

Shootings never stopped during the pandemic: 2020 was the deadliest gun violence year in decades



A police officer stands near the scene of an afternoon shooting in Brooklyn that left one person dead in July. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

By Reis Thebault and Danielle Rindler

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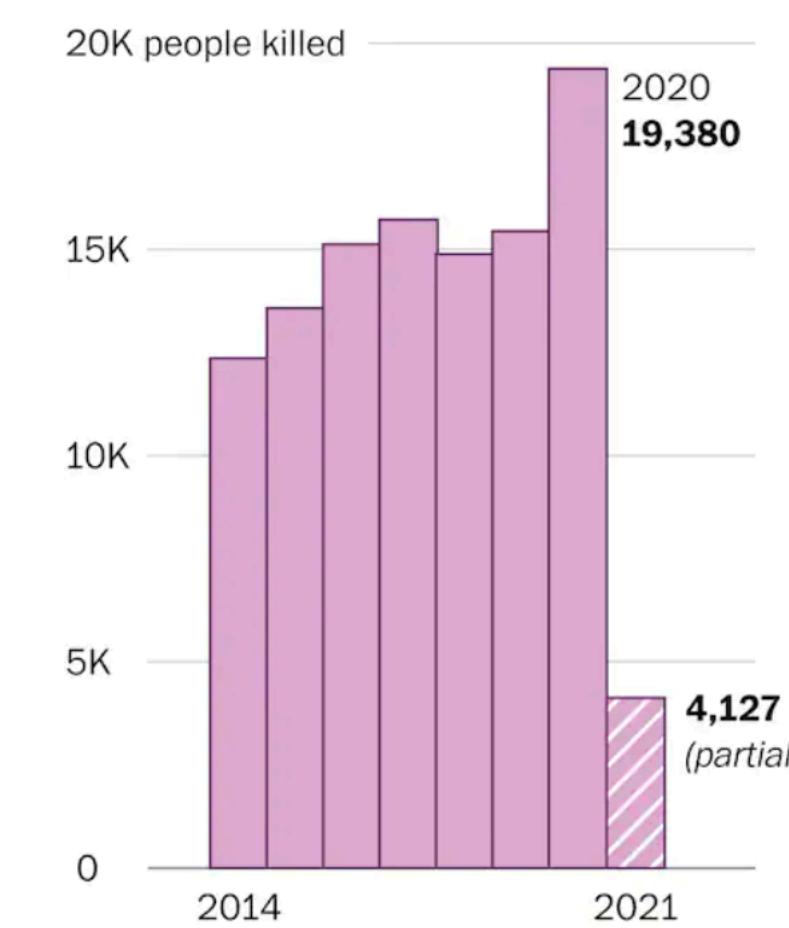
Until two lethal rampages this month, mass shootings had largely been absent from headlines during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic. But people were still dying — at a record rate.

In 2020, gun violence killed nearly 20,000 Americans, according to [data](#) from the Gun Violence Archive, more than any other year in [at least two decades](#). An additional 24,000 people died by suicide with a gun.

