

# Addressing online extremism and radicalization in relations to mass public shootings in Norway

## Executive Summary

In this policy brief, we discuss current policies to counter domestic terrorism in Norway, i.e., gun laws and online moderation frameworks, in the light of two sociological theories, i.e., gun-violence correlation and media contagion effect. We first specify the type of mass shootings that this study focuses on - those that took place in public settings. We draw on empirical data of incidents that happened after the launch of *modern* social media and analyze policies meant to address mass shootings during this timeframe. Policy recommendations are given at the premise of social media as platforms where extreme thoughts and actions are conceptualized and enabled. Social media as a vehicle to combat extremism and prevent mass shootings, however, possess considerable constraints, which are in conjunction with the Internet governance and intelligence sharing arena.

## Introduction

Mass shootings have increasingly become an exigent part of the national security dialogue worldwide. Typically, gun control is often tightened immediately following a violence attack. However, the increase in frequency and severity of mass shootings worldwide question the infallibility of gun-violence correlation and suggest that there may be other independent variables that take part in the execution of armed attacks.

As a result, discussion about mass shootings prevention should seek beyond gun control for other potential policy solutions. The July 2011 incident should have been the last time “mass shootings” were the reason for unexpected deaths in Norway. Recent mass shootings remind us that Norway is far away from fully eliminating mass shootings and renewed attention on causes and solutions are urgently needed.

## What is “Mass Shootings?”

*Mass shootings* is an umbrella term for armed violences resulting in four or more *fatally* shot victims in one or more closely related locations within a 24-hours window.<sup>1</sup> Three types of mass shootings, familicide, felony-related, and mass public shootings, possess homogenous qualitative characteristics - homicides involving guns, their contexts, explanations are unique. These differences are key targets of prevention strategies.

In the context of Norway and for the aforementioned reason, we focus this study on *mass public shootings*. This terminology will be used interchangeably with *active shooter* in this paper. An *active shooter* is “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use armed weapon(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Alan Fox and Jack Levin, “Mass Murder: An Analysis of Extreme Violence,” *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003), 47-64

<sup>2</sup> Jaclyn Schildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass, “Mass Shootings: Media, Myths, and Realities,” (California: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 17

## Mass Shootings in Norway

In the last decade, armed attacks in Norway have all been motivated by extremism and exclusively carried out by lone perpetrators. As one goal is to evaluate social media's role in mass shootings, we collect information on incidents that took place since the launch of *modern* social media outlets in 2004. Table 1, below, summarizes information regarding mass shootings that happened in Norway.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1. Mass Shootings in Norway

Incident	Date & Location	Perpetrators	Motive	Weapons	Victims
July 22 (22/7) attacks • Guns violence	Jul 22, 2011 Oslo & Utøya	Anders Behring Breivik	Radicalized extremism • Political	Car bomb, semi-automatic rifle, semi-automatic pistol	77 deaths & 319 injuries
Kongsberg attack • Spree killing	Oct 13, 2021 Kongsberg, Viken	Espen Andersen Bråthen	Likely mental-illness	Bow and arrow, bladed weapons	5 deaths & 3 injuries
2022 Oslo shooting • Gun violence	Jun 25, 2022 Oslo	Zaniar Matapour Arfan Bhatti (remained as a suspect)	Radicalized extremism • Religious	MP 40 submachine gun	2 deaths & 21 injuries

According to Neumann in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* journal, there are several similar social exposure and connections that might “make one more susceptible to radicalisation and mobilization.”<sup>4</sup> In a study done by the FBI in 2019, “male, in his thirties, single, and unemployed” are the most common profiles across 52 lone offender terrorists in the US between 1972 and 2015. They often have three vulnerable traits - past trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuses.<sup>5</sup>

These traits can be found from Norway active shooters' profiles. For example, Breivik was unemployed, would normally spend excessive amounts of time “hibernating” online and playing violent games, and was addicted to steroids.<sup>6</sup> Espen Bråthen does not have stable relationships with family members and has criminal charges for death threats against his dad and substance use.<sup>7</sup> Both Matapour and Bhatti are active members of online extremist forums and possess several assault and violence convictions.

