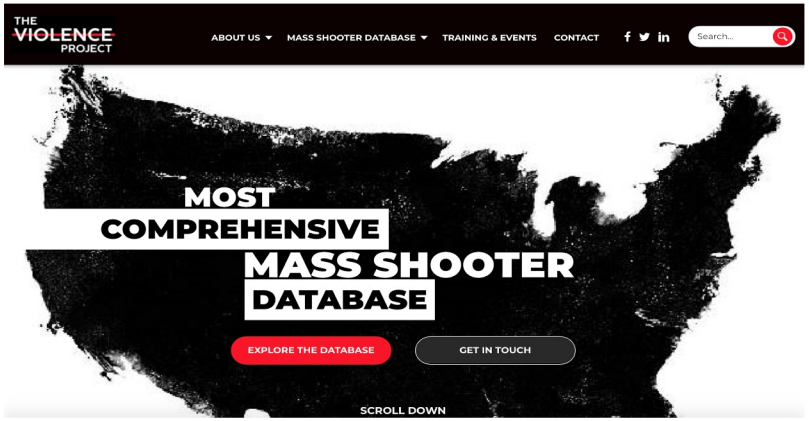
THE VIOLENCE PROJECT

A Knowledge Hub



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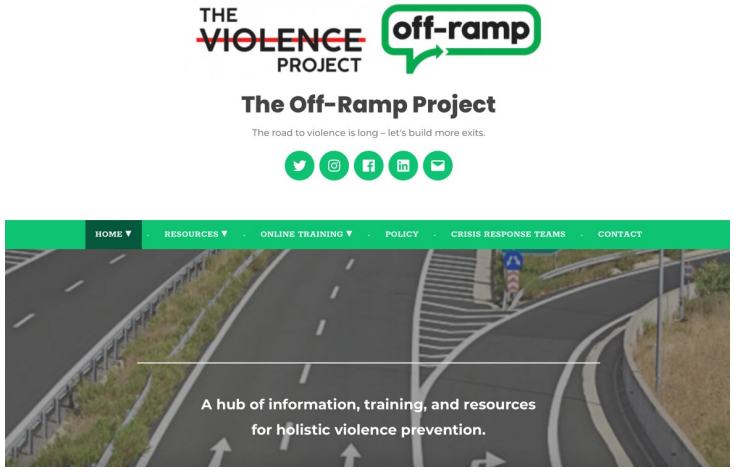

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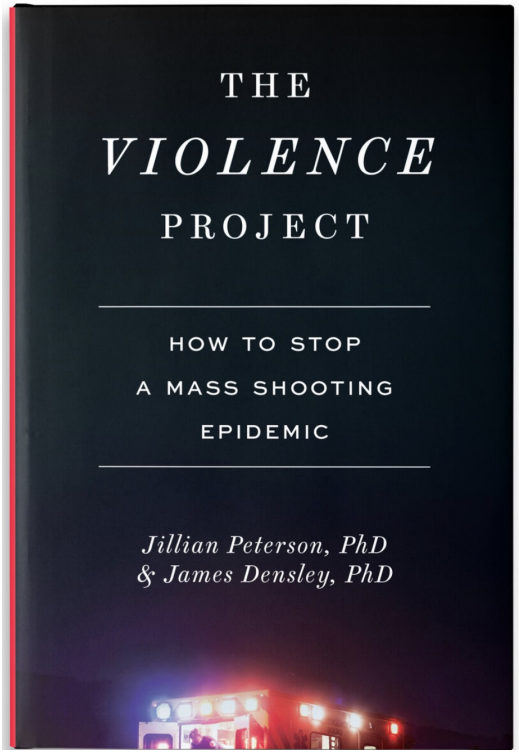

"This is a thorough, groundbreaking work." ***–Library Journal*** (starred review)

"This is a sensitive and knowledgeable treatment of one of America's most vexing social problems." ***–Publishers Weekly***

"A distressing, critical study in the understanding, processing, and prevention of mass-casualty gun violence." ***–Kirkus Reviews***

"The most in-depth study of mass shooters" ***–The New Yorker***

"For teachers, business owners, parents, and health care providers, for anyone passionate about gun control laws, or anyone yearning to know more—this text is for everyone." ***–True Crime Index***

"...identifies 34 potential solutions to the mass shooting epidemic."—***Minneapolis Star-Tribune***

"This data could help put an end to America's deadly mass shootings." ***–The Independent***

"It's a reframing of our mass shooting problem .... a reminder to open our eyes ... a courageous deep dive into a topic for public health that most researchers would rather forget." ***–Mitchell Daily Republic***

"In a groundbreaking new book, *The Violence Project*, two criminologists seek to reframe the public discourse around mass murderers and offer a prevention roadmap that could save lives." ***– The 74 Million.***

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No. 20-843

IN THE
Supreme Court of the United States

NEW YORK STATE RIFLE & PISTOL ASSOCIATION, INC.,
ROBERT NASH, BRANDON KOCH,
Petitioners,
v.
KEVIN P. BRUEN, in His Official Capac
Superintendent of New York State Poli
RICHARD J. MCNALLY, JR., in His Official
as Justice of the New York Supreme Cou
Judicial District, and Licensing Officer for
Rensselaer County,
Respondents.

On Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit

BRIEF OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS AS *AMICUS CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF RESPONDENTS

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James Densley & Jillian Peterson, *We've Analyzed 53 Years of Mass Shooting Data: Attacks Aren't Just Increasing, They're Getting Deadlier*, L.A. Times (Sept. 1, 2019), https://lat.ms/3EAKUd0 17

James Densley and Jillian Peterson, *We Can Do More to Prevent Mass Workplace Shootings Like Aurora, Illinois*, USA Today (Feb. 21, 2019), https://bit.ly/3ks0oaQ.....9

No. 20-843

IN THE
Supreme Court of the United States

NEW YORK STATE RIFLE & PISTOL ASSOCIATION, INC., et al.,
Petitioners,
v.
VIN P. BRUEN, In His Official Capacity As
rintendent Of New York State Police, et al.,
Respondents.

On Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit

BRIEF OF MEMBERS OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY AS *AMICI CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF RESPONDENTS

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SOLLAZZO PAYNE
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Will Hurd @WillHurd

Researchers who created the nonpartisan, nonprofit research center @theviolencepro have studied every mass shooting event in the United States since 1966. They've interviewed countless people connected to these events and have found the same patterns being replicated:

10:51 AM · Jun 1, 2022 · Twitter Web App

73 Retweets **15** Quote Tweets **179** Likes

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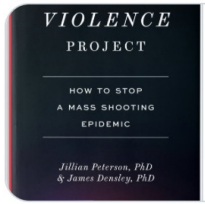
Caitlin Flanagan @CaitlinPacific · Mar 24

This is a database I've found really helpful in trying to understand this terrible phenomenon. Overwhelmingly what these men have in common is profound childhood trauma. There is so much data here, and it's eye-opening.



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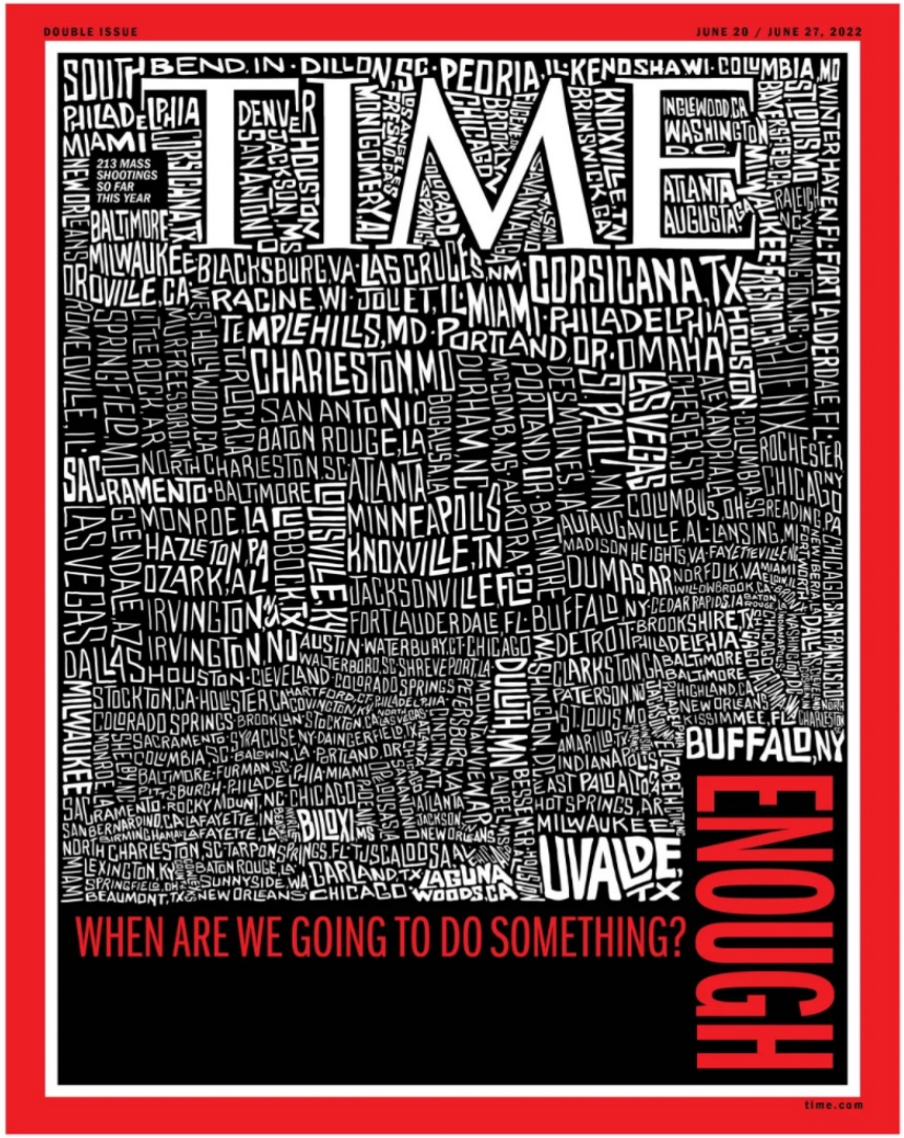

