

'It Takes a Toll': Black Children Struggle to Process Buffalo Massacre

In a community already marked by segregation and poverty, Black students are mourning and demanding change.



By Lola Fadulu

Lola Fadulu has spent the past week on Buffalo's East Side, interviewing more than two dozen children and their guardians.

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Ruyvette Townsend leaned against a student's desk early last week, trying not to cry.

Ms. Townsend, a staff member who tracks attendance at Leonardo da Vinci High School in Buffalo, looked at the rows of students seated in front of her: Some had their heads down, others were tense with anger, and many were shaking their heads.

"Who would drive that far to kill people?" Ms. Townsend, 60, recalled one student asking. "Didn't somebody see him coming?"

Some of the students had shopped with their families at the Tops supermarket where 10 Black people were killed on May 14 in a racist mass shooting. Others had known several of the victims, and one student was there when the bodies were collected.

Some saw the live footage of the massacre and couldn't get it out of their heads.

The mass shooting was the deadliest in the United States so far this year, and one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history. Federal data shows a recent spike in hate crimes against Black Americans.

Many Black families in Buffalo are fearful.

"I think the concern is because the schools are predominantly Black around this area," said Denise Sweet, 48, a mother of two boys. "Who's to say that another sharpshooter, when it's all died down, might not start this all over again and enter school?"

School officials want Black families to trust that if any such threat were to arise on school buses or in classrooms, their children would be protected. Dr. Tonja Williams, the interim schools superintendent, said she was increasing security at schools and bolstering mental health support for students.

She grew up on Buffalo's East Side and knew several of the victims.

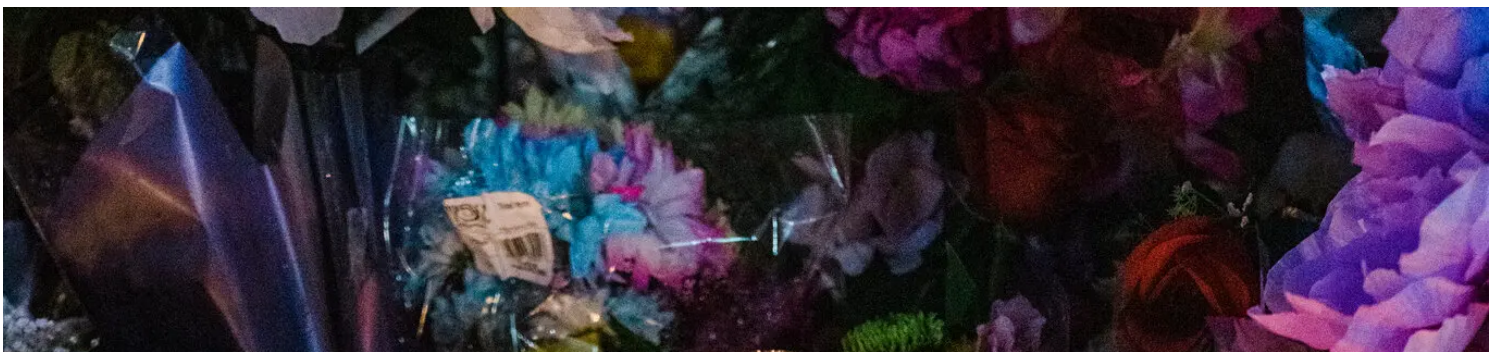
"It's a challenging time for all of us," said Dr. Williams. "What we know is that, in our city, our schools are a safe haven."

But parents and students aren't feeling all that trusting. And some are wondering how a school system that has neglected its Black children for so long can be expected to help them cope with the tragedy.

Buffalo's public school system is racially diverse, but its schools are still segregated. Many Black students are concentrated in schools with high rates of poverty, which tend to underperform, in part because they often have less experienced teachers and fewer rigorous courses.

"This district is not designed for African American children to succeed," said Coleen Dove, 67, a retired principal who worked in the school system for 30 years.

