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The staggering scope of U.S. gun deaths goes far beyond mass shootings

By [Mark Berman](#), [Lenny Bernstein](#), [Dan Keating](#), [Andrew Ba Tran](#) and [Artur Galocha](#)

Illustration by Álvaro Valiño for The Washington Post

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The spate of shooting attacks in communities such as [Highland Park, Ill.](#); [Uvalde, Tex.](#); and [Buffalo](#) has riveted attention on America's staggering number of public mass killings. But the rising number of gun deaths in the United States extends beyond such high-profile episodes, emerging nearly every day inside homes, outside bars and on the streets of many cities, according to federal data.

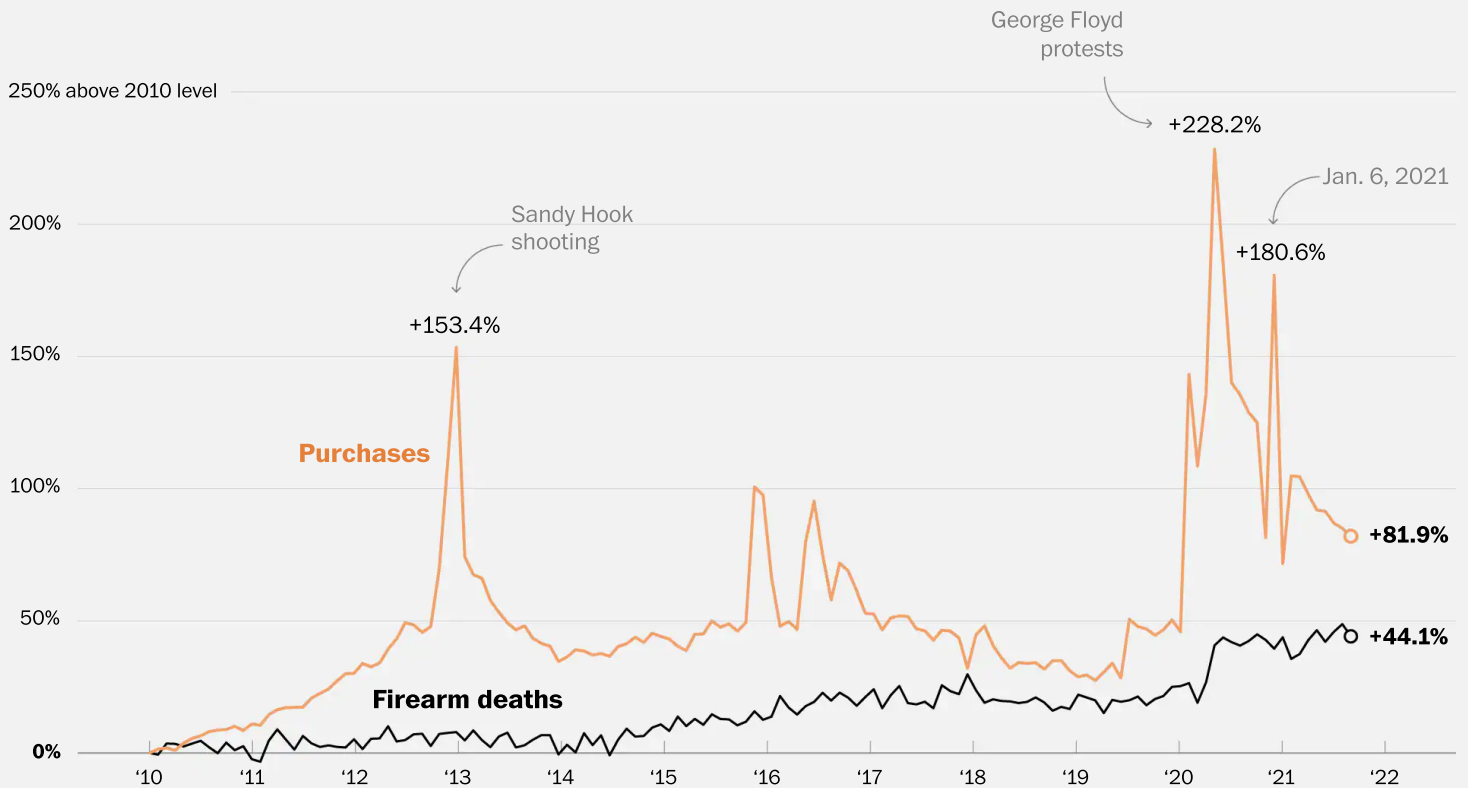
[\[There have been over 300 mass shootings so far in 2022\]](#)

