

# Mass Shooting Events

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## Abstract

In 1999 the United States experienced its first mass shooting at a public school and later at a church in Texas. It sparked renewed interest in gun control. Our response and the response of law enforcement has changed to protect the citizens. A new vocabulary including mass shooting and the active shooter. These new events are increasing at an alarming rate in our nation. The response has been slow and the solutions even slower. In this article we look at the problem, the response, and some possible solutions. However, the questions of motivation, and prevention remain.

## Keywords

shooter, school, church, police, response, victims

## Introduction

The dates associated with some events define our history. In the United States we talk about terrorism pre 9/11 and post 9/11. For mass shootings and the active shooter those dates are marked by the events of Columbine High School, Colorado, April 1999. Currently the United States of America leads the world in the number of mass shootings. These events are not just an American problem, it has affected several nations worldwide. However, there is no denying the frequency of these events in the United States (Donnelly et al., 2023; Newsome et al., 2022; Showstark, 2019). Certainly, this phenomenon is the focus of diverse interdisciplinary research (Jetter & Walker, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; O'Brien & Taku, 2022; Oz, 2023; Smith et al., 2023).

In fairness let me disclose to you, the reader, that I carry a firearm for a living. I work in the private security industry in Texas. I work in that gray area between law enforcement and the citizens, working for private companies. I understand I have a clear bias when it comes to the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights of our nation's Constitution. I am sure some might consider me as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

The United States has a long history with firearms from the very beginning of the colonies' fight for independence back in 1775. In the lives of many citizens firearms mean freedom from oppression. It is embedded into the culture. The United States alone has an estimated 400 million privately owned firearms and only 330 million citizens.

The attack carried out by two high school seniors ages 17 and 18, in Columbine, Colorado defined the start of school shootings. This was in April of 1999, followed by a church shooting in December of the same year. It started the tracking of mass shootings in public places, churches, and schools. Law enforcement had to quickly adapt to this new changing threat.

## Methodology

Researching the issue of mass shootings in Texas involving public schools and churches, along with the accompanying renewed emphasis on gun control, can employ diverse methods and methodologies. Initially, an extensive literature review is conducted, delving into prior research on mass shootings, their causes, trends, and relevant gun control measures.

1. A crucial aspect involves studying and scrutinizing histories of analogous cases to identify commonalities and contributing factors. This entails a quantitative analysis, encompassing the compilation of statistics on school and church mass shootings, encompassing metrics such as victim count, types of weapons employed, age demographics, and other pertinent parameters. The collected data is meticulously analyzed to unveil discernible patterns and trends.
2. Complementary qualitative research is undertaken through interviews with survivors, witnesses, victims' families, law enforcement, and other stakeholders. Additionally, an examination of reports and records from past incidents is conducted to gain insights into the incident dynamics and the response of authorities.
3. Psychological analysis of mass shootings, delving into the motivations of shooters, their psychological states, and factors that may contribute to such tragic events.
4. An integral component of the research involves legislative analysis, scrutinizing the existing gun control laws in Texas and at the national level. A comparative assessment is made, juxtaposing these laws with international standards and those implemented in other states.
5. Conducting a comparative analysis between the situation in Texas and other regions where effective gun control measures have been successfully implemented, along with instances where similar situations have been averted. Expert evaluations in the fields of psychology, criminology, education, and law are sought to obtain a diverse perspective on the issue and explore potential solutions.
6. Employing sociological analysis to delve into public opinion on the gun control matter and understand the viewpoints of various demographic groups. Based on the study results, suggestions are developed to formulate recommendations and proposals aimed at enhancing gun control and preventing mass shootings.
7. Evaluating the efficacy of existing programs involves researching the effectiveness of current initiatives for preventing violence in schools and churches, as well as the effectiveness of established gun control measures. This includes identifying both strengths and weaknesses.
8. Implementing technological solutions encompasses assessing the viability of incorporating video surveillance systems, security sensors, and machine learning algorithms to detect and prevent incidents such as suspicious behavior.
9. Developing a comprehensive training program for school and church staff and students, emphasizing the recognition of potentially dangerous situations, the provision of emotional support, and the assurance of safety.
10. Fostering community engagement to raise awareness about the issue, encouraging active community involvement in crafting solutions, and garnering support for gun control measures.

