

# Debunking Myths the Gun Lobby Perpetuates Following Mass Shootings

By Allison Jordan September 8, 2022

The gun lobby, led by the National Rifle Association (NRA), routinely deploys a series of common myths—designed to undermine legitimate arguments for commonsense gun reform—in the aftermath of high-profile mass shootings.<sup>1</sup> These myths range from scapegoating mental health to “door control”<sup>2</sup> in public spaces such as schools and are united by a set of dangerous and misleading arguments intended to increase gun ownership and decrease industry accountability. The myths play on fear and perpetuate misinformation to such a degree that they are drilled into the public consciousness as fact and can lead to reactionary policies that do little to deter gun violence.<sup>3</sup> This fact sheet combats this misinformation and uplifts evidence-based solutions by debunking the myths that the gun lobby and conservative politicians frequently circulate following gun violence in America.

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## Mental illness is not a major factor in mass shootings

**Myth: Mass shootings are caused by mental illness.** Despite many conservative politicians’ and the NRA’s frequent invocation of mental illness, little evidence exists to suggest that mental illness is to blame for U.S. mass shootings. This common misconception was echoed most recently by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R), when he spoke on the deadly mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde: “[W]e as a society need to do a better job with mental health. ... Anybody who shoots somebody else has a mental health challenge.”<sup>4</sup> This claim runs directly counter to a body of evidence-based research that finds people living with mental illness are far more likely to become victims of violence than perpetrators.<sup>5</sup>

**Fact: While every country is home to people living with mental illness, the United States is the only country in the world that experiences mass shootings daily.** An estimated 1 in 5 Americans live with a diagnosed mental illness.<sup>6</sup> While other countries have similar levels of mental illness, none have the levels of mass shootings that the United States does. Moreover, countries with strong gun oversight experience significantly less gun violence.<sup>7</sup>

## Evidence indicates no connection between mental illness and mass shootings

# 22%

Share of men who committed or attempted to commit a mass shooting who also could be categorized as mentally ill, according to 2015 research study

# 8%

Share of people who perpetrate mass shootings who also have a history of documented psychotic symptoms

# 4%

Percentage of violence in the United States that can be attributed to mental illness

Furthermore, evidence indicates no significant connection between mental illness and mass shootings:

- An FBI report covering active shooter incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013 found that most assailants had not been diagnosed with a mental illness.<sup>8</sup>
- A 2015 research study examining 226 men who committed or attempted to commit a mass shooting found that only 22 percent could be categorized as mentally ill.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2021, researchers found that only 8 percent of people who perpetrate mass shootings have a history of documented psychotic symptoms.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, a number of risk factors are more closely associated with gun violence than mental illness, including adverse childhood experiences, gender and age demographics, and, most importantly, access to firearms.<sup>11</sup> Research demonstrates that only about 4 percent of violence in the United States can be attributed to mental illness, with data indicating most individuals living with mental illness will never perpetrate violence.<sup>12</sup> However, while the expansion of mental health resources is unlikely to decrease interpersonal gun violence or mass shootings, it is likely to help prevent gun suicide.<sup>13</sup> The insistence that mental illness is to blame for mass violence is a deliberate attempt to shift public attention and political momentum from strengthening gun laws in America and will consistently fail to meaningfully address the gun violence epidemic.

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## The gun violence epidemic is uniquely American

**Myth: Gun violence happens everywhere.** The NRA often points to incidents of gun violence abroad to argue gun laws are ineffective and such widespread gun violence is not unique to America. However, the evidence tells a different story.

**Fact: While most countries experience occasional incidents of gun violence, the gun violence epidemic is a uniquely American experience.** The United States has the highest level of gun violence across developed nations, with a gun homicide rate 26 times greater than that of peer nations.<sup>14</sup> This number is even higher among young Americans, who experience a gun homicide rate 49 times greater than that of other developed nations.<sup>15</sup>

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These sobering statistics illustrate the gravity of the gun violence epidemic in the United States:

- In a single year, gun violence kills more than 40,000 Americans, wounds nearly twice as many, and costs the country an estimated \$557 billion.<sup>16</sup>
- Guns are now the leading cause of death among children and teens, killing more young Americans than vehicle crashes, drug overdoses, and cancer combined.<sup>17</sup>
- Women living in the United States are 28 times more likely than those living in peer countries to die by firearm homicide.<sup>18</sup>
- Every day, more than 50 people are murdered with a firearm and another 1,100 are threatened with a gun during a violent crime.<sup>19</sup>

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## Putting more guns in schools is dangerous and ineffective

**Myth: An armed school is a safer school.** A common myth perpetuated by the gun lobby is that an armed society is a safer one. In the wake of mass shootings, particularly those involving children, many politicians legitimize this misconception by rushing to implement reactionary policies and allocate resources toward efforts to increase armed personnel in schools.<sup>20</sup> This myth has fueled ineffective and harmful policy responses to school shootings since Columbine High School, with one county in North Carolina recently moving to arm all school security guards in the district with AR-15 rifles.<sup>21</sup>