The surge in gun violence comes as firearm purchases rose to record levels in 2020 and 2021, with more than 43 million guns estimated to have been purchased during that period, according to a Washington Post analysis of federal data on gun background checks. At the same time, the rate of gun deaths in those years hit the highest level since 1995, with more than 45,000 fatalities each year.

Guns are used in most suicides and are almost entirely responsible for an overall rise in homicides across the country from 2018 to 2021, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Spikes in gun sales and climbing deaths

The pandemic and notable events triggered surges in gun sales. This shows changes in both sales and deaths since 2010.



Estimated sales and gun death rates for homicide, suicide and accidental events are seasonally adjusted.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention mortality data, FBI National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS)

Over the long Fourth of July weekend, when [seven people were killed](#) and dozens wounded at a parade in Highland Park, numerous other fatal shootings played out across the country. In nearby Chicago, 10 people were killed and more than 60 wounded in a string of shootings over the weekend. One person was killed and four were wounded [in a shooting](#) outside a Sacramento nightclub. Two people were shot to death [at a home](#) in Haltom City, Tex., and a neighbor and three police officers were injured. A man was [fatally shot](#) in Clinton, N.C.; hours later, six people, including two children, were injured in a separate shooting there.

[\[With little outcry, Chicago's bloody weekend eclipsed Highland Park toll\]](#)

There is not one clear answer as to what is driving the rise in bloodshed, experts said, but possible factors include the stress of the [coronavirus pandemic](#), fraying

ties between the police and the public, mounting anger, worsening mental strain and the sheer number of guns in America.

“You put all that into a pressure cooker,” said Alex Piquero, a criminologist at the University of Miami, “and you let the pressure cooker blow up.”

[Mass violence takes toll on Americans' psyches]

Local leaders, law enforcement officials and anti-violence workers say they have seen a worrisome trend recently, in which disputes that would have previously led to fistfights instead escalated rapidly to gunfire.

“What we’re seeing is a different type of violence here in Pittsburgh,” said the Rev. Eileen Smith, executive director of the South Pittsburgh Coalition for Peace, a nonprofit that includes violence interrupters. “They’re not fighting, at least not outside of school. They’re killing.”

The ample access to guns plays a significant role, experts said. Americans are arming themselves in the face of deepening fears and divisions, frightening public incidents involving gunfire or violence, or simply because they know others may also have guns.

Data shows that gun sales increase in the wake of violence, political events and uncertainty. Large spikes occurred after the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting; amid coronavirus shutdowns, racial justice protests and the presidential election in 2020; and after the [Jan. 6, 2021, siege of the U.S. Capitol](#).

With an estimated 400 million guns in the country, a figure that eclipses the U.S. population, “there is a self-fulfilling prophecy of, ‘I need a gun because everyone else around me has a gun,’” said Sasha Cotton, director of the Minneapolis Office of Violence Prevention.

The agonizing frequency of nonfatal shootings and firearm deaths, experts said, has become a uniquely American phenomenon.

“Many other countries have disadvantaged folks who are angry and alienated,” said Richard Berk, a professor emeritus of criminology and statistics at the University of Pennsylvania. “But guns aren’t there.”

The massive toll of gun deaths

Mass killings, particularly those in which a gunman opens fire in a crowded public space, tend to draw much more attention than daily violence. But these shootings represent a fraction of gun violence overall, said Jillian Peterson, an

associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Hamline University and co-founder of the Violence Project, which studies mass killers.

[Defining a mass shooting](#) as four or more people killed, Peterson said, such cases account for fewer than 1 percent of all people killed by firearms. They are “very rare, still, even though they’re increasing,” she said. But, Peterson said, it’s not an accident that they receive so much more attention.