Law-enforcement officers at the scene of a deadly school shooting in Uvalde, Texas

VIEWPOINT

HOW TO STOP A MASS SHOOTING

If you see or hear something, say something

By James Densley and Jillian Peterson

AMID A RECENT SPATE OF HORRIFIC mass shootings—at a Buffalo supermarket, a Texas elementary school, and a Tulsa hospital—it feels like little has changed since the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012. In fact, things have gotten worse: mass shootings are more frequent and deadlier than ever.

It's hard not to feel numb. When comparable nations have suffered deadly mass shootings—Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand, Switzerland—they respond with new laws curtailing firearm access and they rarely experience another mass shooting. In America, we wait for decisive action that never comes, while mass shootings continue unabated.

Five years ago, we started researching the lives of mass shooters. To our genuine surprise, talking to mass shooters in prison and people who knew them, people who planned a shooting but never went through with it, victims' families, shooting survivors, and first responders gave us reason to hope. We learned there are things we can do right here, right now, as individual concerned citizens, to stop a mass shooting before it ever starts.

It begins with a shift in mindset. Mass shooters are not *them*. They are *us*—boys and men we know. Our children. Our students. Our colleagues. Our community. This fact may make mass shooters seem harder to stop. The reality is quite the opposite.

Half of all mass shooters, and nearly 80% of school mass shooters, communicate intent to do harm ahead of time. They post threats on social media or tell their family and friends in person. This is a crucial opportunity for intervention, but many people don't know what to do with that information or where and how to report it. By training ourselves to say something if we see or hear something that gives us pause, and by lobbying for behavioral intervention and threat-assessment teams in our schools and workplaces, communities can proactively respond to these warning signs.

A mass shooting is intended to be the final act of a person who has reached breaking point. No one thinks they'll get away with a mass shooting; mass shootings end one of three ways: with the shooter taking their own life, law enforcement taking it for them, or the perpetrator spending the rest of their life in prison.

A person in crisis is like a balloon ready to pop. All we must do is let a bit of the air out

This all means classical deterrence mechanisms like harsh punishment or armed security at the door do little to prevent mass shootings. A suicidal shooter may in fact be drawn to a location if they know someone on site is trained to kill them. Rather than giving desperate people incentive to die, we must give them a reason to live.

Like CPR, suicide prevention and crisis intervention are skills anyone can learn. We've trained thousands of people in verbal and nonverbal de-escalation techniques like active listening and focusing on feelings, not facts.

A crisis overwhelms a person's usual coping mechanisms. A person in crisis is like a balloon ready to pop: all we must do is let a bit of the air out. We don't have to completely deflate the balloon, or figure out then and there how and why it got so full, or make sure it can never get inflated again. The goal is not long-term mental-health treatment.

The problems in the lives of mass shooters feel so massive and overwhelming, but sometimes the smallest thing can get someone through a moment. Likewise, if people can't get their hands on the easiest tools to harm themselves or others, there will be fewer tragedies. Most school shooters get their guns from home, which means parents of school-age children can prevent death simply by locking up their firearms.

Mass shootings are not an inevitable fact of American life; they're preventable.

Densley and Peterson are the co-founders of the Violence Project and co-authors of The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic

We Profiled the 'Signs of Crisis' in 50 Years of Mass Shootings. This Is What We Found.

By Jose Bermudez and James Dorsey
Jose Bermudez is a professor of criminology at Florida University. James Dorsey is a professor of criminal justice at Miami-Dade University. Together they have the Cassandra Project.

He was accused of threatening to kill his roommate.
Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Feb. 27, 1991

He believed his family tried to poison him.
Michael S. Cahill and Ann Donnelly, Albuquerque Tribune, Calif., Jan. 31, 2003

He thought his co-workers were conspiring against him.
Jim Kenan and Jon Hamilton, Chesapeake Times, Va., Feb. 4, 2000

These are abridged details from profiles of the suspected or convicted perpetrators of more than 150 mass shootings in the United States.

They had been collecting firearms and arrive in their basement.
Fox News and Associated Press, Springfield Leader, Mo., Feb. 14, 2008

His parents said they had no warning.
Associated Press, Chicago Tribune, Ill., Jan. 17, 2008

One of his only friends had died from a heroin overdose.
Daniel Wakefield, Mike Ramirez, Los Angeles Times, Fla., Jan. 4, 2008

He suffered from severe back pain.
Fox News and Associated Press, Jan. 4, 2008

He was obsessed with school shootings.
Associated Press, Chicago Tribune, Ill., Jan. 4, 2008

He dropped out of college and lost his his parents stood. 8.
Associated Press, Jonathan Ellis, Ann Arbor News, Mich., Jan. 4, 2008

He published books detailing mass murder fantasies.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 2, 2008

The profiles are based on news reports, public documents and our conversations with the shooters' friends, colleagues, social workers and teachers.

