

*My chest tightens, my body stiff,
My heart beating violently, My leg bouncing without permission,
Why won't it stop? Why can't it just stop?
My head is throbbing, my hands are shaking,
I feel sick, I feel as if my body is closing in,
I want it to stop. Make it stop.
I needed help, I needed someone to help me,
Someone to comfort me, Someone to be there for me,
But they didn't understand, they didn't know how I felt,
So no one helped me. I was alone.*

This was my experience having panic attacks. This was not always the case, but it usually happened like this. I don't blame my parents. They didn't know how to help me, and I didn't know how to explain it to them. However, it was usually because of the yelling and belittling that caused my panic attacks.

I want to start off by saying how much I love my parents. They care about me so much, and everything they do is intended to be in my best interest. They would never purposely hurt me. They just want to help me become better and be successful. It was just the instances where they pushed me a little too hard that became Verbal Abuse. It's important to note that they're only human, and make mistakes, so even though these events occurred, I still have a healthy and loving relationship with them.

My dad yells at me a lot. It's for discipline, and sometimes it's a valid reason, and sometimes it's not. For example, if I forgot to complete a task, he'd yell at me. One time, when my little brother forgot to complete a task, he yelled at him *and* me, the reason being that he didn't *just* want to yell at my brother. Depending on the situation, I'll tell my mom and she says she'll talk to him. She does, but it doesn't usually stop. Sometimes, I'll yell back. That's when things get worse. He'd either send me to my room, or say some really mean words first. Words that I never have forgotten. I'm not innocent though. I've said words to him that I regret just as much as he regrets the words he's said to me. I'm not my father. I can't tell you about the feelings I have caused him to feel. But I can tell you about mine.

Dramatic, Over Exaggerating, Attention seeking. Sometimes I've been directly called these, and sometimes it was hinted at. I have been guilt tripped for making an honest mistake, or belittled if I got into a bad argument. But these words were always the most hurtful to me. I remember nights where I couldn't stop sobbing. I can be pretty sensitive, and I struggle so much explaining why I am upset. Being called these words made things so much worse. I hate these words. These words have made me feel worthless. Like my feelings don't matter, like they are not true. When my dad yells at me, I feel angry. I feel unheard, I feel misunderstood, I feel undervalued, I feel unseen.

I feel miserable. And I didn't know how to tell anyone.

So when I have had panic attacks, I have stayed silent out of fear of others thinking I'm weak. I never really realized how much this unhealthy yelling affected my health and safety. And one of the hardest parts for me was realizing this was youth violence in the first place. Before, I had thought youth violence had to be physical. Little did I know there is so much more to it.

Although my father and I still argue a lot, things have gotten better. I've gotten better at communicating, and he has gotten better at listening. I've reached out and talked about my feelings to an adult I trusted. I've found that writing helps me a lot when I need to explain how I am feeling. And the best part is that I'm better at asking for help when I have a panic attack, or simply just need emotional guidance, including from my dad!

If I had to name the number one cause of youth violence, considering all different varieties of the subject, I would sum it up in one word. Fear. Maybe it is the fear that you'll be 'next' if you don't join in on the bullying. Maybe it's the fear that you're not good enough for anyone, so you cut yourself, or starve yourself. Maybe it's the fear that you'll lose someone you used to love if you speak up for yourself when they hurt you. Fear that you're overreacting, 'they're not that person anymore' or 'they'll be different next time'. Or maybe it is the fear that your child won't be happy or successful when they grow up, so you do whatever you think it takes to ensure they grow up as an amazing person. Fear is natural, it is a part of us. But it's when fear grows from a situation, where there seems to be no other option but to act out of fear, that starts youth violence.

