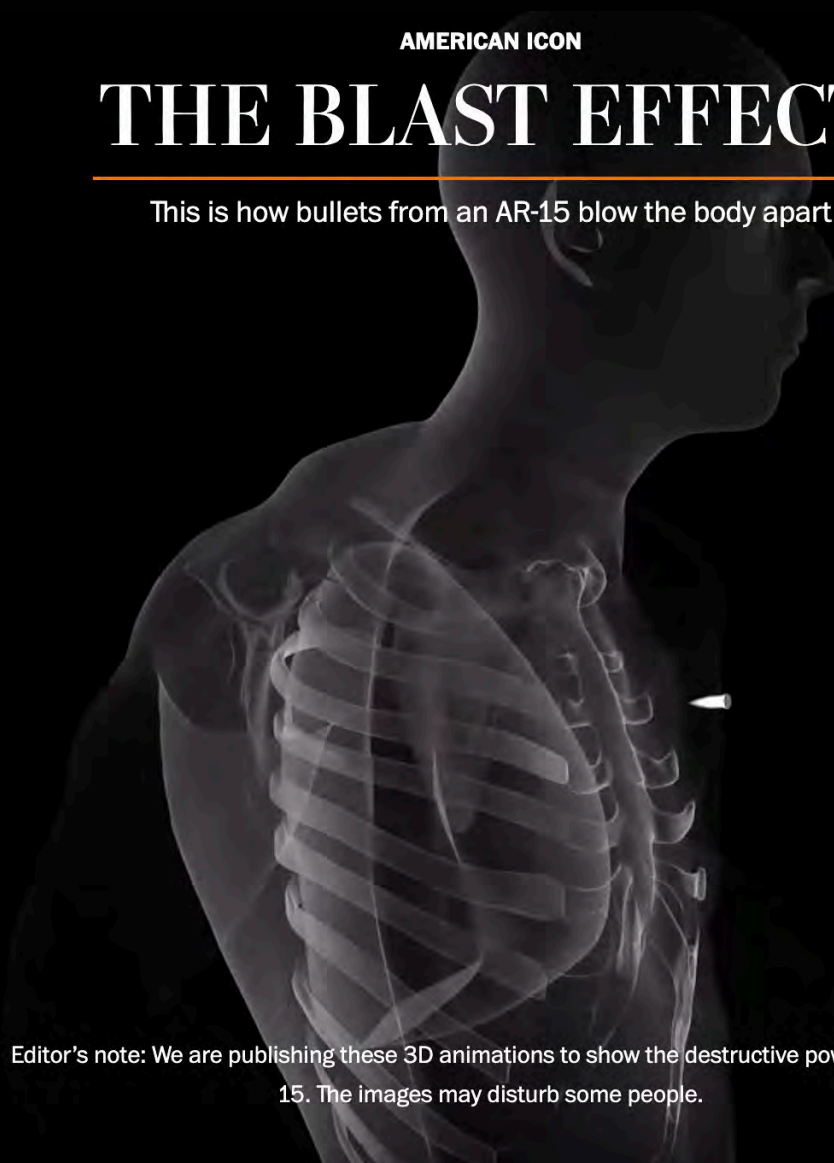


AMERICAN ICON

# THE BLAST EFFECT

This is how bullets from an AR-15 blow the body apart



Editor's note: We are publishing these 3D animations to show the destructive power of the AR-15. The images may disturb some people.

**By N. Kirkpatrick, Atthar Mirza and Manuel Canales**

<https://wapo.st/ar15-damage>

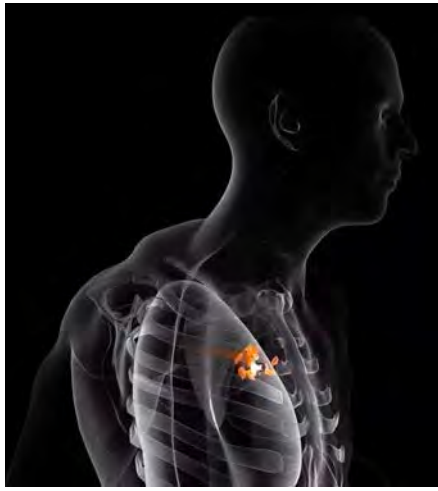
*Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online*

The wounds show the lethal force of the AR-15.

But they are rarely seen.

The gun is the weapon of choice for many mass killers.

It works with brutal efficiency.



The scenes of chaos and terror are all too familiar in America.

The AR-15 fires bullets at such a high velocity — often in a barrage of 30 or even 100 in rapid succession — that it can eviscerate multiple people in seconds. A single bullet lands with a shock wave intense enough to blow apart a skull and demolish vital organs. The impact is even more acute on the compact body of a small child.

“It literally can pulverize bones, it can shatter your liver and it can provide this blast effect,” said Joseph Sakran, a gunshot survivor who advocates for gun violence prevention and a trauma surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

During surgery on people shot with high-velocity rounds, he said, body tissue “literally just crumbled into your hands.”

The carnage is rarely visible to the public. Crime scene photos are considered too gruesome to publish and often kept confidential. News accounts rely on antiseptic descriptions from law enforcement officials and medical examiners who, in some cases, have said remains were so unrecognizable that they could be identified only through DNA samples.

As Sakran put it: “We often sanitize what is happening.”

The Washington Post sought to illustrate the force of the AR-15 and reveal its catastrophic effects.

The first part of this report is a 3D animation that shows the trajectory of two different hypothetical gunshots to the chest — one from an AR-15 and another from a typical handgun — to explain the greater severity of the damage caused by the AR-15.

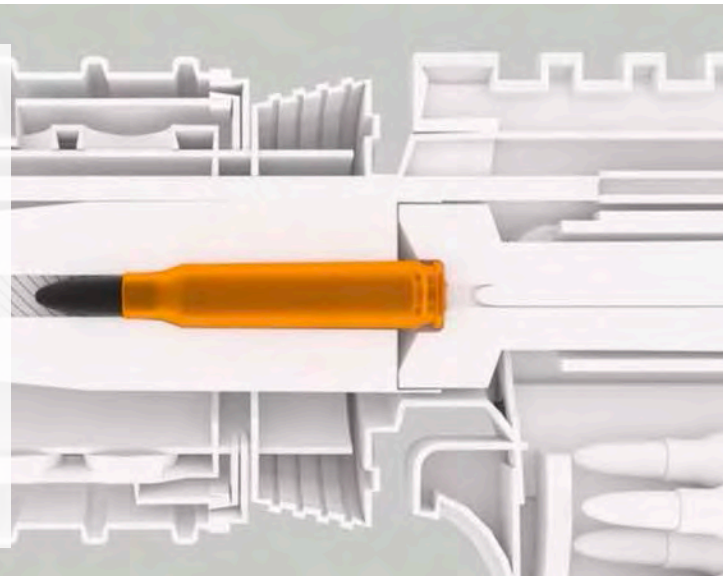
The second part depicts the entrance and exit wounds of two actual victims — Noah Pozner, 6, and Peter Wang, 15 — killed in school shootings when they were struck by multiple bullets.

This account is based on a review of nearly 100 autopsy reports from several AR-15 shootings as well as court testimony and interviews with trauma surgeons, ballistics experts and a medical examiner.

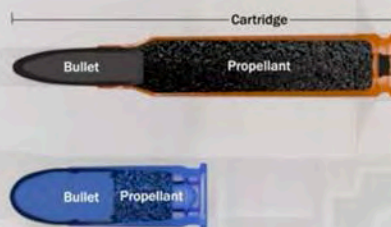
The records and interviews show in stark detail the unique mechanics that propel these bullets — and why they unleash such devastation in the body.

This is a **.223-caliber-sized round** inside an AR-15. What makes the weapon so deadly is the speed of that bullet.

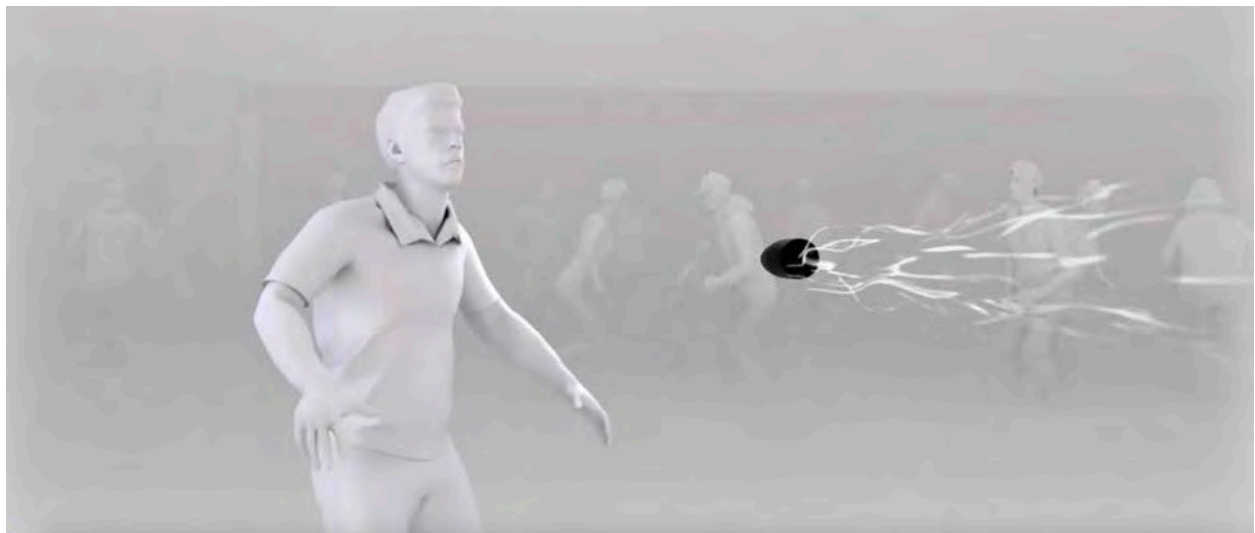
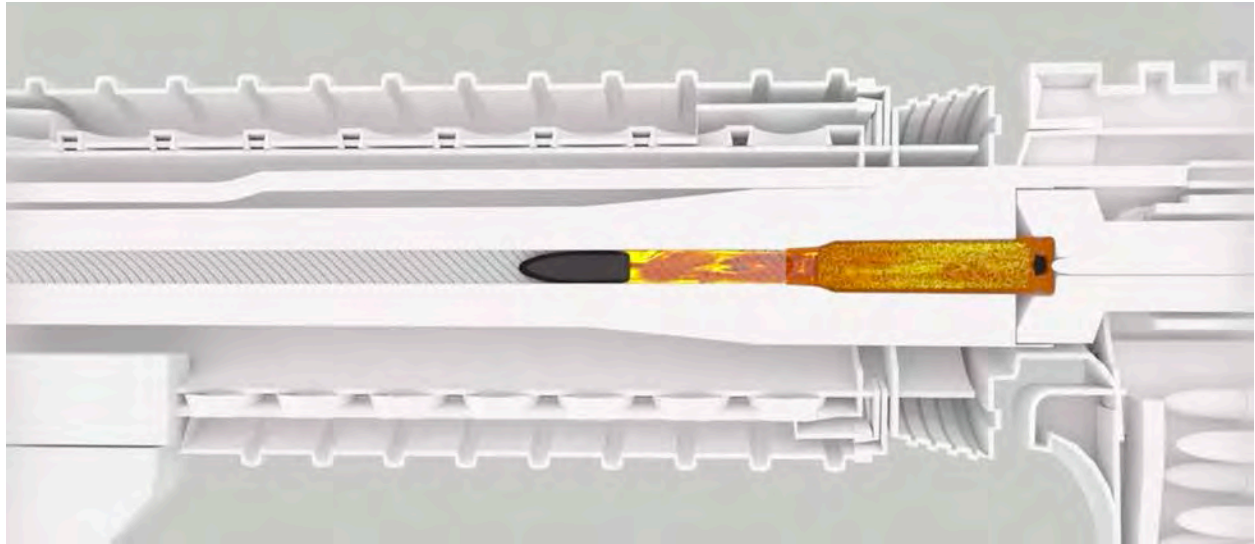
It is small and light. Its cartridge holds enough propellant to send the bullet flying out of the barrel at a speed that would cross six football fields in a second.



This is a **9mm-sized round**, a common choice in handguns. Its bullets are larger, inside smaller cartridges. They don't hold enough gunpowder to match the velocity of the .223.

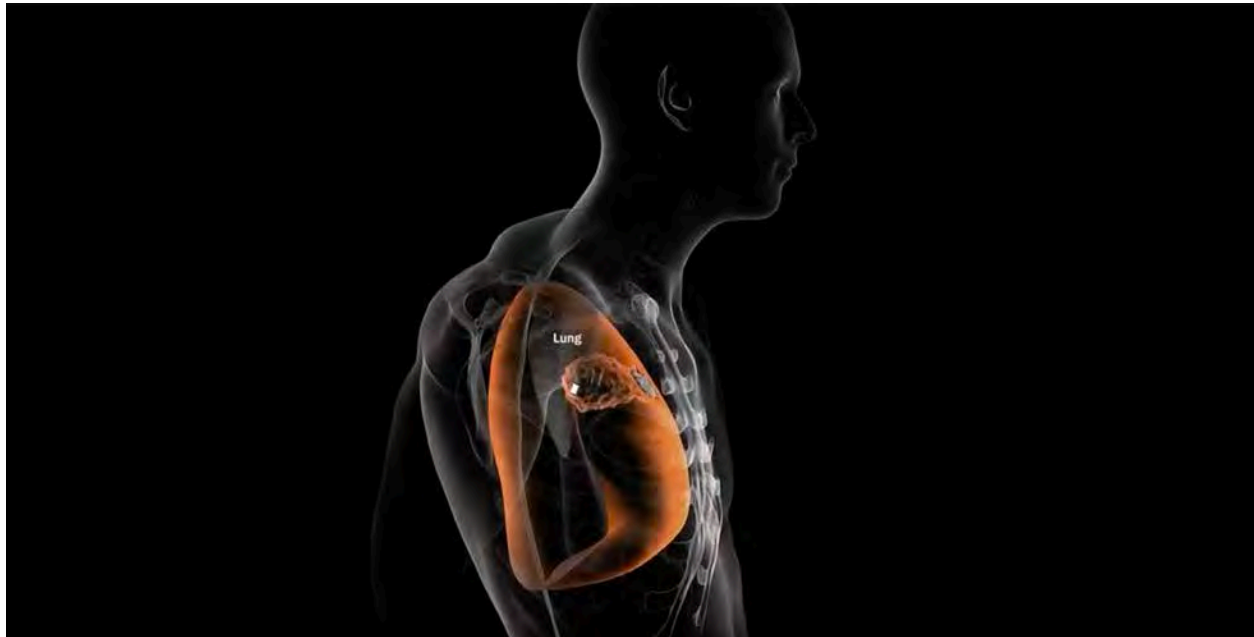






Any bullet can kill, and instantly, when it hits a vital organ. The higher speed of a bullet from an AR-15 causes far more damage after it hits the body and drastically reduces a person's chances of survival.

