

# **GUN OWNERS: SAFETY FIRST!**

## **BE A RESPONSIBLE GUN OWNER**

- Store it securely
- Always assume it's loaded
- Know how to use it
- Make your safety plan known

**REMEMBER:** Ignorance and carelessness are major causes of handgun accidents. Basic gun safety rules must be applied **ALL OF THE TIME**.

## **STORE GUNS SECURELY**

Keep it out of reach of children and irresponsible adults.

Identify a secure location to deter theft or unauthorized access (i.e., locked gun safe). Store gun unloaded, with ammunition in a separate location.

**REMEMBER:** If a child gains access to a firearm and causes injury or death, the owner of that firearm may face criminal charges.

*The Clackamas County Public Safety Training Center (PSTC) in Clackamas is great resource for gun owners with questions: [clackamas.us/sheriff/pstc.html](http://clackamas.us/sheriff/pstc.html)*

*Watch a county video on responsible gun ownership: [youtu.be/z2c8SKYLQbo](https://youtu.be/z2c8SKYLQbo)*

## **ALWAYS ASSUME A GUN IS LOADED**

- Never point a gun at anything you are not willing to destroy or kill
- Keep your finger out of the trigger guard until you are ready to fire
- Be sure of the target and what lies beyond

## **KNOW HOW TO USE IT**

- Obtain firearm training
- Practice using your gun regularly
- Handle guns only when completely sober:
  - no alcohol
  - no illegal drugs
  - no prescription drugs
- Never handle your gun when emotional

## **MAKE YOUR GUN SAFETY PLAN KNOWN**

- Decide who will have access
- Decide who will be taught fundamentals of gun safety
- Make sure all family members know the hazards weapons pose
- Determine how and where the gun and ammunition be stored
- Determine where the keys or combination will be stored
- Update the plan as children age or family circumstances change; review annually
- All family members should discuss and agree to the plan

Mt. Hood photo courtesy Oregon's Mt. Hood Territory

**BE SAFE  
BE SECURE  
BE SMART**



**ASK:**



**“IS THERE AN UNLOCKED GUN IN YOUR HOME?”**

Most parents ask basic safety questions if their child wants to play at an unfamiliar home:

- Will an adult be present?
- Do you know that my child is diabetic and/or allergic to peanuts/furry animals?
- Do you have a swimming pool?

The ASK Program urges you to add:

- **Do you have guns in the house? If so, are they loaded? Are they locked up and away from kids?**

Hiding guns and talking to kids are not enough. Kids are curious; if they find guns they're likely to play with them.

Before you send your child to another home, **ASK**. If you're uncertain about that home's safety, invite the kids to your home or a park.

Consider this:

- Approximately 90% of fatal firearm incidents involving children occur within a home. Forty percent of firearm incidents involve a firearm stored in the room in which the shooting occurs. (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/116/3/e370.full>)
- Forty-two percent of U.S. parents with guns keep at least one unlocked; 25% keep at least one loaded, and 14% keep one unlocked and loaded (Center to Prevent Youth Violence, 2011).

- An average of eight U.S. children and teens are shot every day. About 42 more are seriously injured. (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC, 2010; 2011).

**ASKING MAY FEEL AWKWARD, BUT CONSIDER IT A SMALL PRICE TO ENSURE YOUR CHILD'S SAFETY.**

- 97% of parents who owned a gun said they would not be offended if another parent asked about a gun in their homes. (GSG Parent Study, CPYV, 2011)

The American Academy of Pediatrics urges pediatricians to tell parents that safe storage and preventing access to guns will reduce injuries up to 70%, and guns in homes increase suicide risk among adolescents. [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

**MORE INFORMATION:**

- [AskingSavesKids.org](http://AskingSavesKids.org)
- [coef.ceasefireoregon.org](http://coef.ceasefireoregon.org)
- [ceasefireoregon.org](http://ceasefireoregon.org)
- COEF: 503-220-1669
- [info@ceasefireoregon.org](mailto:info@ceasefireoregon.org)
- [kidshootings.blogspot.com](http://kidshootings.blogspot.com)
- Bi-weekly gun violence prevention reports: [http://org2.salsalabs.com/org/5610/signup\\_page/supgv-join](http://org2.salsalabs.com/org/5610/signup_page/supgv-join)
- Kids and Guns, *Words vs. Actions*: <http://youtu.be/uNe6w4MlovE>
- [Cpyv.org](http://Cpyv.org) (Center to Prevent Youth Violence)



COEF offers free ASK presentations to PTAs and other community groups.

Ceasefire Oregon Education Foundation  
(COEF)

7327 SW Barnes Rd #316

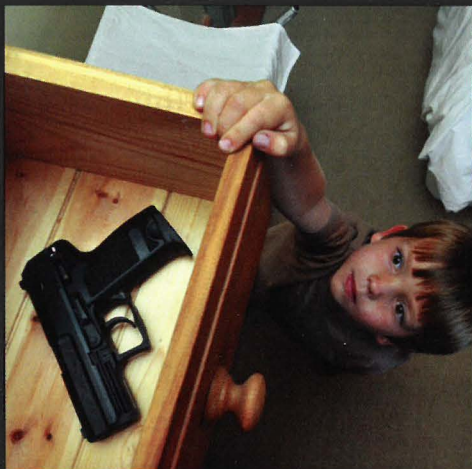
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[coef.ceasefireoregon.org](http://coef.ceasefireoregon.org)

## СПРОСИТЕ:



## ЕСТЬ ЛИ В ВАШЕМ ДОМЕ НЕЗАПЕРТЫЙ ПИСТОЛЕТ?

Если ребенок будет находиться в незнакомом доме, большинство родителей зададут обычные вопросы, касающиеся безопасности:

- Будут ли в доме находиться взрослые?
- Знаете ли вы, что у моего ребенка аллергия на арахис/домашних животных и/или у моего ребенка диабет?
- Есть ли у вас бассейн?

Программа «ASK» настоятельно советует добавить еще один вопрос:

- Есть ли в вашем доме оружие? Если да, заряжено ли оно? Находится ли оно в недоступном для детей месте?

Не достаточно просто спрятать оружие или поговорить с ребенком об этом. Дети любопытны. Если они найдут оружие, они наверняка захотят поиграть с ним.

Перед тем, как отправить своего ребенка в чужой дом, **СПРОСИТЕ**. Если вы не уверены в безопасности, пригласите детей к себе домой или в парк.

Подумайте над этим:

- Примерно 90% смертельных случаев использования оружия детьми происходят дома. 40% случаев использования оружия происходит в той же комнате, где оно хранилось. смертельным исходом (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/116/3/e370.full>)
- 42% родителей, имеющих оружие в США, держат как минимум одно оружие не запертым; 25% держат как минимум одно оружие заряженным, у 14% одно оружие заряжено и не заперто. (Данные центра по предотвращению насилия среди молодежи, 2011 год).

- В среднем каждый день в США 8 детей и подростков будут застрелены, около 42 получают серьезные ранения (Данные центра по предотвращению и контролю травм, CDC, 2010-2011).

