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OPINION | UPWARD MOBILITY

## Perception Diverges From Reality on Mass School Shootings

Gun-control advocates want you to think that tragedies like Uvalde are more common than they are.



By [Jason L. Riley](#) [Follow](#)

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A visitor pays his respects to the victims killed in the recent Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, May 31.

PHOTO: ERIC GAY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Saturation media coverage of such terrifying events as the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, can leave some people with the impression that these things occur far more often than they do. Three years ago, on the 20th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo., the [New York Times](#) published an article noting that public perceptions of school safety are largely at odds with what the data show.

“The unique horror of mass shootings,” the Times [reported](#), “means they occupy a central place in parents’ fears, and in the nation’s political debate about gun access and school safety, even though they remain rare.” Most gun-related deaths—54% in 2020—are suicides. Mass shooting casualties are less than 1% of all gun deaths, and there have been [13 mass school shootings](#) since 1966. These data points are cold comfort to those mourning the shooting victims in Uvalde, but they ought to inform any public policy response under consideration.

There are an estimated 400 million guns in circulation in the U.S., which leads gun-control advocates to conclude that school shootings are an inevitable outcome of having

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so many guns around. Correlation is not causation, however, and research has failed to find a causal relationship between changes in gun-ownership rates and changes in the level of school violence involving firearms. A recent analysis of the Rand Corporation's firearms database by the University of Oklahoma's Daniel Hamlin found significant increases and decreases in school gun incidents during periods when gun-ownership rates remained relatively stable.

Gun violence that occurs away from school settings tells a similar story. Gun-ownership

rates in rural areas are higher than in urban areas, yet our cities tend to be far more violent. Whites own firearms at much higher rates than blacks or Hispanics, yet gun violence among the latter two groups is much more commonplace. Moreover, proponents of additional gun laws ignore that shootings continue to plague places such as Chicago, which already has some of the country's most severe gun restrictions. How passing more gun regulations, or taking guns away from the law-abiding, will deter criminals is a question they can't answer.

Gun-control advocates in the U.S. like to make selective comparisons with other countries, such as Japan, where both gun ownership and gun crimes are lower than in the U.S. But lower levels of gun possession don't necessarily translate into lower levels of violent crime. Gun ownership rates in Switzerland and Austria, for example, are significantly higher than in Germany, even though the Swiss and the Austrians have lower murder rates than the Germans. Likewise, Russia and Mexico have stronger gun-control laws than we do as well as higher homicide rates.

In the two decades leading up to the pandemic, legal gun sales in the U.S. rose while violent crime declined. Covid-19 no doubt helped to reverse crime trends, but the pandemic can't explain everything. Anti-police sentiment had already been growing in the wake of fatal high-profile encounters between police and black suspects. With the blessing of progressive Democrats and most media outlets, activists have tried to reduce police resources and scapegoat law-enforcement for social inequality.

Ironically, the same people who agitate for additional gun restrictions have worked to undermine the police officers tasked with enforcing any new gun laws, and they have praised the district attorneys in San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York and elsewhere who vow not to prosecute repeat offenders.

Low-income blacks are the most frequent victims of violent crime in this country. When you diminish the quality of policing in their communities, you're not helping matters. And gun restrictions that make it more difficult for law-abiding blacks to defend themselves and their families can only make a bad situation even worse.

Sensational killings—particularly those that occur during an election year in a deeply divided nation—are bound to be exploited by political partisans. But if policy makers want to do something constructive in response to what happened in Uvalde, they might first make sure they're not barking up the wrong tree. In a nation with as many firearms as this one, and where gun possession is part of our tradition and protected by the Constitution, forced confiscation or voluntary disarmament are both impractical.

Deterrence is the more realistic option. Misbehaving students can be suspended and expelled if necessary. Mental-health services can be improved. Armed security guards can be employed. No one thinks turning schools into fortresses is ideal, but turning schools into gun-free zones can make them a magnet for mass shooters. When you're worried about someone shooting back, sometimes you think twice about taking the first shot.

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