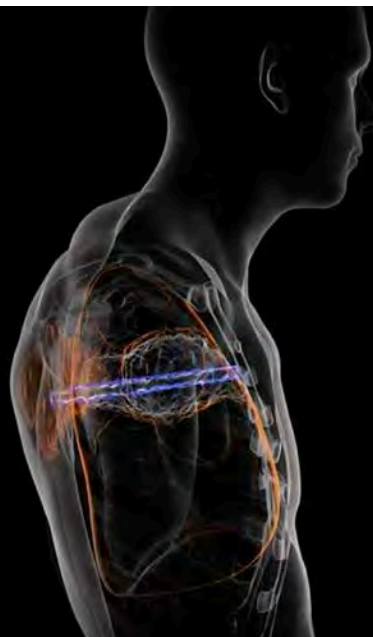
“As that bullet slows down,” said trauma surgeon Babak Sarani, an authority on casualties from mass killings, “that energy is so massive it has to go someplace, and your body will literally tear apart.”



In this hypothetical scenario, the bullet bursts into the chest cavity. It shreds lung tissue, severs nerves and vessels and causes massive bleeding. It also begins to tumble, taking a chaotic path in the body.

The speed at impact creates a blast effect, like the wake that follows a boat, causing internal injuries far outside the bullet's path. Here, the blast destroys large veins that carry blood back to the heart.

A **9mm bullet** from the same distance takes a relatively linear path. Because that bullet doesn't produce the same blast effect, it causes far less damage.





The bullet from the AR-15 leaves behind a gaping exit wound. The [9mm bullet](#) fired from the handgun has a much smaller exit wound.

In this scenario, with immediate medical care and minimal bleeding, the victim has a chance at surviving the 9mm shot to the chest.

The bullet from the AR-15, however, causes torrential bleeding that is quickly lethal.

## Two children, many bullets

When multiple bullets from an AR-15 strike one body, they cause a cascade of catastrophic damage.

This is the trauma witnessed by first responders — but rarely, if ever, seen by the public or the policymakers who write gun laws.

The Post determined that there is a public interest in demonstrating the uniquely destructive power of the AR-15 when used to kill.

What follows is a detailed depiction showing the impact of bullets fired from AR-15s at two young victims. It is based on autopsy reports for Noah Pozner and Peter Wang that The Post obtained through public records.

Due to the unusual visual nature of the presentation, The Post took the added step of seeking — and receiving — the consent of the victims' families before proceeding with this account. The Post offered the families the opportunity to view the depictions in advance of publication, which they declined to do.

The families also declined to be interviewed for this story, but a spokesperson for the Wang family offered a statement explaining why Peter's parents, Hui and Kong Wang, provided their consent to The Post.

"Peter's parents want people to know the truth," said Lin Chen, their niece and Peter's cousin. "They want people to know about Peter. They want people to remember him."

This presentation may be disturbing to some people.



(Family photo)

## Noah Pozner, 6

Newtown, Conn.

Noah was found dead on the floor of Classroom 8 at Sandy Hook Elementary on Dec. 14, 2012. He was 6. He was wearing a red Batman sweatshirt, black pants and black sneakers.

He loved Batman. He was full of energy, his family said, curious and imaginative. He wanted to be an astronaut, and he also wanted to manage a taco factory, because he loved tacos. Noah would tease his sisters that when they went to bed, he was going off “to his third shift” at the factory, so convincingly that they would wake up to make sure he was still in bed.



Noah Pozner in his Batman Halloween costume in 2010.  
(Family photo)



It was cold that morning when his father, Lenny, dropped him off at school, “but he jumped out not wearing his jacket and he had one arm in one sleeve and his backpack in his other arm, and he was kind of juggling both and walking into the school that way,” Lenny Pozner would later testify.

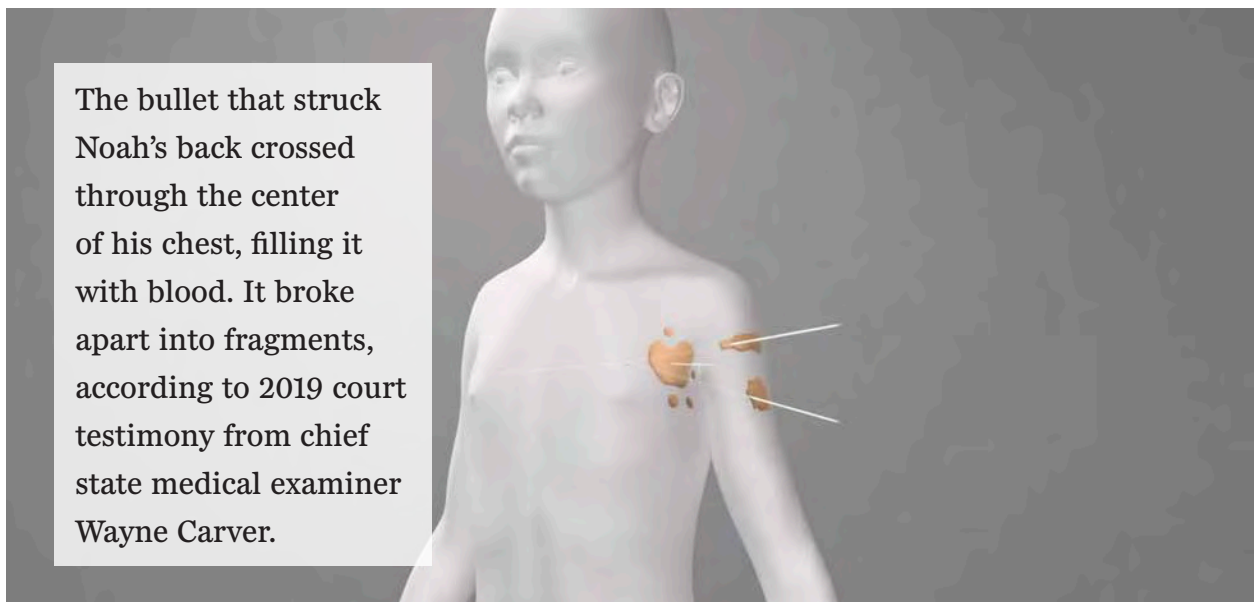
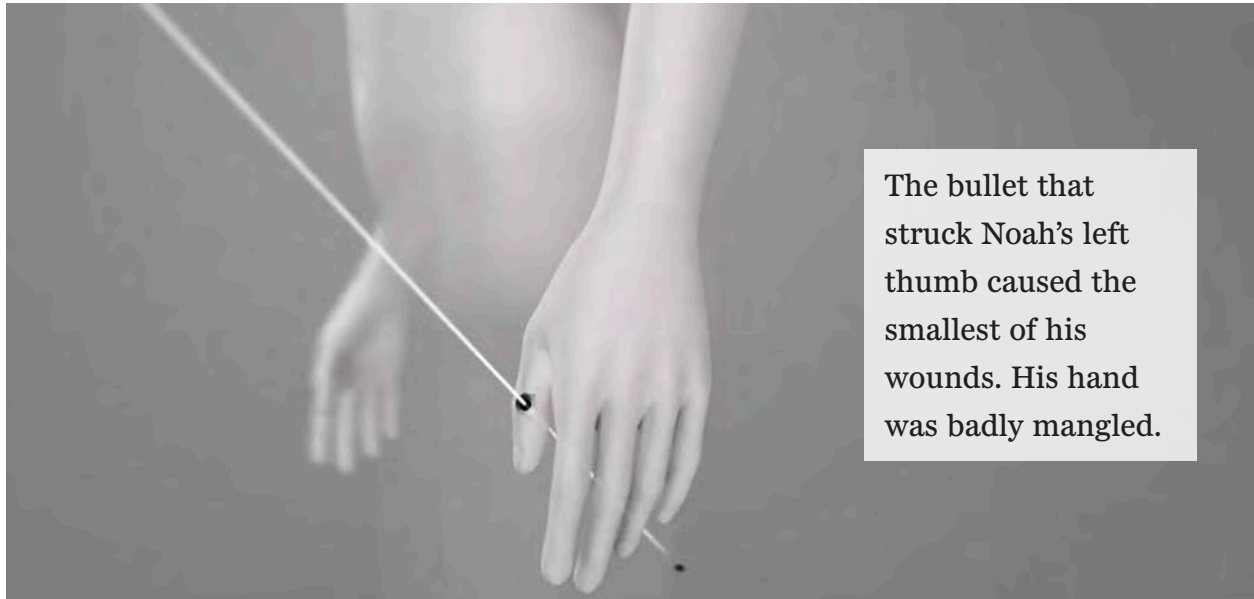
“And that’s the last visual I have of Noah.”

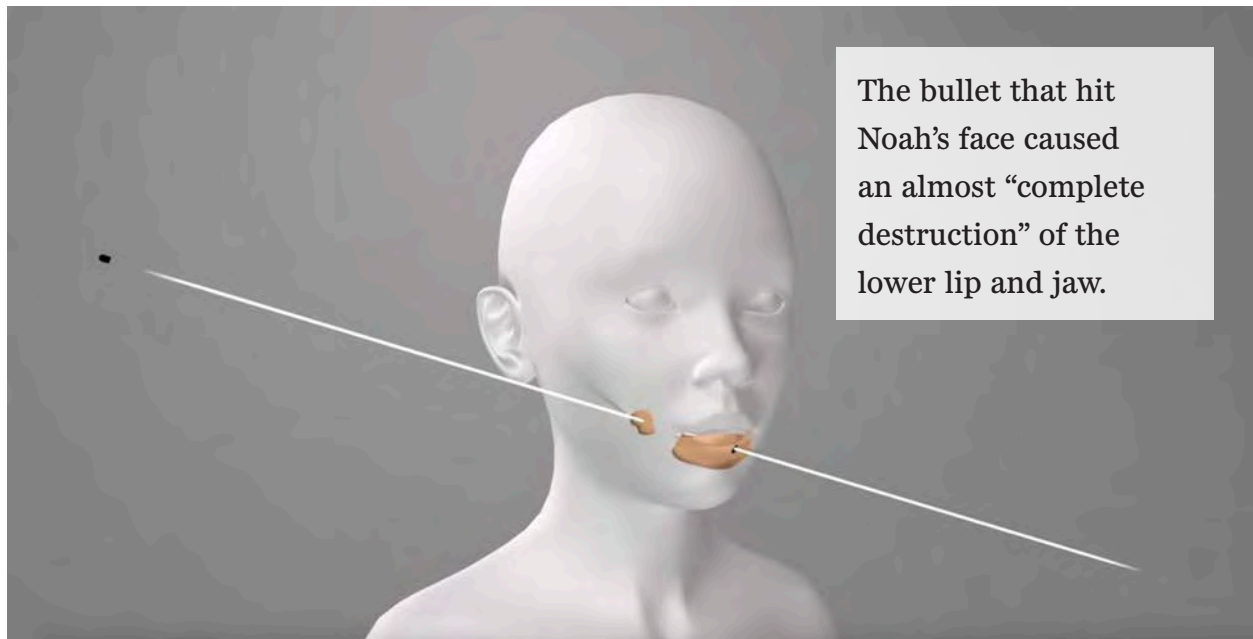
The first visual that Connecticut state police Sgt. William Cario has of Noah is this: 15 children and two educators are piled on top of one another in a small school bathroom on the southwest corner of the classroom. Cario proceeded to pull them out one by one. All were dead.

One of them was Noah.

Noah was shot three times. Adam Lanza took his mother’s AR-15 rifle to the school and fired 80 rounds into the bathroom. Here are the wounds that killed Noah.







Noah's wounds were not survivable, Carver testified. "This particular kind of projectile, it's got so much energy that it just breaks up." The pattern of metal over a wide area, he said, "would give me a marker of ... what organs were destroyed and how completely."



Peter Wang in an Army JROTC uniform.  
(Family photo)

## Peter Wang, 15

Parkland, Fla.

Peter was found dead in a third-floor hallway of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day 2018. He was 15. He was wearing his Army JROTC uniform.

He kept notes in his bedroom drawer about his plans. He had joined the military training corps, with its mission to “motivate young people to be better citizens,” as an important step toward attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Born in New York to parents from China, he was always helping everyone around him, friends and family said. Once, at Disney

World, he held a friend's child aloft in a crowd for 20 minutes so she could see a fireworks display.

When gunfire broke out at Parkland, Peter was in study hall, playing chess with a friend. He held the door open for other students to escape.

A few of them made it. He did not.

Peter was shot 13 times. Nikolas Cruz used an AR-15 he bought legally and fired at least 139 rounds. Here are the wounds that killed Peter.

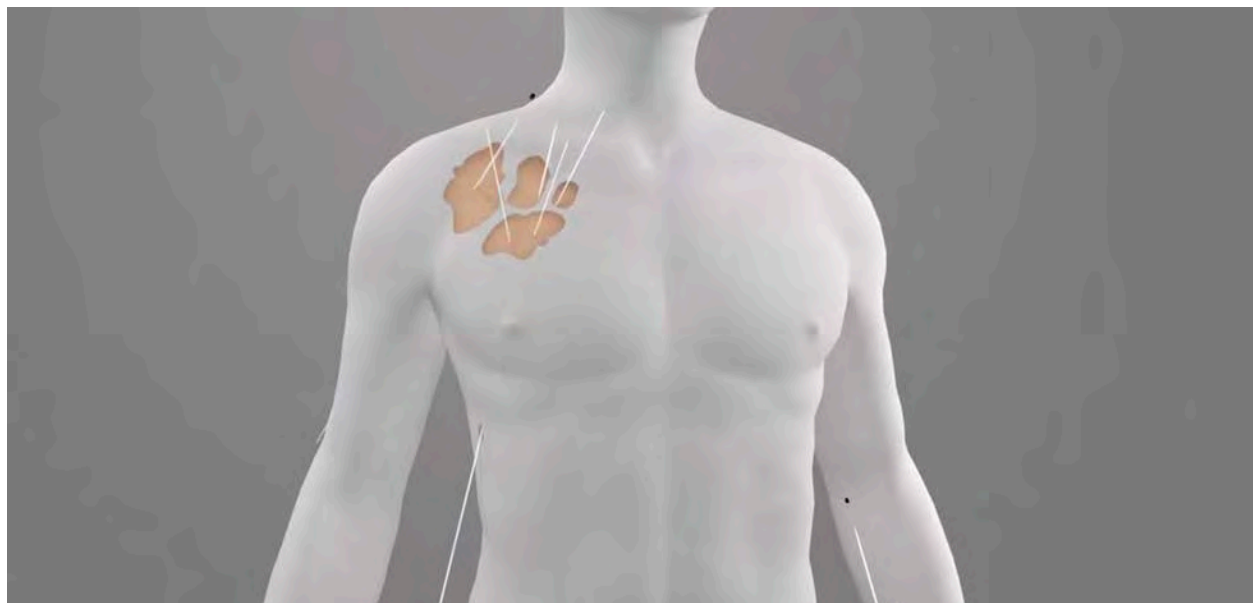
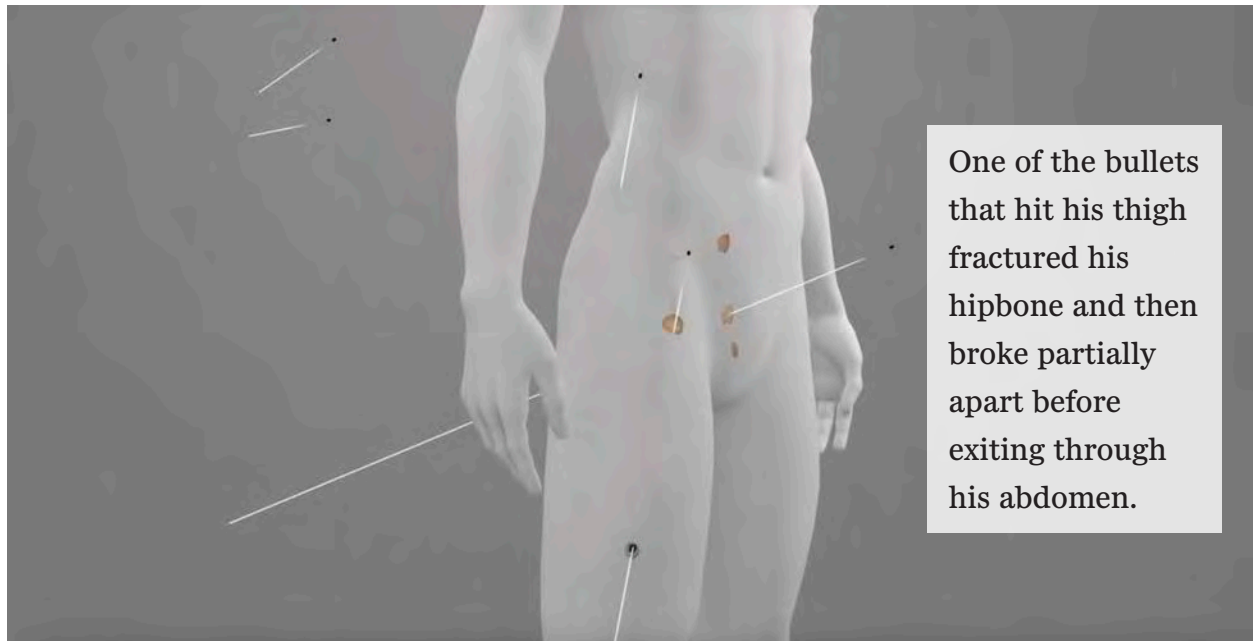


Peter Wang at Walt Disney World in January 2018. (Family photo)

Peter was running down the hallway when he was shot. He was struck once in the foot, twice in the thigh, once in the torso, five times in his arms and, finally, four times in the head.