“Mass shootings, by design, [are] meant to go viral in that sense. That’s the goal of them, is fame, is notoriety,” she said. And these public mass shootings have a “psychological impact” on people, instilling fear of going to the movies or a grocery store, she said.

Monday’s rampage in Illinois marked the 15th time this year that four or more people were killed in a shooting, [according to](#) the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that maintains a database of incidents of gun violence.

The vast majority of gun deaths in America are either suicides or homicides, according to federal data, with accidental or undetermined gun deaths representing a small fraction of the overall share.

Two different demographic groups bear the brunt of [escalating gun violence](#) and are most likely to die of a gunshot wound in America: young Black men and older White men.

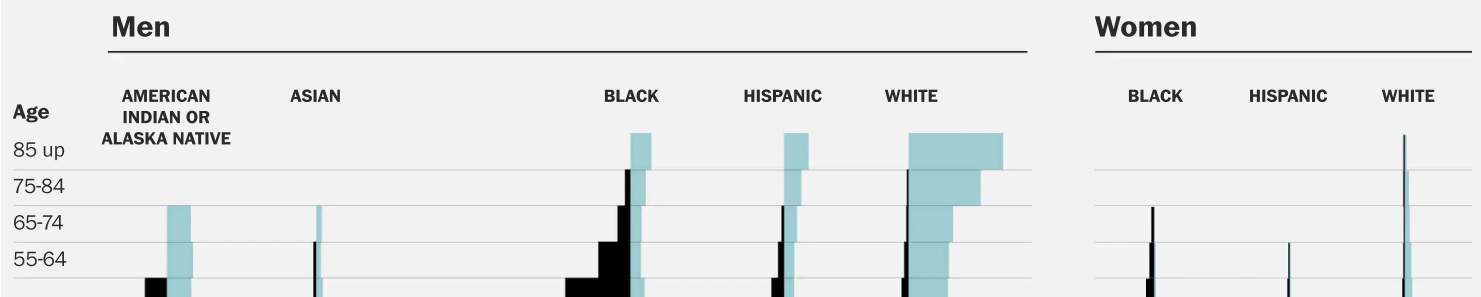
White men are six times as likely to die by suicide as other Americans. Black men are 17 times as likely to be killed with a gun fired by someone else.

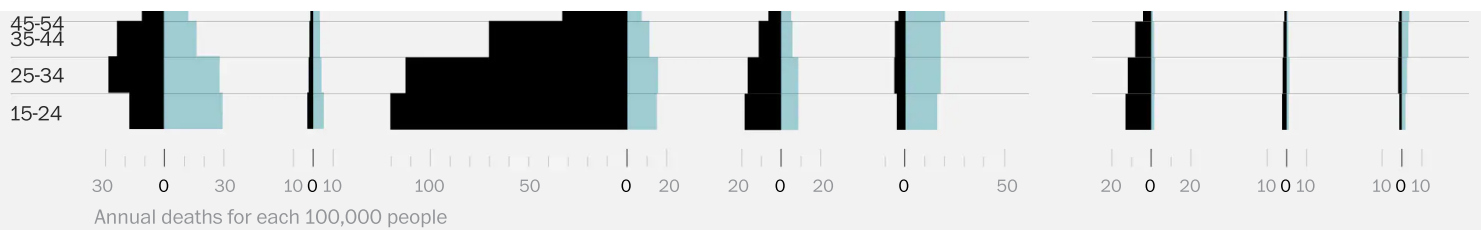
About 60 percent of the gun deaths in the United States each year are suicides, according to CDC data spanning the past 20 years.

Gun deaths are skewed by race

The highest gun death rates are homicide for young Black men and suicide for older White men. White people are far more likely to kill themselves with guns than to be shot by others, and Black people are more likely to be killed by someone else than to kill themselves. Rates for women are much lower than for men.

HOMICIDE ■ SUICIDE





2020 and January to October of 2021. Hispanics are of any race. All other groups are non-Hispanic. Rates are shown for groups with enough deaths for reliable rates to be calculated.

Source: CDC mortality data

Firearms accounted for about 8 percent of suicide attempts but slightly more than 50 percent of the 47,511 suicide deaths in 2019, [according to the American Association of Suicidology](#). Men are nearly four times as likely as women to die in a suicide attempt, mainly because they are much more likely to use a gun.