So what can we *do* about this? How can someone like me or you do something to prevent or put an end to a situation like so? Well, for starters, if you suspect someone is a victim of youth violence, check in on them. Ask them how they're doing, or if they're okay. Letting someone know you're there for them can do a lot more good than one may realize. Knowing you

have someone to talk to, someone who *cares*. It makes a difference. If you're really concerned about someone, *do* something. Sometimes actions speak louder than words. Stand up for someone, or get a trusted adult involved. Doing things like these can sometimes make a more prominent mark. And if none of that is doable, then a great way to play your part is to spread awareness. The more people know, the more they can help. Discuss it with your colleagues, educate children, even sharing a personal experience. If someone relates to you or something you discussed, they might realize an unhealthy situation they didn't know they were in. Better yet, they might reach out to you if you discussed it. More knowledge can help people in plenty of ways. Sometimes simply telling a friend about it can make a difference. And if in the end, you still feel like you didn't or couldn't make a difference. The easiest and sometimes most effective way to do something about youth violence is to simply be kind. Don't spread a rumor, maybe invite someone to lunch. As I have stated before, you truly can never know exactly what someone else is going through. So if you're genuinely kind to people, you might just save a life without even realizing it.

Youth Violence is still a terrible, yet sadly big problem for our society today. As humans, we should put an effort into doing what we can to prevent it. It's easier said than done, but if we can come together, share our stories, spread awareness, stand up for others, especially for ourselves, and maybe, just maybe live with a little more kindness in our hearts,

We could make a difference. A difference for those who need help, but don't know how to ask for it. A difference to those who think they are alone.

Jack (John) Parry*8th Grade – Fort Herriman Middle School*Teacher: Ryleigh Osterloh

You might hate the way you look, the way you speak, the way you talk, the way you walk, maybe your hair and your face you hate too. Everyone feels the sting from the bee in one way or another no matter how happy you are. But some people might feel like the bee only stings them. They want everyone to feel the same pain they feel. They aspire to be the bee. Some maybe don't feel the pain, but they want to cause it. No matter what type of bee you're stung by, their sting will hurt, maybe even more than the regular bee. They'll find you and search you and look at the way you view yourself and they'll knock you down. They could sting you with what they hate about themselves, or point out what they think you hate. You might cry at the pain of their sting, scream, try and run away, but sometimes, that won't work. You can alarm people you love about what the bee is doing to you but they might just say ignore the bee and it'll stop stinging. But the bee doesn't stop. It will keep stinging and stinging until you give it the attention it wants. You might hate going in public in case you see the bee, but the bee can sting you in many ways. They could sting you over social media, they could sting you by messages, calls, their buzz, and their stingers.. They will find a way to sting you no matter what you do. But a bee dies after stinging you. A bee can die, regretting what they did. A bee can die proud, proud of what they've done. Maybe the bee comes with their hive, and they all sting you and all die, happy that they attacked you. Or maybe they feel bad for stinging you. Maybe the bee isn't stinging you, maybe it's the wasp. The wasp will sting as much as it wants, repeatedly, every day. You might threaten them by just being you and they'll sting you. You threaten them by doing nothing, they'll sting you. They constantly want to sting you. They'll sting you digitally, physically, and verbally. The wasp wants to hurt you, and they might feel bad about it, they might not. You can try to get away from it, over it, fight back. But fighting back just makes them want to sting you more. You might not even want to live anymore because the stings hurt so bad. I haven't been stung but people I love very dearly have been stung. I have a friend who is transgender and gets stung at points for being "different" than the others, which I personally think is foolish. So me and my other friends are there for them. We listen, we let them speak, we defend them and let them vent. We didn't just say ignore the stings, we said to report and talk to someone. Fight back instead of being ignorant. Because just ignoring the stings doesn't work. The stinging will keep stinging. They're doing great, and it doesn't happen unless someone just hasn't had the day they wanted. My friends don't sting, I don't sting, and people have been genuinely nicer. Most stingers practically have cobwebs on them now. It's like the world became better around me. But not totally. I still see stinging happen. It doesn't stop. Some wasps fight and sting other wasps. They get separated eventually. Some people get stung because they're weird and "not in a good way" (whatever that's

