

JUN 12, 2022

# Will the Senate Act on Guns?

This is *The Weekly Letter* for June 12, 2022. [About this newsletter](#)

## Big Story

As the U.S. reels from a string of mass shootings, a bipartisan group of Senators is attempting to negotiate a deal on gun safety. [According to Politico](#), Democrats Chris Murphy and Kyrsten Sinema and Republicans John Cornyn and Thom Tillis are engaged in negotiations. The Democrats' strategy is to accept what they can get from a bipartisan deal now and campaign on taking more action in the future.

*The Washington Post* [notes](#) that the deal "could include legislation encouraging states to create red-flag systems, a modest expansion of background checks to incorporate juvenile records, as well as funding for mental health programs and school security improvements."

On June 8, the House passed a broader bill, largely along party lines, which would raise "the minimum age for the purchase of most semiautomatic rifles to 21," ban "high-capacity ammunition magazines," "crack down on gun trafficking, create new safe-storage requirements for gun owners, and codify executive orders that ban untraceable 'ghost guns' as well as 'bump stock' devices that allow a semiautomatic rifle to mimic machine-gun fire." However, due to Republican opposition and the filibuster, the legislation will almost certainly fail to gain traction in the Senate.

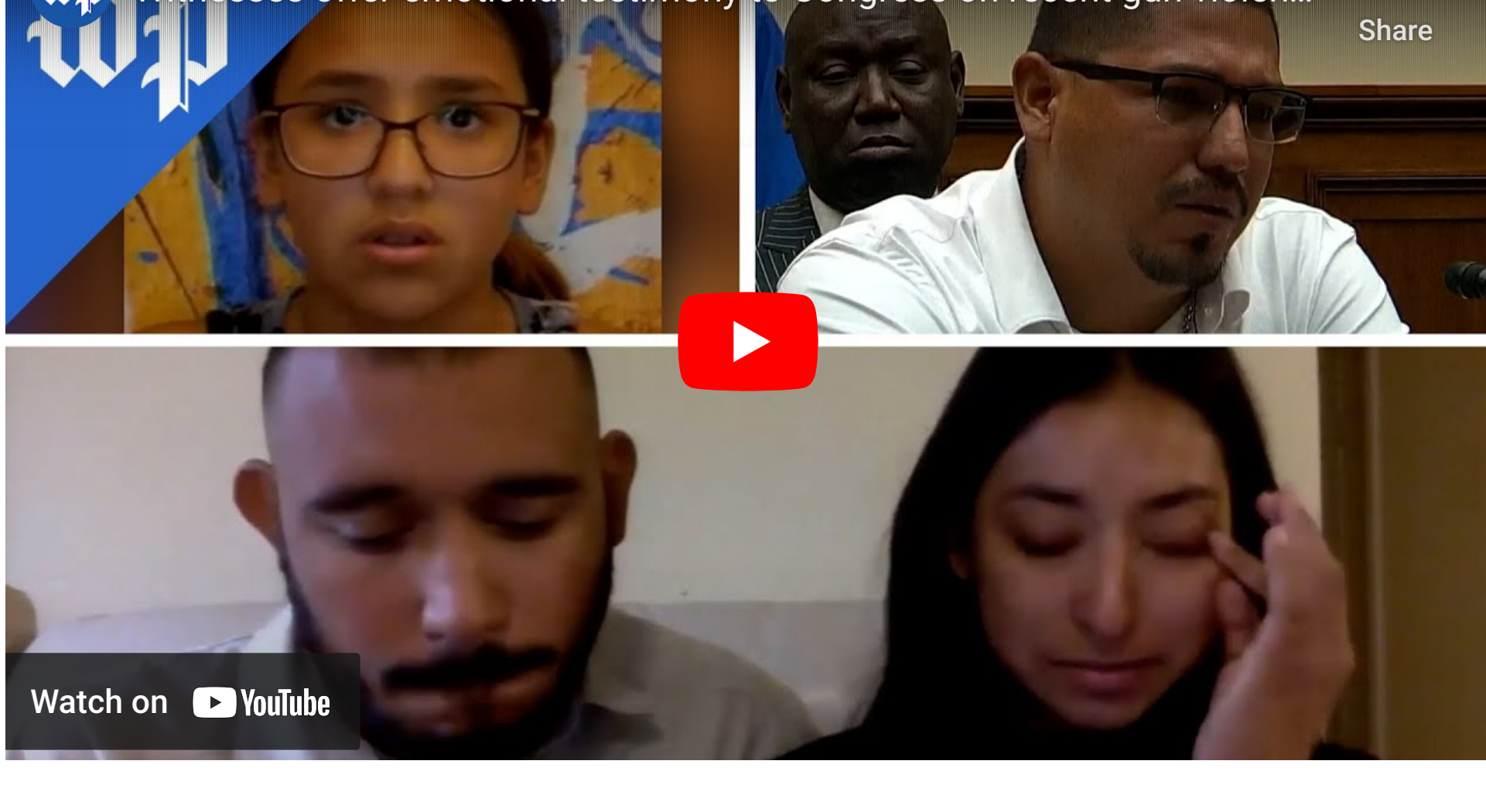
Following the passage of the House legislation, the advocacy group Everytown for Gun Safety and its partner organizations Moms Demand Action and Students Demand Action said in a [statement](#), "With the House taking bold action on gun safety, and President Biden's strong executive actions on gun safety, it is time for the Senate to act."

A Vox [piece](#) looks at where Senate negotiations stood as of Friday. The previous day, Senator Chris Murphy told reporters, "It'll be a miracle if we get a framework agreement, never mind a final bill. But miracles sometimes happen!"