He tortured animals.
Fox News and Jeanne Hendrix, Wichita, Kan., Mar. 28, 2007

He had intense mood swings and alcohol problems.
Mike Allen and Kevin Sullivan, Washington Post, Calif., Jan. 30, 2007

He planned to commit suicide by cop.
Eight killed and seven injured in Omaha police raid, April 21, 2003

He was known for being paranoid with a short temper.
Associated Press and Jeanne Hendrix, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 29, 2007

He believed he was disguising his body odor.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 29, 2007

He posted a series of disturbing videos on Facebook.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 29, 2007

He had been isolating himself from his prime friends.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 29, 2007

These events have become more frequent and more deadly over time. One-third of all the mass shootings in our study occurred in the last decade.

He told his neighbor that spies were following him.
Fox News, Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

He believed that bees were Satan's imposters.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

She stopped working and was evicted from her condominium.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

She threatened her neighbor with a gun.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

He had considered suicide.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

He stopped communicating with his mother and ex-wife.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

He had been convicted of domestic violence.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

He had expressed violent thoughts.
Associated Press, Jan. 28, 2007

This is no coincidence. The killings are not just random acts of violence but rather a symptom of a deeper societal problem: the continued rise of "deaths of despair."

He argued loudly with his mother and kicked holes in the walls.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 7, 2006

He was engrossed in antisemitic rhetoric online.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He believed that his ex-wife cheated on him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 7, 2006

He pleaded guilty to harassing a former classmate.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He had paranoid schizophrenia.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He told friends that people were out to get him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

His mother had died and he was distracting weapons.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He was jealous when his girlfriend began dating someone else.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

This term has been used to explain increasing mortality rates among predominantly middle-aged white men caused by suicide, drug overdose and alcohol abuse.

He been arrested for stabbing a neighbor.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Calif., Jan. 7, 2006

He became depressed and had a shorter temper.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He lost a significant amount of money gambling.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He was broke and blamed himself for getting fired from his job.
Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He was very angry about having to pay child support.
Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He told the F.B.I. that he was being mind-controlled.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He had always been angry, volatile and violent.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

He thought white police officers were carrying out a genocide.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 7, 2006

We think the concept of "deaths of despair" also helps explain the accelerating frequency of mass shootings in this country.

He left the house carrying a bag of guns.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had been depressed.
Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

Neighbors said he was often moody and drank until he passed out.
Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

He was withdrawn and quiet, with no friends.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He was depressed, suicidal and upset about a recent D.U.I.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He got drunk and boasted about plans to start a race war.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He sent his girlfriend suicide text messages.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

Nearly all the killers we profile are men.

He believed that women conspired to make him miserable.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

She was being investigated for embezzlement.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He heard imaginary voices and thought he was being followed.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He went abusive similarly to former co-workers.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He told friends that he wanted to hurt people.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He had anger issues and that his ex-girlfriend with a DB gun.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had contact with his family and refused to talk to an old boss.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He became obsessed with mass murderers and stopped eating.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

Many were socially isolated from their families or their communities and felt a sense of alienation.

He was depressed and thought people were following him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Pittsburgh Post, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He said that he thought about killing people.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He told people that he was a member of a C.I.A. death squad.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He dropped out of school and was angry about tuition.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He was getting cheered and threatened to kill his wife.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He told a priest that he feared demons were after him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He removed the batteries from all the smoke alarms in his house.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

Many of these men felt that their identities were under attack.

He was erratic and frightened his teachers and classmates.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He showed increasing hostility towards his neighbors.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He was forced to resign from his job.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He was dismissed that his wife had left him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He believed that he could hear and speak the world.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He struggled to reconcile his religion and his military duties.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He thought he was the target of a police conspiracy.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

Often, they turned to extreme ideologies to cope with their failures and to find a sense of purpose.

He threatened his wife with a gun after she left him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He had serious mental health issues and was under supervision.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He hit a co-worker and threatened to kill his supervisor.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He stopped taking his medication for paranoid schizophrenia.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He lost his job and stopped taking his antidepressants.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

His fight against the local city government consumed him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He went hate mail and had recently lost his job.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

Most chose not to ask for help when confronted with hardships, like a breakup or being fired from their jobs.

He had been in and out of mental hospitals since he was a child.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He threatened suicide and stalked several female classmates.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had bouts of depression after the death of one of his children.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He abused his romantic partners for decades.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He did not have many friends or a steady job.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

She developed psychosis and talked to imaginary people.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He threatened his neighbors with obscenities and guns.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

They chose mass shootings as a way to seize power and attention, forcing others to witness their pain while attempting to end their lives in a way that only they controlled.

He harmed himself and posted violent stories online.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He had been noticeably depressed and angry at church.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had schizophrenia and talked about killing people.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Ohio, Jan. 6, 2006

He became exhausted and depressed watching his job.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had his job and his home.
Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

He called his old workplace and left drunken messages.
Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He had anger issues and threatened violence against Black people.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

These are public spectacles of violence intended as final acts.