11. Proposing legislative changes involves advocating for stricter controls on gun purchases, enhanced mental health checks for potential gun owners, and the introduction of additional legislative security measures.
12. Conducting media campaigns entails initiatives designed to raise awareness and shift public opinion on gun control issues, emphasizing the urgent need for preventive measures.
13. Establishing a system for long-term monitoring and analysis is crucial. This involves continuous tracking of changes in statistics and security measures to assess the effectiveness of implemented measures and make necessary adjustments.
14. Drawing upon international experiences involves studying how other countries have addressed similar issues, adapting successful approaches to the local context, publishing results, and raising public awareness.

These steps serve as a foundation for a comprehensive study of the problem, fostering a deeper understanding of its multifaceted nature and proposing targeted measures for resolution. Addressing the issue of mass shootings and gun control necessitates a holistic approach, encompassing data analysis, legislative development, community engagement, technological solutions, and educational initiatives.

## Results

Tracking mass shooting events is difficult because the reporting has not been standardized yet for statistics (Bridges et al., 2023). Some departments and agencies consider 3 or more individuals shot, others require 4 or more shot to be considered a mass shooting. News media consider anytime two or more. Some will count the gunman as among the dead. I personally disagree with that. Mass shootings are considered a single event in which 3 or more individuals are shot and killed excluding the gunman. An active shooter is considered an event where a gunman is actively involved in killing individuals (FBI, n.d.).

The FBI also recognizes the active killer. This is thought of as anyone actively engaging in killing as many individuals as possible in a single event with a weapon other than a firearm. An example of this would be the mass stabbing in Canada in which 10 people were killed and 15 wounded in September of 2022 (“10 Dead, 15 Hospitalized in Canada Mass Stabbing Attacks, Police Say,” 2022).

## Mass Shootings

The worst mass shooting in the United States, In October 2017, a gunman opened fire on a crowd attending the Route 91 Harvest festival from his 32nd-floor room at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. The rampage lasted more than 15 minutes as panicked concertgoers tried to take cover, unaware of where the shots were coming from. By the end of it, 58 people were killed, and more than 850 were injured (Abadi et al., 2023). By the time police had located the shooter, breached the door, the gunman had took his own life.

Some mass shooters will publish a manifesto online or leave it behind to be discovered by law enforcement during a search of the shooter’s residence or body. “In many cases, there is no pattern or method to the selection of victims by an active shooter, and these situations are by their very nature unpredictable and evolve quickly. Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes - before law enforcement arrives on the scene - individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation” (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, n.d.).

## Changes to the Law Enforcement Response

In 1999 it was evident that law enforcement was not prepared to handle the new paradigm that mass shootings created. The current response of that time was to rely on specialized trained units like SWAT teams. For the patrolman responding to a shots fired call at a school, or private business was to contain the situation as other officers responded and took up containment positions until a SWAT team was assembled and entered the structure to begin searching for the suspects. I remember watching television coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting and watching patrol officers behind cover as you could hear the shots coming from inside the building.

This response was soon changed, and new policies and procedures were developed for dealing with the active shooter. Law Enforcement cadets in the academy received better training to include shooting skills, room clearing and search techniques. Also included was tactics for working in small teams to immediately begin hunting the active shooter to neutralize and stop the threat. Then and only then were people evacuated and medical personnel allowed to enter. Those that were evacuated were isolated to make sure the shooter was not hiding amongst the victims. As other officers responded a perimeter could be established and more teams available for searching. The goal is to reduce casualties by focusing on the threat.

SWAT teams still have a very important role to play in the active shooter response, however shifting some of that responsibility to trained patrol officers has helped to save lives. Patrol officers can immediately team upon arrival and start moving towards the shooter while a specialized team might still be loading up. Time is important in saving lives.