supposed to be). Some people get stung because they don't own certain shirts, the right jeans, or the right hair. Some people get stung because of their sexuality or believe in something different. Some people get stung so badly they feel the need to sting everyone before they get locked behind bars. Permanently. People get stung for being themselves. If we want people in our society to grow up and make it to the future to provide for their kids, the stinging has to stop. But how do we stop it? Be the baking soda or the itching cream. As weird as that sounds, do it. Be the baking soda that takes the venom out of people that have been stung. Be the itching cream that helps people deal with the stings. Be a friend that people can rely on. Secondly, we need to be nicer. I know some of the bees or wasps will read this and laugh and keep on stinging, but I'm being serious. Hatred is so common in our society nowadays. Everywhere you go, there's hatred. Politics: hatred. School: hatred. Walking down the street: hatred. You can't escape it. Which is why kindness and positivity needs to be more normalized. Years ago back in elementary school I didn't have that many friends. I had people, but I didn't play with them during recess everyday. And on those days when I didn't feel like playing with my friends, I would go over to the buddy bench by the cafeteria door. The bench was there for people who didn't have anyone to hang out with at recess. So I would go over to the bench, and whoever was sitting on the bench became my friend. I would make them feel included. But now, there's not a lot of chances to provide that. If you see someone and they look down, ask them, "Are you okay?" Don't be weird about it, don't make it strange, be genuine. Listen to how they were stung. Be there for them. Everyone has a bad day but no one deserves that bad day. Make the bad day better. In the end the bees sting and die, the wasps will sting and live. But the stung needs to stick together. Because without each other, we are nothing.

Tristan Penrod

8th Grade – Sand Ridge Junior High

Teacher: Amy Kendell

My Experiences I guess I might as well start off with saying that I have little to no experiences with real youth violence. While I have had verbal bullying I still have not had that much experience with it. I have been in a few fights but nothing really crazy. This is the first of two stories I have. This was in 6th grade. At this time my parents were getting a divorce so I was very on edge. On this particular day we were going to play football at recess and it was my friend's ball and he was saying that a bunch of my friends couldn't play with us which was making me really mad. In hindsight this was a silly thing to get mad about. I ended up ruining the entire recess football game. During this same day I said a lot of things that I wish I could take back but like my church taught us, words are like toothpaste, once you say something it is impossible to take back. I did end up apologizing to all the friends I hurt and they all understood what I was going through. The second and last story I have is from 4th grade, I lived in Alabama at the time. For my entire 4th grade year I was sexually harassed by the same group of 3 kids. To start, I was friends with all of these kids before all this started. I also had a best friend who then stopped hanging out with me to hangout with this one kid who was super annoying. One day out of the blue this one girl started to shove her fingers up my butt super hard. I told the teacher about it but she did absolutely nothing. So for the entire year I had this happen at least three times every day. I would have told my parents but I was scared they would be mad that I talked about it. We even had a sexual harassment prevention slip sent home, but I threw mine away because like I said I was scared that they would be mad. I ended up telling them that they were doing other things that were not sexual, so my parents thought that I was doing something to deserve it. One of the worst days for me was during snack time when we were hanging out, all of a sudden the kids I was sitting with started to throw rocks at me. I ran around the building and grabbed a tennis racket and was hitting the rocks back at them. We all ended up getting in trouble but because the teachers weren't watching one of the kids ducked into a group of kids and still never got in trouble for anything the entire year. About 3 weeks before the end of the year I finally told my parents what was happening and my mom told the school what was happening, the kids still never got in trouble so my mom took me out of school three weeks before the end of the year. I realize that this was a very long story but it was worth it to finally type out all that happened. What can we do about youth violence I personally think that a lot of people could do a lot of good. My idea is for people to say more things on the internet. Ever since the internet became such a big thing people have used it to hurt a lot of people, obviously there has also been a lot of good that has come from the internet. For example

there is a youtuber named Noah Anderson. He does a lot of videos about how you can help yourself and others. Currently he is doing something called the 75 hard challenge which is where he takes an ice bath and talks about a lot of ways you can better yourself both mentally and physically. I think if people come up with their own original ideas, we can help a lot of people who are struggling. One more thing I have to say is if you or your loved ones are struggling or have struggled with mental health I think that you should share it on the internet because if anyone is struggling or are just scrolling on the internet they might see your video and see that their life is worth living. I have struggled with mental health and so have my friends, and unfortunately so have a ton of other people all across the United States and the world. In 2020 approximately 46,000 committed suicide, that alone is a mind bogglingly high number. As of mid 2025 nearly 445,000 people have committed suicide. As I'm writing this I am heartbroken that this many people have felt like they are not enough for this world and that nobody loves them. I wonder just how many deaths are caused by the internet. I also wonder what kind of household they grew up in. Obviously a lot of these people have had great homes but I also feel immensely sorry for those who didn't grow up in loving, supportive households. All in all I think there are a lot of people that can help with the mental health crisis that is spreading like wildfire across the nation and the world. I hope that if anyone sees this essay that it can help them see that they are not alone in this big beautiful world.