**Вероятно, вам будет неудобно задавать такие вопросы, но помните, что это всего лишь небольшая цена за безопасность вашего ребёнка.**

- 97% родителей, владеющих оружием, не будут оскорблены вопросом других родителей о наличии в их доме оружия (GSG Parent Study, CPYV, 2011)

Американская педиатрическая академия настоятельно рекомендует педиатрам информировать родителей о том, что безопасное хранение и предотвращение доступа к оружию сократит травмы детей на 70%, а также о том, что наличие оружия в доме повышает риск суицида среди подростков. [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

## ДОПОЛНИТЕЛЬНАЯ ИНФОРМАЦИЯ

- [AskingSavesKids.org](http://AskingSavesKids.org)
- [coef.ceasefireoregon.org](http://coef.ceasefireoregon.org)
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- COEF: 503-220-1669
- [info@ceasefireoregon.org](mailto:info@ceasefireoregon.org)
- [kidshootings.blogspot.com](http://kidshootings.blogspot.com)
- Отчеты по предотвращению насилия с использованием оружия, выходящие раз в две недели:
- Дети и оружие, слова против действий: <http://youtu.be/uNe6w4MlovE>
- [Cruv.org](http://Cruv.org) (центр по предотвращению насилия среди молодежи - Center to Prevent Youth Violence)

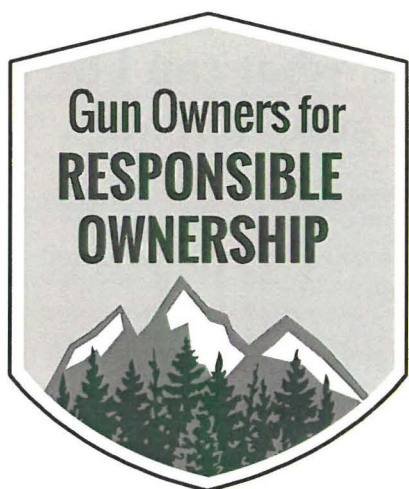
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COEF предлагает бесплатные презентации **ASK** для ассоциаций родителей и учителей и других общественных групп.

Образовательная организация штата Орегон по предотвращению огня (Ceasefire Oregon Education Foundation (COEF).

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## ***As Gun Owners, We Must Take the Lead to Reduce Gun Violence***

We believe our Second Amendment rights come with responsibilities and privileges.

The preservation of this right and privilege depends on our personal commitment to ensure the safe and responsible use of firearms.

We support common-sense efforts to reduce gun violence and promote gun safety.

### **Gun Violence is a Daily Reality in Oregon and It Must Stop**

Every year, more than 400 Oregonians die because of gun violence

Every 21 hours someone in Oregon is killed with a gun

82% of gun deaths in Oregon are suicides

24% of firearm homicides in Oregon involve intimate partner violence

In many mass shootings in Oregon and the Northwest, the shooter was able to access an unsecured or improperly stored firearm.

### **What Can We All Do Together To Help Reduce Gun Violence?**

Make ending gun violence your priority.

Talk with your friends and neighbors

ASK - If your children are visiting someone else's home, ASK "Do you have guns in the house? If so, are they loaded? Are they locked up and away from kids?"

Support common sense efforts to reduce gun violence such as requirements for universal background checks and safe and secure storage of firearms.

Join up! There are community organizations representing families, veterans, survivors, health professionals, and law enforcement all working together to end gun violence.

**Contact Us:** [www.responsibleownership.org](http://www.responsibleownership.org), [info@responsibleownership.org](mailto:info@responsibleownership.org)

P.O. Box 2394 Lake Grove, OR 97035

## Common Sense Measures

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Universal background checks at the state and federal levels to help keep firearms out of the hands of dangerous people.

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Safe and secure storage practices and requirements to prevent access by children or any unauthorized person.

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Establish criminal liability in cases where a gun owner fails to secure a weapon and it is used in a shooting.

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Restore and increase research on causes and measures to reduce gun violence. Lift the Congressional ban on CDC research



## I'm a gun owner, what can I do to help reduce gun violence?

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*Lead the way in responsible ownership - Take the Pledge:*

I will practice safe storage. I will keep my firearms and ammunition locked and separate.

I will support universal background check requirements. I will not sell or buy a firearm without a background check.

I will support the rights of my fellow citizens to be free from intimidation by the open display of firearms in public. I will avoid the unnecessary carrying of firearms in public particularly in places where children are present

I will always make gun safety a priority in my home, in the field, or on the range.



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# JOIN THE CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE CHILD GUN DEATHS

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

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It's simple. Spread the Be SMART message. Talk to your friends and family about the importance of responsible gun storage, and get the word out in your community. Volunteers all over the country are available to deliver a 20-minute presentation entitled "Be SMART: A conversation about kids, guns and safety" to local groups and organizations. **Visit [BeSMARTforKids.org](http://BeSMARTforKids.org) to learn more and get involved.**

When it comes to kids' safety, we're all in this together!

## BE SMART

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Each year in the United States, nearly 100 children under the age of 17 die from unintentional shootings, and more than 400 commit suicide with a gun. We have the power to prevent tragedies like these from happening.

Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America has developed the SMART framework to help parents and adults prevent child gun deaths and injuries. Together, we can protect kids.

- S**ecure all guns in your home and vehicles
- M**odel responsible behavior around guns
- A**sk about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes
- R**ecognize the risks of teen suicide
- T**ell your peers to be SMART

## DID YOU KNOW

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- 1.7 million American children live in homes with guns that are both loaded and unlocked.
- A Harvard study found that more than two-thirds of kids know where their parents keep their guns — and many know even when the parents think they don't.
- Around 100 children 17 and under die each year in unintentional shootings.
- Every year more than 400 children 17 and under die by suicide with a gun.
- SMART adults can protect vulnerable kids by storing guns locked, unloaded and separately from ammunition, and taking steps to make sure children never get unauthorized access to unsecured guns.



# SAFETY IS ALWAYS AN ADULT RESPONSIBILITY

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Kids will be kids. They won't always make smart decisions about their own safety. Always assume that curious or impulsive kids may find and touch an unsecured gun, even if they've been told not to.

If a child handles a gun, a bad decision can quickly become a fatal one. SMART adults protect kids by storing guns locked, unloaded and separately from ammunition, and by making sure children are never in the presence of unsecured guns.



## THE BE SMART CAMPAIGN


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Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America launched the Be SMART campaign to take action to promote responsible gun ownership and reduce child gun deaths. The campaign focuses on education and awareness about child gun deaths and responsible gun storage. Moms encourage parents and caretakers to “Be SMART” and take these five simple steps to help prevent shootings by children: **S**ecure all guns in your home and vehicles; **M**odel responsible behavior around guns; **A**sk about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes; **R**ecognize the risks of teen suicide; **T**ell your peers to be SMART. For more information visit [BeSMARTforKids.org](http://BeSMARTforKids.org).

## MOMS DEMAND ACTION FOR GUN SENSE IN AMERICA

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Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America is a grassroots movement of American mothers fighting for public safety measures that respect the Second Amendment and protect people from gun violence. Moms Demand Action campaigns for new and stronger solutions to lax gun laws and loopholes that jeopardize the safety of our children and families. Since its inception after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Moms Demand Action has established a chapter in every state of the country and along with Mayors Against Illegal Guns is part of Everytown for Gun Safety, the largest gun violence prevention organization in the country with more than 2.5 million members and more than 40,000 donors. For more information or to get involved visit [www.momsdemandaction.org](http://www.momsdemandaction.org). Follow us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/MomsDemandAction](http://www.facebook.com/MomsDemandAction) or on Twitter at @MomsDemand.

**MOMS**   
**DEMAND**  
**ACTION**  
FOR GUN SENSE IN AMERICA

  
**EVERYTOWN**  
FOR GUN SAFETY | SUPPORT FUND

PROGRAM MADE POSSIBLE WITH FUNDS FROM EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY SUPPORT FUND



**Members of the ARS Oregon Coalition for Common Sense include:**

Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, Co-Founder, Americans for Responsible Solutions

Lou Jaffe, Vietnam Veteran; Board Member, Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership

Lt. Col. Jeff Julum, U.S. Army (Ret.), Veteran's Advocate

Paul Kemp, President, Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership

Chief Ron Louie, Ret., from the Hillsboro Police Department

Keri L. Moran-Kuhn, Associate Director, Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

Jessica Nischik-Long, Executive Director, Oregon Public Health Association

Tom O'Connor, Gun Owners For Responsible Ownership Board Member

Tom Potter, Former Mayor, City of Portland; Retired Chief of Police, Portland Police Bureau

Michael Reese, Retired Chief of Police, Portland Police Bureau

Tawna Sanchez, Interim Executive Director, Native American Youth and Family Center

John Sanford, Disabled Combat Veteran; President, Oregon Veterans Lobby

Jim Scott, M.D., Past President, National Physicians Alliance

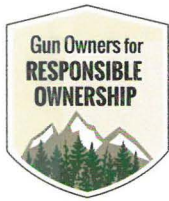
Susan Stoltenberg, Executive Director, YWCA of Greater Portland

Vanessa Timmons, Executive Director, Oregon Coalition against Domestic and Sexual Violence

Lexie Weaver, Oregon State Lead, Organizing for Action; Board Member, Oregon Alliance for Gun Safety

Jenna Yuille, Board Member, Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership & Americans for Responsible Solutions Regional Manager

Robert Yuille, Veteran; Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership Board Member



Paul Kemp  
Board Member

[Paul@ResponsibleOwnership.org](mailto:Paul@ResponsibleOwnership.org)

Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership  
P.O. Box 2394, Lake Grove, Oregon 97035  
[www.ResponsibleOwnership.org](http://www.ResponsibleOwnership.org)

# What Does Gun Violence Really Cost?

A special investigation by Mark Follman, Julia Lurie, Jaeah Lee, and James West. Based on research by Ted Miller.