'It could just happen to me'





Some children have stayed out later than usual on school nights since the shooting, attending vigils to pay their respects to the 10 people who were killed. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

The day after the shooting, a preacher knelt in the street, praying, urging the community to remember that God was ultimately a good God.

Black children and their parents gathered around him, staring somberly at a tree with red balloons tied to its branches, tall prayer candles with images of Jesus Christ at its roots, and many, many flowers.

Simier Sweet, 13, Jaiden Sweet, 12, and their mother, Ms. Sweet, were among the onlookers. Simier, who attends a local charter school, said he was nervous about walking to the bus stop alone.

"I'm there by myself, like it could just happen to me," said Simier. "It could happen on the bus, anywhere, me walking to my school."

His concerns weren't unwarranted. The suspect considered going to a school as part of his rampage and listed one Buffalo elementary school in particular as a target, according to his Discord chat logs. On Wednesday last week, officials said they were going to increase the police presence at Buffalo schools because of social media threats.

Teraia Harris, 15, a high school student, said she heard about the threats and asked her mother to pick her up early.

"This is supposed to be an institution of learning, where they are supposed to feel comfortable and feel safe," said her mother, Tamara Martin, 43, who is a nurse.

Some parents are simply keeping their children home; others are opting to drive them to school instead of allowing them to take the bus. Some children are seeking out counseling at school and finding it woefully inadequate.

Three of the people killed in the shooting were or had been school district staff: Pearl Young, 77, was a substitute teacher; Margus D. Morrison, 52, was a bus aide; and Aaron Salter Jr., 55, was a former substitute teacher.

"It takes a toll on these children," said George Wilson, 35, who said one of his daughters was close with Katherine Massey, 72, their neighbor, who was also killed.

'It's going to be a long time before any of us really feel safe'





Buffalo Public Schools remained open after the shooting, but many families across the district were too nervous to let their children go. José Esquilin kept his daughter Avalynn home for two days. Malik Rainey for The New York Times

Standing at a memorial near the store's parking lot, José Esquilin, 43, and Alice Castricone, 46, were debating whether to send their daughter, Avalynn Esquilin, 7, to school last Monday.

Avalynn stood nearby, with a piece of chalk in her hand, staring down at a message she had written with a heart underneath it: "RIP we love you, from all of us."

"I just don't know what's going to go on because a lot of people are shooting and killing," she said. Her parents decided to keep her home on Monday and Tuesday.

Dr. Williams sent a letter to staff and parents after the shooting that asked principals to begin the school day last Monday by giving students and staff members time to share what was on their minds. Counselors, psychologists and social workers were also available.

"It's going to be a long time before any of us really feel safe," said Dr. Williams. "When something this heinous happens there, you do question: Am I safe anywhere?"

Alicia Northington, 45, said her daughter, Solei Watson, 7, who attends a local charter school, recently found her crying and asked what was wrong.





Many parents are dreading the day when they have to fully explain the shooting to their young children. Alicia Northington said her daughter Solei Watson, who is 7, had asked her what “a white man” had to do with it. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

“I haven’t really gotten into the racism part, because I think the biggest part is for her to know people are grieving,” said Ms. Northington, who has been dropping her daughter off instead of allowing her to take the bus.

But she said Solei had asked her repeatedly what the “white man” she heard about at school had to do with the shooting.

“She knows that it’s something with white and Black,” said Ms. Northington, adding: “I want to make sure that she knows that everything is not just white and Black. Something happened, someone individually did something.”

She said it was imperative that her daughter stay in school. “I also want her to know you have to keep moving through this, you can’t be afraid,” she said.

Older children are much more aware of the factors that led to the shooting, and some have been eager to talk about it.

Teraia, the high school student, said that she had been looking forward to discussing the massacre, thinking it would help her process what happened.

But when she brought it up with a teacher and classmates, she said, the teacher told her to visit a “mindfulness room,” which existed at the school before the shooting happened.

It wasn’t helpful, Teraia said, adding that the message seemed to be: “Live life and don’t be scared.”