He was unstable, unemployed and looking for work.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He threw tantrums at work and fought with his co-workers.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He attacked his ex-girlfriend's car with an ax.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He frequently believed that he was the archangel Michael.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He thought his wife was having an affair.
Associated Press, Calif., Jan. 6, 2006

He learned that the L.B.S. would start garnishing his paychecks.
Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

He believed that the F.B.I. was monitoring him.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

Whether it's self-inflicted, or comes at the hands of police officers or after life in prison, a mass shooting is a form of suicide.

He was paranoid and thought co-workers were sabotaging his work.
Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

He began taking his father's prescription medications.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Wichita, Kan., Jan. 6, 2006

He killed his daughter's pet because he was upset.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He was fired for missing work shifts.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He turned in school assignments with violent imagery.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He created a website that threatened a classmate.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

His wife was leaving him and he attempted suicide three times.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

This is something that separates mass shootings from other crimes and is why traditional preventive measures like increased armed security or harsh criminal sentences will do little to stop them.

He tried to buy a stolen gun at school.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He was often in trouble at school for behavioral problems.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He was upset he had been passed over for a promotion.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He felt that he had been unfairly fired.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He was angry about being forced out of his business.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He believed that he had been fired because of racism.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

He blamed city officials for his wife's death from cancer.
Associated Press and Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2006

Mass shooters are not the victims. But in order to prevent future tragedies we must treat the underlying pathologies that feed the shooters' despair.

He lost his job and his water heater broke.
Five killed and one injured in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Feb. 9, 1996

He had schizophrenia and stopped taking his medication.
Five killed and three injured in Bronx, N.Y., on Dec. 19, 1995

He was upset about a performance evaluation at work.
Four killed in Los Angeles on July 19, 1995

He was discharged from the Air Force.
Four killed and 23 injured in Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., on June 20, 1994

He stopped eating and sleeping and began committing robberies.
Four killed and one injured in Aurora, Colo., on Dec. 14, 1993

He was obsessed with racism and believed it caused all his failures.
Six killed and 19 injured in Garden City Park, N.Y., on Dec. 7, 1993

He struggled to get a job for years and became isolated.
Four killed and five injured in Oxnard, Calif., on Dec. 2, 1993

Mass shootings must no longer be written off as "inexplicable" episodes of "unthinkable" violence.

He became depressed after learning he needed knee surgery.
Four killed and two injured in El Cajon, Calif., on Oct. 14, 1993

At a party, he told children to shoot and kill Black people.
Four killed and seven injured in Fayetteville, N.C., on Aug. 6, 1993

He was bankrupt and had liens on his property.
Eight killed and six injured in San Francisco on July 1, 1993

He was evicted and his wife and daughter left him.
Six killed and one injured in Paso Robles, Calif., on Nov. 8, 1992

His wages were being garnished for child support.
Four killed in Watkins Glen, N.Y., on Oct. 15, 1992

He began hearing voices and talked about committing violence.
Four killed and 10 injured in Olivehurst, Calif., on May 1, 1992

He was upset about a recent breakup.
Four killed in Phoenix on March 15, 1992

Our communities and governments need to find ways to reduce social isolation more broadly and improve access to mental health care and substance abuse treatment.

He was fired from his job at the post office.
Four killed and six injured in Royal Oak, Mich., on Nov. 14, 1991

He was discharged from a psychiatric program for hitting a nurse.
Four killed in Harrodsburg, Ky., on Nov. 9, 1991

He felt cheated because another student had won a school prize.
Five killed and one injured in Iowa City on Nov. 1, 1991

He sent a letter denouncing the women in his town as vipers.
23 killed and 22 injured in Killeen, Tex., on Oct. 16, 1991

His wife got a restraining order and his car was repossessed.
11 killed and six injured in Jacksonville, Fla., on June 18, 1990

He lost his job and became isolated and angry.
Nine killed and 12 injured in Louisville, Ky., on Sept. 14, 1989

He abused drugs and alcohol and had been arrested frequently.
Five killed and 30 injured in Stockton, Calif., on Jan. 17, 1989

Increased investment in suicide prevention, crisis intervention and reporting systems for violent threats will help prevent desperate people from becoming mass shooters.

He had PTSD from fighting in Vietnam.
Four killed and two injured in Chicago on Sept. 22, 1988

He was distraught after his wife left him while she was pregnant.
Four killed and five injured in Winston-Salem, N.C., on July 17, 1988

He stalked a co-worker for years and was fired from his job.
Seven killed and four injured in Sunnyvale, Calif., on Feb. 16, 1988

He threatened neighborhood children with his gun.
Six killed and 14 injured in Palm Bay, Fla., on April 23, 1987

He felt like he was being mistreated at work.
14 killed and six injured in Edmond, Okla., on Aug. 20, 1986

He had been under pressure at work and was worried about layoffs.
Four killed and two injured in South Connellsville, Pa., on March 16, 1985

He was banned from a bar.
Five killed and one injured in Hot Springs National Park, Ark., on July 24, 1984

These steps must be taken not in place of but in addition to passing widely supported gun safety laws like background checks, longer waiting periods, safer gun storage requirements and red flag laws.