Photograph by Carlos Javier Ortiz

**IT WAS A MILD**, crystal clear desert evening on November 15, 2004, when Jennifer Longdon and her fiance, David Rueckert, closed up his martial-arts studio and headed out to grab some carnitas tortas from a nearby taqueria. They were joking and chatting about wedding plans—the local Japanese garden seemed perfect—as Rueckert turned their pickup into the parking lot of a strip mall in suburban north Phoenix. A red truck with oversize tires and tinted windows sideswiped theirs, and as they stopped to get out, Rueckert's window exploded. He told Longdon to get down and reached for the handgun he had inside a cooler on the cab floor. As he threw the truck into gear, there were two more shots. His words turned to gibberish and he

slumped forward, his foot on the gas. A bullet hit Longdon's back like a bolt of lightning, her whole body a live wire as they accelerated toward the row of palm trees in the concrete divider.

The air bag against her was stifling, the inside of the cab hot. She managed to call 911. "Where are you shot on your body?" the dispatcher asked. "I don't know, I cannot move. I can't breathe anymore. Somebody help me," she pleaded. "I'm dying."



There was a rush of cool air, and a man leaning over her. Then a flood of bright lights. "Am I being medevacked?" she asked. "Those are news vultures," the EMT told her. He shielded her face with his hand as they rushed the gurney into the ambulance. She couldn't stop thinking of her 12-year-old. "Tell my son I love him," she said.

Half of her ribs were shattered. Her lungs had collapsed and were filling with blood. As the ambulance screamed toward the hospital, Longdon, an avid scuba diver, clawed at the oxygen mask. She kept trying to tell them: "My regulator isn't working. My regulator isn't working." The EMT held her hand as she faded in and out.

She was barely hanging on as the ER doctor prepared to insert a tube through her rib cage. “I’m really fast,” he assured her, “and I’m going to do this as quickly as I can.” As the nursing staff held her down, Longdon heard a dog wailing in the corner of the room. How could they allow a dog into this sterile place and let it howl like that? “The last thing I remember was realizing that it wasn’t a dog,” she recalls. “It was me.”

A couple of days into what would become her five-month hospital stay, Longdon was lying with her back to the door when a doctor came in. She didn’t see his face when he calmly told her the news: She was a T-4 paraplegic, no longer able to move her body from the middle of her chest down. Rueckert had also survived, but a bullet through his brain left him profoundly cognitively impaired and in need of permanent round-the-clock care.

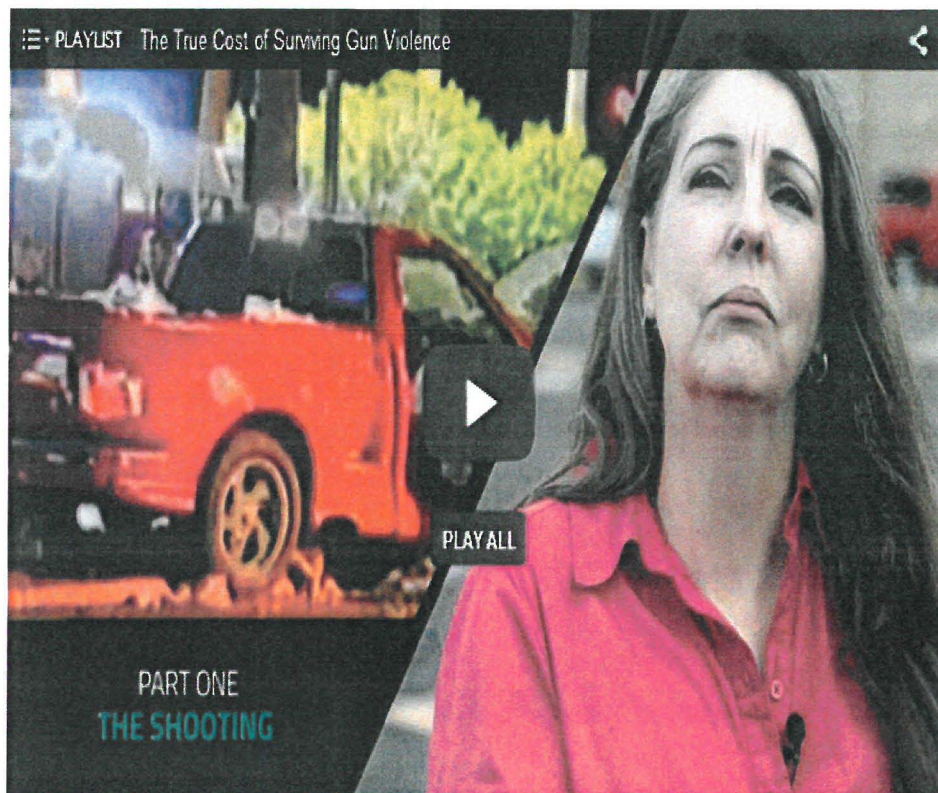


Longdon didn’t know it yet, but she was also facing financial ruin. Shortly after the shooting, her health insurance provider found a way to drop her coverage based on a preexisting condition. She would be hospitalized three more times in quick succession, twice for infections and once for a broken bone; all told, the bills would approach \$1 million in the first year alone. Longdon was forced to file for personal bankruptcy—a stinging humiliation for someone who had earned about \$80,000 a year working in the software industry and building a massage therapy practice on the side.

“I’d never not paid a bill on time before that,” Longdon told me as we looked across the mostly empty parking lot on an overcast afternoon in late February. Little had changed about the place except for the name on the Mexican restaurant. “I felt like a failure,” she added, beginning the lengthy

process of loading herself back into her custom lift-equipped van. “Those doctors had given their all to save my life.”

Over the past decade, Longdon has been hospitalized at least 20 times. One especially bad fall from her wheelchair in 2011 broke major bones in both legs. She came close to having them amputated and had to have titanium rods inserted. In 2013, she was admitted five times for sepsis, once after being defibrillated on her living room floor because the fever from the infection had caused her heart to stop. She has taken so many antibiotics that some no longer have any effect.



Most of Longdon’s medical bills have been covered through a combination of Medicaid and Medicare. Her income since the shooting has been primarily from Social Security Disability Insurance, which pays her about \$2,000 a month. It has amounted to about a quarter million dollars over the past 10 years, though that’s barely been enough to keep her in her small house, which required extensive modifications just so she could wheel herself through the front door, take a shower, or make a bowl of ramen for dinner.

When I asked Longdon to try to add it all up—the hospital bills, the countless hours of physical therapy, the trauma counseling, the in-home care, the wheelchairs, the customized van, her lost income—she let out a sharp laugh.

“Please don’t make me cry.” She pondered the numbers for a long moment. “I don’t know, maybe \$5 million?” She started the engine and used a lever next to the steering wheel to accelerate back toward the main road.

**HOW MUCH DOES** gun violence cost our country? It’s a question we’ve been looking into at *Mother Jones* ever since the 2012 mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, left 58 injured and 12 dead. How much care would the survivors and the victims’ families need? What would be the effects on the broader community, and how far out would those costs ripple? As we’ve continued to investigate gun violence, one of our more startling discoveries is that nobody really knows.