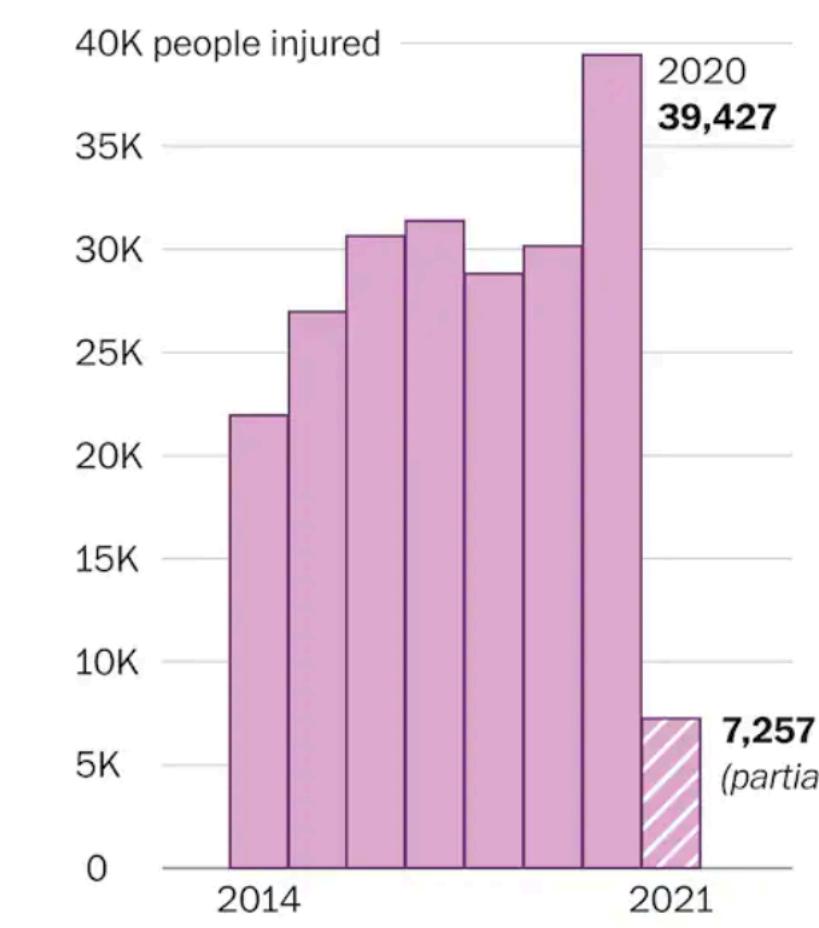
The vast majority of these tragedies happen far from the glare of the national spotlight, unfolding instead in homes or on city streets and — like the covid-19 crisis — disproportionately affecting communities of color.

2020 was a record year for gun violence

Gun deaths by year



Gun injuries by year



Note: Counts do not include the roughly 20,000-25,000 gun-related suicide deaths that occur each year.

Source: Gun Violence Archive

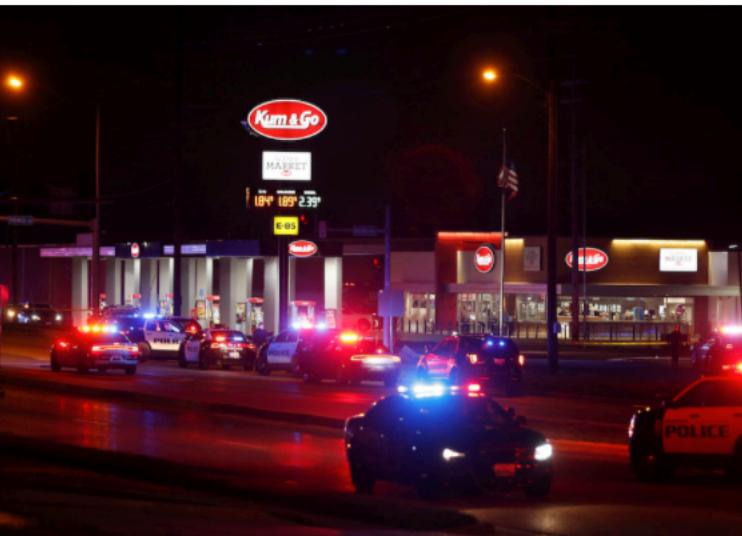
DANIELLE RINDLER/THE WASHINGTON POST

Last week's shootings at [spas in the Atlanta area](#) and Monday's shooting at [a grocery store in Boulder, Colo.](#), killed a combined 18 people and rejuvenated a national effort to overhaul gun laws. But high-profile mass shootings such as those tend to overshadow the instances of everyday violence that account for most gun deaths, potentially clouding some people's understanding of the problem and complicating the country's response, experts say.

"There are many communities across this country that are dealing with ever-present gun violence that is just part of their daily experience," said Mark Barden, a co-founder of the gun violence prevention group [Sandy Hook Promise](#). "It doesn't get the support, the spotlight, the national attention. People don't understand that it's continuous and it's on the rise."

Shooting deaths in 2020 outpaced the next-highest recent year, 2017, by more than 3,600. The rise resembles other alarming trends: Last year, the United States saw [the highest one-year increase](#) in homicides since it began keeping records, with [the country's largest cities](#) suffering a 30 percent spike. Gunshot injuries also rose dramatically, to nearly 40,000, over 8,000 more than in 2017.