## Workplace or Public Active Shooter Response

At the facility I work to secure we are required to complete yearly active shooter training and insider threat detection. The following is a short summary of what is commonly taught and is posted on the Federal Bureau of Investigation website (*Active Shooter Safety Resources, 2023*).

### *Excerpts From an Article I wrote Strategies for Surviving the Active Shooter*

Your personal safety and security should always start with you being aware of what is happening around you, knowing where you are, where you are going, and what potential threats you might encounter. Anytime you are going into a building, facility or even a store to go shopping it's important to know where the emergency exits, elevators, stairwells and restrooms that are within the building. I like to even know where the loading docks, storage areas and janitor closets are. Most of the time a building layout can be located in the entry lobby or close to the elevators. I want to know where I'm going, how I'm getting there and how to get out in an emergency.

Remember, if something doesn't feel right, it's probably not. Listen to your intuition. You may never know how your intuition keeps you safe. I think we are wired on an intuitive level that we don't understand. The book by Gavin DeBecker, "The Gift of Fear." is a good read.

"Intuition is always right in at least two important ways; It is always in response to something. it always has your best interest at heart" (p.82).

You hear gunshots in the distance. What do you do? You hear gunshots just outside your office door in the hallway. What should you do? What is your plan? Run-Hide-Fight.

- **Run.** If you can escape outside through an emergency exit, doorway, or window. Do it. Get out of there. During the process of getting out make sure it doesn't put you into the line of fire from the attacker. Hallways tend to stack people up and can make you an easy target so use caution. Stay upright but make yourself a small target and move with the flow of people. Avoid the attacker. Use the stairs, elevators box you in.
- **Hide.** Under your desk in a cubical should be the absolute last resort, but it may have to do. Remember this: movement and sound will attract attention. Attention you may not want. If you must hide, move to a more secure location. Turn off the lights, lock the door, find a safe, out of sight hiding place. For example, better than under a desk is behind a locked office door, locked bathroom, or janitor closet. The next time you are at work take some time to look around. Remember the difference between cover and concealment. Just remember cover will stop bullets, concealment only hides you from a gunman.
- **Fight.** This is the last resort. As a group or even individually you can successfully defend against a gunman. Here's some tips. A fire extinguisher is a great weapon, spray them with the foam and hit them over the head with the can. Make this sicko come to you and surprise him in the doorway. Doorways are transition zones. It is during this time that you can spring into action. Remember it's not enough to control the muzzle of the weapon, injury is the best way to neutralize him. Fight like your life depends on it because it does.

You should contact emergency services to get law enforcement to respond as soon as possible. That being said, don't put yourself at greater risk, by stopping your escape to do so. Get to a safe spot and call for assistance. If possible, stop others from entering the area. Give a description of the attacker if possible. Location of the attacker, building address, building name. The emergency dispatcher will have a lot of questions. Answer them to the best of your ability, if you don't know, tell them that. Someone else may be calling with the information you don't have. Giving false or inaccurate information can delay the response and add to confusion.

- **Police Response.** Police officers responding to the 911 calls of an active shooter are faced with an extremely chaotic situation to sort out. The officers will be very direct and possibly yelling instructions. Follow them. They are working to sort everything out quickly. They may treat you as a potential threat until the scene is under control. During an active shooter their primary job will be to neutralize the shooter. Your primary job is to survive. Follow the instructions given to you by officers on the scene. Officers will be dealing with a lot of confusion and adrenaline. Until the threat is neutralized and the area secured, they will not be rendering first-aid, medical help will wait until the scene is safe.

### **Recap.**

Know where you are going and how to escape in an emergency.

- Run — get to the exits and out of the building. Call the police. Know the address and name of the building you are at. Stop others from going into the building if possible. If the gunman is too close, then hide.
- Hide — If you cannot run, Hide in a secure place. Lock the door. Turn out the lights. Stay put until the police secure the scene. If you hear the gunman on the other side of the door. Prepare to fight.