**Gun violence costs more than \$700 per American a year. We spend more on it than on obesity, and almost as much as we spend on Medicaid.**



Mother Jones

Jennifer Longdon was one of at least 750,000 Americans injured by gunshots over the last decade, and she was lucky not to be one of the more than 320,000 killed. Each year more than 11,000 people are murdered with a firearm, and more than 20,000 others commit suicide using one. Hundreds of children die annually in gun homicides, and each week seems to bring news of another toddler accidentally shooting himself or a sibling with an unsecured gun. And perhaps most disturbingly, even as violent crime overall has declined steadily in recent years, rates of gun injury and death are climbing (up 11 and 4 percent since 2011) and mass shootings have been on the rise.

Yet, there is no definitive assessment of the costs for victims, their families, their employers, and the rest of us—including the major sums associated with criminal justice, long-term health care, and security and prevention. Our media is saturated with gun carnage practically 24/7. So why is the question of what we all pay for it barely part of the conversation?

*A top public health expert describes the chill this way: “Do you want to do gun research? Because you’re going to get attacked. No one is attacking us when we do heart disease.”*

Nobody, save perhaps for the hardcore gun lobby, doubts that gun violence is a serious problem. In an editorial in the April 7 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a team of doctors wrote: “It does not matter whether we believe that guns kill people or that people kill people with guns—the result is the same: a public health crisis.”

And solving a crisis, as any expert will tell you, begins with data. That’s why the US government over the years has assessed the broad economic toll of a variety of major problems. Take motor vehicle crashes: Using statistical models to estimate a range of costs both tangible and more abstract—from property damage and traffic congestion to physical pain and lost quality of life—the Department of Transportation (DOT) published a 300-page study estimating the “total value of societal harm” from this problem in 2010 at \$871 billion. Similar research has been produced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on the impact of air pollution, by the Department of Health and Human Services on the costs of domestic violence, and so on. But the government has mostly been mute on the economic toll of gun violence. HHS has assessed firearm-related hospitalizations, but its data is incomplete because some states don’t require hospitals to track gunshot injuries among the larger pool of patients treated for open wounds. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also periodically made estimates using hospital data, but based on narrow sample sizes and covering only the medical and lost-work costs of gun victims.

Why the lack of solid data? A prime reason is that the National Rifle Association and other influential gun rights advocates have long pressured political leaders to shut down research related to firearms. The *Annals of Internal Medicine* editorial detailed this “suppression of science”:

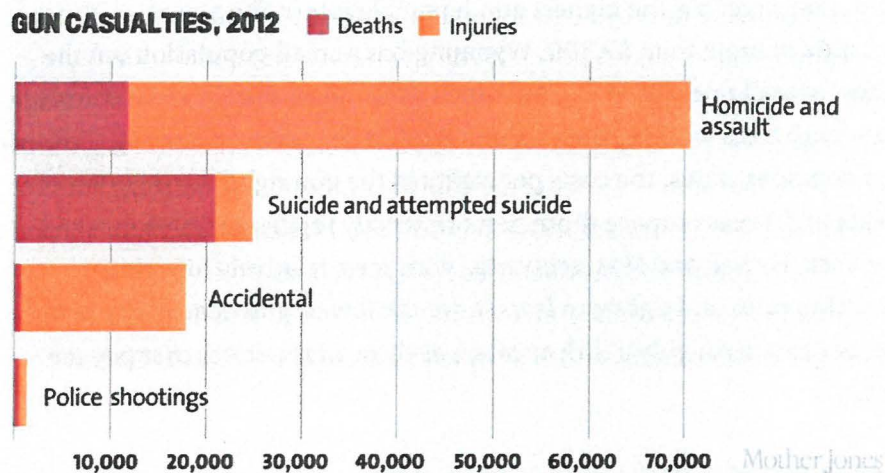
*Two years ago, we called on physicians to focus on the public health threat of guns. The profession’s relative silence was disturbing but in part explicable by our inability to study the problem. Political forces had effectively banned the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other scientific agencies from funding research on gun-related injury and death. The ban worked: A recent systematic review of studies evaluating access to guns and its association with suicide and homicide identified no relevant studies published since 2005.*



An executive order in 2013 from President Obama sought to free up the CDC via a new budget, but the purse strings remain in the grip of Congress, many of whose members have seen their campaigns backed by six- and even seven-figure sums from the NRA. “Compounding the lack of research funding,” the doctors added, “is the fear among some researchers that studying guns will make them political targets and threaten their future funding even for unrelated topics.”

David Hemenway, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, describes the chill this way: “There are so many big issues in the world, and the question is: Do you want to do gun research? Because you’re going to get attacked. No one is attacking us when we do heart disease.”

To begin to get a grasp on the economic toll, *Mother Jones* turned to Ted Miller at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, an independent nonprofit that studies public health, education, and safety issues. Miller has been one of the few researchers to delve deeply into guns, going back to the late 1980s when he began analyzing societal costs from violence, injury, and substance abuse, as well as the savings from prevention. Most of his 30-plus years of research has been funded by government grants and contracts; his work on guns in recent years has either been tucked into broader projects or done on the side. “I never take positions on legislation,” he notes. “Instead, I provide numbers to inform decision making.”



Miller’s approach looks at two categories of costs. The first is direct: Every time a bullet hits somebody, expenses can include emergency services, police investigations, and long-term medical and mental-health care, as well as court and prison costs. About 87 percent of these costs fall on taxpayers. The

second category consists of indirect costs: Factors here include lost income, losses to employers, and impact on quality of life, which Miller bases on amounts that juries award for pain and suffering to victims of wrongful injury and death.

In collaboration with Miller, *Mother Jones* crunched data from 2012 and found that the annual cost of gun violence in America exceeds \$229 billion. Direct costs account for \$8.6 billion—including long-term prison costs for people who commit assault and homicide using guns, which at \$5.2 billion a year is the largest direct expense. Even before accounting for the more intangible costs of the violence, in other words, the average cost to taxpayers for a single gun homicide in America is nearly \$400,000. And we pay for 32 of them every single day.

Indirect costs amount to at least \$221 billion, about \$169 billion of which comes from what researchers consider to be the impact on victims' quality of life. Victims' lost wages, which account for \$49 billion annually, are the other major factor. Miller's calculation for indirect costs, based on jury awards, values the average "statistical life" harmed by gun violence at about \$6.2 million. That's toward the lower end of the range for this analytical method, which is used widely by industry and government. (The EPA, for example, currently values a statistical life at \$7.9 million, and the DOT uses \$9.2 million.)

Our investigation also begins to illuminate the economic toll for individual states. Louisiana has the highest gun homicide rate in the nation, with costs per capita of more than \$1,300. Wyoming has a small population but the highest overall rate of gun deaths—including the nation's highest suicide rate—with costs working out to about \$1,400 per resident. Among the four most populous states, the costs per capita in the gun rights strongholds of Florida and Texas outpace those in more strictly regulated California and New York. Hawaii and Massachusetts, with their relatively low gun ownership rates and tight gun laws, have the lowest gun death rates, and costs per capita roughly a fifth as much as those of the states that pay the most.

**AT \$229 BILLION, THE** toll from gun violence would have been \$47 billion more than Apple's 2014 worldwide revenue and \$88 billion more than what the US government budgeted for education that year. Divvied up among every man, woman, and child in the United States, it would work out to more than \$700 per person.

But even the \$229 billion figure ultimately doesn't capture what gun violence costs us. For starters, there are gaps in what we know about long-term medical and disability expenses specifically from gunshots. Miller's research accounts for about seven years of long-term care for victims, and for lifelong care for those with spinal-cord or traumatic brain injuries. But Kelly Bernado, a former police officer who now works as an ER nurse near Seattle, points out that survivors' life spans and medical complications can exceed expectations. One of her patients was shot as a teenager: "He was paralyzed from the neck down and could not feed himself, toilet himself, dress himself, or turn over in bed. He will live the rest of his life in a nursing home, all paid for by the taxpayers, as he is a Medicaid patient." She estimates that over the last two decades the price tag for this patient's skilled nursing care alone has been upwards of \$1.7 million. Even in less severe cases the consequences from gunshots can be profound, says Bernado, who joined the advocacy group Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense not long after police killed a man who had been firing shots outside her son's high school. "These people have long-term problems—bowel issues, arthritis problems, chronic pain. They're on pain medication, and there are addiction issues. They keep returning to the hospital." In August 2014, a medical examiner concluded that former presidential aide James Brady's death in a nursing home at age 73 was due to complications from the bullet he took to his head during the attempt on Ronald Reagan's life almost 34 years earlier.