Two bullets tore Peter's chest apart. One entered his torso and flew upward, fragmenting and perforating his chest muscle, which bruised his lungs and created a cluster of three large exit wounds. The other struck the back of his upper right arm, pierced the shoulder joint and opened up a gaping hole on the way out.



The four bullets that obliterated Peter's head were the last four he received, medical examiner Wendolyn Sneed, who performed the autopsy, testified at Cruz's sentencing trial last year. Surveillance video showed that Peter's legs were moving as the killer came closer to him and fired rapidly.

The combined energy of those bullets created exit wounds so "gaping" that the autopsy described his head as "deformed." Blood and brain splatter were found on his upper body and the walls. That degree of destruction, according to medical experts, is possible only with a high-velocity weapon.



Peter was one of 16 Parkland victims who were shot several times. The shooter had equipped his AR-15 with the ability to fire dozens of rounds without pausing to reload, preventing people from escaping.

In many of America's mass killings, shooters hit multiple victims, multiple times. In seconds.

**You have been on this page for more than 11 minutes.**

It took 11 minutes for the shooter to kill 60 people and injure 869 others at a Las Vegas concert.

### **About this story**

Reporting by N. Kirkpatrick and Atthar Mirza. 3D modeling and animations by Manuel Canales and Ronald Paniagua. Jon Swaine and Alex Horton contributed to this report.

Design and development by Aadit Tambe, Anna Lefkowitz and Rekha Tenjarla. Design editing by Madison Walls.

Editing by Ann Gerhart, Peter Wallsten, Chiqui Esteban and Wendy Galietta.

Additional editing by Jordan Melendrez, Kim Chapman and Tom Justice.

Additional support by Frank Hulley-Jones, Angela M. Hill, Natalia Jimenez, Sarah Murray, Courtney Beesch, Angel Mendoza, Bishop Sand, Kiley Schultz, Brandon Carter, Ashleigh Wilson and Bryan Flaherty.

Video credits: Bystanders take cover outside the Odessa Cinergy Theater during a shoot out with law enforcement in 2019 in Texas.

People flee as shots ring out at a Las Vegas concert on in 2017. (Twitter/Morgan Marchand/Storyful)

Students raise their hands as armed law enforcement officers enter a classroom at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., in 2018 (Alexander Ball/Storyful)

The models and animations were constructed from academic research reviews, interviews, autopsy reports and other records The Post obtained, in consultation with the following: Babak Sarani, director of trauma and acute care surgery at George

Washington University Hospital; Joseph Sakran, vice chair of clinical operations and a trauma surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital; Cynthia Bir, chair of biomedical engineering at Wayne State University; and Victor Weedn, deputy medical examiner for Washington, D.C.

The Post relied on post-mortem and autopsy reports and medical examiner testimony at trials to illustrate with precision the entrance and exit wounds that were identified in the bodies of Noah Pozner and Peter Wang. The depictions are as precise as could be determined from the records, which included the medical examiner's hand-drawn diagrams for Peter. Those documents do not detail the position the victims were in when they were struck, or the full sequence of the bullets and their precise path through the body.

The calculation that a .223 round fired from an AR-15 can reach speeds of up to six football fields in a second was made using a 55 grain .223 Remington full metal case round fired at a horizontal trajectory. The muzzle velocity of this round is 3,240 feet per second. This estimate accounts for drag as the bullet slows down over distance and time. It does not account for weather or other interference. Nor does it account for horizontal drop as the bullet would probably hit the ground before reaching six football fields. The Post consulted with mechanical engineer John Greenawalt and Cynthia Bir, chair of biomedical engineering at Wayne State University.

Ten of the 17 deadliest U.S. mass killings since 2012 have involved AR-15-style guns. (Handguns are involved in the bulk of U.S. gun homicides, responsible for 90 percent of cases in which the type of firearm is known.)

The Washington Post defines mass killings as a shooting event in which at least four people are killed, not including the gunman.

The timer at the conclusion includes 10 mass killing events that involved AR-15s. The time elapsed from the first shot to last were all under 11 minutes. That timing is approximate and based on official reports and news reports.

American icon

# TERROR ON REPEAT

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A rare look at the devastation caused by AR-15 shootings

**Editor's note**

The photos and personal accounts inside are extremely disturbing and may be too upsetting for some people.



from the editor

# Why we are publishing disturbing content from AR-15 mass shootings

In “Terror on repeat,” the latest story in our series examining the role of the AR-15 in American life, The Washington Post is taking the unusual step of publishing photographs and videos taken during the immediate aftermaths of some of the nation’s deadliest mass shootings.

Like other news organizations, we cover the effects of these tragedies when they occur. But because journalists generally do not have access to crime scenes and news organizations rarely if ever publish graphic content, most Americans have no way to understand the full scope of an AR-15’s destructive power or the extent of the trauma inflicted on victims, survivors and first responders when a shooter uses this weapon on people.

Drawing on the details of 11 mass killings from the past 11 years, this story is the result of a months-long effort to examine these episodes as a cumulative and relatively recent phenomenon that has upended communities across the country.

The story is largely narrated by those who experienced the shootings firsthand. It reveals the commonalities shared by each tragedy — the sudden transition from normal life to terror, then the onset of chaos, destruction and death, and, finally, the gruesome aftermath of investigation and cleanup.

Our decision to publish this story came after careful and extensive deliberation among the reporters and editors who worked on it, as well as senior leaders in our newsroom.

The goal was to balance two crucial objectives: to advance the public’s understanding of mass killers’ increasing use of this readily available weapon, which was originally designed for war, while being sensitive to victims’ families and communities directly affected by AR-15 shootings.

While many types of firearms, including other semiautomatic rifles, are used to commit violent crimes, the AR-15 has soared in popularity over the past two decades and is now the gun used more than any other in the country’s deadliest mass shootings.

In the end, we decided that there is public value in illuminating the profound and repeated devastation left by tragedies that are often covered as isolated news events but rarely considered as part of a broader pattern of violence.

We filed more than 30 public records requests in jurisdictions that had investigated AR-15 shootings since 2012, the year that included massacres at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., and at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., seeking medical examiner records, crime scene photographs, police body-camera footage and other investigative files. Most of our requests were rejected, with officials citing ongoing investigations or local laws preventing the release of such information. Officials in some communities released documents in response to our requests, including Dayton, Ohio, Aurora and Las Vegas.

Our reporters also gathered court records and other information that had previously been made public, and scoured social media and websites for photos and videos that may have surfaced after AR-15 shootings and that we could authenticate. They interviewed survivors and first responders willing to share their experiences, searched for official transcripts of witness testimony and compiled relevant interviews conducted in the past by Post journalists — amassing firsthand accounts that are crucial to this story.

The Post separately obtained a collection of evidence from the 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Tex., compiled by state and federal police, some of which has not previously been made public. Those files include intensely graphic crime scene photos and videos taken moments after police entered the classrooms where 19 students and two teachers were killed.

Before viewing the graphic content, our reporters and editors participated in training by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, learning best practices for viewing disturbing photos and discussing how publishing them could affect readers.

At the same time, reporters and editors engaged in intensive discussions over the merits of publishing disturbing photographs and videos. We engaged in conversations with advocates, including victims’ families, some of whom see a potential value in publishing content to increase public awareness and others who see such publication as dehumanizing and traumatizing.

Our team grappled with our own standard practices when it comes to publishing graphic content. We seek to be thoughtful about how doing so affects victims of violence and those who care about them, but we also recognize that at times disturbing photos and videos can add to an accurate understanding of events. We also realize that news outlets are often more comfortable publishing pictures of violence overseas, where some of our readers are less likely to have a direct connection.

For this project, we established one ground rule at the start of our reporting: If we sought to publish any pictures of identifiable bodies, we would seek permission from the families of the victims. Some families indicated they would be open to granting permission, but ultimately we decided that the potential harm to victims’ families outweighed any potential journalistic value of showing recognizable bodies. We ultimately included nine photos from the Uvalde files showing scenes inside the classrooms taken shortly after bodies were removed. In addition, we show sealed body bags in the school hallway.

The only photograph in this story showing bodies is one taken immediately after the 2017 shooting at the Route 91 Harvest festival in Las Vegas. We felt the scene captured in this photo — a field strewn with the dead and wounded beneath the Las Vegas skyline — illustrates why witnesses often liken AR-15 shootings to American war zones. The perspective of the photograph, in which the victims are seen from a distance, makes it unlikely that individuals could be identified.

As we prepared to publish this story online, we sought to be sensitive to the people most directly affected — providing advance notice to many families of victims, their representatives and community leaders so they could choose to avoid the coverage if they preferred.

We have taken similar steps to give our print readers a chance to decide whether to engage with this piece — printing it as a special section, with warnings on both the front cover of the special section and the front page of the paper.

We realize this story will be disturbing to readers, but we believe that publishing these images gives the public a new vantage point into the pattern of AR-15 mass killings in the United States.

— Sally Buzbee, Executive Editor

**When a gunman fires an AR-15 ...**



Office of the District Attorney for the 18th Judicial District of Colorado

**... a seemingly safe, familiar place instantly transforms into a hellscape of chaos, destruction and mass death.**

BY SILVIA FOSTER-FRAU, N. KIRKPATRICK AND ARELIS R. HERNÁNDEZ

**M**ass shootings involving AR-15s have become a recurring American nightmare.

The weapon, easy to operate and widely available, is now used more than any other in the country's deadliest mass killings.

Fired by the dozens or hundreds in rapid succession, bullets from AR-15s have blasted through classroom doors and walls. They have shredded theater seats and splintered wooden church pews. They have mangled human bodies and, in a matter of seconds, shattered the lives of people attending a concert, shopping on a Saturday afternoon, going out with friends and family, working in their offices and worshipping at church and synagogue. They have killed first-graders, teenagers, mothers, fathers and grandparents.

But the full effects of the AR-15's destructive force are rarely seen in public.

The impact is often shielded by laws and court rulings that keep crime scene photos and records secret. Journalists do not typically have access to the sites of shootings to document them. Even when photographs are available, news organizations generally do not publish them, out of concern about potentially dehumanizing victims or retraumatizing their families.

Now, drawing on an extensive review of photographs, videos and police investigative files from 11 mass killings between 2012 and 2023, The Washington Post is publishing the most comprehensive account to date of the repeating pattern of destruction wrought by the AR-15 — a weapon that was originally designed for military combat but has in recent years become one of the best-selling firearms on the U.S. market.

This piece includes never-before-released pictures taken by law enforcement officials after shootings inside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Tex., in 2022, and the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Tex., in 2017, that were obtained by The Post. It is also based on Post interviews with survivors and first responders from multiple shootings as well as transcripts of official testimony provided by law enforcement officials who were among the first to witness the carnage.

The review lays bare how the AR-15, a weapon that has soared in popularity over the past two decades as a beloved tool for hunting, target practice and self-defense, has also given assailants the power to instantly turn everyday American gathering places into zones of gruesome violence.

This is an oral history told in three parts that follows the chronological order of a typical AR-15 mass shooting. It weaves together pictures and the recollections of people who endured different tragedies but have similar stories to tell.

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**About the terminology:** Colt acquired the AR-15 patent and trademark from Armalite in 1959. The patent expired, leaving many companies to produce their own weapons, commonly called AR-style rifles. While Colt still holds the trademark, "AR-15" has become a ubiquitous term for a popular style of gas-operated, magazine-fed semiautomatic rifles. For this reason, we refer to the rifle broadly as the AR-15 in this series.

## PART I

# Shots are fired

To some it sounds like fireworks, to others a deafening roar. The initial burst from the AR-15 is often the first sign that something unusual is happening. Moments later, bullets riddle walls, windows, shelves and notebooks. Some people are shot and others scramble for safety. Later, investigators identify dozens or hundreds of bullet casings.

**All of a sudden**, out of nowhere, you just hear the loudest, most unbelievably piercing sound you’ve ever heard in your life. *Danielle Gilbert, high school student. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, Fla.*

**People started screaming**, and there was hysteria and people were dropping to the ground. *Heather Brown Sallan, vendor. Route 91 Harvest festival, Las Vegas.*

**I turned around** and . . . looked at the back doors, just trying to get my bearings and figure out, is this some kids throwing firecrackers? *David Colbath, church congregant. First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Tex.*

**I heard what sounded like metal chairs falling**, and I figured that was for the holiday program or something. *Abbey Clements, teacher. Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Conn.*



First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Tex. Nov. 5, 2017. 26 killed.



Texas Department of Public Safety/Obtained by the Washington Post



Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Conn. Dec. 14, 2012. 26 killed.



Connecticut State Police

Tree of Life synagogue, Pittsburgh. Oct. 27, 2018. 11 killed.



u.s. Justice Department



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, Tex. May 24, 2022. 21 killed.



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

The gunman fired through a classroom door before entering.

I just saw things flying off the walls, and that's when it hit me  
— that it was bullets, that it was a gun that was firing off.

**Arnulfo Reyes**, teacher. Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, Tex.

**The face my wife** made the moment we heard shots and she started to run with the stroller . . . super tense — I don't know how to describe it.

*Daniel Seijas, shopper. Allen Premium Outlets, Allen, Tex.*

**Smoke filled** the place up from the constant shooting inside here. . . .

You could smell the smoke. *David Colbath, church congregant. Sutherland Springs.*

**Since it was pitch black,** I could see the muzzle flashes coming from that left side. . . . There was drywall fragments falling from the ceiling.