Mayreen Pinto

8th Grade – Sand Ridge Junior High

Teacher: Amy Kendell

Youth violence is a serious issue that affects individuals, families, schools, and entire communities. While violence is often imagined as fists, weapons, or crimes shown on the news its most common form is quieter and far more ignored. It lives in classrooms, hallways, and homes. Many acts of youth violence are not random; they are the result of pain, pressure, and environments that fail to protect and support young people. Youth violence is like a crack in a dam – what looks small on the surface can break everything once the pressure becomes too much like a flood of emotions. In hallways filled with echoing footsteps and classrooms filled with judgement. Understanding the causes of youth violence and recognizing what we can do about it are important steps towards creating safer and more compassionate communities.

One major cause of youth violence is untreated mental health struggles. Many young people deal with depression, anxiety, and overwhelming negative thoughts but do not receive the help they need while being expected to function like nothing is wrong. I have watched this pain consume some of the people I love most and the fear that comes with it is overwhelming. One of my closest friends has struggled with self-harm, depression, anxiety, and has tried to end her life. I remember just laying in bed watching my favorite show. I picked up the phone like normal, noticing her voice was very shaky. I said, "Hi" we talked for a bit about life until finally she said, "I'm so tired of feeling like this." I immediately started to think, "I don't want to lose her." My chest tightened, my hands started to sweat, and fear started to settle painfully in my stomach because loving someone does not prepare you for the possibility of losing them. Watching someone you love fight a battle like that is terrifying and heartbreaking. You feel powerless, scared to lose them, and constantly worried, as if you are standing in a storm and can't shield them from the rain. Another one of my best friends lives with depression and constant negative thoughts. It hurts to watch someone you love so much disappear behind self doubt and sadness. Especially when they are someone you idolize. These struggles reveal a painful truth that violence is not always loud or visible.

Bullying is another powerful cause of youth violence. Growing up I was bullied and told horrible things that stayed with me. I can still remember the sharp tone of voices, the laughter that followed, and the way my stomach dropped every time I walked into school or the dance studio. Some teachers instead of encouraging me said things like, "You're never going to succeed in life," and that made me feel awful. Words like that can damage a young person's confidence

and sense of worth, especially when they come from adults who are supposed to encourage and guide students. I also remember a peer once mocking me when I came to school crying from pain due to an ear infection sneering, "What, are you crying because your dad's dead?" I didn't respond. It felt like the classroom went silent and I was numb. This comment was especially painful because my father is actually deceased; he died when I was two. That sentence did not just hurt me, it reopened a wound I already carried every day. Cruel words can haunt you, replaying in your mind long after they are spoken, leaving scars no one can see.

Youth violence is often the result of feeling unheard, unsupported, or degraded. When young people are constantly told that they are worthless, weak, or destined to fail some begin to believe it. Over time that belief settles in like a storm lingering over you all of the time. Anger rumbles like thunder loud and restless, hopelessness falls like endless rain quiet and heavy, and exhaustion strikes like lightning sudden and draining. Which builds quietly especially when no one seems to listen. Violence becomes a response to feeling powerless.

Despite how overwhelming this issue is, there is still hope. Young people have the power to reduce youth violence through empathy, courage and action. Speaking up against bullying, checking in on friends, or asking for help are acts of strength not weakness. Even something as simple as saying, "I'm here for you," that can change a life. Kindness feels like a light in the dark. Another way to make a difference is by challenging harmful behavior and demanding better support for mental health in schools. Schools should be places of safety not fear, places where students can feel accepted instead of judged and hopeful instead of defeated. But a lot of the times school could be the problem. Schools are filled with comparison, judgement, stress and so many more things that can lead to youth violence. But schools also have many resources for kids to reduce youth violence. Kids can go to a counselor if they need someone to talk to, they can send in tips to SafeUT, principals can be better at making sure that bullies are punished and that bullying actually stops. These are all things schools can do to help students but they all have one common denominator. People speaking up. That is when change will happen.