"More than 100 Americans are killed daily by gun violence," Ronnie Dunn, a professor of urban studies at Cleveland State University, said, using a figure that includes suicides. "The majority are in Black and Brown communities. We don't really focus on gun violence until we have these mass shootings, but it's an ongoing, chronic problem that affects a significant portion of our society."



Police cars surround a Kum & Go gas station in Springfield, Mo., after a man killed four people before killing himself in March 2020. (Nathan Papes/Springfield News-Leader/AP)

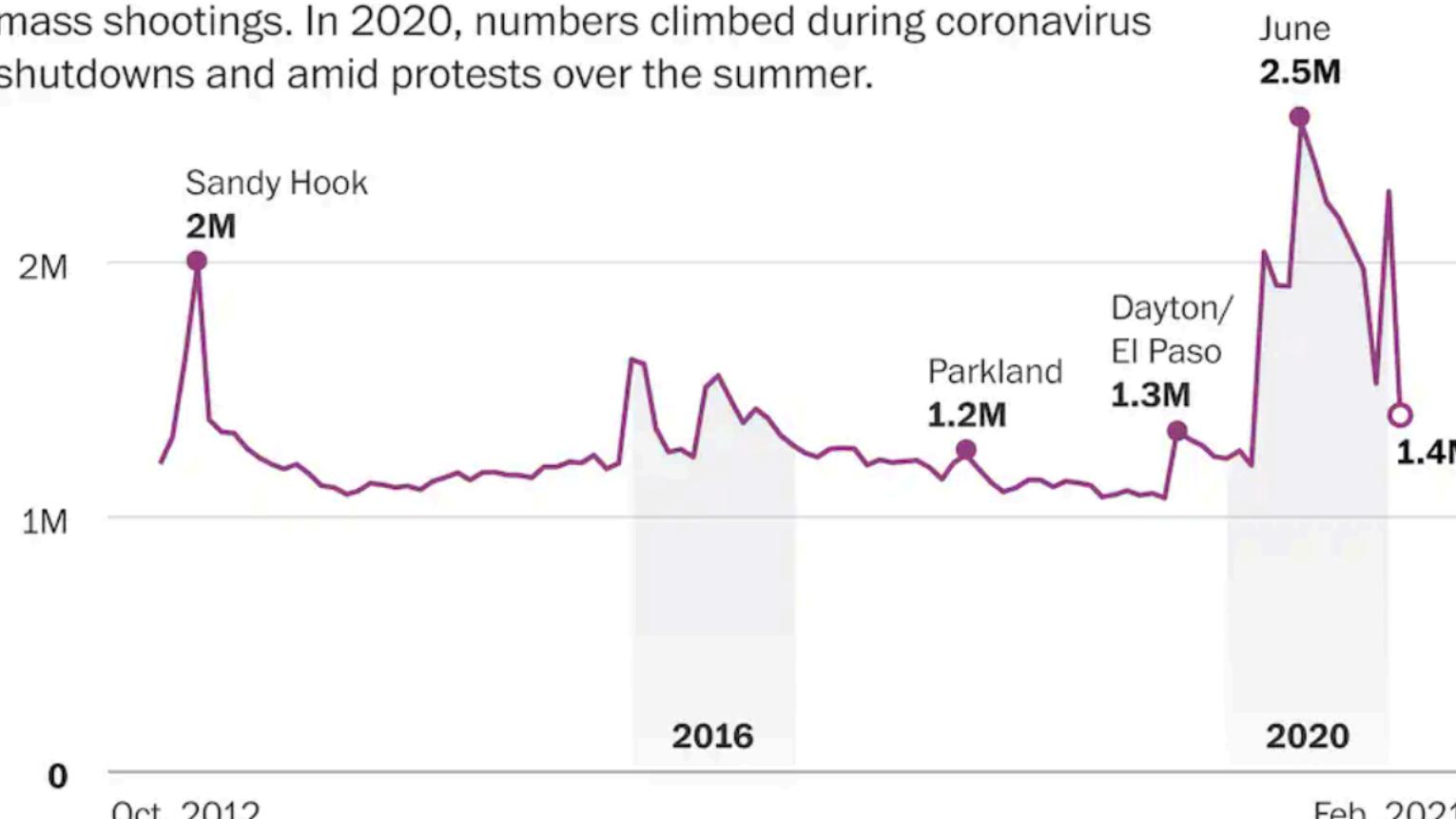
Researchers say the pandemic probably fueled the increases in several ways. The spread of the coronavirus hampered anti-crime efforts, and the attendant shutdowns compounded unemployment and stress at a time when schools and other

community programs were closed or online. They also note the apparent collapse of public confidence in law enforcement that followed [the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis](#).