*Anthony Burke, police detective and SWAT officer. Tree of Life synagogue, Pittsburgh.*

**To be able to cope** with being in a position where I couldn't do anything, I did the most useful thing that I can think of: I was counting rounds and reloads. *Morgan Workman, church congregant. Sutherland Springs.*

**Before he ever came in,** there was really hardly anybody that could rise up and challenge him. But with these bullets just flying through the air, there was nobody going to be able to do it and nobody could.

*David Colbath, church congregant. Sutherland Springs.*

**The bullets were ricocheting off the street.** . . . You could hear the pinging and the ricocheting of them hitting the cars around you. It was the chaos of it — it just kept going and going and going.

*Heather Brown Sallan, vendor. Las Vegas.*



Tree of Life synagogue, Pittsburgh



u.s. Justice Department

A damaged prayer book.



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

Blood at the base of a classroom file cabinet.



Century 16 movie theater, Aurora, Colo. July 20, 2012. 12 killed.



Office of the District Attorney for the 18th Judicial District of Colorado

Blood is mixed with spilled popcorn. Investigators said they ran out of evidence markers and used business cards instead.



**I got shot four times.** . . . I thought I got hit with a ton of bricks . . . so I looked behind me to try to see if there's anyone to help me. And all I could see was blood. *Maddy Wilford, high school student in classroom 1213, Parkland.*

**There's dust everywhere.** There's debris. . . . I had like dust and debris coming off of my hands. . . . I was still just covered from head to toe. *Danielle Gilbert, high school student. Parkland.*

**When I could hear the gunfire,** I knew where he was. When I didn't hear the gunfire, I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh, he's coming this way.' I kept thinking that everyone was dead. There's no way they're not all dead. *Dallas Schwartz, employee. Old National Bank, Louisville.*

**I only thought he got shot** one time, and it was five. . . . As the police and them come to us I just grab on my dad and just kept telling him I loved him before he died. *Dion Green, bar patron. Oregon Historic District, Dayton, Ohio.*

Oregon Historic District, Dayton, Ohio. Aug. 4, 2019. 9 killed.



Dayton Police Department

Yellow tags mark 41 spent shell casings, among other pieces of evidence. The gunman fired dozens of rounds in 32 seconds.



Route 91 Harvest festival, Las Vegas. Oct. 1, 2017. 60 killed

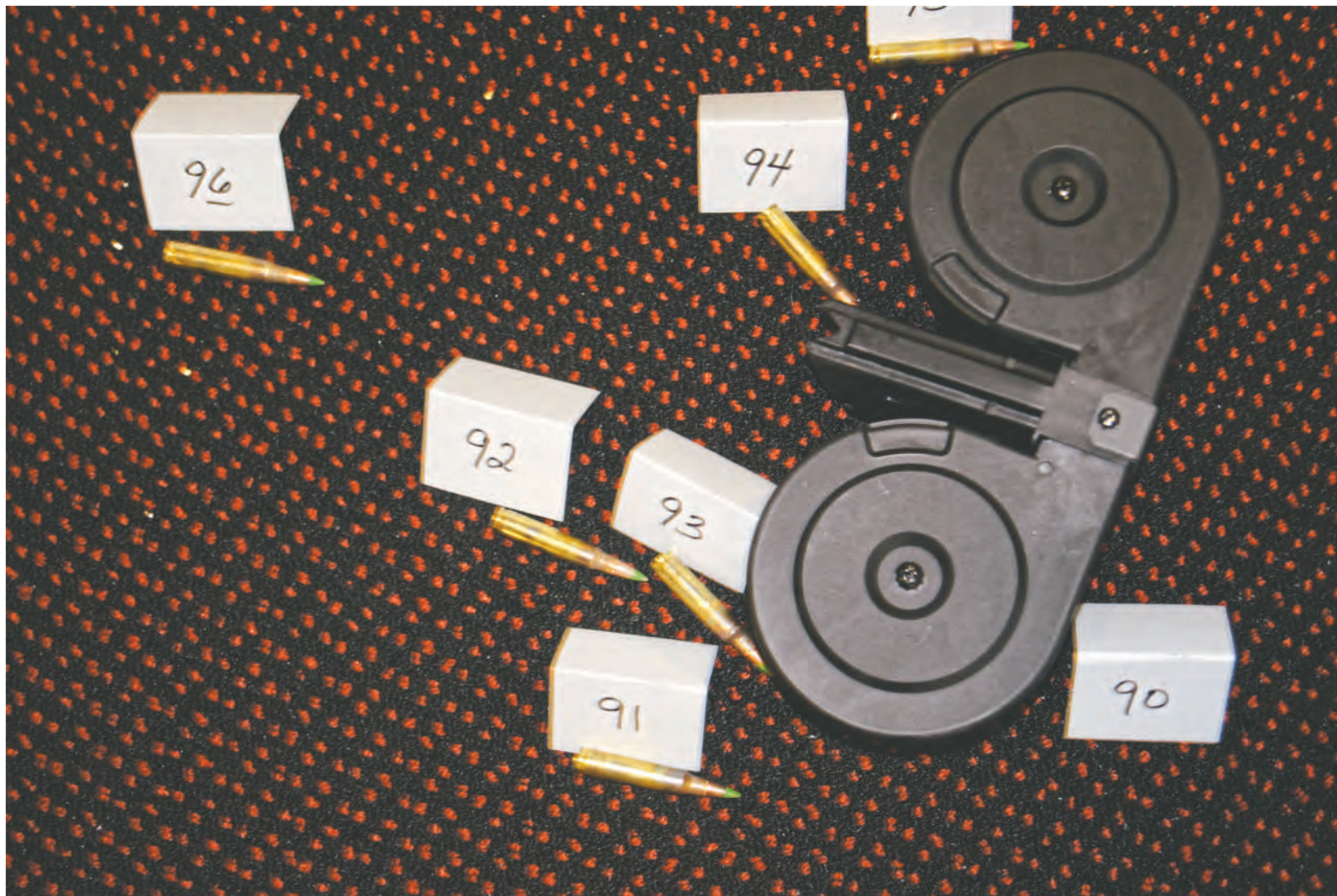


Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department

The gunman fired over 1,000 rounds in 11 minutes from 14 AR-15 and AR-10 rifles from a hotel room overlooking the country music festival.



Century 16 movie theater, Aurora



Office of the District Attorney for the 18th Judicial District of Colorado

Investigators found 65 unspent rounds in this drum magazine.

First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

Bullet casings litter the floor after the gunman fired 450 rounds inside the church in minutes.

**Note to readers**

The next section includes photographs in which you can see the blood and destruction that remain after bodies have been removed from the scene of an AR-15 shooting.



## PART 2

# The attack unfolds

In minutes, injured and dead fall to the floor. Some are able to flee, others are rushed to safety by police. Smoke from the rifle fills the air. The Post obtained never-before-published photographs from Robb Elementary School classrooms 111 and 112 in Uvalde. They show the carnage left behind, including the large volume of blood that collects. The photos, along with personal accounts describing young children's lifeless bodies, echo descriptions provided 11 years earlier by witnesses at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

**I was stunned.** I was hurt. I couldn't move. Two kids fell on my back. Another two kids fell on those two kids' back. We were stacked up right here like cordwood. *David Colbath, church congregant. Sutherland Springs.*

**I saw my right arm get blown open** in two places and my right hand. The pain was the worst pain I ever felt. I looked at it as I felt it, and it looked like shredded raw meat. And there was a lot of blood.

*Andrea Wedner, synagogue congregant. Pittsburgh.*

**It was a war zone** and there was injured, there was blood everywhere. There was magazines, there was bullets. *Danielle Gilbert, high school student. Parkland.*

**He shot the students there under the table.** And so, I didn't hear any yelling or crying. But I think it was due to the bullets, the gun, being so loud. *Arnulfo Reyes, teacher. Uvalde.*



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

In classroom 112, children who were killed were found huddled together in the corner.

I notice on the whiteboard it looked like somebody had taken, like, their hand and, like, it just, it was wrote in blood — it looked like they wrote LOL on the whiteboard.

**Travis Shrewsbury**, Border Patrol agent. Uvalde.



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

The police waited 77 minutes before confronting the gunman in classroom 111. They rushed in and began dragging students from the room. Only teacher Arnulfo Reyes survived.



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

The hallway was used to treat and triage wounded and dying children.

One of my cousins — the cops dragged him in the hallway when they were taking us out. I saw the bullet in his head.

**Jaydien Canizales**, elementary school student. Uvalde.



**I could hear a little girl** say, ‘Officers come in, we’re in here,’ and she sounded far away so I knew it was in the other room. And she said that once. And then maybe two or three minutes later she said it again. And then I just heard him walk into that other room. And he shot some more. So after that I didn’t hear her no more. And so I had figured he had killed her.

*Arnulfo Reyes, teacher. Uvalde.*

**My breathing was changing**, it was getting more shallow, more rapid. I was salivating. I was losing my ability to expand my lungs. I was drooling. The pressure in my abdomen was getting greater by the minute and through my rectum. I felt that I was leaving. . . . I felt that I was dying.

*Daniel Leger, synagogue congregant. Pittsburgh.*

**I could hear people screaming**, and I could hear people – you know, last words were uttered, things that were – fear, and just really awful sounds. And then it eventually started getting quieter. And that was the worst part. Was knowing that the quiet meant the worst.

*Morgan Workman, church congregant. Sutherland Springs.*

**As I exit the classroom**, there’s two more bodies on the right-hand side in the hallway, a girl and a boy both face down. *Danielle Gilbert, high school student. Parkland.*

**After a while**, I could see she was shot and she wasn’t going to survive. . . . I kissed my fingers, and I touched my fingers to her skin. . . . I cried out, ‘Mommy.’

*Andrea Wedner, synagogue congregant. Pittsburgh.*

Tree of Life synagogue, Pittsburgh



u.s. Justice Department

A rifle on the ground next to blood-spattered books.



Oregon Historic District, Dayton



Dayton Police Department

**They came, these three police officers with long guns. . . .** I was instructed to unlock the door and to raise my hands and we all came out at gunpoint and were evacuated. *Marcus Kergosien, store manager. Allen.*

**It was emergency vehicle sounds,** and I couldn't even look up. I looked at my feet, and the cold air in my chest, we had no coats and we were running toward the firehouse and it was — we didn't know that it was over, so the trauma continued there. And then it's just the worst scene you can imagine. You had chaos, and kids couldn't find their siblings. *Abbey Clements, teacher. Newtown.*

**I remember when** we ran out and there was the police. . . . The look on his face, the terror on his face. He had people under his car. In his car. And I remember him just screaming: 'Run for your fucking lives. Do not stop.' . . . I remember my mouth being bone dry and my lungs were burning and I was so physically uncomfortable and I was so thirsty and I couldn't stop. I just kept running and running and running. *Heather Brown Sallan, vendor. Las Vegas.*

**Two 6- or 7-years-old girls** followed by two older, taller boys came out the east exit and approached. One little girl was heavily blood spattered and dazed. . . . Her friend said that she was all right and 'stuff got on her.' . . . I told the two to hold hands and go. *Paul Lukienchuk, state trooper. Newtown.*

**The kids,** some are scared, some are quiet, some are crying, some don't know what's going on. Some thought it was a practice fire drill. But they were ready to see us. ... We told them: 'Single file. Get your kids. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.' *Alexander Cuellar, Border Patrol agent. Uvalde.*



The Covenant School, Nashville. March 27, 2023. 6 killed.



Jonathan Mattise /AP



Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Conn. Dec. 14, 2012. 26 killed.



Shannon Hicks / Newtown Bee/Polaris



Route 91 Harvest festival, Las Vegas



David Becker /Getty Images

Dani Westerman is protected by a friend who recognized the sound of gunfire from training in the Army. Both survived.

He threw me down on the ground and got on top of me. . . .  
I think that moment was him grabbing my face and saying, 'This is happening, like there are actual bullets flying at us now.' . . .  
I just remember that feeling, I swear it was the moment that photo was taken, when he opened my eyes to what was actually happening.

**Dani Westerman**, concertgoer. Las Vegas

## PART 3

# Devastation

When the shooting ends, police, coroners and other first responders bear witness to the destruction. They check for signs of life, attempting to separate the barely living from the dead. They collect evidence, photograph the scene and remove the bodies. A once familiar place is now forever changed.

**There were shoes scattered,** blood in the street, bodies in the street.  
Straight out of a nightmare. *Dion Green, bar patron. Dayton.*

**I walked in there,** and you're, like, slipping and sliding, trying not to slip because it was bad. And just the thing I won't forget is the smell.  
*Alexander Cuellar, Border Patrol agent. Uvalde.*

**We were standing there** looking at the scene and the phones kept ringing and ringing and ringing in the backpacks and on the desk of the parents calling their children. . . . They kept calling and calling and calling. *Eulalio Diaz, justice of the peace and coroner. Uvalde.*

**It was dim.** The movie was still playing. The alarm was going off. . . . I could smell the gas. . . . Then I began to notice the bodies. . . . There was blood on seats, blood on the wall, blood on the emergency exit door. Pools of blood on the floor. *Annette Brook, police officer. Century 16 movie theater, Aurora, Colo.*



Century 16 movie theater, Aurora



Office of the District Attorney for the 18th Judicial District of Colorado

Some of the 70 people who were wounded ran and crawled out this emergency exit. The gunman fled through the same door.

Century 16 movie theater, Aurora



Office of the District Attorney for the 18th Judicial District of Colorado

The gunman fired at least 65 rounds from an AR-15, six from a shotgun and five from a handgun. Evidence markers show the trajectories of some of those rounds.



**As we were clearing the rooms**, we came across a classroom which I thought at first was an art room because I saw a lot of red paint all over the walls and in the far left corner I thought I observed a pile of dirty laundry. ... As I continued to stare at the room not being able to figure out what I was looking at, I realized that the red paint was actually blood and the pile of dirty laundry were actually dead bodies.