In conclusion, youth violence is deeply connected to mental health struggles, bullying, and a lack of support from the systems meant to protect young people. My experiences and the experiences of the people I love shows how real and painful this issue is. But they also show why compassion, understanding, and action matter. One thing I do to hopefully help reduce youth violence is reporting things I see to SafeUT and I recommend other people to do the same. By choosing empathy over cruelty and speaking up instead of staying quiet we can create a future where young people are no longer shaped by violence but by support and hope.

Noah Ransom

8th Grade – Summit Academy Draper

Teacher: Kim Arminen

I remember it all too well. It was a cold January day in New York City when I was in 5th grade. I was walking home with my brother trying to catch up with our friend waiting for the light. I saw my friend get splashed with a soda by the McDonalds on the corner. We quickly ran to him and asked him what happened. He said a group of boys in black masks and hoodies splashed him with soda and said some very bad curse words. We started walking to our building and the guys who splashed my friend with soda started following us. When we got to the next block the boys started running towards us. We got to the end of the block where we hoped the light would change. It didn't, at least not on time. The boys got on either side of us. They said they had weapons. One guy said he had a knife and another guy said he had a gun. He showed my friend a shiny thing. We were scared out of our minds, we thought we were going to die. Then we saw our neighbor walking towards us. She saw us and told the guys to scram and go and pick on someone their own size. They ran off and started screaming racial slurs at my neighbor. She ignored them and we walked away. As we walked home we dropped off my friend at his apartment. We told our friend to change his shirt and come over. My brother and I told my mom while we were bawling and she was so upset she called the police. After she called the police my friend showed up knocking at our door and we asked him if he was okay again. He said he was fine, just a little scared. The police showed up and they asked for our story and what the boys looked like. After we told the police they said they would be looking out for them and would call us if they found them. It was the next day at school and the guidance counselor called my friend, my brother and I to her office together. We told her the story of what happened. She said she was so sorry that had happened. We waited and waited for days and weeks for the police to call and tell us they found the boys. They never did after all these years. I still wonder what happened to the boys. I also wonder what they wanted to do with us and what would have happened to me if my neighbor did not show up and save us.

There are many causes of youth violence. For example behavioral disorders, involvement in drugs and alcohol, poverty, violence in family, and much more. I can reduce youth violence if it's affecting peers. I can support my peers and be nice to them by saying hello every day in the halls. If it's affecting me I can talk to an adult to get support.

Quinn Ryskamp

7th Grade – Diamond Fork Middle School

Teacher: Reilly Ryan

A fist to the head.

I wish he were dead. But who did it first? Who is worse? Did I do something to him? Did I make him this grim? I did, I did! I hurt him first. Does this mean that I am worse? If I have done more than he has, Then do I deserve to pass? NO! I have the right, To think, to live, but not to fight. I have many things equal to him, So neither of us should be grim. I know what I did was wrong, So I must be strong, Not to fight, Not to bite, Not to break or steal, But to help and heal. I can save myself and him, If I can just let him in. How is youth violence in my life? The event in this story was real. I was the one behind the fist. I was the violent one. But he did something to me first. He was the one who hurt me. I was violent because he was violent. Violence breeds violence. I attacked because he attacked. I hated him because he hated me. What he did to me was this. He jumped onto my back, making me fall over, and started choking me. I couldn't breathe! Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he hopped off. A teacher then came and asked if I was all right. I was physically, but not really mentally. I was hating him. It was from that point on that I loathed him with all my heart. Just a few years later, he attacked me again. It was during a church activity when we were in the car. I was in the middle of a full car, with him behind me. The activity leader was in front of me. He was touching my hair from over the seat. Not a big deal, but still annoying. I tried to get his hand away from my hair, but he grabbed it. He pulled as hard as he could to get it to break. "Let go!" I screamed, while my arm felt like it was falling off. He had my elbow on the back of the seat, using it as a fulcrum. I don't think that he was using all of his strength when he was pulling it down, but it still hurt terribly. He didn't say anything, but just kept pushing down on my arm. The pain was excruciating, and I didn't think that my arm could hold on for much longer. I yelled at my friend in the back seat, but he couldn't do anything to stop him. I had a sudden vision of him standing up in the car, but then using all of his weight to push down on my elbow. Not only that, but I was imagining the pain that the breaking of the limb would cause. "Help!" I cried to the leader, who was the driver. The leader responded, "Whatever is happening in the back needs to stop. I need to focus on driving, so I can't help you." That was just great. The one adult in the car who could help was unable to. I was doomed. I was screaming my head off when he finally let go. As I breathed a loud sigh of relief, I pulled my arm back to my side. The rest of the way home, the whole car was silent. Then came my attack. We were playing a kickball game when I thought there was an unfair call on him. We hadn't had anything happen for years, so I believed that we were neutral toward each other. I ran onto the field and yelled at him that he was safe. He called himself out, so I went berserk. I punched his head about nine times. I don't know why I was so mad at him, but it was probably because of all