- Fight — is usually listed as a last resort. If you must fight, unleash hell and don't stop fighting until the threat is neutralized.

Understand how the police will respond. Follow their directions.

## **School Active Shooter Response**

Schools will respond much differently, because of the need to be accountable for the children in their care. This puts a lot of responsibility on the teachers. In several states including Texas which has now made it mandatory to have a School Resource Officer or SRO. That SRO in many cases are certified police officers but in some cases of private schools, they are using specifically training security officers. Valor Force Security owned and operated by Tony Lett. Mr. Lett has a team of armed security officers that participate twice a year in firearms training and annually in active shooter training. The SRO in many cases is the immediate responder in the situation while first responders are in route.

When an active shooter enters a school. They will immediately go on lockdown. Classroom doors are locked, lights turned off, sometimes windows in the door will be covered to block a gunman's view. Students are accounted for and moved away from doors and windows. The idea is to limit and deny access to the gunman. Once officers arrive on scene they can engage the threat in a lobby, hallway, or common area.

### **Recap:**

- 911 is contacted. SRO in route.
- School goes into lockdown procedures. Doors locked, Lights off. Students accounted for and moved away from doors and windows. Remain quiet and out of sight.
- Police arrive. Threat neutralized. Medical begins.
- Students evacuated. Students accounted for and reunited with families.
- This is how it should work. A plan properly executed. Prevention is the goal.
- Here's a staggering fact from the Washington Post. Since Columbine in 1999 an estimated 365,000 kids have been exposed to an active shooter. 365, 000 (Cox et al., 2023)!

## **Failure at Uvalde**

Without a doubt the shooting at Robb Elementary School, in Uvalde, Texas will be remembered as a failure on the part of law enforcement ("Uvalde School Shooting," 2023). The police chief, who was relieved of command after the event, declared it a barricaded suspect situation instead of active shooter, citing no key to open an unlocked door that was never checked. It was unlocked. Then it was reported that the officers on scene didn't have the equipment they needed. Once the after actions investigation was complete and the surveillance videos released, it was hard to watch. Over 70 minutes until the shooter was neutralized. 300 officers present from several agencies including local, state, and federal. During this time, you could hear the gunman still shooting. In the end, 19 children and 2 adults lay dead. Failure of leadership. Failure to act. Eventually the door was breached, and the threat stopped. Parents that were outside could hear the shooting and wanted to rescue their kids, they were threatened with arrest. One mother was handcuffed, then released by officers. She immediately found a way into the school and started rescuing children and leading them to safety. The police were not happy with her. The price of failure is high.

## Church Shootings

A few months after Columbine, Ft Worth, Texas experienced its first church shooting. This changed the way churches prepared to protect themselves and different churches have different plans in place. Most immediately encouraged every police officer they had in the congregation to carry concealed to help protect the people. I was working part-time in a gun store and remember selling several pistols and revolvers to ministers, preachers, and pastors. Many of them prepared to carry concealed during services to help “protect the flock”.

White Settlement Texas, December 2019, an armed gunman entered a church and killed a deacon but was shot and killed by the church’s head of security before he could do more harm. Church security teams have become very common. They are licensed, trained, organized and very professional. Many have their own medical teams. Church security usually hides in plain sight. Other churches will hire a security company, like Valor Force to provide a uniformed security presence.

The worst church shooting was in Texas Sutherland Springs, November 2017. 26 people were killed by the gunman, 22 injured. He was stopped only when a citizen heard the shots, grabbed his rifle, and went towards the church and engaged the shooter (Mooney, 2022). Law enforcement arrived at the scene after the gunman was stopped. In rural areas police and deputies have increased response times, just because of the distance they cover.

According to the Attorney General of Texas, Texas law allows a church, synagogue, or other established place of religious worship to utilize volunteers to provide security services, hire law enforcement officers or licensed security officers to provide security (Attorney General of Texas, n.d.). I personally know of several preachers, pastors, ministers and worship leaders that conceal carry a firearm even during services.