He was fired and had sought help at a mental health clinic.
21 killed and 19 injured in San Ysidro, Calif., on July 18, 1984

He was upset that his wife had left him.
Six killed in College Station, Tex., on Oct. 11, 1983

He ranted in his classroom and was suspended from teaching.
Eight killed and three injured in Miami on Aug. 20, 1982

He was in a pay dispute with his employers.
Six killed and four injured in Grand Prairie, Tex., on Aug. 9, 1982

He became reclusive and avoided all social interactions.
Four killed and one injured in Conoqoqlo, Pa., on July 21, 1980

He began hoarding food and planning for the end of the world.
Five killed and 11 injured in Daingerfield, Tex., on June 22, 1980

He thought his family and co-workers were trying to poison him.
Four killed in Warwick, R.I., on June 17, 1978

Instead, we have allowed mass shootings to become normalized in American culture, and ask our children to participate in active shooter drills and pass through metal detectors on their way to class.

He was discharged from the Marines and was on probation.
Six killed in Hackettstown, N.J., on Aug. 26, 1977

His wife left him and he had attempted suicide.
Six killed and two injured in Klamath Falls, Ore., on July 23, 1977

He was delusional and had angry outbursts.
Seven killed and two injured in Fullerton, Calif., on July 12, 1976

He quit his job suddenly and planned to commit suicide.
Five killed and one injured in Smith River, Calif., on March 2, 1975

He denounced Christianity and began to drift from place to place.
Seven killed and eight injured in New Orleans on Jan. 7, 1973

He said he would rather die than go back to jail.
Four killed and five injured in Raleigh, N.C., on May 29, 1972

He believed that "the man" was after him.
Four killed and 17 injured in Harrisburg, Pa., on April 5, 1969

We say "never again" and yet less than 48 hours elapsed between the shootings in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay, Calif. "Again" keeps happening because mass shooters are not monsters who appear out of thin air.

He only ate canned food because he feared poisoning.
Six killed and six injured in Lock Haven, Pa., on Oct. 23, 1967

He became obsessed with famous murderers.
Five killed and two injured in Mesa, Ariz., on Nov. 12, 1966

He suffered mood swings and periods of overwhelming hostility.
15 killed and 31 injured in Austin on Aug. 1, 1966

Mass shooters live among us. They are us. They are for the most part the men and boys we know. And they can be stopped before they pull the trigger.

Source: Profiles of mass shooters and death and injury counts are based on data collected by the Violence Project.

Note: These profiles are limited to perpetrators of mass public shootings, which the Congressional Research Service defines as a shooting in or around a public location in which at least four victims were killed with a firearm. The definition excludes shootings related to criminal activity or commonplace circumstances like arguments or romantic triangles. A death is counted if the victim was killed by the perpetrator in an incident that lasted less than 24 hours and died within one year as a result of their injuries.

Design and development by Quoctrung Bui, Gus Wezerek, Ana Becker and Jessia Ma.

Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology at Hamline University. James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metro State University. Together they run the Violence Project and are the authors of "The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic."

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POLITICO

MAGAZINE

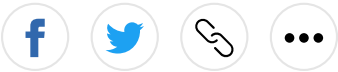
Q&A

Two Professors Found What Creates a Mass Shooter. Will Politicians Pay Attention?

Mass shooters overwhelmingly fit a certain profile, say Jillian Peterson and James Densley, which means it's possible to ID and treat them before they commit violence.

Crosses with the names of Tuesday's shooting victims are placed outside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. | Jae C. Hong/AP Photo

By MELANIE WARNER
05/27/2022 02:54 PM EDT



Melanie Warner is a writer in Honolulu and author, most recently, of ***The Magic Feather Effect: The Science of Alternative Medicine and the Surprising Power of Belief****.*

Each time a high-profile mass shooting happens in America, a grieving and incredulous nation scrambles for answers. Who was this criminal and how could he (usually) have committed such a horrendous and inhumane act? A few details emerge about the individual's troubled life and then everyone moves on.

Three years ago, Jillian Peterson, an associate professor of criminology at Hamline University, and James Densley, a professor of criminal justice at Metro State University, decided to take a different approach. In their view, the failure to gain a more meaningful and evidence-based understanding of why mass shooters do what they do seemed a lost opportunity to stop the next one from happening. Funded by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the Department of Justice, their research constructed a database of every mass shooter since 1966 who shot and killed four or more people in a public place, and every shooting incident at schools, workplaces and places of worship since 1999.

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Peterson and Densley also compiled detailed life histories on 180 shooters, speaking to their spouses, parents, siblings, childhood friends, work colleagues and teachers. As for the gunmen themselves, most don't survive their carnage, but five who did talked to Peterson and Densely from prison, where they were serving life sentences. The researchers also found several people who planned a mass shooting but changed their mind.