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that there are debates surrounding the birth of modern social media. In this study, we take the launching year of Facebook as a setting timestamp.

<sup>4</sup> Peter R. Neumann, “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 6 (2013): 431-459

<sup>5</sup> National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, “Lone Offender: A Study of Lone Offender Terrorism in the United States (1972-2015),” Federal Bureau of Investigation Behavioral Analysis Unit, (2019), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/lone-offender-terrorism-report-111319.pdf/view/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on video gaming and violence, see Linda Schlegel, “Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 23 (2020), <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/359>

<sup>7</sup> Ola Mjaaland, Christine Svendsen, Øyvind Bye Skille, Simon Solheim, Olav Døvik, Pedja Kalajdzic, Runar Henriksen Jørstad, Ali Iqbal Tahir, Sverre Holm-Nilsen, Martin Sunday and Intisaar Ali, “Espen Andersen Bråthen siktet for drapene i Kongsberg” [Espen Andersen Bråthen charged with the murders in Kongsberg] (in Norwegian Bokmål). NRK. (2021)

Another common factor between mass shootings in Norway is the role social media has in facilitating active shooters' radicalization and mobilization. All 3 perpetrators have online presences on social media and/or online forums. Prior to the attacks, Breivik is reported to actively contribute to neo-Nazi and anti-Islam forums.<sup>8</sup> Bråthen shares excessive content on Islam and gives people "warnings," which later got him into trouble.<sup>9</sup> Matapour expresses his extreme views with a recording of himself burning LGBT flag. It was clear that Norwegian police do not have comprehensive guidelines on monitoring individuals with possible extremist views and criminal threats.

## Policy Changes in Key Areas

Many Norwegians own guns and consider hunting and shooting as sports. Our country has almost 500,000 hunters and 1,500,000 guns registered by civilians in 2020. It is said that Norway already has some of the "toughest gun laws in the world." However, the July 22 incident raises concern over ways Breivik circumvented gun ownership requirements.

Mass shootings is a potential source of new "foundational fictions" of Norway nationhood in which our country "must re-contextualize and reconfigure" its policy.<sup>10</sup> Exact 10 years after this incident, the Kongsberg active shooter brought back Norwegian society's nightmare. Even though death tolls are much lesser than that of 22/7, barbarian execution and perpetrator's choice of weapons capture the need to renew prevention metrics for mass shootings. However, one year following, when new guidelines were not yet fully developed, Norway was already hit by another mass shooting in Oslo.

To assess the influence and relevance of policy actions taken after attacks, we collect key policy changes in Norway that have been put into effect after the July 22 incident.

TABLE 2. Changes in policy landscape following July 22 attacks<sup>11</sup>

Area	Pre July 22, 2011 [2005 version]	Post July 22, 2011
Firearms Control	<p><b>"Firearms Act"</b></p> <p><b>Types:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total ban on automatic weapons for civilians, unless in collector category</li> <li>• Maximum legal caliber is .460 S&amp;W Magnum</li> <li>• Modification without police consent is a felony</li> </ul> <p><b>Ownership:</b> A license is required, hunting or sports shooters license, for purchase</p>	<p><b>"Firearms Act" &amp; "Firearms Regulations"</b></p> <p><b>Types:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• illegal to acquire, hold, or possess firearms normally used as weapons of war, fully automatic weapons, and firearms disguised as other objects</li> <li>• ban semiautomatic weapons, unless the weapon cannot be easily converted to produce fully automatic fire and the would-be owner obtains police approval for the weapon</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> "32-åringen skal tilhøre høyreekstremt miljø – Norge". *Nyheter* (på norsk).= NO: NRK. (2010)

<sup>9</sup> Marit Kolberg and Ali Iqbal Tahir, "Barndomsvenn varslet politiet om Kongsberg-drapsmann i 2017 – fryktet liv kunne gå tapt" [Childhood friend alerted police about Kongsberg killer in 2017 – feared lives could be lost]. Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. (2021)