the little things that he got away with. And the larger attacks. What causes and promotes violence? Violence is when one person hurts another, whether physically or emotionally. It can mean attacking someone or just saying unkind things. I have had a lot of violence in my life, and I want it to stop. He bullied me, so I hated him and wanted to bully him back. Violence makes violence. It can also be at home that you learn violence. If a parent or other family member always hurts you, then you want to hurt them back. If you can't hurt them, then you will hurt others to get your anger out. I don't know what happened to him, but he was mean to me. It might have been a bully or a family member. But he hurt me, so I hurt him back. Violence creates violence. What can I do about violence? If I can be kind to others, I can help stop violence. If violence creates violence, then to stop it, you have to be kind. Kindness makes people want more kindness. If one person is kind to another, then they will be kind to more people. However, if one person is unkind to another, then they will want to hurt someone else. I want everyone to be kinder, more understanding, and more loving toward everyone else. Some specific steps you can take to help others are by talking to them, even if they say that they are "all right." You can also show that you want to stop violence by helping someone to understand how horrible violence is. If something does happen, then we should tell an adult. If we do, we can stop violence from continuing.

Harper Spencer

8th Grade – Roy Junior High

Teacher: Dustin Flores

My name is Harper Spencer, and I am an eighth grader at Roy Junior High. Youth violence is not something I learned about from a textbook. It is something I see in the world around me and feel in the way my community struggles to survive. Youth violence is not always loud or obvious. Sometimes it looks like empty shelves at a food pantry, kids coming to school hungry, or neighborhoods where the air smells dirty and people feel forgotten. These conditions shape how young people grow up, and they have shaped my life too.

Youth violence has affected my life by making insecurity feel normal. I have watched families stress about where their next meal will come from and kids my age carry anger and fear they should not have to hold. At my school, I volunteer at our food pantry, where I see students who look just like me quietly picking up bags of food for their families. I have also worked with an organization called Holiday Heroes, where we collected food and donations to help families who could not afford a full Thanksgiving dinner because they lost funding or suffered a medical emergency. Standing in rooms filled with canned food and donated turkeys, I could feel how close desperation sits to hope. When basic needs are not met, frustration builds. That frustration can turn into violence, especially for young people who feel unheard and unsupported.

The causes of youth violence are deeply connected to environment and inequality. When families struggle with poverty, unstable housing, food insecurity, and unsafe neighborhoods, young people absorb that stress. Government decisions play a major role in this. Programs like SNAP and other food assistance have been reduced, while tax breaks continue to favor wealthy individuals and corporations. For families already living paycheck to paycheck, losing that support means kids go hungry. Hunger affects how students behave, learn, and cope with emotions. It is hard to focus in class when your stomach hurts or to make good choices when survival feels uncertain. The causes of youth violence are deeply connected to environment and inequality, especially hunger and chronic stress.

When kids do not have enough food, our bodies and brains do not function the way they should. Hunger makes it harder to focus, control emotions, and think through consequences. Stress from poverty, unstable housing, or worried parents keeps the nervous system in survival mode, where frustration builds quickly and patience disappears. For many young people, this turns into irritability, anger, or aggression, not because they want to hurt others, but because their basic needs are not being met. Government decisions that cut food assistance programs like SNAP make this worse. When families lose access to reliable food and being able to pay for school lunch, kids carry that stress into classrooms, friendships,

and public spaces. Over time, that pressure can explode into fights, unsafe choices, or violent behavior, turning needs that can't be met into real harm.