The actor Matthew McConaughey, a native of Uvalde, Texas, spoke at the White House on June 7 to call for gun safety and share the stories of those who lost their lives in the Uvalde school shooting.



Prior to the June 8 House vote, people affected by gun violence, as well as supporters and opponents of gun control, testified to a House committee.



## Opinion

**Michelle Cottle:** The heroes and villains of the first [January 6 committee](#) hearing. (NY Times, 6/10)

**William Neuman:** U.S. [sanctions targeting Venezuela's economy](#) are ineffective and exacerbating the country's humanitarian crisis. (The Guardian, 6/6)

**E.J. Dionne Jr.:** It's possible to both [fight crime and reform](#) the criminal justice system. (Washington Post, 6/8)

**Ezra Klein:** Climate change will continue to cause great suffering. But no, your kids are [not doomed](#). (NY Times, 6/5)

## My View

On June 24, 1973, Sylvia Rivera took the microphone at the Christopher Street Liberation Day rally in Washington Square Park, NYC. Facing boos from the crowd, Rivera [spoke](#):

"Y'all better quiet down. I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a goddamn thing for them.... They've been beaten up and raped after they've had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and to try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women's Liberation and they write STAR, not the women's groups, they do not write women, they do not write men, they write STAR because we're trying to do something for them.... I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way?..."

(See video of the speech [here](#).)

While Rivera was a pioneer who fought for all members of what is today called the LGBTQ+ community, her contribution to the struggle of transgender and gender nonconforming people was especially deep. Along with Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera founded the organization Street Transvestite Action

Revolutionaries (STAR), which adopted a left-wing [manifesto](#) for liberation and provided support for transgender prisoners and unhoused transgender people.

(Gender terminology was in flux during Rivera's time, and Rivera described [her own gender identity](#) in different ways during her life. She is commonly considered a trailblazer for transgender rights, and I primarily use the term "transgender" here to refer to the community she fought for.)

However, the presence of Rivera and others who identified as drag queens at the rally was [virulently opposed](#) by members of the organization Lesbian Feminist Liberation, which considered drag queens "female impersonators" (during her own speech, a member of the organization, Jean O'Leary, referred to Rivera as "a man"). Rivera asserted in her speech that she and other gender nonconforming people were marginalized due to factors of race and class. She said that unlike the "men and women that belong to a white, middle-class... club," those at STAR House "are trying to do something for all of us..."

Rivera was anguished by her treatment at the rally. The context of Rivera's speech is discussed in the 2017 documentary *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* (available on Netflix). In an archival interview featured in the documentary, Rivera says that after the rally she attempted to kill herself (her life was saved by Johnson). She then left the gay liberation movement.

When Rivera returned to activism years later, she resumed her struggle against the oppression of transgender people. And she was not afraid to [criticize](#) the mainstream of the gay liberation movement when it marginalized the transgender community. One focus of Rivera's ire was the attitude that trans people should wait for their rights until after gays and lesbians secured theirs.

The story of Sylvia Rivera has a lot to teach us. On the negative side, it tells us that social movements can shamefully marginalize those who are multiply oppressed—and on the front lines of the movement—in the name of pragmatism and respectability. The disdain of some feminists toward drag queens also indicates that for some on the left, ideology can take precedence over solidarity.

We can see this fairly clearly in the position of trans-exclusionary radical feminists today. But we can also see the privileging of ideology over solidarity in other contexts, such as in the history of left-wing support for repressive countries because of their status as 'workers' states' or supposedly anti-imperialist states. From the Communists who denied or excused Stalin's atrocities to Western leftists who viewed Syrian revolutionaries as American puppets, the left has often lost its way regarding international issues due to unquestioning adherence to faulty doctrines.

However, Sylvia Rivera's uncompromising commitment to the transgender community, to LGBTQ+ liberation more broadly, and her STAR organization's support for a revolutionary transformation of society as a whole represents the left-wing spirit of solidarity at its best. From the personal to the system-wide, Rivera believed in a revolution from the bottom-up. Her insistence that no one be left behind is an example of a left-wing impulse that is perhaps most elegantly stated in the Industrial Workers of the World slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all."

The importance of prioritizing support for political demands for equality over dubious ideological speculation is argued in an [episode of ContraPoints](#) by the YouTuber Natalie Wynn. Wynn argues that opponents of transgender rights distract by asking trans people to justify their gender identity through asking questions like, "what is a woman?" This leads to a dead-end debate about metaphysics and semantics. But the real issue, Wynn says, is not the metaphysics of gender but the concrete reality of inequality and discrimination against trans people.

(Wynn has herself been criticized for comments and actions that have been viewed as marginalizing non-binary people. An [article](#) on the website *Pride* addresses this controversy.)

I think this focus on achieving equality can also help reframe some of the issues that are embroiled in the 'culture wars.' Whatever the right-wing may say, the LGBTQ+ movement is not attempting a cultural takeover—it's demanding dignity and equal status. It's engaged in a *political* struggle.

If the fight against oppression is a core part of the left-wing project, then our focus has to be on how we can achieve equality—or, more accurately, equity—concretely in the real world. Although our basic commitments are informed by theory, we must be wary of the ways in which doctrine can steer us away from solidarity.

We are in the middle of a wave of backlash against political and social progress made by the LGBTQ+ community. As a heterosexual and cisgender man, I don't presume to propose how to guard against the backlash and take the next steps forward. But I will do my best to be in solidarity with the struggle for equity. An injury to one is an injury to all.

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