*Some costs have hardly been studied at all—like the trauma and fear that stunt neighborhood development and prompt schools to deploy armed guards.*

To gauge mental-health impact, Miller uses a study he coauthored back in 1998 that surveyed practitioners treating patients for trauma stemming from a broad range of violent crime. It calculated the rate of people who sought counseling, and the corresponding costs. Applying those numbers to current data on gun injuries and deaths gives an estimate of \$410 million annually in direct mental-health costs. But that sum would rise substantially if all gun victims and their families could afford to seek counseling. Miller hasn't had resources to build on the data since, and *Mother Jones* could find no other firearm-related mental-health studies by government or private institutions.

Then there are the costs that the available research doesn't capture at all. What about the trauma to entire communities, whether from mass shootings or chronic street violence? What about the steep societal cost of fear, which stunts economic development and provokes major spending on security and

prevention? “This is what big-city mayors worry about,” says Duke University economist Philip Cook, who coauthored a study 16 years ago that asked people how much they’d be willing to pay to reduce gun violence where they live. “How can Camden get out of the profound slump it’s in? The first answer has to be, ‘We’ve got to do something about the gun violence.’”



The fallout from mass shootings, which have been on the rise in recent years, includes outside financial impact. Legal proceedings for the Aurora movie theater killer, for example, reached \$5.5 million before the trial even got underway this spring, including expenses related to the pool of 9,000 prospective jurors called for the case. Most Americans probably don’t even recall a less lethal rampage that took place just a few months after the Aurora tragedy, at the Clackamas Town Center near Portland, Oregon. When a gunman killed two people, wounded another, and took his own life at the shopping complex in December 2012, more than 150 officers from at least 13 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies responded—an investigation that lasted more than three months and culminated in a report nearly 1,000 pages long. To calm the public, make repairs, and beef up security, the 1.5-million-square-foot mall shut down for three days during the height of the holiday shopping season, depriving 188 retail businesses of revenue.

Since the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, the federal government has doled out at least \$811 million to help school districts hire security guards, including \$45 million since 20 first-graders and six adults were massacred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. That sum doesn’t account for spending at the state and local level; according

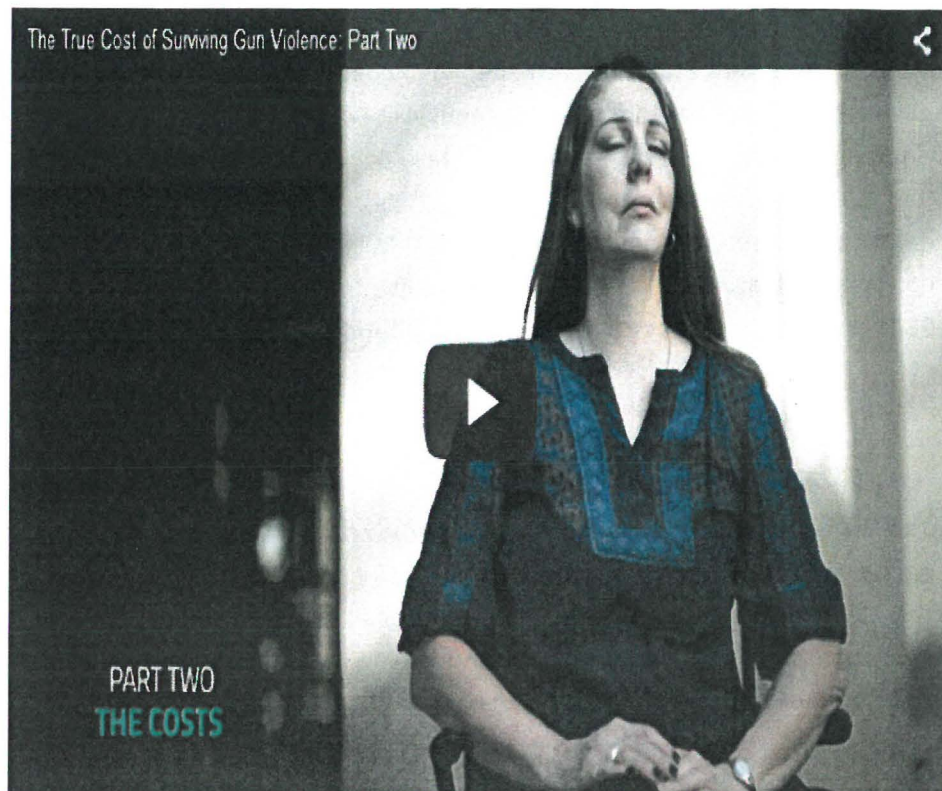
to the trade magazine *Campus Safety*, approximately 90 percent of American school systems have made security enhancements since Sandy Hook. Many have worked with law enforcement agencies to conduct active-shooter drills. Companies are marketing “bulletproof” backpacks and other defensive gear for children. A Massachusetts school recently tested an “active-shooter detection system” that costs as much as \$100,000 and uses technology also deployed in war zones. One research company recently projected that by 2017, school security systems will be a \$5-billion-a-year industry.

**JENNIFER LONGDON KNOWS** how culturally important guns are in Arizona, where almost anyone 18 and older can purchase firearms at any time, no questions asked. She grew up with guns and has shot them for sport over the years, including periodically since her injury—she favors the reliable heft of a .45-caliber Glock in her palm.

She also sometimes worries that she might turn one on herself. She staves off the feeling with a packed schedule and the occasional pour of añejo. But grief, PTSD, and perpetual neuropathic pain linger. So do the questions.

Had they been targeted? Was it a spontaneous act of road rage? Maybe a case of mistaken identity? The Phoenix police investigated, but never arrested anyone.

Sitting near her favorite waterfall at the Japanese garden where she and Rueckert once planned to get married, Longdon tells me how she eventually had to let go of the idea of justice. “People think all of these crimes make sense,” she says, “that all of them have some beginning, middle, and end. They don’t.”



Longdon, who is 55 and has long dark hair and a sly, charismatic smile, never lets a conversation stay heavy for too long. Many days, she transports herself to meetings with advocacy groups, the mayor’s office, or Arizona legislators, hammering away on guns and disabilities issues alike. So you’d better not refer to her as handicapped or wheelchair-bound—she’s a woman and a wheeler. “I’m no saint,” she adds, “simply a deeply flawed loudmouth on a mission.”

Before her injury, fitness was essential to her life. She and Rueckert were black-belt martial artists and trained rigorously. Often they would begin their days by hiking to the top of Piestewa Peak, where they’d snack on fruit and watch the sun rise over the mountains around Phoenix.

*“People think all of these crimes make sense, that all of them have some beginning, middle, and end. They don’t.”*

Now, Longdon says, “my morning ritual is so consumed with just setting up this body for survival for the day.” It’s a taxing hour and a half: the careful process of checking her lower limbs and getting out of bed, the transfers to the toilet and then the shower chair—every day a formidable workout for the arms—and then the tedious process of “logrolling” into her clothes. “And

that’s before I even put on my makeup, get the coffee going, and start thinking about work,” she says.

Gun politics in Arizona are as rough as anywhere, and on the morning we head over to Phoenix City Hall, Longdon is going off about legislation just introduced by a state senator to legalize silencers and sawed-off shotguns. Longdon believes in universal background checks for gun buyers, a position national polls show is shared by most gun owners. But speaking out about the issue has drawn her vicious attacks from gun rights activists—she’s been stalked, spat on in public, and harassed with rape and death threats.