Of the 90,498 gun deaths in 2020 and 2021, 38,796 were homicides. Nearly 21,000 of those victims were Black men.

Cotton, in Minneapolis, said the higher homicide toll among Black people brought to mind the saying: When America gets a cold, Black America gets the flu.

“Of course it’s worse,” she said. [“Covid was worse for us.](#) Gun violence is worse for us. And the trickle-down effect will continue to be worse for us, until there’s equity in our systems and in our society.”

[\[‘When it’s a shooting on a city street, nothing happens’\]](#)

Data show gun deaths surged almost everywhere in America in 2020, “a very broad phenomenon” and one that “was almost as intense outside of metro areas as it was inside of metropolitan areas,” said Philip J. Cook, a Duke University professor emeritus of public policy and economics.

In 2020, while the overall crime rate nationwide fell, “that was not true for shootings,” Cook said. That year, he said, there was an “unparalleled” surge in people killed by firearms compared with 2019.

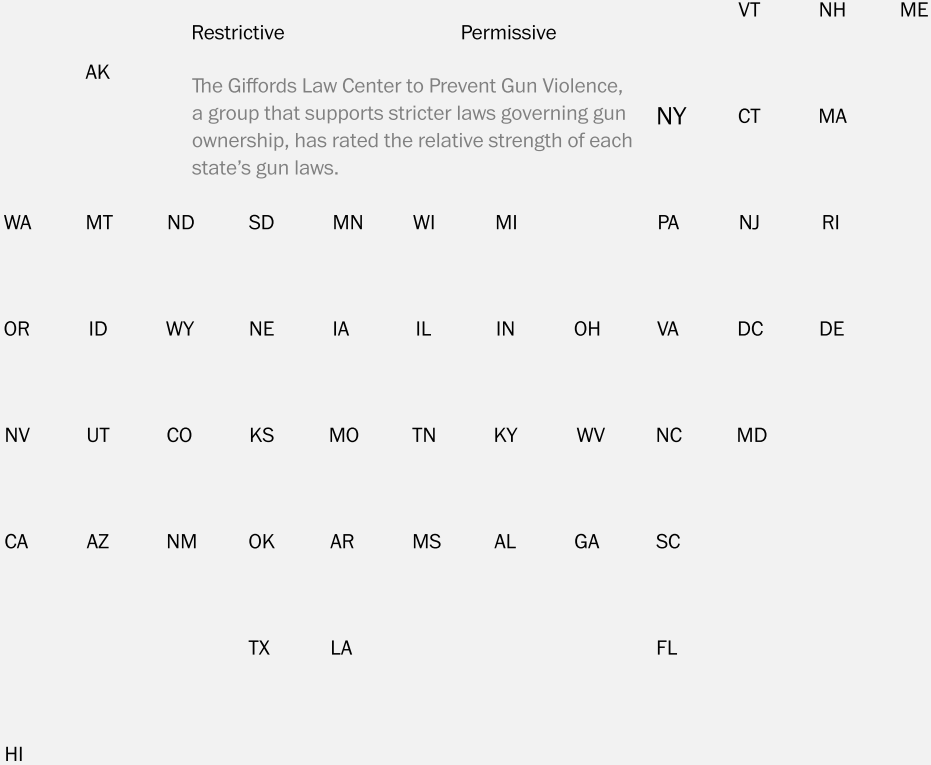
Southern and Western states allow greater access to guns than most states in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast and on the West Coast.

The states in **darker purple** with easier access to guns show greater numbers of gun purchases and, in many cases, steep increases in gun deaths from 2010 through 2020.

The **orange line** shows each state's gun purchases, with spikes in 2020, such as in Louisiana. The **black line** tracks the gun death rate at the same time.

Illinois has tighter rules than nearby states and lower purchase rates than neighboring Missouri, Kentucky and Indiana. But guns move across borders, and the homicide rate is similar to the neighbors' rates.