Their findings, also published in the 2021 book, *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*, reveal striking commonalities among the perpetrators of mass shootings and suggest a data-backed, mental health-based approach could identify and address the next mass shooter before he pulls the trigger — if only politicians are willing to actually engage in finding and funding targeted solutions. POLITICO talked to Peterson and Densely from their offices in St. Paul, Minn., about how our national understanding about mass shooters has to evolve, why using terms like "monster" is counterproductive, and why political talking points about mental health need to be followed up with concrete action.

POLITICO: Since you both spend much of your time studying mass shootings, I wonder if you had the same stunned and horrified reaction as the rest of us to the Uvalde elementary school shooting. Or were you somehow expecting this?

Jillian Peterson: On some level, we were waiting because mass shootings are socially contagious and when one really big one happens and gets a lot of media attention, we tend to see others follow. But this one was particularly gutting. I have three elementary school kids, one of which is in 4th grade.

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James Densley: I'm also a parent of two boys, a 5-year-old and a 12-year-old.

My 12-year-old knows what I do for a living and he's looking to me for reassurance and I didn't have the words for him. How do I say, "This happened at a school, but now it's OK for you to go to your school and live your life." It's heartbreaking.

POLITICO: Are you saying there's a link between the Buffalo and Uvalde shootings?

Peterson: We don't know for sure at this point, but our research would say that it's likely. You had an 18-year-old commit a horrific mass shooting. His name is everywhere and we all spend days talking about "replacement theory." That shooter was able to get our attention. So, if you have another 18-year-old who is on the edge and watching everything, that could be enough to embolden him to follow. We have seen this happen before.

Densley: Mass shooters study other mass shooters. They often find a way of relating to them, like, "There are other people out there who feel like me."

POLITICO: Can you take us through the profile of mass shooters that emerged from your research?

Peterson: There's this really consistent pathway. Early childhood trauma seems to be the foundation, whether violence in the home, sexual assault, parental suicides, extreme bullying. Then you see the build toward hopelessness, despair, isolation, self-loathing, oftentimes rejection from peers. That turns into a really identifiable crisis point where they're acting differently. Sometimes they have previous suicide attempts.

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What's different from traditional suicide is that the self-hate turns against a group. They start asking themselves, "Whose fault is this?" Is it a racial group or women or a religious group, or is it my classmates? The hate turns outward. There's also this quest for fame and notoriety.

POLITICO: You've written about how mass shootings are always acts of violent suicide. Do people realize this is what's happening in mass shootings?

Peterson: I don't think most people realize that these are suicides, in addition to homicides. Mass shooters design these to be their final acts. When you realize this, it completely flips the idea that someone with a gun on the scene is

going to deter this. If anything, that's an incentive for these individuals. They are going in to be killed.

It's hard to focus on the suicide because these are horrific homicides. But it's a critical piece because we know so much from the suicide prevention world that can translate here.

POLITICO: I've heard many references over the last few weeks to "monsters" and "pure evil." You've said this kind of language actually makes things worse. Why?

Densley: If we explain this problem as pure evil or other labels like terrorist attack or hate crime, we feel better because it makes it seem like we've found the motive and solved the puzzle. But we haven't solved anything. We've just explained the problem away. What this really problematic terminology does is prevent us from recognizing that mass shooters are us. This is hard for people to relate to because these individuals have done horrific, monstrous things. But three days earlier, that school shooter was somebody's son, grandson, neighbor, colleague or classmate. We have to recognize them as the troubled human being earlier if we want to intervene before they become the monster.

Peterson: The Buffalo shooter told his teacher that he was going to commit a murder-suicide after he graduated. People aren't used to thinking that this kind of thing could be real because the people who do mass shootings are evil, psychopathic monsters and this is a kid in my class. There's a disconnect.

AD

POLITICO: Do you get criticism about being too sympathetic toward mass shooters?

Peterson: We're not trying to create excuses or say they shouldn't be held responsible. This is really about, what is the pathway to violence for these people, where does this come from? Only then can we start building data-driven solutions that work. If we're unwilling to understand the pathway, we're never going to solve this.

POLITICO: So, what are the solutions?

Densley: There are things we can do right now as individuals, like safe storage of firearms or something as simple as checking in with your kid.

Peterson: Then we really need resources at institutions like schools. We need to build teams to investigate when kids are in crisis and then link those kids to mental health services. The problem is that in a lot of places, those services are not there. There's no community mental health and no school-based mental health. Schools are the ideal setting because it doesn't require a parent to take you there. A lot of perpetrators are from families where the parents are not particularly proactive about mental health appointments.

POLITICO: In your book, you say that in an ideal world, 500,000 psychologists would be employed in schools around the country. If you assume a modest salary of $70,000 a year, that amounts to over $35 billion in funding. Are you seeing any national or state-level political momentum for even a sliver of these kind of mental health resources?

Densley: Every time these tragedies happen, you always ask yourself, "Is this the one that's going to finally move the needle?" The Republican narrative is that we're not going to touch guns because this is all about mental health. Well then, we need to ask the follow-up question of what's the plan to fix that mental health problem. Nobody's saying, "Let's fund this, let's do it, we'll get the votes." That's the political piece that's missing here.