**Investigating how much gun violence costs our country wasn't easy, and it wasn't cheap.**

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Nobody who knows Longdon expects any of that to get in her way—certainly not the mayor’s chief of staff, Reuben Alonzo, who worked closely with her on a program in 2013 that took 2,000 unwanted firearms off the streets, the largest buyback in the state’s history. Longdon was one of the first people the mayor turned to for advice on gun policy, Alonzo says, noting that it wasn’t just a matter of her personal story. “There’s a stereotype about advocates like Jennifer,” he says, “but her approach is really quite pragmatic. She has the knowledge to back it up.”

Longdon is well aware that 2,000 unwanted guns melted down by the Phoenix PD is a tiny fraction of the firepower out there. But the cost of gun violence works out to more than \$800 a year each for Arizona’s 6.7 million residents, and if she can start to chip away at that by keeping guns out of the wrong hands, it’s worth it to her. “Not one of those guns will ever be used in a suicide, an accidental discharge, or a crime,” she says, “and that is significant.”

And maybe it will help save someone from having to pay what she has. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t give to go back to where life was before. On long nights, when I’m alone and my pain level is high, and maybe something has triggered the memories, I have to be really careful not to let that melancholy

and grief overwhelm me,” she says. “It’s an ongoing battle every day—choosing to stay alive, and to continue to fight.” ■

*This story first appeared in the May/June 2015 Issue of Mother Jones.*



# Mother Jones

## Inside the Race to Stop the Next Mass Shooter

*How experts are using cutting-edge forensics to help prevent future tragedies.*

By Mark Follman | Mon Oct. 5, 2015 8:00 AM EDT

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Soon after the school year started in September 2000, a police officer working at McNary High in Keizer, Oregon, got a tip about a junior named Erik Ayala. The 16-year-old had told another student that "he was mad at 'preps' and was going to bring a gun in." Ayala struck the officer as quiet, depressed. He confided that "he was not happy with school or with himself" but insisted he had no intention of hurting others. Two months later, Ayala tried to kill himself by swallowing a fistful of Aleve tablets. He was admitted to a private mental health facility in Portland, where he was diagnosed with "numerous mental disorders," according to the police officer's report.

READ MORE:

- [the columbine effect](#) [1]
- [the media and copycats](#) [2]
- [the cost of gun violence](#) [3]
- [mass shootings soar](#) [4]

To most people, Ayala's suicide attempt would have looked like a private tragedy. But for a specialized team of psychologists, counselors, and cops, it set off alarm bells. They were part of a pioneering local program, launched after the Columbine school massacre the prior year, to identify and deter kids who might turn violent. Before Ayala was released from the hospital, the Salem-Keizer school district's threat assessment team interviewed his friends, family, and teachers. They uncovered additional warning signs: In his school notebooks, Ayala had raged about feeling like an outsider and being rejected by a girl he liked. He had repeatedly told his friends that he despised "preps" and wished he could "just go out and kill a few of them." He went online to try to buy a gun. And he'd drawn up a hit list. The names on it included his close friend Kyle, and the girl he longed for.

The threat assessment team had to decide just how dangerous Ayala might be and whether they could help turn his life around. As soon as they determined he didn't have any weapons, they launched a "wraparound intervention"—in his case, counseling, in-home tutoring, and help pursuing his interests in music and computers.

"He was a very gifted, bright young man," recalls John Van Dreal, a psychologist and threat assessment expert involved in the case. "A lot of what was done for him was to move him away from thinking about terrible acts."

As the year went on, the team kept close tabs on Ayala. The school cops would strike up casual conversations with him and his buddies Kyle and Mike so they could gauge his progress and stability. A teacher Ayala admired would also do "check and connects" with him and pass on information to the team. Over the next year and a half, the high schooler's outlook improved and the warning signs dissipated.

When Ayala graduated in 2002, the school-based team handed off his case to the local adult threat assessment team, which included members of the Salem Police Department and the county health agency. Ayala lived with his parents and got an IT job at a Fry's Electronics. He grew frustrated that his computer skills were being underutilized and occasionally still vented to his buddies, but with continued counseling and a network of support, he seemed back on track.

The two teams "successfully interrupted Ayala's process of planning to harm people," Van Dreal says. "We moved in front of him and nudged him onto a path of success and safety."

But then that path took him to another city 60 miles away, where he barely knew anyone.

This past August, I traveled to Disneyland to join more than 700 law enforcement agents, psychologists, and private security experts from around the country at the annual conference of the [Association of Threat Assessment Professionals](#) [5]. While families splashed in the Disneyland Hotel's pools and strolled to the nearby theme park, conference attendees sat in chilly ballrooms for sessions like "20 Years of Workplace Shootings" and "Evil Thoughts, Wicked Deeds."

After a day of talks focused on thwarting stalkers and preventing the next Sandy Hook, it seemed incongruous to emerge to throngs of overexcited kids and their weary parents enjoying the nightly fireworks. But it is no coincidence that Disney plays host to this conference. As gun rampages have [increased](#) [4], so have security efforts at public venues of all kinds, and threat assessment teams can now be found everywhere from school districts and college campuses to corporate headquarters and theme parks. Behind the scenes, the federal government has ramped up its threat assessment efforts: Behavioral Analysis Unit 2, a little-known FBI team based in Quantico, Virginia, now marshals more than a dozen specialists in security and psychology from across five federal agencies to assist local authorities who seek help in heading off would-be killers. Those calls have been flooding in: Since 2012, the FBI unit has taken on more than 400 cases.

The conference keynote was given by Reid Meloy, a tall, white-haired forensic psychologist from the University of California-San Diego who is a leading researcher in the field. His presentation was peppered with gallows humor—a clip from *Breaking Bad*, a photo of Jack Nicholson "playing himself" in *The Shining*—and professional koans. "Monitor your own narcissism," he warned the assembled investigators. "This is going to be easier for some of you to get than others," he quipped, flashing an image of Donald Trump.

There was a simple reason, Meloy suggested, for the record number of people packing the room: Mass murder is on the rise. "We've seen this very worrisome pattern over the past five or six years of an increase in targeted violence in public places," he told me later. "Personally and professionally, this is a big concern—that uptick is very important, especially as violent crime has decreased."

Threat assessment is essentially a three-part process: identifying, evaluating, and then intervening. A case usually begins with a gut feeling that something is off. A teacher hears a student's dark comments and alerts the principal, or someone gets freaked out by a coworker's erratic behavior and tells a supervisor. If the tip makes its way to a local threat assessment team, the group quickly analyzes the subject's background and circumstances. They may talk with family, friends, or coworkers to get insight into his intentions, ability to handle stress, and, most importantly, potential plans to strike. "One of the first things you focus on with this process is access to weapons," Meloy notes. Like the group that handled Ayala's case, the team draws on mental health and security expertise. Possible responses range from helping the subject blow off steam and refocus on school or work to providing longer-term counseling. If violence seems imminent, involuntary hospitalization or arrest may be the safest approach.

But such drastic measures are rare. "With a lot of these cases, you peel back the curtain and there are good social and mental health interventions that are diverting the person onto a better course," Meloy says. Often the best initial step is the most direct—conducting a "knock and talk" interview, which has the dual benefit of offering help and putting the subject on notice. Simply realizing that authorities are watching can be an effective deterrent.

## A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

MASS SHOOTINGS ARE BECOMING MORE COMMON—AND DEADLIER.



THE FREQUENCY OF MASS SHOOTINGS HAS **TRIPLED** SINCE 2011.

BETWEEN 1982 AND 2011, A MASS SHOOTING OCCURRED IN THE UNITED STATES EVERY

**200**  
DAYS.

BETWEEN 2011 AND 2014, A MASS SHOOTING OCCURRED EVERY

**64**  
DAYS.

OF THE **13 MASS SHOOTINGS** WITH DOUBLE-DIGIT DEATH TOLLS OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS,

**7**

TOOK PLACE IN THE **LAST 9 YEARS.**

Sources: Harvard School of Public Health, Congressional Research Service

Mother Jones

Threat assessment requires a remarkable shift in thinking for law enforcement because in most cases no crime has occurred. "Our goal is prevention over prosecution," supervisory special agent Andre Simons, who led the FBI unit until this summer, explained when we met at the bureau's headquarters in Washington earlier this year. "If we can facilitate caretaking for individuals who are not able to perceive alternatives to violence, then I think that's a righteous mission for us."