<sup>10</sup> Bhabha (1990): 5

<sup>11</sup> 22 July Commission, "Report of the 22 July Commission," Oslo: Regjeringen. (2012), [https://www.regjeringen.no/html/smk/22julikommisjonen/22julikommisjonen\\_no/en/content/download/434/3526/version/2/file/press\\_release\\_22\\_july\\_commissio.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/html/smk/22julikommisjonen/22julikommisjonen_no/en/content/download/434/3526/version/2/file/press_release_22_july_commissio.pdf)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rifle and shotgun: “sober and responsible” persons 18 years or older. Between 16-18 needs parents’ consent.</li> <li>• Handgun: at least 21 years old with no exceptions.</li> </ul> <p><b>Purchase:</b> The owner must provide a written statement explaining their motivation of purchase.</p> <p><b>Transportation:</b> The owner must have a good reason to bring the weapon to a public place. Such reasons include transportation to the range or hunting, transportation to repairs or perhaps another gun enthusiast for maintenance and discussion</p>	<p><b>Purchase:</b> Such permission must be only for a certain quantity of ammunition and may not be made valid for a period longer than three months</p> <p><b>Transportation:</b> Permit to carry weapons is decided by police district operations leader</p>
Prevention	<p><b>“Criminal Procedure Act”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning or preparing to commit a terrorist act by conspiring with another person is punishable upon conviction with a prison term of up to twelve years</li> <li>• A penalty of imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years shall be applied to any person who illegally provides, receives, sends, procures or raises money or other assets with the intent or knowledge that the resources will be wholly or partly used</li> </ul>	<p><b>“Digital Services Act”</b></p> <p><b>Harmonized response to illegal content online:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediary liability model to detect illegal content.</li> <li>• General content monitoring is prohibited</li> </ul>

*Gun-violence correlation* is commonly accepted within the academia and policy-makers community. As denoted in *Epidemiologic Reviews*, “[...] specific restrictions on purchase, access, and use of firearms are associated with reductions in firearm deaths.”<sup>12</sup> This sociological theory drives prevention of firearm violence that mainly focuses on gun control efforts. After the deadly mass shooting in 2011, the Norwegian government has tightened gun ownership laws. However, the increase in frequency of gun violence and the June 2022 mass shooting in Oslo prompt a question regarding the accuracy of high gun ownership and high gun violence correlation.

When analyzing on an international and regional scale or against countries with high frequency and severity of mass shootings, like the United States, gun-violence correlation holds its validity, in a sense that Norway has a low gun violence rate, even though the rate of gun ownership among citizens is relatively high. However, when we evaluate by itself, gun-violence theory is falsifiable. This unexpected behavior over time suggests that there may be other independent variables that cause rising rates of gun violence in Norway.

Indeed, if one looks at mass shootings through the lens of ‘contagion theory’, a theory that treats the spread of mass shootings like the spread of a viral pathogen, one can visualize the

<sup>12</sup> Julian Santaella-Tenorio, Magdalena Cerdá, Andrés Villaveces, Sandro Galea, “What Do We Know About the Association Between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries?,” *Epidemiologic Reviews*, Volume 38, Issue 1, (2016), Pages 140–157, <https://doi.org/10.1093/epirev/mxv012>

ubiquitousness of mass shootings and killings.<sup>13</sup> One of the main observations from Liu's study is that *social media* is the leading cause of the *spread* of mass shootings. *Spread* here refers to exposure of the shooting, and such exposure can engender such things as copycat killers, those that praise the gunmen for their acts, spreading of manifestos, misinformation, etc. Therefore, our recommendations to tackle this wicked problem will primarily be focused on what can be done with regards to social media, as this is the main cause of the dissemination of misinformation and hate than can give rise to new shootings, in which facilitating radicalization and mobilization of new perpetrators or creating a more hostile online environment.