Comparing states with easy access to guns and greater restrictions

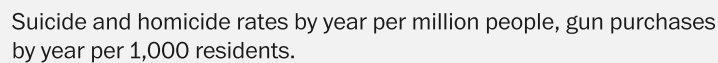


Source: Giffords Center

Some states, including New Jersey, have [tightened gun laws in recent weeks](#), in response to recent shootings and a [Supreme Court decision](#) that expanded gun-carry rights outside the home. At the federal level, Congress [last month approved](#), and President Biden signed, gun-control legislation that provides

States with tighter laws have lower death rates

— Firearm homicides per million residents — Firearm suicides per million residents
— Purchases per 1,000 residents



Source: CDC mortality data, FBI NICS

The surge is clear, but the reasons less so

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2022/gun-deaths-per-year-usa/>

to FBI National Instant Criminal Background Check System data surveying handgun, long-gun and multiple-gun background checks leading to purchases.

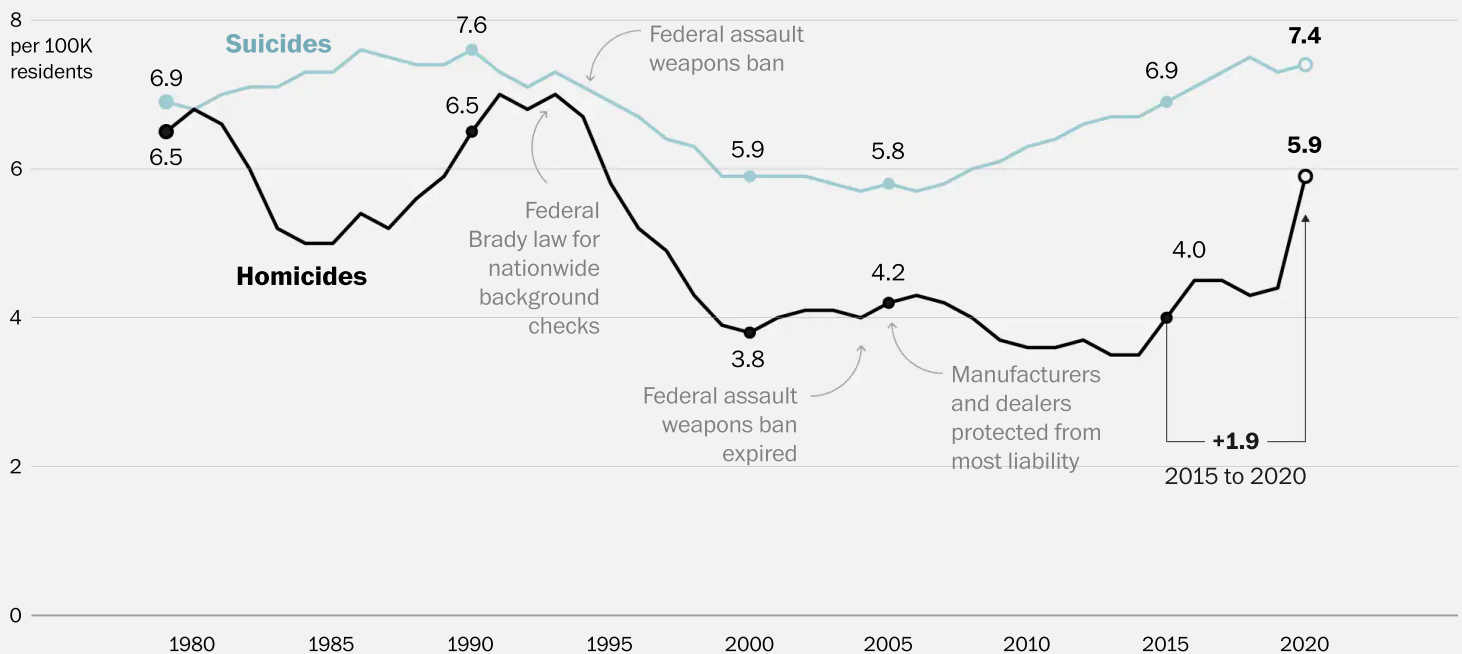
There is little consensus as to why gun sales and deaths have jumped so much over the past two years. The only clear thing, Cook said, is that “the increase in homicide was almost entirely an increase in gun homicide.” Beyond that, it is difficult to parse all the things happening at once. Even the theories that have been floated about the rise in violence have weaknesses, experts said, adding that there is a lack of good research about what is driving the increase.