Covid-19 and the protests over police brutality also led to [a surge of firearm sales](#). In 2020, people purchased about 23 million guns, a 64 percent increase over 2019 sales, according to a Washington Post analysis of federal data on gun background checks.

Estimated firearm sales surged in 2020

Before 2020, spikes coincided with elections and the months after mass shootings. In 2020, numbers climbed during coronavirus shutdowns and amid protests over the summer.



Note: Sales estimates are based on methodology surveying handgun, long gun, and multiple-gun background checks leading to purchases.

Source: Post analysis of FBI NICS data

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Dunn pointed to this flood of firearms as the most detrimental factor in the fight to curb gun violence. When shootings become “the soundscape of inner-city neighborhoods,” he said, “it increases anxiety and stress and creates toxic stress.” Dunn compared the effect to post-traumatic stress disorder akin to what war veterans experience.

One recent study, from the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, called gun violence “a public health crisis decades in the making.” An analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found Black males between the ages of 15 and 34 accounted for 37 percent of gun homicides, even though they made up 2 percent of the U.S. population — a rate 20 times that of White males of the same age.

Failing to focus on this more common form of gun violence obscures the severity of the crisis, Dunn said.

Nicole Hockley is another co-founder of Sandy Hook Promise, who, like Barden, lost her first-grade son in a mass shooting at their elementary school in Newtown, Conn. She said she still recalls, with remorse, a time when she didn’t see the far-reaching impact of gun violence. When a gunman killed 12 people at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., Hockley was ironing clothes in her living room.

“When I heard it on the news, my heart broke, I was so sad,” she said. “But then I got on with my life.”

Five months later, her son was killed at school.

“If we think about how many people are dying every single day, and we think about how would that be in our family or our community, perhaps that would motivate us to take ongoing action rather than spikes of action when something happens,” Hockley said.

“Even if it’s not happening in your community, it’s happening in the community of America.”



Shoppers are evacuated from a grocery store in Boulder, Colo., after a gunman opened fire on Monday. (Chet Strange/Getty Images)

Across the country, the swell of shootings has not spared the young.