## Recommendations

Mass shootings are in no way intrinsically linked to one country. Though a country such as the United States experiences significantly more mass shootings than several other countries due to its unique cultural and societal makeup, this does not mean that mass shootings are a uniquely American problem. If what happened at Oslo in 2011 and 2022 are any indication, mass shootings are just as relevant in Norway. Though they are not as common in our country, they can still occur, and their emotional and cultural toll is equally as devastating. In order to effectively fight this problem, one must analyze the main way in which information about a mass shooting can primarily spread.

Firstly, we recommend a **proactive approach for handling information** about mass shootings in Norway, as opposed to a reactive approach. This proactive approach concerns actions that can be done within the medium of social media. Some acts may require government action, while others will be suggestions that can be made towards private companies and organizations. Perhaps the most basic policy recommendation that we can make would be for the Norwegian government to crack down on hate speech and specifically, speech that incites or approves of violence.

Social media has already been established to have an effect on mass shootings, specifically with the dissemination of information that either appraises or encourages violence. Therefore, we recommend that Norway make a greater effort to crack down on such speech. One recommendation would be to **crack down on speech that encourages violence** directly, but such government intervention may be viewed as an overreach by the state, especially in our country. Norway could partner with private social media companies to take down items on their mediums of communication that encourage such violence. We refer here specifically to recruitment videos, as for example: the Orlando Shooter in 2016 was allegedly exposed to al-Qaeda recruitment videos, and such exposure to propaganda and violence helped to gear the shooter towards inciting violence. Since 2015, ISPs in Norway have begun blocking streaming and torrenting sites that break the rights of copyright holders, since such websites allow Norwegian citizens to perform digital piracy.<sup>14</sup>

Norwegians targeted for piracy have been singled out via their IP address by ISPs on behalf of copyright holders, which has led to file sharing convictions and other such charges.<sup>15</sup> With these

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<sup>13</sup> Dixizi Liu, "Exploring the Contagion Effect of Social Media on Mass Shootings." *Computers & Industrial Engineering*, Pergamon, (2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360835222005678>.

<sup>14</sup> Ray Walsh. "Internet Censorship in Norway: Staying Secure Online." *ProPrivacy.com*, (2020), <https://proprivacy.com/guides/norway-privacy>.

<sup>15</sup> Walsh. "Internet Censorship in Norway: Staying Secure Online"

actions by ISPs against copyright infringement as precedent, we suggest that social media companies' strategy for **removing unwanted speech** follow a similar route. Public protection laws, or speech laws that specifically target recruitment videos that incite violence can be created by the Norwegian government in accordance with such a policy.

Rather than a law that would target speech in an umbrella-like manner, a **more direct crackdown on terror recruitment** would be more likely to pass in the Storting. In order to protect citizen's privacy, we recommend that such preventative actions that target the speech of the user directly may only be taken into effect when the suspect has a history of watching such videos, and an intervention be staged only when the PST (Norwegian Police Security Service) has established a credible threat. Overall, we deem that a crackdown on recruitment videos and propaganda incentivising violence would be an advisable action, which would either be a job for the government or (perhaps less controversial) by the social media companies themselves. Such pressure could be applied onto social media companies by the government.

The Norwegian government enforces a certain amount of surveillance on its citizens by means of **mandatory data retention laws**, which force all telecommunications companies and ISPs to store records of metadata and browsing history for six months. Such records are only accessible with a warrant that is granted by a court under the pretense of demonstrated reasonable suspicion.<sup>16</sup> We recommend that, for persons of interests or individuals under the watch of the PST, that the data of said person can be archived or maintained in a kind of 'watchlist'-like database. We refer here to those under active investigation by the PST or those considered for investigation, and we suggest the creation of a system that can archive data of said individuals that are currently under investigation. The purpose of the archival of this data is so that the data can be brought up again after an investigation has concluded. We also recommend a stricter process for letting individuals off of "terror watchlists", as individuals who are cleared from the watchlist or cleared from an investigation can go on to commit a crime such as a mass shooting in the future.