POLITICO: Are Democrats talking about mental health?

Densley: Too often in politics it becomes an either-or proposition. Gun control or mental health. Our research says that none of these solutions is perfect on its own. We have to do multiple things at one time and put them together as a comprehensive package. People have to be comfortable with complexity and that's not always easy.

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Peterson: Post-Columbine there's been this real focus on hardening schools — metal detectors, armed officers, teaching our kids to run and hide. The shift I'm starting to see, at least here in Minnesota, is that people are realizing hardening doesn't work. Over 90 percent of the time, school shooters target their own school. These are insiders, not outsiders. We just had a bill in Minnesota that recognized public safety as training people in suicide prevention and funding counselors. I hope we keep moving in that direction.

Densley: In Uvalde, there was an army of good guys with guns in the parking lot. The hard approach doesn't seem to be getting the job done.

POLITICO: Do you support red flag laws?

Peterson: Our research certainly supports them, because so many perpetrators are actively showing warning signs. They are talking about doing this and telling people they're suicidal. But what Buffalo showed us is that just because you have a red flag law on the books doesn't mean people are trained in how it works and how they should be implementing it.

POLITICO: What has to change to make the laws more effective?

Densley: There are two pieces. One is training and awareness. People need to know that the law exists, how it works and who has a duty to report an individual. The second piece is the practical component of law enforcement. What is the mechanism to safely remove those firearms? Especially if you have a small law enforcement presence, maybe one or two officers, and you're asking them to go into somebody's rural home and take care of their entire arsenal of weapons.

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POLITICO: What should have happened in Buffalo, given that the state of New York has a red flag law?

Peterson: From what we know, it sounds like there should have been more education with the police, the mental health facility and the school. If any one of those three had initiated the red flag process, it should have prevented the shooter from making the purchase.

It really shows the limitations of our current systems. Law enforcement investigated, but the shooter had no guns at that moment, so it was not an immediate threat. The mental health facility concluded it was not an immediate crisis, so he goes back to school. If it's not a red-hot situation in that moment, nobody can do anything. It was none of these people's jobs to make sure that he got connected with somebody in the community who could help him long term.

Densley: Also, something happens to put people on the radar. Even if they're not the next shooter, something's not right. How can we help these individuals reintegrate in a way that's going to try and turn their lives around? That gets lost if we fixate just on the word "threat."

POLITICO: I was struck by a detail in your book about one of the perpetrators you investigated. Minutes before he opened fire, you report that he called a behavior health facility. Is there always some form of reaching out or communication of intent before it happens?

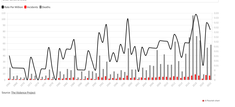
Peterson: You don't see it as often with older shooters who often go into their workplaces. But for young shooters, it's almost every case. We have to view this "leakage" as a cry for help. If you're saying, "I want to shoot the school tomorrow," you are also saying, "I don't care if I live or die." You're also saying, "I'm completely hopeless," and you're putting it out there for people to see because part of you wants to be stopped.

We have to listen because pushing people out intensifies their grievance and

Key Findings

Mass public shootings today are more frequent and deadlier.

Mass Public Shootings in the United States, 1966–2022
N=185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solutions
overview

individuals	
Trauma	Build relationships and mentor young people
Crisis	Develop strong skills in crisis intervention and suicide prevention
Social Proof	Monitor our own media consumption
Opportunity	Safe storage of firearms; if you see or hear something, say something
institutions	
Trauma	Create warm environments; trauma-informed practices; universal trauma screening
Crisis	Build care teams and referral processes, train staff
Social Proof	Teach media literacy; limit active shooter drills for children
Opportunity	Situational crime prevention; anonymous reporting systems
society	
Trauma	Teach social emotional learning in schools. Build a stronger social safety net with adequate jobs, childcare, maternity leave, health insurance, and access to higher education
Crisis	Reduce stigma and increase knowledge of mental health; open access to high quality mental health treatment; fund counselors in schools
Social Proof	No Notoriety protocol, hold media and social media companies accountable for their content
Opportunity	Universal background checks, red flag laws, permit-to-purchase, magazine limits, wait periods, assault rifle ban

crisis intervention
4-step model

1 MANAGE YOURSELF

- Emotional contagion
- Don't panic
- Don't take it personally
- Recognizing your limits

2 MANAGE THE ENVIRONMENT

- Get rid of any audience
- Reduce distractions
- De-escalate the space
- Create time and space

3 NON-VERBAL DE-ESCALATION

- Body Position
- Eye Contact
- Tone of Voice
- Mirroring

4 VERBAL DE-ESCALATION

- Open-ended, simple questions
- Active listening - empathy
- Focus on feelings
- Give 2 simple options

S.A.V.E.

• SLOW	Slow down, calm yourself, don't take it personally
• AWARE	Be aware of who you are, where you are, avoid distractions and audience
• VOICE	Verbal de escalation, empathy, focus on feelings, how you speak
• ENGAGE	Active listening, body language, be flexible

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