*When lunch bells ring,
and hunger clings,
we'll find
we can't eat money*

The physical environment also matters. Air quality in many communities is getting worse, especially in lower income areas near highways and industrial sites. Polluted air makes people sicker, more tired, and more irritable. Instead of strengthening environmental protections, the federal government has rolled back regulations that limited pollution and invested less in clean energy. When leaders choose profit over public health, it sends a message that some lives matter less. Young people who grow up breathing dirty air and feeling ignored by those in power often lose trust in systems meant to protect them. That loss of trust can turn into anger, hopelessness, and eventually violence.

*When forests fall,
no air at all,
we'll find
we can't breathe money*

Youth violence grows when inequality feels permanent. When young people believe the future is already decided against them, some stop caring about consequences. Most of us think that the state of our planet is doomed, to put it in a dramatic way. They lash because they are scared and feel like there is no point, not because they are necessarily bad

Reducing youth violence starts with action. I may be young, but I can still make a difference. Volunteering at my school food pantry and with Holiday Heroes showed me that helping people meet their basic needs can restore dignity and hope. I can continue to speak up online about unfair policies, support environmental protections, and encourage others to get involved in their communities. Listening to young people instead of dismissing them is also critical. When youth feel seen and valued, they are less likely to turn to violence.

Youth violence is not inevitable. It is created by choices, and it can be reduced by better ones. We need leaders who protect families instead of corporations, who fight for clean air instead of ignoring pollution, and who invest in young people instead of cutting the programs that keep them alive. As students, neighbors, and citizens, we can demand better. We can volunteer, vote when we are old enough, raise our voices, and refuse to accept a system that allows kids to go hungry and communities to be poisoned. If we change the environment we are raising youth in, we change the future.

The causes of youth violence are deeply connected to environment and inequality, especially hunger and chronic stress. When kids do not have enough food, their bodies and brains do not function the way they should. Hunger makes it harder to focus, control emotions, and think through consequences. Stress from poverty, unstable housing, or worried parents keeps the nervous system in survival mode, where frustration builds quickly and patience disappears. For many young people, this turns into irritability, anger, or aggression, not because they want to hurt others, but because their basic needs are not being met. Government decisions that cut food assistance programs like SNAP make this worse. When families lose access to reliable food, kids carry that stress into classrooms, friendships, and public spaces. Over time, that pressure can explode into fights, unsafe choices, or violent behavior, turning unmet needs into real harm.

In this essay I included some lines from my poem “*We Can’t Eat Money*” to show how ignoring basic human needs creates the conditions for youth violence. When food, clean air, safety, and fairness are treated as less important than profit, young people are left to carry the consequences. The following lines reflect how government choices impact real lives.

When soil turns to stone,
No seeds are grown,
We’ll find
we can’t eat money

When forests fall,
no air at all,
we’ll find
we can’t breathe money

When rivers dry,
no wells nearby,
we’ll find
we can’t drink money

When waste runs deep,
the planet weeps,
we’ll find
we can’t heal money

When the skies turn gray
and stars fade away
we’ll find
we can’t wish on money

When lunch bells ring,
and hunger clings,
we'll find
we can't eat money

When truth is sold,
for praise and gold,
we'll find
we can't trust money

When hate wears crowns,
and truth is drowned,
we'll find
we can't rule money

When rights are torn,
and hope's is worn,
we'll find
we can't free money

When she can't speak,
and truth grows weak,
we'll find
we can't hear money

When color's blamed,
and hope's unnamed,
we'll find
we can't free money

When love's denied,
and hearts must hide,
we'll find
we can't love money

When guns define,
what's yours and mine,
we'll find
we can't protect money

when forests fall,
and rivers stall,
we'll see
how nothing's sunny

when voices fade,
and rights betrayed,
we'll know
how life feels funny

when hate burns bright,
and hearts lose sight,
we'll find
we can't heal it with money

once people are one,
and fear's undone,
we'll know
we don't need money.

Utah's Do the Write Thing

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