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## Mass murder is not an impulsive crime—and therein lies the promise of threat assessment.

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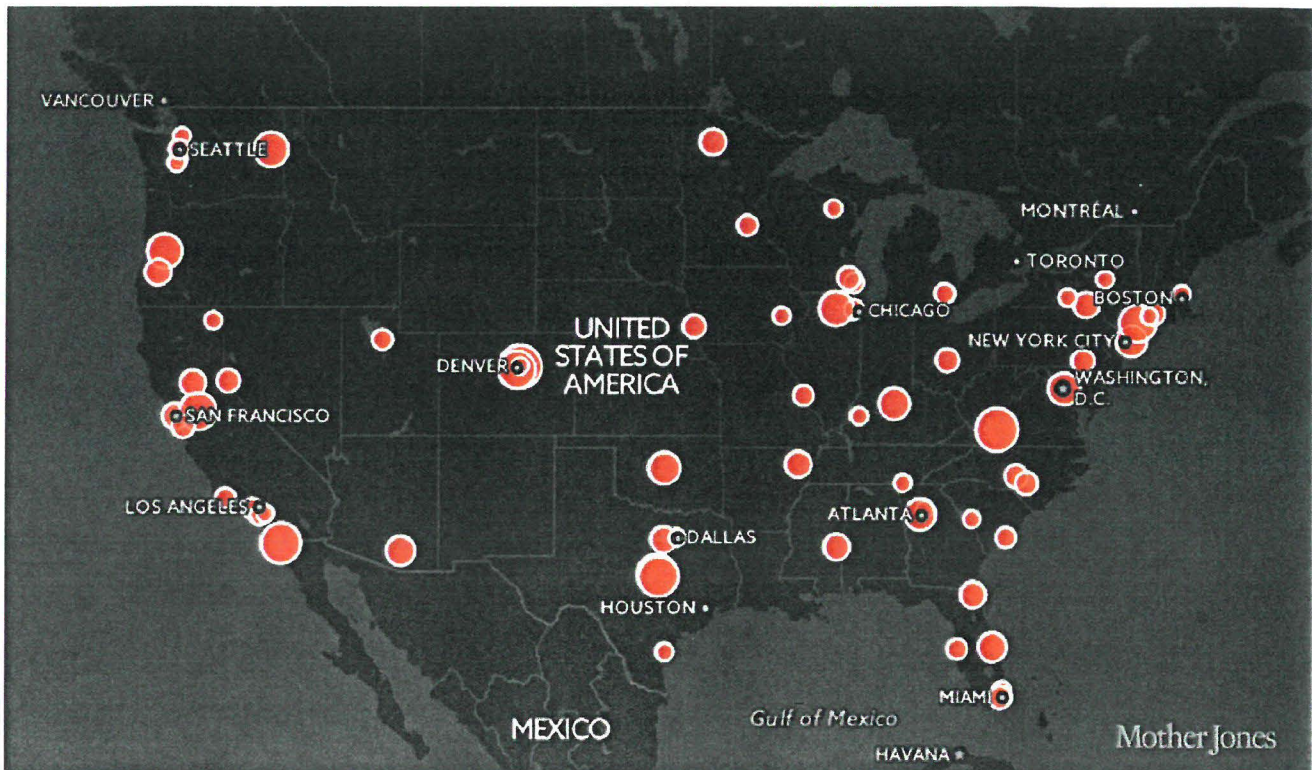
Ever since Columbine, the FBI has been studying what drives people to commit mass shootings. Last fall it issued a [report](#) [6] on 160 active-shooter cases, and what Simons could disclose from its continuing analysis was chilling: To a much greater degree than is generally understood, there's strong evidence of a copycat effect rippling through many cases, both among mass shooters and those aspiring to kill. Perpetrators and plotters look to past attacks for not only inspiration but operational details, in hopes of causing even greater carnage. Emerging research—including our own analysis of the "[Columbine effect](#)" [7]—could have major implications for both threat assessment and [how the media should cover mass shootings](#) [8].

In October 2013, then-Attorney General Eric Holder [announced](#) [9] that Simons' FBI unit had helped prevent almost 150 attacks in one year. The nearly two dozen experts I spoke with didn't like to be so definitive, noting that it's impossible to prove a negative. But many cited cases in which they believed threat assessment teams had prevented great harm. Sergeant Jeff Dunn, who leads the Los Angeles Police Department's Threat Management Unit, described a firefighting recruit who became enraged when he failed out of the academy. "He told another recruit, 'When they fire me, I'm gonna come back here and fucking massacre everyone.'" Academy officials alerted the LAPD, and Dunn's unit got a search warrant for the recruit's home. "This guy was absolutely geared to go to war," Dunn said. His arsenal included nearly a dozen semi-automatic handguns and assault rifles and a homemade explosive device. "Had there not been an intervention of some sort," Dunn said—in this case, an arrest on a felony weapons charge—"I have no doubt that it would've resulted in an active-shooter scenario."

But cases often aren't so clear. One of the biggest challenges for threat assessment teams is that sometimes the quieter, less outwardly threatening subjects can prove the most dangerous. "When there are individuals who prompt a sense of anxiety or fear but no law or policy has been broken," Simons says, "that's the real work." Of the hundreds of subjects tracked by the FBI unit, he told me, only one went on to injure somebody. But measuring the effectiveness of threat assessment is tricky because ultimately there is no way of knowing whether someone would have otherwise gone on to attack.

Meloy compares the challenge to fighting cardiovascular disease: Doctors can't predict whether someone will have a heart attack, but they can do a lot to decrease the risk. "You try to lower the probability."

## Mass shootings in America, 1982-2015



[10]

When the next shooting happens at a school, an office building, or a movie theater, the question will again be asked: "[What made him snap](#) [11]?" But mass murder is not an impulsive crime. Virtually every one of these attacks, forensic investigations show, is a predatory crime, methodically planned and executed. Therein lies the promise of threat assessment: The weeks, months, or even years when a would-be killer is escalating toward violence are a window of opportunity in which he can be detected and thwarted.

A growing body of research has shed light on this "pathway to violence." It often begins with an unshakable sense of grievance, which stirs thoughts about harming people and leads to the planning and preparation for an attack. Elliot Rodger, convinced that women were unfairly denying him sex, seethed for months and fantasized about a "day of retribution" before he bought firearms, scouted sorority houses, and went on to [kill](#) [12] 6 people and injure 14 others near Santa Barbara, California, in May 2014.

A confluence of behaviors can indicate that someone is poised to walk into a school or a shopping mall and open fire. These include an obsession with weapons, a fixation on images of violence, and a history of aggressive acts that aren't directly related to the planned attack—possibly a way for the perpetrator to test his resolve. Almost a year before Rodger struck, he attempted to push some women off a 10-foot ledge at a house party. Some killers have mutilated pets before going on rampages.

In fact, the vast majority of mass shooters signal their intentions in advance, though usually not directly to their intended targets. This "leakage," as threat assessment teams call it, can be difficult to recognize. Before Dylann Roof murdered nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, he told a friend about his desire to kill people and start a race war. (The friend [claimed](#) [13] he didn't think Roof was serious.) Weeks before Rodger attacked, he posted disturbing videos that prompted his mother to alert a county mental health agency that he was suicidal. In response, sheriff's deputies went to Rodger's apartment to do a welfare check, interviewing him just a few strides from where he'd stashed three handguns and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. He persuaded them he was fine. "Thankfully, all suspicion of me was dropped," he later [wrote](#) [14], "and the police never came back."