Some experts theorize that the pandemic helped drive the surge in killings. But gun deaths started rising in 2015 before spiking five years later, said Andrew Morral, a behavioral scientist at the Rand Corp. and leader of its Gun Policy in America initiative.

The rise in gun sales, he said, might also play a role. “But the real question in my mind is, is that the key driver? Does that explain a lot of the jump or a little of the jump?” he said. “And I don’t know.”

Gun deaths are approaching rates of early 1990s

Deaths dropped in the mid-1990s from peak levels. Suicides began climbing again around 2005 and homicides around 2014.



Rates of gun suicide and homicide per 100,000 people.

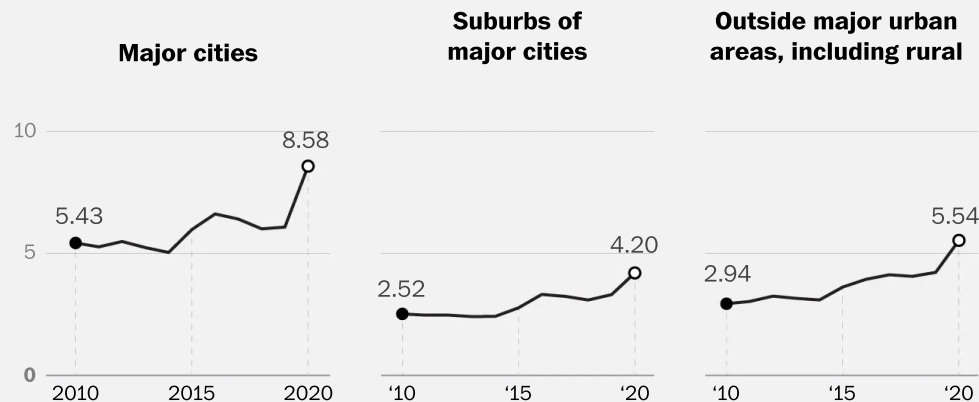
Source: CDC mortality data

Homicide rates remained low for more than two decades before 2015, “even as the number of guns in circulation was increasing,” Morral said. If the gun sales drove the spike, why did that not happen over those decades?

Morral said one theory — claiming that police pulled back in response to racial justice protests and calls to cut funding in 2020 — has problems because the surge in violence happened across the board, in urban areas and rural ones, in blue cities and red. American policing is decentralized, with some 15,000 local departments and sheriff’s offices, most of them employing [no more than two dozen officers](#).

Gun homicides rate rose in urban, suburban and rural areas

Deaths per 100,000 residents



Source: CDC mortality data

Morral said there is some evidence of police pulling back, but that “making the link from de-policing to homicides is a big jump.” To grow “beyond anecdote,” he said, more research is needed.

“There’s certainly people who will claim it’s not mysterious and point at one thing or another,” said Berk, the University of Pennsylvania professor emeritus. “But I haven’t heard a coherent narrative which integrates all the pieces. And I’m not sure we’ll ever have one.”

Cook, the Duke University professor emeritus, said increased efforts to solve shootings could help get a handle on the surge in violence, even if its precise drivers are unknown. Police nationwide in 2020 “cleared” about half of all homicides, according to the FBI, which usually means that someone was arrested and charged or the case was closed another way, including the death of the attacker.

Solving more shootings, particularly nonfatal ones, “would interrupt the cycle of retaliation,” Cook said, and might improve local trust in the police. “That would be a productive use of money,” he said.

It is also difficult to determine exactly who will commit gun violence, though research shows that politicians and others may be focusing too much attention on one factor, particularly when it comes to mass shootings.

A persistent refrain

In the wake of mass shootings, politicians are often quick to invoke mental health.

“Anybody who shoots somebody else has a mental health challenge. Period,” [Texas Gov. Greg Abbott](#) (R) said shortly after [the Uvalde shooting](#) in May.

But three decades of research has established that people with mental illness are responsible for just a [small percentage](#) of interpersonal and gun violence.

Numerous studies have reached the same conclusion: While people with illnesses such as schizophrenia have a somewhat greater risk of committing violent acts than other members of the public, and substance use increases that risk, the vast majority of people with mental illness never perpetrate violence. In fact, they are more likely to be victims of violence.