*Carlo Guerra, state trooper. Newtown.*

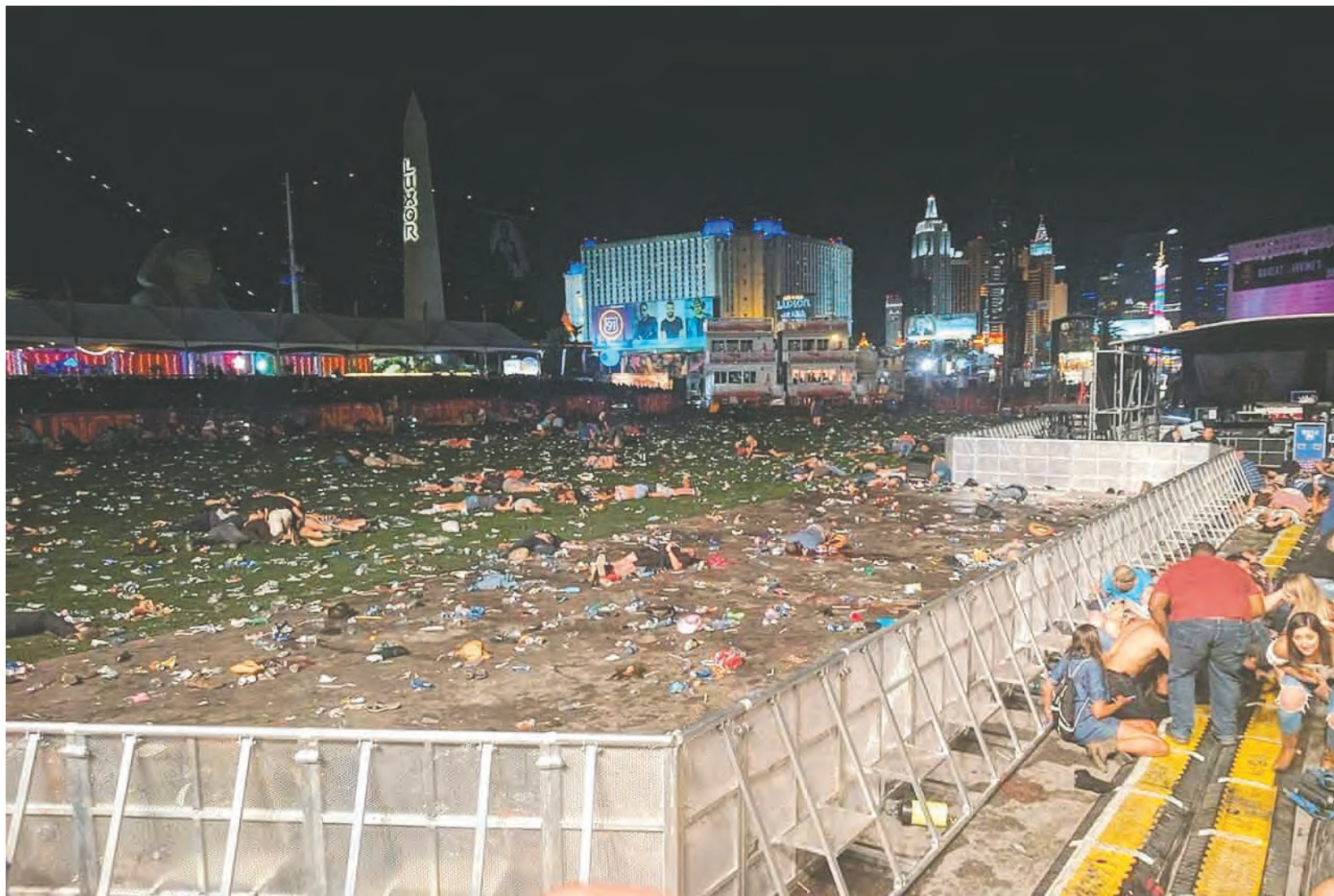
**As I stared in disbelief**, I recognized the face of a little boy on top of a pile. . . . I then began to realize that there were other children around the little boy and that this was actually a pile of dead children. ... I tried to count the number of dead between rooms #10 and #8, but my mind would not count beyond the low teens and I kept getting confused.

*William Cario, police sergeant. Newtown.*

**It looked like a bomb went off in there.** When you can tell the difference between, you know, when somebody is alive and somebody is dead, it's because there were pieces of people just laying everywhere. And those were the dead ones. The ones that were alive were barely moving but were moving.

*Rusty Duncan, volunteer firefighter. Sutherland Springs.*

Route 91 Harvest festival, Las Vegas



Obtained by The Washington Post

This was the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, with 60 killed and more than 800 wounded.

**You can only** imagine that gun being pointed down and shooting as much as you can into a body, what it would do. It'll make you unrecognizable in a heartbeat. So, yes, I believe it, because I saw it with my own eyes.

**Rusty Duncan**, volunteer firefighter. Sutherland Springs.



Robb Elementary School, Uvalde



Texas Department of Public Safety /Obtained by The Washington Post

comments

# Readers react to Post report on devastation from AR-15 shootings

The Washington Post’s latest story on the impact of the AR-15 in American culture drew a massive response from readers. Below is a selection of those comments, which have not been edited. They appear with subscribers’ chosen online user names.

As hard as it was to make my way through this, I needed to do so. I can admit to becoming more and more numb as these shootings keep happening. Much like the lack of coverage of war casualties, we need to see this. We can never experience what the victims have, but we need to see this and start pressing for action NOW.  
— *LibrasAreAwesome*

I fully support the Washington Post publishing this piece. I Have No Reservations about it and would like to see the nation rid itself of the AR-15. That said, the absence of the bodies from the pictures renders the whole thing sort of saccharine and abstract. Contrast these pictures with what we are seeing in our media nightly from Gaza, the videos of the Wounded children in the hospitals, the devastation everywhere, the never-ending misery. Those pictures are much more penetrating than the pictures of walls with bullet holes. I'm afraid that our population is so numbed by all these stories that they will be underwhelmed by this article. I really am sorry to have to say this because I welcome and encourage Outlets like the post to tell this story and to tell it often. But I think the full impact of the Carnage needs to be shown to people. — *Abc3*

The article is hyperbole. AR-15s and the provocative articles are a sideshow. Focus on the 18,000 murders by hand guns. Don't get lost in the provocative articles like this that are totally misleading. — *SoMuch*

This is what it takes. It took TV bringing live newsreels into our homes to help stop the Viet Nam war. And it'll take our seeing the blood and broken bodies of our friends and children to help stop this carnage. we can do this. Let's do it.  
— *Gary Meader*

I think this was a very important story, but if anything, it didn't go far enough. I think we should be seeing blown-apart bodies on the floors to really comprehend the absolute horror of these murders. Seeing a cute 10 year old's school picture next to a picture of his/her little ruined body might finally make people howl in outrage in numbers that can change things! These weapons are made for one thing: killing people, and as quickly as possible. Keep your dang deer rifle, and let's get weapons of war off our streets. — *Leslie BRC*

These images should be plastered on tvs billboards and computers on start up. You would hear an immediate clamor to do something about it. — *Forgottenman*

I pray for anyone affected by the shootings named. I hope they don't see or read this article.  
— *PollyStew*

This is why my youngest cannot attend high school in person. She has relentless panic attacks at school. We've had to move her to online schooling at home. Her first actual lockdown (not a drill) happened in kindergarten, less than a year after Sandy Hook. — *MHS1234*

I'm shaking from reading the accounts and seeing the debris of a slaughter. This should be seen. If we're a country that won't stop this from happening we should not be able to turn away, because we did this, we all did this. If we won't stop it from happening over and over again, we're responsible, and there should be no turning away. — *Alizer*

continued on next page

from previous page

My hope for this country lessens with each killing. Whether 1 or 121, lives are lost, lives are traumatized, lives are forever changed. Mental illness is said to be the reason for the horrific actions. Maybe so, but for me, it's straight up hatred of others. Civilians shoot to kill. Police shoot to kill. The actions are spoken of, repeatedly sometimes, but the names and lives of the victims quickly fade out and away. As does my hope. I have no answers, just questions. Why does it continue? How do we stop it? When will congress act? What is the magic number of dead necessary to act? Where will the next tragedy occur? Because as we all know, there will be a next. — *Judy Recca*

Thank you, thank you, thank you. I can't thank you enough. I wish I could somehow force every elected official in this country to read this article. I also wish I could force them to look at the most graphic photos of those killed in these shootings. Let them look at the destroyed little bodies of our children and then tell us that banning such weapons won't help. Thanks again and please keep up the great work. Respectfully, Jim.  
— *James Martin*

I thought I could watch this. I found I couldn't.  
— *PoohBah2*

I will never, ever forget seeing these photos. Speechless. I already am active in trying to elect common sense gun safety legislators. This does not have to keep happening in this country. It's the guns. — *momo1tx*

I view these images from my armchair in Edinburgh, Scotland. Though born and raised to age 17 in the United States, I have now lived in Scotland for almost 40 yrs. I find it unbearable that my homeland has given birth to this repetitive acting out of anger, frustration, hatred by shooting others, especially human children. How can this BE? No answer is thinkable. Compassion for the pain and ignorance which fosters this, is the only place I can think to go. Words alone are pathetic, but some level of communication seems absolutely necessary. NEW CONVERSATIONS: how to begin? If you have any ideas, please share. — *mirapeerance1*

Terrible to see. Impossible to ignore. Respectfully presented — if anything like this can be, WaPo did. This is what journalism is about. — *Sai Tang*

Thank you, Washington Post. America did not ban assault rifles after Sandy Hook and will not until it is forced to see photos of dead children. Your display helps, but I am sorry it is not graphic enough. America needs to see dead children before it bans these weapons of war.  
— *MichiDan*

I'm ashamed to live in a place that allows this and can stop this. — *Dimlybright*

Reading this and seeing the images made me weep. America is the only country in the world where this sort of deranged, evil slaughter regularly and predictably happens and is then ignored by at least half of our elected Congressional leaders. They apparently believe that their "thoughts and prayers" are enough.  
— *NaClH2O*

To show these very gory photos, the WaPo must be worried that people are softening in their zeal to ban guns. Next we will need to see close ups of the murder victims. I am not sure what will need to be shown after that. Nobody is for murder, but plenty of people value the 2nd Amendment.  
— *Tedison*

This is still too sterilized. Until people are actually confronted with the unthinkable brutality these weapons inflict on real bodies, Americans will continue to pretend it's not happening. Anyone who purchases one of these weapons is part of the problem. — *monika19*

OK. Well, if people are proposing removing the ability to own and purchase assault-type weapons from American citizens' hands, can we also propose prohibiting the sale of alcohol as well? There are millions of individuals and families who've been killed and severely maimed by drunk drivers. — *No Drama Here*

I kept looking away. I kept coming back. Because we can't keep looking away. — *Canada LJS*

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**More online:** Read all the comments, and add your own at [wapo.st/terroronrepeat](http://wapo.st/terroronrepeat)



Additional credits

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The following people were interviewed by The Post: Jaydien Canizales, Abbey Clements, David Colbath, Eulalio Diaz, Rusty Duncan, Danielle Gilbert, Dion Green, Marcus Kergosien, Arnulfo Reyes, Heather Brown Sallan, Dallas Schwartz, Daniel Seijas, Dani Westerman, Maddy Wilford and Morgan Workman. Seijas was interviewed in Spanish.

Comments from Annette Brook, Anthony Burke, Daniel Leger and Andrea Wedner are drawn from court testimony. Comments from William Cario, Alexander Cuellar, Carlo Guerra, Paul Lukienchuk and Travis Shrewsbury are drawn from police investigative files.

While other weapons, including various types of semiautomatic rifles, are used in violent crimes, AR-15s have been used in 10 of the 18 shootings since 2012 in which 10 or more people were killed — making it the most commonly used weapon in the country’s deadliest mass killings. This data is drawn from a database maintained by the AP, USA Today and Northeastern University and analyzed by The Post.

Notes on the photographs

Texas Department of Safety photographs were not released by the agency but were separately obtained by The Post.

Crime scene photos from the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh have been cropped to remove labels placed by investigators.

The photograph of the large field strewn with bodies from the Route 91 Harvest festival in Las Vegas was posted on Reddit and 4chan on Oct. 2, 2017, the day after the shooting. The Post verified the time and location of the photograph by comparing it to body-camera footage, social media videos, police reports and other pictures taken at the scene. The Post could not determine the original online post or the photographer. The Post consulted Siwei Lyu, a computer science and engineering professor at the University at Buffalo and an expert on photo and video manipulation, who found no signs of manipulation.



**american icon**

Read more from the series examining the AR-15, a weapon with a singular hold on a divided nation at [wapo.st/american-icon](https://wapo.st/american-icon)



## AMERICAN ICON

# The gun that divides a nation

The AR-15 thrives in times of tension and tragedy. This is how it came to dominate the marketplace – and loom so large in the American psyche.

**By Todd C. Frankel, Shawn Boburg, Josh Dawsey,  
Ashley Parker and Alex Horton**

<https://wapo.st/3MpKY40>

*Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online*

**It is revered as a modern-day musket. It is reviled as a tool for mass killers.**

The AR-15 wasn't supposed to be a bestseller.

The rugged, powerful weapon was originally designed as a soldiers' rifle in the late 1950s. "An outstanding weapon with phenomenal

lethality,” an internal Pentagon report raved. It soon became standard issue for U.S. troops in the Vietnam War, where the weapon earned a new name: the M16.

But few gunmakers saw a semiautomatic version of the rifle — with its shrouded barrel, pistol grip and jutting ammunition magazine — as a product for ordinary people. It didn’t seem suited for hunting. It seemed like overkill for home defense. Gun executives doubted many buyers would want to spend their money on one.

The industry’s biggest trade shows banished the AR-15 to the back. The National Rifle Association and other industry allies were focused on promoting traditional rifles and handguns. Most gun owners also shunned the AR-15, dismissing it as a “black rifle” that broke from the typical wood-stocked long guns that were popular at the time.

“We’d have NRA members walk by our booth and give us the finger,” said Randy Luth, the founder of gunmaker DPMS, one of the earliest companies to market AR-15s.

Today, the AR-15 is the best-selling rifle in the United States, industry figures indicate. About 1 in 20 U.S. adults — or roughly 16 million people — own at least one AR-15, according to polling data from The Washington Post and Ipsos.

Almost every major gunmaker now produces its own version of the weapon. The modern AR-15 dominates the walls and websites of gun dealers.

The AR-15 has gained a polarizing hold on the American imagination. Its unmistakable silhouette is used as a political statement emblazoned on T-shirts and banners and, among a handful of conservative members of Congress, on silver lapel





The AR-15 is prominent at the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival, a gun rights event held in Greeley, Pa., in October. (Photos by Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

pins. One Republican lawmaker, Rep. Barry Moore of Alabama, introduced a bill in February to declare the AR-15 the “National Gun of America.”

It also has become a stark symbol of the nation’s gun violence epidemic. Ten of the 17 deadliest U.S. mass shootings since 2012 have involved AR-15s.

### Ten of the seventeen deadliest mass killings in the U.S. since 2012 involved AR-15s

	Place	Year	Weapon	Dead
1	<b>Las Vegas</b>	2017	<b>AR-15*</b>	60
2	Orlando	2016	MCX rifle	49
3	<b>Newtown, Conn.</b>	2012	<b>AR-15*</b>	27
4	<b>Sutherland Springs, Tex.</b>	2017	<b>AR-15*</b>	25**
5	El Paso	2019	AK-47	23
6	<b>Uvalde, Tex.</b>	2022	<b>AR-15</b>	21
7	<b>Parkland, Fla.</b>	2018	<b>AR-15</b>	17
8	<b>San Bernardino, Calif.</b>	2015	<b>AR-15*</b>	14
9	Thousand Oaks, Calif.	2018	Handgun	12
10	Virginia Beach	2019	Handgun	12
11	<b>Aurora, Colo.</b>	2012	<b>AR-15*</b>	12
12	Washington Navy Yard, D.C.	2013	Shotgun, handgun	12
13	Monterey Park, Calif.	2023	Handgun	11
14	<b>Pittsburgh</b>	2018	<b>AR-15*</b>	11
15	Santa Fe, Tex.	2018	Shotgun, handgun	10
16	<b>Boulder, Colo.</b>	2021	<b>AR-15</b>	10
17	<b>Buffalo</b>	2022	<b>AR-15</b>	10

\* This shooting involved more weapons than just an AR-15.

\*\*Including a pregnant woman

Sources: The Associated Press, USA Today, Northeastern University Mass Killing Database

This transformation — from made-for-combat weapon to mass-market behemoth and cultural flash point — is the product of a sustained and intentional effort that has forged an American icon.