Myah Durham, 14, was also frustrated by the counseling provided at her charter school.

“It didn’t work for me,” she said, adding that she was told: “It’s going to be OK, nothing ever happened to Buffalo, just pray and keep your eye out when you’re walking, no headphones in your ears, be aware of your surroundings.”

Myah said she had viewed white people differently since the shooting, unsure of who was racist, whom she could trust. Inside the classroom, she has had trouble focusing.

Heyward Patterson, 67, another shooting victim, was a deacon at her church. She recalled how he always greeted her with a hug.

Her mother, LeCandice Durham, has encouraged her to keep her head up.

“We’re going to change the narrative, that’s the plan,” said Ms. Durham, 36, as she stood near a memorial next to the supermarket on Tuesday evening while her three other children drew with chalk and chased each other around. “I don’t want Buffalo to be known as the place of the mass shooting.”

She added: “Are we still going to be the City of Good Neighbors? I believe we will.”

As she spoke, Myah gazed into the distance. Asked if she too felt hopeful, she shrugged: “I don’t have an answer,” she said.

An already burdened public school system





Mental health professionals are available to help students process the shooting, but some say the sessions have been inadequate. LeCandice Durham said it was hard to see her daughter Myah feeling heartbroken and defeated, even after counseling. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

What made the East Side a target for the suspect — a high percentage of Black residents, living closely together — has made it a community for the people who live here. Many residents have lived in the area for decades. They greet each other by first name.

At the same time, living conditions for Black Buffalo residents, across measures of health, housing, income and education, have improved little and in some cases have declined over the last 30 years, according to a 2021 University at Buffalo report.

“The school doesn’t know how to accommodate for any of that,” said Dr. Henry Louis Taylor Jr., a professor of urban studies at the University at Buffalo.

Buffalo Public Schools were already struggling to serve Black students, education experts said. The district suspends them at especially high rates compared to other cities in New York.

The federal Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights has found substantial evidence of racial inequality, including in hiring and in the locations of new schools, and required the city to address it. But experts say little progress has been made.

Dr. Williams, the interim superintendent, said there was no denying that there was some segregation in the schools. But she said allowing parents to decide where their children went to school had kept it from being worse.

“Do we have things we can certainly improve upon? Absolutely,” she said, adding that she would continue listening.

Students at East Community High School reacted to the mass shooting in a number of ways last week, said Leah Rush, a family support specialist with Say Yes to Education Buffalo, a nonprofit organization that serves Buffalo schools, as she sat in her office in the school’s health clinic on Friday.

Some were withdrawn; others got angry or cried.

“The overall temperature is that kids feel burnout, and I would say a little bit hopeless for change,” said Ms. Rush, who has worked inside the school and conducted home visits for the past six years.

She said students were already worried for their safety, especially since some had lost friends to gun violence. “They’re struggling to identify ways to change this, due to the years of segregation and oppression,” she said.

Samuel L. Radford III, the co-chairman of We the Parents of Western New York, a parent advocacy group, said the city must harness “all the good will that’s coming into the community, all the energy,” and figure out how to “change things for the better, not just rhetoric.”

Some teens are paving the way. Na’Kya McCann, 18, a first-year college student, grew up on Buffalo’s East Side and coaches cheerleading for a group of Black girls age 6 and up. She has created her own space for the children she works with to talk about the shooting.



After-school programs have been a place where children can go to avoid thinking about the shooting. But Na'Kya McCann, center, the junior coach of a Black cheerleading team, wants children to know they can express their emotions about it at the gym. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

She said she wanted to teach them to love themselves, in spite of racism and hate.

Ms. McCann after practice on Wednesday asked if the young cheerleaders knew their lives were valuable. The group of girls and one boy seated in a circle around her nodded, some looking down into their laps.

“Yes, they don’t agree with us,” Ms. McCann said. “But at the end of the day, their negative energy doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

Troy Closson and Jonah E. Bromwich contributed reporting.