**Fact: Efforts to put more guns in schools have caused harm.** Rather than pass meaningful gun regulation in response to mass shootings, the federal government has poured millions of dollars into arming school officers—fueling a \$2.7 billion school security market.<sup>22</sup> Despite these responses, clear evidence indicates that campus law enforcement has failed to stop the rise of gunfire on school grounds:<sup>23</sup>

- Of the 225 incidents of gunfire on school grounds identified by *The Washington Post* from 1999 to 2022, there were only two cases where a school resource officer was able to stop or disarm an active shooter;<sup>24</sup> more often, armed guards were outgunned by well-equipped shooters who only needed seconds to inflict mass casualties—or, in the case of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, flee.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, gun violence occurred in at least 68 schools with an armed guard or police officer on grounds, indicating the presence of an armed guard is unlikely to deter a mass shooter.<sup>26</sup>

- Researchers at *JAMA Network Open* found that of 133 incidents of K-12 school shootings from 1980 to 2019, 1 in 4 had an armed guard on scene. Moreover, researchers found the presence of armed guards failed to result in fewer casualties, instead noting a death rate 2.83 times greater in school shootings with armed personnel.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, some of the deadliest school shootings in American history had an armed resource officer on scene:

- Robb Elementary School (2022)<sup>28</sup>
- Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2018)<sup>29</sup>
- Santa Fe High School (2018)<sup>30</sup>
- Marshall County High School (2018)<sup>31</sup>
- Great Mills High School (2018)<sup>32</sup>
- Santana High School (2001)<sup>33</sup>
- Columbine High School (1999)<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the presence of school resource officers has been linked to increased arrests of students for noncriminal behavior, as students are often referred to law enforcement for typical behavior and small infractions such as theft and vandalism as well as nonviolence behaviors such as dress code violations. This school-to-prison pipeline is particularly devastating for students with disabilities and students of color.<sup>35</sup>

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## More than 95 percent of teachers do not feel comfortable with a measure that would allow them to bring guns to schools.

Allowing security guards to carry firearms also puts students and faculty at risk. In 2020, a security guard unintentionally fired a gun in a school parking lot in Florida, striking another staff member in the eye.<sup>36</sup> And in November 2016, a high school resource officer in Michigan accidentally discharged his gun and struck a teacher in the neck.<sup>37</sup> Armed teachers, too, have put others at risk. At Blountsville Elementary School in Alabama, in 2019,<sup>38</sup> a first grade student was injured after a substitute teacher carrying a handgun in his pocket unintentionally fired the weapon. At California's Seaside High School in 2018,<sup>39</sup> a teacher reportedly fired a Glock 21 .45-caliber semi-automatic handgun during class, leaving three students injured by bullet fragments and falling debris. And at Dalton High School in Georgia, in 2018,<sup>40</sup> a teacher with a .38 caliber snub-nosed revolver fired at students and faculty after they attempted to enter the classroom.

Finally, students, faculty, and community members broadly oppose allowing guns in school.<sup>41</sup> According to a 2018 survey,<sup>42</sup> more than 95 percent of teachers do not feel comfortable with a measure that would allow them to bring guns to schools, while 68 percent of National Education Association members oppose allowing teachers and school staff to carry guns on school grounds. In 2013, 202 national- and state-led organizations endorsed a framework for school safety that opposed armed personnel.<sup>43</sup> And students around the country have organized to call for bans on arming faculty and staff.<sup>44</sup>

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## **Policies to harden schools with visible security measures have proved ineffective**

### **Myth: Hardening schools with visible security measures will deter mass shooters.**

Many conservative politicians and gun lobby groups have argued that hardening schools through visible security measures such as metal detectors, single-entry doors, bulletproof windows, and surveillance cameras is an effective way to prevent mass shootings.<sup>45</sup> However, some states and schools have already implemented many of these measures, with evidence showing that they ultimately failed to prevent mass shootings.<sup>46</sup>

**Fact: Attempts to harden schools have been ineffective at preventing school shootings and often leave students and faculty feeling less safe.** Despite having robust safety plans including armed security, social media monitoring software, fences, threat assessment teams, video cameras, and metal detectors, these schools, among others, experienced deadly instances of gunfire on campus:

- Robb Elementary School (2022)<sup>47</sup>
- Oxford High School (2021)<sup>48</sup>
- Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2018)<sup>49</sup>
- Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012)<sup>50</sup>

Measures to harden schools would be costly and impractical for day-to-day activities. Many schools, for example, have thousands of students and staff, who would take hours to funnel in and out of a single entrance, and renovations for bulletproof doors and windows would be an extremely expensive waste of resources. Additionally, single-entry doorways pose a significant fire hazard and limit possible escape routes in the case of emergency. These measures also run contrary to schools' role as community spaces: While most schools already limit entryways and restrict visitors, multiple entrances are often necessary for after-school activities and community events such as sporting games or voting.

