Opinion

BEN PENNINGTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Student vigil-goers held candles and huddled in Lippitt Memorial Park in Providence on Dec. 14.

When school shooting headlines fade, the trauma doesn't

By Maya Rossin-Slater, Molly Schnell, and Hannes Schwandt

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The mass shooting at Brown University last weekend has once again thrust school shootings into the national spotlight. The country is pausing to grieve, debate gun laws, and search for answers. But when the news cycle moves on, the students who lived through it will be left to cope with the aftermath.

For at least two students at Brown, this trauma is not new. The shooting, which left two dead and nine injured, was not the first time they had experienced the shock and grief of a school shooting, nor the first time their lives were briefly pulled into the national spotlight. As school shootings have become more frequent — more than doubling in recent years — a growing number of young people are now encountering this kind of trauma during their education, and in some cases more than once.

Our research shows that surviving a school shooting leaves deep and lasting scars. In a series of studies, we examined how these tragedies shape the lives of students long after the headlines fade. Two of our studies draw on a decade of national prescription drug claims data to measure the mental health impacts of exposure to school shootings in grades K-12, while a third uses 30 years of education and labor market records from the state of Texas to track long-term effects on learning and earnings. Together, the evidence reveals how a school shooting can reverberate for many years.

In the years after a shooting, students exposed to the event experience large increases in mental health conditions requiring treatment with prescription antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications. These effects are long-lasting: The initial rise in prescriptions shows little sign of fading even five years after the shooting, when students have likely graduated or left the school where they experienced the event. The emotional toll also spills into learning. Students who experience gun violence at their schools are more likely to be chronically absent and to repeat a grade, and less likely to graduate from either high school or college.

In adulthood, these mental health and educational impacts have economic consequences. By their mid-20s, shooting survivors earn about 13 percent less than peers who attended comparable schools where no shooting occurred. If that gap endures over their working lives, it could amount to more than $100,000 in lost lifetime earnings. The effects of school gun violence, in other words, reach far beyond the tragic loss of life — they quietly reshape the futures of those who survive.

What's more, these effects appear in every type of community — urban and rural, affluent and disadvantaged, large districts and small towns. They occur for students both with and without prior use of mental health medications.

And the economic consequences of school shootings add up. With more than 50,000 American K-12 students experiencing a school shooting each year, our estimates of long-term earnings losses suggest more than $5 billion in lost productivity annually. That total would be even higher if shootings on college campuses were also taken into account. These statistics underscore that the economic burden of gun violence at schools is borne not only by the survivors, but also by the communities in which they live and work.

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Schools are meant to be safe, stable environments where children learn, form relationships, and build the skills that shape their futures. When violence occurs there, it erodes trust in the very place students are expected to focus, learn, and perform.

School shootings can also disrupt students' lives through various channels. Trauma spreads through peer networks and classrooms, while learning environments themselves can be altered as routines break down and teachers and staff leave. Unlike violence that occurs elsewhere, school shootings affect not just individual students but the institutions responsible for their education — helping to explain why the impacts we observe persist long after the event itself.

After a school shooting, public attention understandably focuses on preventing the next one. That is essential. But our findings point to another urgent reality: When these tragedies do occur, survivors need sustained support long after the immediate crisis ends. In most districts across the nation, mental health resources arrive for a few weeks or months — if at all — and then disappear, even as symptoms persist or intensify. Recovery from trauma takes time, and the care the districts provide must match that timeline.

For students at Brown, like those at far too many schools before them, this is not a moment that will simply pass. The scars of school shootings often endure for years, shaping mental health, educational trajectories, and economic futures. Ensuring that access to trauma-informed mental health services and other supports extends beyond the immediate weeks and months after a shooting is critical. So, too, is demanding that policy makers act to prevent the next one. Doing so is not only a moral imperative — it is an investment in the well-being and economic future of an entire generation.