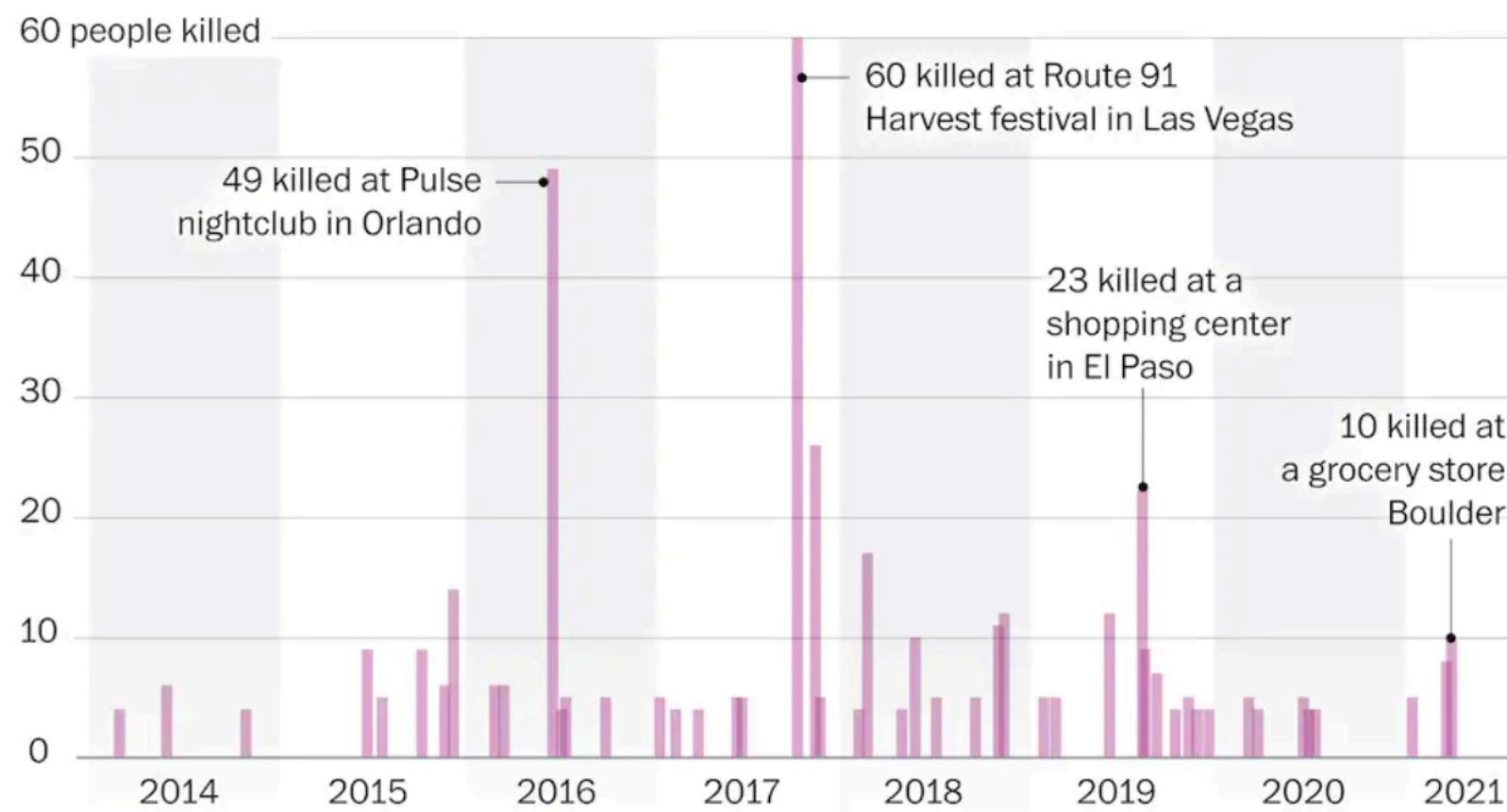
Nearly 300 children were shot and killed in 2020, according to Gun Violence Archive data, a 50 percent increase from the previous year. More than 5,100 kids and teens 17 and younger were killed or injured last year — over 1,000 more than any other year since 2014, when the website began tracking it.

The increase is especially striking because it occurred in a year when most children weren't attending class in person and were spared deadly school shootings. Experts say it highlights the severity of suicide and domestic violence.

[Sandy Hook Promise's crisis center](#) is fielding a record number of calls from young people contemplating suicide or witnessing other violence, Barden said.

"For a lot of students in our country, home is not the safest place to be," he said.

The rate of mass shootings has slowed during the pandemic, but they did not stop completely



40 people have died in 7 mass shootings since last March



Note: The Post defines a mass shooting as one that happens in a public place and in which four or more people, not including the shooter, are killed.

Source: Washington Post research, Gun Violence Archive DANIELLE RINDLER/THE WASHINGTON POST

undefined (Danielle Ridler)

Even though the rate of mass shootings slowed last year, several occurred before the killings in Atlanta and Boulder, according to The Post's [public mass shootings database](#).

Twenty-two people have been killed in five other shootings since last March: At a weekend Juneteenth celebration in Charlotte, a July 4 block party in Chicago and at a convenience store in Springfield, Mo., among others.

On average, there was one mass shooting every 73 days in 2020, compared with one every 36 days in 2019 and one every 45 days in 2017 and 2018. The slowdown interrupted what had been a five-year trend of more frequent and more deadly mass shootings.

That gun violence increased overall even as mass shootings declined underscores the fact that those high-profile events account for a relatively small share of firearm deaths. It should draw more attention to the victims and survivors of gun violence across the country, Barden said.

"They will bear the trauma and the scars of that catastrophe for the rest of their lives," he said. "The collateral damage is unquantifiable, and it's reaching almost everyone."



Graham Bloomsmith and Cynthia Shi hold each other outside Gold Spa, where three women were shot and killed on March 16. (Elijah Nouvelage for The Washington Post)