One resource for churches is FEMA, they are awarding grants to nonprofits organizations that can assist in safety and security planning, training, access and entry controls, security cameras, external lights, security fencing and gates, and even contract security guards (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2022).

## Discussion

Immediately after every mass shooting that makes the news the politicians are quick to say, “our hearts go out to the victims and their families”, “our thoughts and prayers are with the people affected by this tragedy.” Then the talk of gun bans, banning the assault rifle, limiting magazine capacity, enhanced background checks. Go down the list it stays the same (Furlow, 2022; see also Luca et al., 2020; Pomeranz & Ochoa, 2021; Stone et al., 2022; Tiderman et al., 2023).

Gun free zones. I have never heard of a criminal changing their behavior because of a sign that marks Gun Free Zone. These signs only restrict law abiding citizens from carrying a firearm to protect themselves and others. I told you I had a bias towards firearms and being armed. Most mass shooters don’t attack a police department; however, murders will kill an unsuspecting officer. Never get complacent.

Banning assault rifles. This is a heated topic. The AR is not short for assault rifle, but for the Armalite Rifle platform is a good shooting weapon. It is safe, reliable, accurate, everything you want for home defense. Many politicians that speak ill of firearms have no experience, or knowledge of how they work. Banning firearms will only create more outlaws of law-abiding citizens and embolden the criminal. Criminals by nature don’t follow the law. If mass shooters

were lawful citizens, they'd understand that murder is against the law.

**Limiting magazine capacity.** The idea that you would have to take the time to reload. During that time less people would be shot and could escape. With practice magazine changes can be accomplished in a short amount of time. Many mass shooters have been bringing multiple firearms with them, limiting the need to change magazines.

**Red flag laws.** This is an idea that simply states an individual can report you because they feel you are a danger to yourself or others (Zeoli et al., 2022). Law enforcement could then come to your house and remove all the firearms from the home. You would then have to go to court in order to gain possession of your firearms. Sounds reasonable, however anyone could make a claim against you, an ex-spouse, a coworker, and disgruntled neighbor (Pear et al., 2022).

**Mental Health Resources.** While resources for mental health are available there is a stigma still attached to getting professional health especially for first responders, service men and women and even firearms owners. Some law makers are asking for increased funding for mental health screening and treatment. The relevance and significance of mental health issues is reflected in current research (Abdalla et al., 2022; Ali & North, 2016; Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Hylton et al., 2019; Thoresen et al., 2016).

**Mandatory use of School Resource Officers.** The state of Texas passed legislation to require schools to use either police or security working at schools. In the remote areas of the state this can be a teacher or administrator. Having an active presence with a professional trained officer did make the mass shooter in Tennessee go to a secondary location. The shooter was also being treated for an emotional disorder (New York Times, 2023).

**Increased security through building design.** The layout of a building or campus should include design modifications to increase safety but also security. I feel that this can be accomplished without turning schools, churches, or public buildings into fortresses resembling prisons. They already include design into retail buildings for loss prevention.

**Use of technology.** Currently there are several technologies that can be deployed to find concealed weapons, sound detecting alarms that can hear gunshots. Facial recognition. X-ray and metal detectors. Surveillance cameras. Integrating new technology like artificial intelligence software with access and entry controls security cameras, external lights, security fencing and gates, and using mass notification systems like SaferWatch (<https://www.saferwatchapp.com/>) along with contract security officers and law enforcement will hopefully yield the best results in the future.

In the article for Campus Security Today, Mike Lahiff the CEO of Zero Eyes states, "When an active shooter is capable of killing dozens before a 9-1-1 call can be made, every second counts. Reactive technologies can't help change the course of events" (Lahiff, 2022). This is true. Cameras will only record the event. Locked doors only work if they are locked. Contracting with armed security companies only works if they are professionally trained, proactive and present. He also warns against "fortressing" schools to feel more like prisons and becoming counterproductive to fostering a learning environment.