A Washington Post investigation found that the AR-15's rise to dominance over the past two decades was sparked by a dramatic reversal in strategy by the country's biggest gun companies to invest in a product that many in the industry saw as anathema to their culture and traditions.

The Post review — based on interviews with 16 current and former industry executives, some of them talking publicly in depth for the

first time, along with internal documents and public filings that describe the changes in previously unknown detail — found that the U.S. firearms industry came to embrace the gun's political and cultural significance as a marketing advantage as it grasped for new revenue.

The shift began after the 2004 expiration of a federal assault weapons ban that had blocked the sales of many semiautomatic rifles. A handful of manufacturers saw a chance to ride a post-9/11 surge in military glorification while also stoking a desire among new gun owners to personalize their weapons with tactical accessories.

“We made it look cool,” Luth said. “The same reason you buy a Corvette.”

Through it all, even after repeated mass killings involving the AR-15 that accounted for some of the nation's darkest moments, efforts in Congress to resurrect an assault weapons ban repeatedly fizzled.

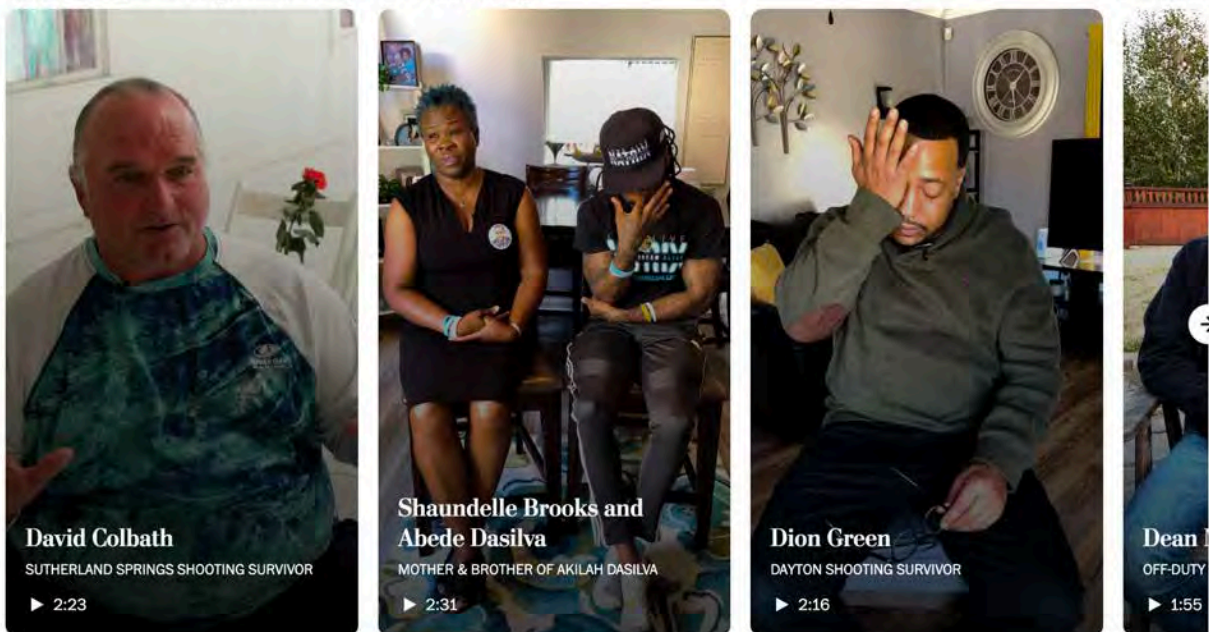
Calls by Democratic politicians to renew the ban fell short, with some in their own party voting against it at key moments. Almost no Republican would even entertain the idea. President Donald Trump briefly considered pushing for a ban, asking aides at one point why anyone needed an AR-15, but backed away after advisers warned he would anger his base as well as the NRA.

“The protection of the AR-15 has become the number one priority for the gun lobby,” said Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), a vocal supporter of stronger gun laws. He added: “It makes it harder to push this issue on the table because the gun lobby does so much messaging around it.”



Free from congressional scrutiny, the AR-15 has become a consumer product like none other — a barometer of fear and a gauge of political identity, its market success driven by the divisions it sows.

### What it's like to experience an AR-15 shooting



Videos by Jon Gerberg

While handguns are involved in the bulk of U.S. gun homicides — responsible for 90 percent of the deaths in cases where details are available, compared to less than 5 percent for rifles, the FBI says — AR-15 sales jump the most with each school shooting and contentious presidential campaign.

They soared in the run-up to the election of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 and after the mass killings at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., in 2012 and a high school in Parkland, Fla., in 2018, and again ahead of the turbulent 2020 presidential election.

Today, the industry estimates that at least 20 million AR-15s are stored and stashed across the country.

More than 13.7 million of those have been manufactured by U.S. gunmakers just since the Newtown massacre in late 2012, with those sales generating roughly \$11 billion in revenue, according to a Post analysis of industry estimates through 2020, the most recently available data. In other words, at least two-thirds of these guns have been made in just the past decade.

Supporters of the AR-15 say its popularity reflects its legitimacy as a tool for law-abiding people. “This firearm is lawfully owned by millions of Americans — used in shooting competitions, for recreational purposes, hunting and home protection,” said NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam.

Others say this was not the original idea behind the gun.

Eugene Stoner, a World War II veteran who invented the AR-15 in the late 1950s while working at Armalite, a small engineering firm in Hollywood, had no interest in civilians using his invention, said C. Reed Knight, who owns a Florida gunmaking company and considers Stoner his mentor.

“He looked at this thing as only for the military side of the house,” Knight said. Stoner, who died in 1997, thought his invention was past its prime by the mid-1990s, Knight said. He added that Stoner would have been horrified by the idea that “he invented the tool of all this carnage in the schools.”

Harry Falber, a former executive at Smith & Wesson, one of the country’s best-known firearms brands, saw how Stoner’s invention changed the gun industry. The AR-15’s success came at a huge price, he said.

“The firearms industry, in the aggregate, is very small,” Falber told The Post. “And look at the havoc it wreaks.”

## A firearm initially unintended for civilians



Early versions of the AR-15 were sent to Vietnam, which proved to be a testing ground for the new rifles. The weapon later became standard issue and designated the M16. (Horst Faas/AP)

Smith & Wesson made its name with handguns, such as Dirty Harry's "Feeling Lucky?" six-shooter.

The company had never mass-produced a rifle in its storied history stretching to 1852.

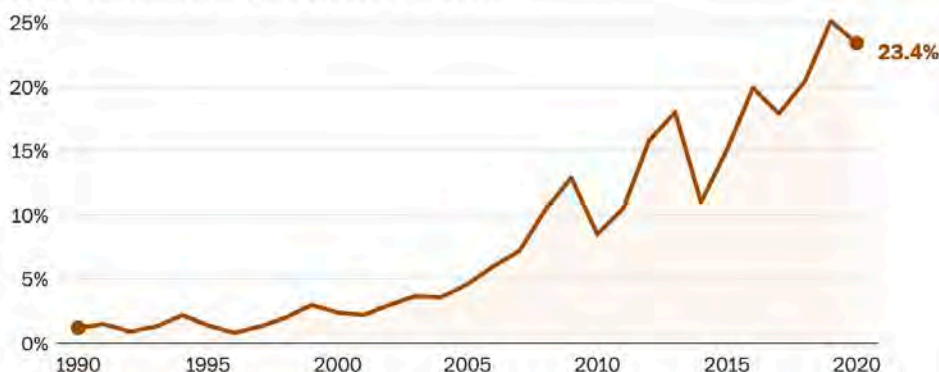
That began to change in 2005.

It was a tough time for the firearms industry. Gun sales had been flat for several years, according to federal background check data, the best available proxy for the number of firearms sold. Data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives shows that American gunmakers produced fewer pistols, revolvers, rifles and shotguns in 2005 than they had five years earlier.



### Rise in production of the AR-15

AR-15s, which accounted for 1.2 percent of all manufactured U.S. guns in 1990, made up 23.4 percent of all guns produced in 2020.



Numbers as share of total firearms manufactured.

Source: National Shooting Sports Foundation and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

At Smith & Wesson, executives were looking around for new lines of business when, corporate filings show, a company survey detected strong consumer interest in one gun it didn't make: a tactical rifle.

"The long gun market is a terrific opportunity," Michael Golden, then the company's chief executive, told financial analysts in August 2005.

And the power of the Smith & Wesson brand meant "we have got one foot in the door," he said.

Neither Smith & Wesson nor Golden, who is no longer with the company, responded to multiple requests for comment.

The market for tactical rifles, such as the AR-15, was still largely untapped. None of the big gunmakers made one.

The AR-15 — Armalite Rifle Model 15 — was different from other military rifles, which had always used big, heavy rounds.



The M16 drew complaints that it was prone to jamming. But the gun won over military leaders. (Photos by AP)

Designed around the Pentagon's desire for a lightweight weapon to match Soviet rifles such as the AK-47, the AR-15 fired small bullets at very fast speeds. The higher velocity meant the tiny projectiles became unstable when they penetrated a human body, tumbling through flesh to create devastating wounds. But the real innovation was the addition of a small tube to redirect the gas from fired cartridges. This dampened recoil, making it easier to keep steady aim on a target.

The U.S. military started using the rifle during the Vietnam War, with Colt — which had acquired the gun's patent rights from Armalite — winning the contract to produce the M16. The new gun was met by complaints that it was prone to jamming, even mid-firefight, until Colt revamped the design. Despite its mixed success, the new gun won over military leaders.

Colt held exclusive rights to the semiautomatic, civilian version of the AR-15 until 1977, when the patent expired. Then, other gunmakers could make and sell AR-15s of their own.

Most in the gun industry remained wary. For decades, the AR-15 was regarded as an outsider. Then came the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

As the U.S. military was sent to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, gunmakers looked to play off the conflict-zone images of soldiers in tactical gear holding M16 and M4 carbine rifles. The next best thing for civilians was buying an AR-15.

“There has never been a better accidental advertising campaign in history,” said Doug Painter, a former president of the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), a firearms industry lobbying group.

Smith & Wesson's first AR-15 was unveiled to the public in February 2006 at the industry's marquee annual convention, the Shot Show in Las Vegas. It was called the M&P 15.

While the name indicated the gun was for professionals — “M” for military and “P” for police — the company always had its eyes on the consumer market, according to corporate filings and statements from executives. Golden told financial analysts a few months after the M&P 15's debut that “our intent when we launched the new tactical rifle was to first penetrate the consumer market.”



Many gun company executives saw military and police sales as less profitable, due to lower prices and precise specifications, according to documents and interviews. But they were still important because of the “halo effect,” as a 2009 document prepared for Smith & Wesson called it, in which buyers would be attracted to what they saw professionals using.

The consumer “does pay attention to that,” a Smith & Wesson executive at the time, James Debney, would later explain to financial analysts in 2016.



Images of soldiers using M16s and M4s in Afghanistan and Iraq influenced how gunmakers marketed the AR-15. (Photos by David Guttenfelder/AP)

The M&P 15 was a hit. Smith & Wesson reported revenue from this line of tactical rifles more than quintupled in the gun's first five full years on the market — from \$12.8 million to \$75.1 million.

Other big gunmakers soon followed Smith & Wesson's lead.

New Hampshire-based Sig Arms, later renamed Sig Sauer, said in late 2006 that it planned to make an AR-15 — soon after the firm had been “about two seconds away from imploding,” chief executive Ron Cohen later told Management Today.

The new rifle was credited with helping save the company. Sig Sauer did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Wall Street noticed the sales blitz, too.

A private equity firm called Cerberus Capital Management had rolled up several gunmakers into a single conglomerate called Freedom Group. In late 2007, it purchased AR-15 maker DPMS, which was bringing in nearly \$100 million in annual sales, said Luth, its founder.

“They saw the AR-15 as the cash cow, which it was,” Luth said.

The change in attitudes toward the AR-15 occurred with “mind-boggling” speed, recalled Ryan Busse, who wrote about his turn from gun industry executive to critic in his 2021 book “Gunfight.”

The AR-15 was suddenly being celebrated after years of being widely viewed with suspicion, Busse said. Gunmakers were no longer avoiding the gun that many had once regarded as the kind of weapon that society would disdain.

He recalled the pressure within the industry to either get on board with the AR-15 or keep quiet. In 2007, prominent hunting writer

and TV host Jim Zumbo lost his industry jobs after calling for a ban on hunting with AR-15s. His fate became a watchword: Cross the AR-15 and you might get Zumboed. Zumbo did not respond to requests for comment.

“Nobody thought AR-15s were a good idea just a couple years ago,” Busse said. “And then you couldn’t criticize them without getting fired.”

## A marketplace and rebrand for the AR-15



Barack Obama at an election night gathering in Chicago in 2008. Sales of AR-15s soared in the run-up to his election. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images )

In 2008, economic crisis and political upheaval bolstered the AR-15’s market appeal, according to several industry insiders, as the stock market collapsed under the weight of soured mortgage securities and the country elected its first Black president, a Democrat portrayed by conservatives as an anti-gun radical.



Obama's victory created an opening for pro-gun groups to tease the potential for a new assault weapons ban — a claim that industry executives have credited with energizing AR-15 sales.

In 2008, when growing demand led U.S. gunmakers to increase production of all firearms by 15 percent, AR-15 production rose by 65 percent, according to government and industry figures. These AR-15s were rapidly becoming a larger share of the overall firearms market — reaching 10 percent of all guns made that year for the first time.



Obama's election in 2008 spurred gun sales, as pro-gun groups teased the potential for a new assault weapons ban. (George Frey/Bloomberg News, LM Otero/AP, Joe Raedle/Getty Images, Eric S. Swist/Houston Chronicle/AP)

Jeff Buchanan, then-chief financial officer at Smith & Wesson, recalled several years later at a business conference that Obama spurred sales “because he was a pronounced liberal” and “people buy because they are afraid of future legislation.”

Obama was mockingly crowned 2009’s “gun salesman of the year” by the gun-friendly news service Outdoor Wire.

That same year, in what many industry insiders saw as a watershed moment, another legendary American gunmaker, Ruger, entered the AR-15 market with its SR-556. The Southport, Conn.-based company had a reputation for high-end firearms. Its corporate motto was “Arms Makers for Responsible Citizens.”

Michael Fifer, the gunmaker’s CEO at the time, described to financial analysts in 2009 how Ruger brought in roughly \$200 from each handgun — but each AR-15-style rifle brought in \$1,000.

“That’s kind of a 5-to-1 ratio there,” Fifer said.

Ruger declined to comment through its general counsel.

AR-15 fans saw Ruger’s new rifle as validation of a once-taboo gun.

“There is no better illustration for this change than the Evil Black Rifle itself which has just joined the Ruger product offering,” Steve Johnson wrote on his popular Firearm Blog, using a sarcastic name popular with gun owners for AR-15s.

Getting comfortable with the AR-15, industry allies worked to soften the image of the “black rifle.”

NSSF executives recalled in interviews with The Post that they bemoaned that the public mistakenly thought the “AR” stood for “assault rifle.”

“We should not cede the rhetorical high ground to our political enemies,” Larry Keane, the NSSF’s general counsel, recalled saying during a 2009 meeting.

They brainstormed ways to rebrand the gun and win over traditional hunters.