There is one major, well-established connection between mental illness and gun violence: suicide. A [Rand report](#) summarizing other studies found higher rates of suicide among people with mental health issues that included depression and schizophrenia.

It’s clear that many other factors are more closely associated with gun violence than mental illness. They include experiencing trauma and violence during childhood, being young and male, living in neighborhoods where violence is more prevalent, poor impulse control, poor anger control, and perhaps most of all, easy access to a firearm.

[\[Young men, guns and the prefrontal cortex\]](#)

“To think we’re going to lower population-level violence rates by better treatment of mental illness, we’re not going to get there doing that,” said Daniel Webster, who studies gun violence policy at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Instead, he said, officials must help create environments where there is less trauma in the home, support families and strengthen services for children in schools.

In 1994, Duke University gun violence researcher Jeffrey W. Swanson calculated that if all active psychotic and mood disorders were eliminated overnight, interpersonal violence would be reduced by just 4 percent. In many other countries, guns are tightly restricted, but the United States has taken a different route, he said.

“We don’t have gun control as much as we have people control,” he said. “We try to figure out the people who are so dangerous that we have to limit their access to guns.”

The 1998 MacArthur Violence Risk Assessment Study, which followed 951 people who had been released from three psychiatric facilities, found that 23 committed 67 acts of interpersonal gun violence — a rate of 2 percent — in the next year. Just 19 of those acts, committed by nine people, were against strangers.

[Research conducted in 2020](#) by a team led by Swanson found that among people in Florida with serious mental illnesses, including some who were committed to a psychiatric facility involuntarily or for a short-term emergency hold, 0.9 percent were arrested for a violent crime involving a gun within seven years — about the same rate as the general population.

Recent years have been brutal for Americans’ mental health, with the [CDC finding](#) that rates of anxiety and depression tripled nationwide. But there is no reason to believe that is responsible for rising gun violence over the past two years, said Jennifer Skeem, a clinical psychologist and professor of public policy and social welfare at the University of California at Berkeley.

The consistent invocations of mental health after massacres such as those in Buffalo, Uvalde and Highland Park are ways for officials to distance themselves from the horror of the event, to explain the unfathomable, Skeem said.

“It’s a tragedy that demands explanation, and the stigma of mental illness is something that fuels pseudo-explanations,” she said. “It’s a fake explanation. Why has this man done this terrible thing? The answer is because he’s mentally ill. How do you know he’s mentally ill? Because he’s done this terrible thing.”

The most common mass killings, Peterson said, are those that typically get the least public attention: household killings, in which someone kills their relatives and then themselves.

[\[Domestic slayings: Brutal and foreseeable\]](#)

In that sense, those mass killings have something in common with most other gun violence in America — people tend to know their killers, according to FBI

data.

“Commonly, the victim and the perpetrator know each other or know about each other,” Berk said. “They’re not total strangers. It makes it even more sad.”

If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) or visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

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Newest

JDW - Crazy Canuck

1 year ago

Instead of "gun deaths", start calling them "post term abortions". Maybe then things will change???



greenmountains

1 year ago

We need to start treating gun violence as the public health issue it is, by getting out the message that the gun in your home is far more apt to kill someone in your family than it is to aid in your "self defense." Self defense is a fantasy—pushed as a gun company marketing tool—not a reality. If you want to protect yourself, and your family, get the guns out of your home.



Jjfi

1 year ago

Haven't read the entire article but it's not hard to figure out that the common denominator is....wait.....guns! Get rid of them. Exceptions: military and police.



RFM123

1 year ago

Congratulations on a terrific article that refutes most of the popular explanations for the gun craziness in America: it's not a mental health problem; per capita homicides are below the levels experienced in the early '80's and '90's; and it's not random street crime (except for in black communities, but that's just racism, which we are all too willing to tolerate). Mass shootings are not a significant piece of the problem, despite the emotional distress of seeing young children slaughtered, that's only about 700 of the 45,000 gun deaths a year. Take away the 20,000 young black men who die by homicide and the roughly 20,000 suicides, what rare you left with. Not much.

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