**Privacy Concerns.** The use of security cameras, body worn cameras, smart cards, biometrics, and artificial intelligence comes down to information gathering and privacy concerns. For security and safety some people are willing to give up a degree of privacy, others are not. We have laws that protect our personal information and our conversations with attorneys, and doctors. Will we be able to find a balance between Big Brother security and safety, and personal freedoms.

**Citizen training.** Training in Run, Hide, Fight is a must for business and employees, but also for every citizen. Everyone should be able to spot indicators and warning signs of trouble in people around them. If you see something. Say something "If You See Something, Say Something®" the national campaign to raise public awareness of the signs of terrorism and



terrorism-related crime, and how to report suspicious activity to state and local law enforcement (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.)

- Examples of Red Flags to watch for:
- Making Threats.
- Difficulty controlling emotions and impulses.
- Researching mass shootings and violence.
- Sudden fascination with guns of violence.
- Isolation from friends, family, or co-workers.
- A sign for adults, but especially kids is being bullied (physical, verbal or online).
- Depression, a sense of hopelessness, or signs of self-harm.

## Gun control measures

Implementing effective gun control measures requires a comprehensive approach that considers citizens' rights while prioritizing public safety. Here are some practical recommendations:

1. Enhance background checks for gun purchases by strengthening systems, conducting more detailed criminal and mental health history checks for purchasers.
2. Institute mandatory waiting periods between applying for and receiving a gun purchase to allow for more thorough background checks.
3. Develop and implement educational programs for prospective gun owners, including training on safe gun handling and legal basics.
4. Consider mandating insurance for gun owners to encourage responsible use and storage of weapons.
5. Introduce measures restricting gun access for individuals with a history of domestic violence and limited emotional management resources.
6. Elevate gun storage standards with stricter requirements, including the use of secure storage facilities and locking mechanisms to prevent unauthorized access.
7. Increase penalties for illegal possession of guns as a deterrent.
8. Monitor Internet gun sales by tightening controls and implementing measures to track and prevent illegal transactions.
9. Support mental health detection programs by increasing funding for detection and treatment programs, ensuring the availability of quality mental health services.
10. Consider restrictions on the sale and possession of military-style weapons suitable for mass shootings.
11. Research and develop technological solutions such as smart gun systems that can prevent unauthorized use.
12. Collaborate with educational institutions to foster a culture of safety and provide educational activities in the community.
13. Regulate gun shows by introducing strict controls to prevent illegal operations and sales.
14. Engage in international cooperation by sharing experiences with other countries and participating in international research projects to identify effective arms control methods.

Practical gun control measures should consider various factors and strike a balance between citizens' rights and the responsibility to ensure societal safety. I understand that some gun owners will oppose several of these suggestions, however this is for the lawmakers to debate and argue over, then implement and find out what works and what doesn't.

## Conclusions

When examining the role of gun culture in the United States, it is crucial to consider historical, cultural, and legal dimensions. The constitutional right to own a gun, rooted in principles of individual liberty and self-defense, plays a significant role. The gun industry's substantial economic influence extends to shaping political discussions and sustaining an ongoing discourse on gun control. The diversity of perspectives within society underscores the necessity of reaching compromises when formulating legislation and practices, always prioritizing the well-being of citizens and public safety. The evolving public attitudes and debates highlight the paramount importance of education and public awareness in fostering responsible attitudes towards gun ownership.

I think a lot of this comes down to where we put our priorities as a society. Protecting children, protecting worshippers, and protecting citizens need to become a priority. Bright minds with common sense ideas need to be put forth. I don't have answers, just questions. It will need to be a multi-layered approach. I also think the solution really starts in the home and how we need to learn again to respect life.

This is a callout to academia, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and problem solvers. The United States is built on a gun culture. This will not change, at least not in my lifetime. Criminals will always be criminals, violence will always be a part of life, and maybe the answers don't lie in policies, laws, and restriction, but in changing the hearts and minds, and treatment of mental illness. How do we instill a respect for life and the possibility of the future to prevent such tragedies?

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