Finally, hardening schools affects student experience. A 2013 study found that metal detectors and other efforts to harden security measures in schools were associated with a decrease in students who reported feeling safe.<sup>51</sup>

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## Most mass shootings happen in spaces where guns are permitted

**Myth: Mass shooters are likely to target gun-free zones.** Gun lobbyists often deploy this myth to deter legislative efforts to limit gun carrying in certain locations that are considered particularly sensitive or unsuitable for guns, such as schools, houses of worship, or government buildings. However, the overwhelming majority of fatal mass shootings in the United States occur in locations where guns are allowed or not explicitly banned, such as in private homes or public locations.<sup>52</sup>

**Fact: Most mass shootings occur in areas where guns are permitted.** The gun lobby often claims that 98 percent of mass shootings occur in gun-free zones, but research has thoroughly debunked this.<sup>53</sup> Of the 156 mass shootings that occurred from 2009 to 2016, only 10 percent occurred in gun-free zones. The majority of these shootings—63 percent—occurred in private homes.<sup>54</sup>

# 10%

Percentage of mass shootings from 2009–2016 that occurred in gun-free zones

Incidents of mass shootings in spaces where guns were permitted include:

- Outdoor festival in Oklahoma (2022)<sup>55</sup>
- Supermarket in Buffalo, New York (2022)<sup>56</sup>
- Gun store in New Orleans (2021)<sup>57</sup>
- Ned Peppers Bar in Dayton, Ohio (2019)<sup>58</sup>
- Walmart in El Paso, Texas (2019)<sup>59</sup>
- Military base in Fort Hood, Texas (2009)<sup>60</sup>

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## The criminal justice reform movement is not the cause of the recent increase in violent crime

**Myth: The criminal justice reform movement is to blame for the country's recent rise in violent crime.** Since 2020, the United States has experienced a rapid increase in violent crime, with homicides, aggravated assault, and mass shootings on the rise. To shift public attention from efforts to strengthen gun laws, the NRA and conservative politicians have attempted to blame the criminal justice reform movement for the recent rise in violent crime.<sup>61</sup> However, the evidence points to guns as the driving force behind the increase.

**Fact: Rising crime rates are largely driven by an increase in gun-related homicides.** From 2019 to 2020, homicides rose by nearly 30 percent, and more than 75 percent of these murders were committed using a firearm.<sup>62</sup> From 2019 to 2020, mass shootings increased 46 percent; from 2020 to 2021, they increased another 13 percent. Preliminary data for 2022 predicts there will be more than 500 mass shootings—an average of more than one shooting per day—before year's end.<sup>63</sup>

From 2019 to 2020, the rate of gun homicides among children and teenagers ages 1–19 rose by roughly 40 percent.<sup>64</sup> And guns in the United States don't just fuel crime domestically; research suggests U.S.-sourced guns are used to commit crimes abroad “approximately once every 31 minutes.”<sup>65</sup>

Significantly, violent crime and homicide rates are worse in states with weaker gun laws.<sup>66</sup> According to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, states that received an “F” grade based on the strength of their gun laws had the highest homicide rates.<sup>67</sup>

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## Gun safety does not violate Second Amendment rights

### **Myth: Gun laws violate the freedoms guaranteed under the Second Amendment.**

In the 2008 case *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the U.S. Supreme Court explicitly stated that the Second Amendment does not grant an individual the unlimited right to own and use firearms in the United States. The majority opinion, authored by Justice Antonin Scalia, stated: “Like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited. [It is] not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose.”<sup>68</sup>

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– U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia

In the 2022 case *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen*, the Supreme Court struck down “proper cause”<sup>69</sup> requirements for concealed carry permitting in five states and Washington, D.C., invalidating a key safeguard for ensuring those who carry in public do so lawfully and safely. The court’s increasingly conservative decisions and massive shadow lobbying campaigns funded by the NRA<sup>70</sup> have left gun violence prevention advocates concerned over a future push to redefine Second Amendment rights. However, even with the Supreme Court’s conservative stance on a variety of issues, commonsense policies such as extreme risk protection orders, safe storage, and background checks are still constitutional.

**Fact: Efforts to promote gun safety are constitutional.** Since *Heller*, courts around the country have continually affirmed the legality of gun safety legislation, upholding a wide range of gun laws as constitutional.<sup>71</sup>

- Laws restricting concealed and open carry of loaded guns in public<sup>72</sup>
- Extreme risk protection orders and prohibitions on the possession of guns by people with criminal convictions or court orders related to domestic violence<sup>73</sup>
- Firearm design safety standards<sup>74</sup>
- Safe storage laws<sup>75</sup>
- Waiting periods<sup>76</sup>
- Private sale background checks and licensing laws<sup>77</sup>

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## Conclusion

Contrary to gun lobby rhetoric, gun violence in U.S. communities is not an issue of too many entry points, unarmed teachers, or a lack of mental health supports, and efforts to prevent gun violence are not attempts to remove constitutional rights. Instead, America's gun violence epidemic is the result of an industry and culture that has made guns readily available to nearly anyone, with little interest in preventing these guns from being used to harm others. If policymakers hope to address this crisis and protect future generations, they must reject harmful myths that seek to divert public attention from strengthening gun laws and instead rely on evidence-based research to inform meaningful gun regulation.

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