“I just said, ‘It’s a modern sporting rifle,’” recalled Painter, then the NSSF president. “And there the phrase stuck.”

The NSSF just needed to persuade others to use the term, which it shortened to “MSR.”

Glenn Sapir, then the NSSF’s director of editorial services, recalled that executives pressed gunmakers and industry publications to adopt the name. It slowly began popping up in gun magazines and catalogues. Companies used it during earnings calls. Gun owners were given pocket fact cards with the preferred talking points.

A four-page ad from the NSSF’s foundation spelled out the campaign.

“Some hunters look askance at AR-style rifles, and that’s understandable,” read the ad in the November 2009 issue of Outdoor Life magazine. “They don’t look like any type of rifle they, their dads or granddads ever carried into the woods. Looks can be deceiving, however, and in the case of AR-platform rifles, they certainly are.”

Some AR-15 supporters saw the MSR campaign as a phony attempt to make the black rifle seem less ominous — even though what many loved most about it was the threatening look.

“The true AR enthusiasts, they kind of saw through it,” Luth said. “It stuck, but not with the true believers.”



## How gunmakers craft ‘realistic’ gaming experiences



An attendee plays “Call of Duty: Black Ops III” during the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles in 2015. (Patrick T. Fallon/ Bloomberg News)

Video games introduced a new generation to the AR-15 through popular first-person shooter games such as “Call of Duty.” Players got to simulate using military weapons with down-to-the-bolt realism.

The firearms industry was eager to help out.

In 2010, representatives of two gun manufacturers and a video game maker converged at an outdoor shooting range north of Las Vegas. Employees from two Freedom Group subsidiaries deployed a stockpile of weapons, including AR-15s, while technicians from Infinity Ward, developer of “Call of Duty,” carefully recorded the sounds, according to participants. Infinity Ward’s parent company, Activision Blizzard, declined to comment.

No detail, even the click of inserting a magazine, was too small to capture, participants said.

“We went through all the guns slowly and methodically, shooting until they got the quality sound they needed,” recalled Cory Weisnicht, who was an employee with a Freedom Group company tasked with firing the guns at the Clark County Shooting Complex.

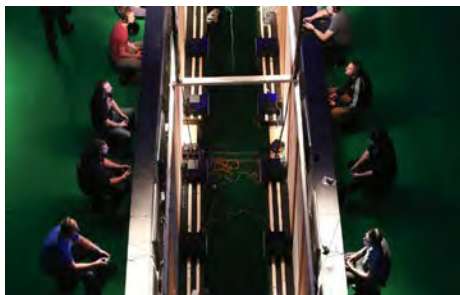
The meeting reflected a move by some gunmakers at the time to strike licensing agreements with gaming firms to feature certain firearms, according to lawyers and experts, along with interviews and documents obtained by The Post.

“We wanted the brand exposure,” said a former employee of a Freedom Group subsidiary familiar with the Las Vegas meeting who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal company strategy.

The push for realism in shooting video games was influential for some buyers, retailers said. Many gun owners bought real-world versions of the firearms they used online, said Lucas Botkin, founder of the gun gear outfitter T.Rex Arms. And they could accessorize their guns in the same way.

Botkin recalled how he fixed up his first AR-15.

“I built it out very similarly to what I had in ‘Modern Warfare,’” he said, referring to the M4 in a game in the Call of Duty series. “It was my reference point.”



First-person shooter games such as “Call of Duty” introduced a new generation to the AR-15. (Jae C. Hong/AP, Paula Bronstein/Getty Images, Stephen Yang/Bloomberg News, Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg News)

The AR-15 also was winning over new fans in other ways.

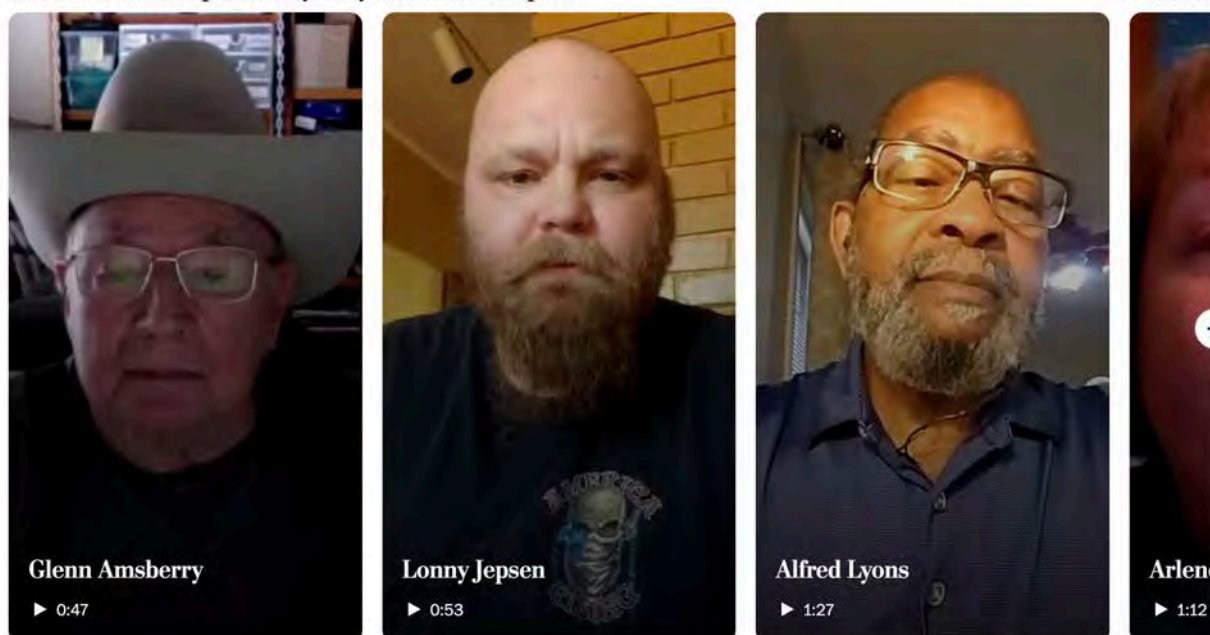
In the Philadelphia suburbs, Bill Shanley saw his first AR-15 up close when one of his adult sons came home with one in 2010. Shanley was in his mid-50s and had been raised around guns. He’d taught his own children how to shoot, too. But he’d never given much thought to the AR-15.



“It never would’ve occurred to me to get a gun like that,” Shanley recalled.

Father and son took the AR-15 to a gun range. Shanley couldn’t believe how loud it was, even with ear protection, the sound crashing off the range overhang. But the black rifle had little recoil. It was fun to shoot. Three shots with his old hunting rifle bruised his shoulder. Fifty rounds with the AR-15 felt like a breeze. Shanley was sold. He soon bought his own, a Smith & Wesson M&P 15.

#### AR-15 owners explain why they have the weapon



Videos by Jon Gerberg

The AR-15 changed Shanley’s thinking about these kinds of weapons. Now, he saw them as no different from the traditional firearms owned by his great-grandfather or the shotgun his uncle gave him when he was a teenager. His dad used to keep a shotgun at home for protection. Shanley, a manufacturing sales manager, started keeping an AR-15 in his bedroom.

“The AR is the modern-day musket,” he said.

## An uneasiness over AR-15 marketing



Former Smith & Wesson marketing executive Harry Falber at his home in Weston, Conn. “A consumer wants to be identified with the product they are using, and a gun is no different,” he said. (George Etheredge for The Washington Post)

Harry Falber knew little about the gun world when he joined Smith & Wesson, first as a consultant and then as head of licensing at the gunmaker’s headquarters in Springfield, Mass.

But he knew how to sell big consumer brands after years of working on ads at Volvo, Polaroid and Hallmark.

“A consumer wants to be identified with the product they are using, and a gun is no different,” said Falber, speaking publicly in detail about his tenure at Smith & Wesson for the first time.

Falber thought Smith & Wesson's line of M&P firearms was "a brilliant marketing name." And he loved Smith & Wesson's strong reputation and long history.

But he said he struggled with how to sell a military weapon to civilians.

"I didn't care what you did with it," he said. "It was still a black gun."

In late 2010, after he had been with the company for about a year, Falber commissioned a study comparing two Smith & Wesson ads that had recently appeared in Guns & Ammo magazine, according to internal documents obtained by The Post.

One showed Falber's vision for selling guns. It featured a silver revolver and a black pistol, side by side against the light backdrop of a range target, under the block type "FINE-TUNED MACHINES."

The other ad showed what looked like a police SWAT team officer, with dark gloves and tactical helmet, pointing an AR-15 at some unseen target in the distance. "THE CHOSEN ONE," it read.

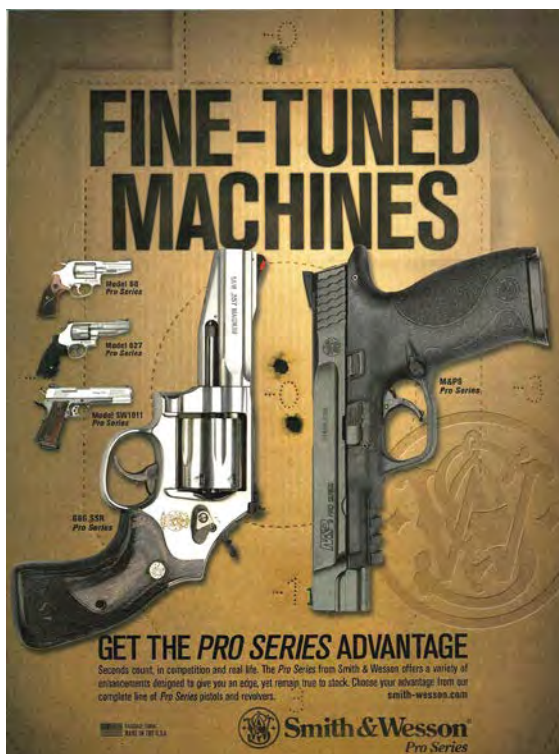
Consumers gave higher scores to the "FINE-TUNED MACHINES" ad, according to the report, which recommended that future ads be tested "to maximize message, positive image, and consumer motivation."

Falber thought he had won the argument. He wanted to stress craftsmanship.

But Smith & Wesson went in the direction of "THE CHOSEN ONE."

"They went full-bore into a dark, dark milieu," Falber said.





In 2010, one Smith & Wesson ad focused on craftsmanship, while another ad had a military and police theme. (Images obtained by The Washington Post)

Smith & Wesson was not alone in adopting messages that made Falber uneasy.

Bushmaster was running ads for its AR-15 with the line “CONSIDER YOUR MAN CARD REISSUED.” Daniel Defense posted social media ads showing its AR-15 with a helmeted soldier in a war zone under “USE WHAT THEY USE.”

“It was just appealing to the worst levels of what you can conjure up in someone’s mind,” Falber said. “And we’d been nurturing this.”

Daniel Defense declined to comment.

By 2011, the AR-15 and similar firearms enjoyed warm welcomes at the gun industry’s biggest events. They were the stars. Half the

exhibition space at the annual Shot Show was now occupied by AR-15 gunmakers and tactical-equipment makers — even as the convention itself had doubled in size to 500,000 square feet, said Painter, the former NSSF president.

Every exhibitor clamored to be next to the big rifles because that's where the crowds were.

“The best analogy is the AR rifle was like the kids who wore their baseball hats turned around,” Painter said. “It wasn’t cool until suddenly it became cool.”



Falber displays a Smith & Wesson knife case at his home. (Photos by George Etheredge for The Washington Post)

But Falber wanted out.

“I just couldn’t stomach driving up there anymore,” he said.

In 2012, he quit Smith & Wesson.

The massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary came two months later.

A little after 9:30 a.m. on Dec. 14, 2012, a man used a Bushmaster AR-15 to shoot his way into the school in Newtown. The gunman fired 154 rounds in minutes, striking children who were just 6 and 7 years old multiple times, according to a Connecticut state's attorney's report. Twenty children and six school employees were killed.

Falber lived 20 miles from Newtown. His wife worked in education. He could imagine the scene inside. He was in disbelief. He took no comfort in the fact that the rifle used in the massacre was made by Bushmaster and not Smith & Wesson.

"It ripped me apart," he said.

## Mass killings, politics fuel division on AR-15



A school bus carries people to a memorial vigil for the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, on Dec. 16, 2012, in Newtown, Conn. (David Goldman/AP)



The deadliest mass killing at a K-12 school in U.S. history focused attention like never before on the destructive power of the AR-15.

With Newtown, the weapon so meticulously marketed as a “sporting rifle” had been used as a killing machine that destroyed the bodies of young victims.

Cerberus, the private equity giant, soon announced plans to sell off Freedom Group — the conglomerate it had assembled as a big bet on the AR-15’s success and the owner of the Bushmaster brand. Cerberus declined to comment. One of its companies at the time owned Bushmaster, maker of the weapon used in the shooting, which would eventually defend its firearms advertising as lawful in a lawsuit filed by Newtown families alleging the gunmaker’s marketing was aimed at troubled young men.

Dick’s Sporting Goods immediately stopped selling AR-15s at its flagship stores during what the company called “this time of national mourning.”

Collaboration between gunmakers and the gaming industry also came to a quick end, said Glen Schofield, co-director of “Call of Duty: Modern Warfare.”

“We all kind of want to leave that era behind us,” he said. “Every time there was a mass shooting we got blamed.”

Days after the shooting, Obama called for new gun laws, citing public support for banning “military-style assault weapons” and high-capacity magazines. But any notion that the tragedy in Newtown would compel the politically influential NRA to compromise evaporated a week later. Wayne LaPierre, the group’s executive vice president, unveiled a school security plan that boiled down to his mantra of “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”



After the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, Obama said that the nation must take “meaningful action” to stem such violence. (Jessica Hill/AP, Peter Foley/European Pressphoto Agency, Kristoffer Tripplaar/Sipa/Pool/Bloomberg News)

NRA leaders feared there would be momentum for a ban, and they even huddled with companies and lobbyists to begin plotting strategy, former officials said.

But the focus on banning the AR-15 only made the gun more popular with firearms enthusiasts, NRA leaders later said.

“People who never planned to buy one went out and got one,” said Grover Norquist, an anti-tax activist who was on the NRA board. “It was an f-you to the left.”

David Keene, who was the NRA’s president at the time, said that was the moment gun rights became a top issue for Republicans — with the AR-15 at the center.

“It became a political symbol,” said Keene, who also served as the longtime chairman of the American Conservative Union.

The NRA’s embrace of the AR-15 was also practical, said Joshua Powell, a former longtime NRA adviser and chief of staff to LaPierre. NRA membership numbers were declining, but AR-15 owners remained loyal. Powell said the organization wanted the rifle to be viewed as “America’s gun.”

“The heart and soul of the NRA membership was hardcore AR folks,” Powell said.

The move to defend the AR-15 was off-putting to some NRA members, such as John Goodwin, who worked as an NRA lobbyist in the late 2000s and now belongs to a gun safety advocacy group called 97Percent. Discussions about the AR-15 sounded nothing like how he talked about the shotgun he used for bird hunting.

“They make it sound like the AR-15 is a religious relic,” Goodwin said.

The AR-15’s resilience post-Newtown was clear weeks later when the organizer of a major gun event in Harrisburg, Pa., the Eastern Sports and Outdoor Show, was forced to cancel amid the backlash from its decision to ban displays of the weapon.