Such an event was observed in the case of the Orlando shooter in 2016 (though this occurred in the United States, it is relevant for our purposes and the event bears similarities to what happened in Oslo in 2022). The Orlando shooter was previously under investigation and labeled a person of interest in 2013, and the result of a 10-month long investigation ended with no charge at that time. The shooter of the LGBTQ+ bar in Oslo in 2022 was also previously known to the Norwegian Intelligence agency (the PST) since 2015; though the PST spoke with the shooter in May of 2022, they assessed that he did not have violent intentions (PSTNorge).

We believe that an archive of the data of a person of interest and a harder criteria for exiting a watchlist would be beneficial in order to **keep potential violent perpetrators under the eye of the law**. Both cases mentioned above were examples of individuals who were investigated for possible violent inclination, had said investigations dropped, and proceeded to be involved in mass shootings in the future. Therefore, we believe that a **more robust watchlist system**, a better maintenance of suspected persons' data and an archival of their information to be accessible for possible further investigations would be the best course of action to prevent a

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<sup>16</sup> Walsh. "Internet Censorship in Norway: Staying Secure Online"



suspected individual from committing a mass shooting. To assuage possible privacy concerns, there should be another warrant granted by a court in order to archive an individual's data, in addition to the warrant for accessing such information.

So far, we've recommended tactics that can be utilized by targeting possible perpetrators of violent mass shootings, however, more preventive measures can be taken in order to minimize the chances of another mass shooting in Norway. The first approach is an experimental one, which is the utilization of **empathy-based counterspeech** to combat hate speech and speech that incentivizes violence. The tactic of empathy-based counterspeech is one where bots (AI controlled social media bots) post content to social media to dissuade and warn of consequences to those who post about hate and violence, and whose second purpose is to facilitate a less-hostile environment on a social media page. The bots can either reply to the individual directly, or post around the harmful post in an attempt to drown it out. Such practices can be utilized in lieu of content moderation, or it can be used in conjunction with it. This can also be utilized either by private social media companies or the Norwegian government itself.

Empathy-based counterspeech from the study done by PNAS was the only method among the tactics used in the study to have an effect within the conditions prescribed by the study. Despite the fact that this effect was limited in nature, we recommend more research to be done in this topic so it can possibly be effectively utilized in the future. We also recognize the potential ethical concerns of using artificial intelligence to create social media speech that can possibly be confused with real speech coming from a real person. Since this is a relatively new approach, we recommend more research be done on this topic, and hence, to leave this method on the table as an option, as all options need to be considered when dealing with a contagion such as mass shootings and mass violence.

Finally, a more typical recommendation we would give to the Norwegian government would be to possibly **hold private social media companies accountable** for what their users say on their platforms. Perhaps a law can be enacted that holds social media companies accountable, or such a law can encourage this behavior. We recognize that such a policy might be difficult to institute in Norway, due to our country's high commitment to privacy.

We also would like to encourage novel approaches to tackling this issue, such as the **utilization of AI/ deep learning** in order for companies to find and delete social media posts that may pose a danger to the public. This involves speech that incites violence, manifestos, live streams (of shootings that can be used to recruit more shooters), and other such materials. We recognize the potential privacy concerns, which is why we suggest such actions to be taken by private social media companies.

## Acknowledgment

Our approach to tackling the problem of mass shootings is more focused on the social media used to inspire such acts rather than the guns used to commit them. Because of Norway's specific culture concerning guns, we recommend that the focus of any potential action be on social media, rather than guns. Norway's gun culture is significantly more stable and responsible than that of the United States, and it is much harder to acquire a gun in Norway than it is in the states. Norway's gun laws make it explicitly harder to purchase a gun on an impulse.

Both guns and social media are ubiquitous, but it is only in social media where ideas can be spread that make use of said guns. Hence, guns are *nothing* without a person behind it to pull the trigger. We, in making these policy recommendations, want to achieve a Norway where no unfit individual can make use of a gun or any weapon of mass destruction in order to terrorize this nation.