“We’re not going to go into business with people saying you can’t have this gun or that gun,” Tommy Millner, CEO of the outdoor retailing giant Cabela’s at the time, recalled saying when he pulled the company’s sponsorship.

Any push for a new assault weapons ban seemed destined to fail in Congress. And gun sales were soaring again.

In December 2012, the same month as the Newtown shooting, monthly gun background checks hit what at the time was an all-time high of 2.8 million and stayed elevated for months.

Stores were picked clean of their AR-15 inventory. Prices jumped.

While the government doesn’t break out AR-15 sales, the industry group NSSF estimated that companies produced at least 3.2 million AR-15s firearms in 2012 and 2013 alone — more than they’d made in the entire previous decade.

When a new assault weapons ban finally came to a vote in the Democratic-led Senate soon after Newtown, it didn’t come close to passing — earning just 40 votes.

Just one Republican, Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois, voted in favor. But even more galling to gun-control advocates was that just 38 of the chamber’s 54 Democrats voted in favor.

After Congress failed to act, a handful of states, such as Connecticut, New York and Maryland, moved to pass their own assault weapons bans.

## A firearm at the center of rallies, protests and ads



A person armed with a rifle joins demonstrators in 2019 at the Ohio Statehouse to protest gun-control legislation. (Matthew Hatcher/Getty Images)

In March 2013, C.J. Grisham, then an Army master sergeant, decided to sling an AR-15 over his shoulder and take a walk with his son along a dirt road in tiny Temple, Tex. He wasn't breaking the law, but a police officer stopped him.

"Some reason why you have this?" the officer asked, grabbing the rifle.

"Cause I can," Grisham said.

The officer drew his pistol and pinned Grisham to the hood.

The encounter ended peacefully, but it was caught on video and posted online. Almost overnight, Grisham, who was later

convicted of misdemeanor police interference, became the face of a movement.

“It wasn’t that I was carrying a rifle,” recalled Grisham, a former member of the Proud Boys, a far-right group with a history of violence. “It was the fact I was carrying *that* rifle.”

Grisham went on to create Open Carry Texas, a group advocating for carrying weapons in public. Open-carry demonstrations had



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gun rights activists in Cleveland in 2016; Austin in 2016; Arlington, Va., in 2010; and Austin in 2015. (Victor J. Blue/Bloomberg News, Erich Schlegel/Getty Images, Win McNamee/Getty Images, Drew Anthony Smith/Getty Images)



been cropping up in conservative states since the 2008 election, typically with holstered pistols, but Grisham's group pushed a new tactic. Its members made a show of carrying hunting rifles, shotguns and AR-15s as they visited places like Sonic, Chipotle and Home Depot.

Even the NRA was uneasy about the brash, public displays. It called the Texas protests "downright weird." But so many gun owners sided with Grisham that the NRA quickly flip-flopped, saying its original opposition had been a mistake.

It became increasingly common to see people openly armed with black rifles at protests and political rallies — their AR-15s gripped in their hands or slung over their shoulders. The practice would take off on the far right, as armed demonstrators would play a prominent role in white-supremacist gatherings such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017, as well as protests in 2020 against pandemic restrictions and counterdemonstrations against racial justice activists.

The AR-15 seemed to be everywhere. Its cultural profile was rising, not unlike the way the Soviet-made Kalashnikov became a symbol of insurgency and freedom for many around the world.

Companies such as Black Rifle Coffee Co. launched. Youth baseball teams ran AR-15 raffles as fundraisers. Companies offered free AR-15s with a new roof or new car, like banks giving away toasters for new checking accounts.

More political candidates were displaying AR-15s in campaign ads, too — and not just conservatives looking to impress their base. Jason Kander, an Army veteran and Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate in Missouri, put out a 2016 campaign ad that showed him assembling an AR-15 while blindfolded. Kander did not respond to a request for comment.

In 2016, amid rising political tensions with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump vying for the White House, the U.S. gun industry reported that it had crossed an important threshold: It produced more than 2 million AR-15s for the first time, 63 percent more than were manufactured the year before, according to NSSF estimates.

The AR-15 had truly entered the mainstream.

## America's angst with the AR-15



Manny and Patricia Oliver lost their son Joaquin, 17, in the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Manny Oliver tended to view guns like an outsider.

Ever since moving to Florida from his native Venezuela years ago, Oliver had noticed how people in his new home tied guns to notions of freedom and patriotism.

“In America, they treat guns like they are their salvation,” Oliver said.

He didn’t understand it. But like many people, he didn’t feel the need to.

By 2018, he and his wife, Patricia, had settled near Parkland, Fla., an affluent suburb outside Fort Lauderdale. Gun violence rarely intruded, except when mass shootings made the news. Oliver recalled talking with his teenage son, Joaquin, about the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, where a gunman with a Sig Sauer MCX semiautomatic rifle killed 49 people. And Joaquin had been rattled by the 2017 Las Vegas shooting — where a gunman used an arsenal that included AR-15s to kill 60 people — because his mom had been there on a business trip just a week earlier.

It seemed so random, Oliver said.

Four months later, on Valentine’s Day 2018, a gunman walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland armed with a Smith & Wesson M&P 15 and killed 17 people. Joaquin, 17, died after being shot multiple times, according to testimony at the gunman’s trial.

The shooting ignited a new kind of anti-gun activism that was intensely personal, such as the student-led March for Our Lives that drew hundreds of thousands of protesters to the National Mall a month later. They were grieving. And they were angry.

“I refused to think this is a normal thing that happens,” Oliver said.

He and his wife founded a gun violence prevention group called Change the Ref and focused on attention-grabbing projects such as renting a billboard outside Smith & Wesson’s headquarters in Massachusetts with a picture of their son.





The student-led March for Our Lives drew hundreds of thousands of protesters to the National Mall in D.C. in March 2018, the month after the Parkland shooting. (Photos by Salwan Georges and Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

The Parkland shooting also highlighted America's growing unease with the AR-15.

Kroger raised the minimum age to buy guns and ammunition from 18 to 21. Walmart — which had quietly stopped selling AR-15s three years earlier, in 2015 — did the same.

Top NRA officials worked to persuade other retailers, such as Bass Pro Shops, not to pull AR-15s from their shelves, according to Powell, the group's former chief of staff.

"The gun folks will go nuts against you, and it's going to be incredibly bad for business, and it's going to get you a lot of bad press," Powell recalled NRA officials telling Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris. In other cases, Powell warned there would be NRA member boycotts.

Morris backed down, Powell said. "He understood who his customers were."

A representative for Bass Pro Shops said Morris had no "recollection" of the conversation. "Decisions on the products and services we offer have always been based on customer preferences in compliance with all federal, state and local laws," the spokesman said.

Unable to just move on, the shooting forced Oliver and his wife to reinvent their lives.

"We are not searching for happiness," he said. "I don't think we're ever going to be happy."

## An uptick in shootings and a stalemate on gun control



President Donald Trump — flanked by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and Andy Pollack, the father of a Parkland shooting victim — watches as Scarlett Lewis shows a photo of her slain son during a White House roundtable on school safety in December 2018. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Shortly after Parkland, President Donald Trump repeatedly floated the idea of supporting a new assault weapons ban.

He mentioned it on live television to one of the Senate's most vocal gun-control backers, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), and in a private meeting with Parkland families. His comments rattled NRA officials and some of his own advisers.

NRA representatives later warned Trump against taking action. "They came up here and said to him, the base is going to blow you up," according to a former official who sat in during a series of meetings with the NRA. They, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private interactions.



But Trump kept coming back to the idea, according to several former administration officials.

In the summer of 2019, after back-to-back mass shootings in Dayton, Ohio, and El Paso involving an AR-15-style pistol and an AKM-style rifle, Trump told aides that he wanted to ban AR-15s, according to people present for the statements.

“I don’t know why anyone needs an AR-15,” Trump told aides as he flew on Marine One to the White House in August 2019, according to a person who heard his comments.

As one former official put it in describing the real estate developer turned politician, “His reflexes were a New York liberal on guns. He doesn’t have knee-jerk conservative reflexes.”

But Trump was also petrified of the NRA and others taking him on, former advisers said, and heard from a number of advisers that it would be unpopular. Trump ultimately stopped entertaining the idea of working with Democrats on gun control later that year, when he was caught in a scandal over his now-infamous phone call with Ukraine’s president.

“F--- it, I’m not going to work with them on anything. They’re f---ing impeaching me,” Trump said in one Oval Office meeting, according to a participant.

Steven Cheung, a Trump spokesman, did not respond to detailed findings in this article but said that “there had been no bigger defender of the Second Amendment than President Trump.” He said that Trump had offered other proposals after mass shootings, such as adding security guards to schools and allowing teachers who are licensed to carry a weapon to do so.

Murphy, the Democratic senator from Connecticut and a participant in a White House meeting on a potential ban, described Trump's lack of action as a missed opportunity for an unusually powerful Republican leader. "I said this to Trump in that meeting: I think the Republican Party would have followed him wherever he went, and he ultimately decided to stand with the NRA," Murphy said.

But, Murphy said, the burst of post-Parkland activism transformed gun politics among Democrats. Many in the party, he said, started to see gun control as a cause that could energize their core voters — rather than fearing it as one that would rile up the right.

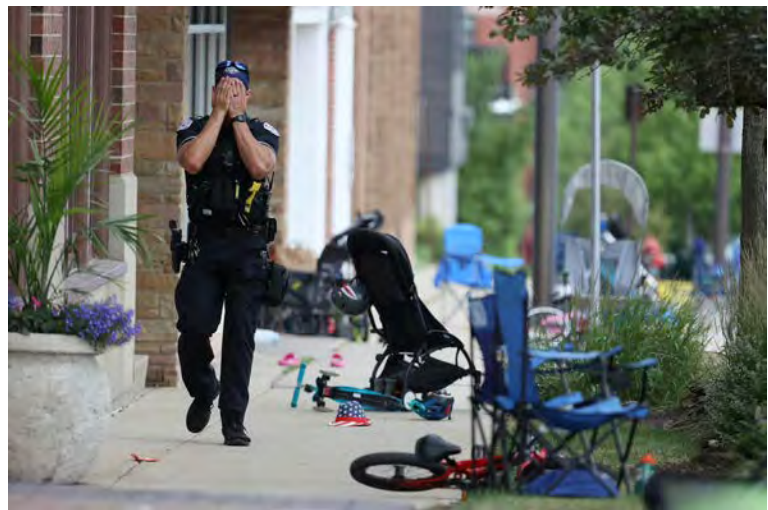
"For whatever reason those kids finally shamed the Democratic Party into running on this issue," Murphy said.

Several months after the Parkland shooting, one of the Democrats who had voted against an assault weapons ban in 2013 in the wake of Newtown announced he had changed his mind.

Sen. Mark R. Warner, who earned the NRA's support as Virginia's governor in the mid-2000s, represented a state that was now trending more liberal. He would go on to co-sponsor new proposed assault weapons bans in the Senate.

"While I was far from the deciding vote," Warner wrote of the post-Newtown legislation in a 2018 op-ed in The Post, "I have nevertheless wrestled with that 'no' vote ever since." Despite his own role in helping to defeat the ban, Warner described Congress's failure to act as part of a "sad pattern of dysfunction."

The AR-15, however, was about to reach new heights of popularity.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The aftermath of mass killings in Uvalde, Tex., in May; Buffalo the same month; Highland Park, Ill., in July; and Boulder, Colo., in March 2021. (Joshua Lott/The Washington Post, Matt Rourke/AP, Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune/AP, Rachel Woolf for The Washington Post)

In 2020, a year of pandemic lockdowns, racial justice protests and a bitterly fought presidential campaign, U.S. gunmakers produced about 2.5 million AR-15s, according to the NSSF. That added up to roughly 1 in 4 of all guns that ATF said were manufactured in the United States.

Helped by its line of M&P 15 rifles, Smith & Wesson saw its sales nearly double to a record \$1.1 billion, according to financial filings.



CEO Mark Smith described it as “the most successful year in the 169-year history of the company.”

One Smith & Wesson M&P 15 sold in 2020 ended up in the hands of Kyle Rittenhouse, the teenager who fatally shot two people and wounded a third during that summer’s racial justice protests in Kenosha, Wis.

Rittenhouse, later found not guilty based on claims of self-defense, explained during his trial why he chose an AR-15: “I thought it looked cool.” Rittenhouse could not be reached for comment.

The AR-15 was also especially alluring to the gunman who killed 10 Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo in May 2022.

“The AR-15 and its variants are very deadly when used properly,” he wrote in a manifesto filled with hateful vitriol. “Which is the reason I picked one.”

Ten days later, 19 schoolchildren and two adults were shot to death in Uvalde, Tex., with another AR-15, the Daniel Defense DDM4.

The string of attacks prompted President Biden, who as a senator had strongly supported the 1994 assault weapons ban, to promise a renewed effort to stop the sale of military-style weapons.

“For God’s sake, how much more carnage are we willing to accept?” Biden said in June.

Then, a gunman with a Smith & Wesson M&P 15 killed seven people at an Independence Day parade in Highland Park, Ill.

Later that month, executives from five gunmakers were called to Capitol Hill to answer questions about AR-15s. The hearing played

out in expected fashion. Democrats decried the gunmakers, the Republicans defended them, and the gun executives deflected.

“A firearm, any firearm, can be used for good or for evil,” said Christopher Killoy, chief executive at Ruger.

Smith & Wesson’s chief executive refused to show up.

A House Oversight report produced for the hearing spotlighted the money earned by the gun industry, saying that Ruger’s gross earnings from AR-15 rifles nearly tripled from 2019 to 2021 to more than \$103 million.

Two days later, the Democratic-led House passed a new assault weapons ban on a tight party-line vote of 217-213 — the first time the measure had been voted on in nearly three decades. But the Senate, also run by Democrats, never took action.

Amid the growing scrutiny, Smith & Wesson chief executive Mark Smith put out a statement claiming his company’s guns were not responsible for any crimes, but politicians and the media “are the ones to blame for the surge in violence and lawlessness.”

Smith’s comment was a revealing reminder of just how much the firearms industry had changed — from defender of a gun culture familiar to many Americans to a mass producer and leading champion of AR-15s.

That new legacy permeated this year’s Shot Show, held in January in Las Vegas.

At the same event two decades ago, AR-15s were shown only in restricted areas in the back.

This year, Smith & Wesson's sprawling exhibit was surrounded by other gunmakers offering their own AR-15s, such as Mossberg, Black Rain Ordnance and Savage Arms. Smith & Wesson promoted its latest addition to its AR-15 lineup: the M&P Volunteer.

The closed-door trade event was open only to people with industry ties. But photographs and video reviewed by The Post showed racks of matte black Volunteer rifles in different configurations, such as the M&P 15 Volunteer XV Pro, with a suggested retail price of \$1,569.

Back home in Connecticut, Falber, the former marketing executive, still admired the "M&P" name. But "Volunteer" felt different to him. He shrugged off the suggestion that it was just a nod to Smith & Wesson's decision to begin moving its headquarters from liberal Massachusetts to conservative Tennessee, whose nickname is the Volunteer State.

Putting that name on such a powerful rifle evoked scenes of armed civilian patrols along the country's southern border and at racial justice protests, Falber said.

Maybe, he said, it will help Smith & Wesson sell the AR-15. "But," he added, "how many more guns can they possibly sell?"

### **About this story**

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