**The vast majority of mass shooters signal their intentions in advance, though usually not to their intended targets.**

We know that many mass shooters are young white men with acute mental health issues. The problem is, such broad traits do little to help threat assessment teams identify who will actually attack. Legions of young men love violent movies or first-person shooter games, get angry about school, jobs, or relationships, and suffer from mental health afflictions. The number who seek to commit mass murder is tiny. Decades of research have shown that the link between mental disorders and violent behavior is small and not useful for predicting violent acts. (People with severe mental disorders are in fact far more likely to be [victims of violence](#) [15] than perpetrators.)

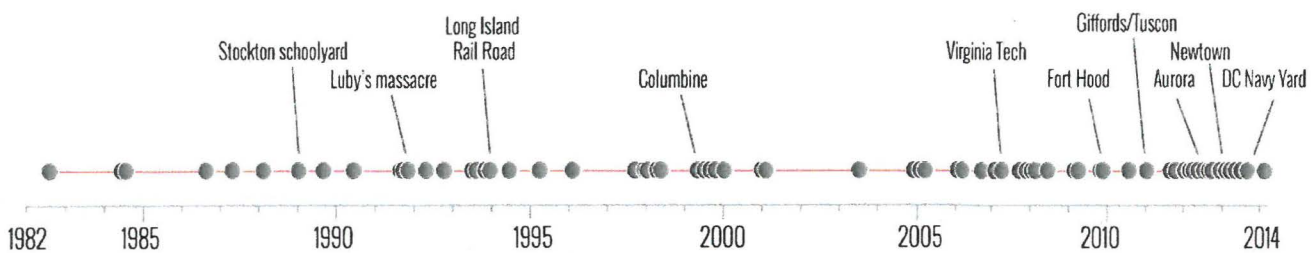
That's why sizing up a suspect's current circumstances is crucial: Did he recently get fired from a job? Did he lose his kids in a nasty custody battle? Is he failing out of school or abusing drugs? Investigators also look for visible signs such as deteriorating hygiene or living conditions, which is why approaching someone directly and building

rapport can be so important.

"Most people who have a psychotic episode aren't thinking violently," explains Mario Scalora, a forensic psychologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. But for those who are experiencing psychosis—including 80 percent of stalkers who target public figures—intervention can head off disaster. Scalora describes the case of a student he calls Bob who experienced a psychotic break in his early 20s. Scalora's campus threat assessment team grew concerned after getting a tip about Bob muttering to himself and making ominous comments. They sent plainclothes detectives to his residence, where on the wall of his room hung a grotesque theater mask whose mouth had been sewn shut with black string. Bob said that voices were commanding him to hurt people at the behest of God, and that he was scared. The detectives persuaded him to check into a psychiatric ward for evaluation. "This made him feel cared for," Scalora says, "and gave us a mechanism by which we could continue to manage him. By building rapport with him, we're learning a lot about him and getting rich assessment data, and in the meantime he's not stalking people on our campus. It's a win-win."

When the lead detective followed up with Bob a couple of days into his hospital stay, he asked her, "Can you go to my room and get the mask, and this big knife that's under my bed? I don't want them anymore."

**Time Between Mass Shootings, 1982-2014**



Data analysis by Harvard School of Public Health

Mother Jones

[16]

The concept of cops and mental health experts working hand in hand to stop violent crimes before they occur is relatively new. Its origins trace in part to a summer morning in West Los Angeles. Shortly after 10 a.m. on July 18, 1989, a 21-year-old actress named [Rebecca Schaeffer](#) [17] was getting dressed for a meeting with Francis Ford Coppola about a role in the next *Godfather* movie when her apartment buzzer sounded. The intercom was broken, so Schaeffer went to the front door, where a young man stood holding a shopping bag. Nineteen-year-old Robert Bardo had been trying to reach Schaeffer for two years, writing her fan letters and periodically taking a bus from Tucson to LA to look for her. He'd never been able to get onto the soundstage where Schaeffer filmed the sitcom *My Sister Sam*, but he'd finally found her address.

Bardo had already dropped by that morning, according to his [own account](#) [18], and Schaeffer had chatted with him politely. But now she was anxious. "You came to my door again," she said. "Hurry up, I don't have much time." Bardo later recalled, "I thought that was a very callous thing to say to a fan." In his bag he had a letter and a CD he wanted to give her. He also had a .357 Magnum handgun. A neighbor heard Schaeffer scream as Bardo fired a single shot into her chest.

Until then, obsessive behavior that could turn violent was still widely viewed as a mental health issue beyond the purview of law enforcement, even after the attacks on John Lennon and Ronald Reagan and a spate of government workers "going postal." But Schaeffer's murder shocked Hollywood, and studio heads called for action by the LAPD, which was already frustrated by its inability to stop a string of stalking murders of nonfamous women. The LAPD devised a plan for a multidisciplinary team that would aim to head off such crimes.



[8]

[How the media inspires copycat mass shooters—and six ways it could stop doing so](#) [8]

The LAPD Threat Management Unit's mission expanded in 1995 after a city electrician, angry about a poor performance evaluation, walked into the Piper Tech center downtown and shot four supervisors to death. "Piper Tech" became shorthand for the rising wave of workplace threats the unit began to confront. (It currently handles about 200 cases a year, roughly half of which are workplace related.) Meanwhile, in Washington, DC, the Secret Service had also been developing tenets of threat assessment, led by a former agent from Reagan's security detail. But for most cops, close collaboration with mental health experts remained unheard of. And the idea of intervening before there was a crime to investigate went against everything they knew from their training. "It requires a paradigm shift," says the LAPD's Dunn. "So many in law enforcement don't recognize how useful a tool this can be."

Then came Columbine.

As they plotted for months to slaughter their classmates, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold weren't just driven by rage and depression—they wanted to be immortalized and to inspire future school shootings. In diary entries and videos, the duo fantasized about Hollywood directors fighting over their story. They filmed themselves firing guns and yelling into the camera about killing hundreds and starting a "revolution."

Such "legacy tokens" now often include manifestos posted online by perpetrators. "They do this to claim credit and to articulate the grievance behind the attack," says the FBI's Simons. "And we believe they do it to heighten the media attention that will be given to them, the infamy and notoriety they believe they'll derive from the event."

There has long been evidence that stalkers and mass murderers emulate their famous predecessors. Before Bardo gunned down Schaeffer, he sent a letter to Mark Chapman, imprisoned for the 1980 murder of John Lennon. When Bardo fled from Schaeffer's building, among the items he discarded was a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the novel Chapman famously sat down to read after shooting Lennon. John Hinckley Jr. had a copy of the book and a John Lennon photo calendar in his hotel room when he tried to assassinate Reagan in 1981. Forensic psychologists describe this phenomenon as following a "cultural script," or the "[Werther effect](#) [19]," referring to a spate of copycat suicides in 18th-century Europe after the publication of Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

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**One security expert says Columbine has "a cult following unlike anything I've ever seen before."**

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The Columbine killers authored a grimly compelling new script at the dawn of the internet age. Sixteen years later, the Columbine legacy keeps reappearing in violent plots, driven in part by online subcultures that obsess over the duo's words and images. "It's a cult following unlike anything I've ever seen before," says one longtime security specialist.

To gauge just how deep the problem goes, *Mother Jones* examined scores of news reports and public documents and interviewed multiple law enforcement officials. We analyzed [74 plots and attacks](#) [20] across 30 states whose suspects and perpetrators claimed to have been inspired by the Columbine massacre. Law enforcement stopped 53 of these plots before anyone was harmed. Twenty-one plots evolved into attacks, with a total of 89 victims killed, 126 injured, and 9 perpetrators committing suicide.

The data reveals some disturbing patterns. In at least 14 cases, the suspects aimed to attack on the anniversary of Columbine. (Twelve of these plots were thwarted; two attacks ultimately took place on different dates.) Individuals in 13 cases indicated their goal was to outdo the Columbine body count. And in at least 10 cases the suspects referred to Harris and Klebold as heroes, idols, martyrs, or God.

# The Columbine Effect

KNOWN COPYCAT CASES

74

53 21  
PLOTS OR THREATS THWARTED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT ATTACKS

THE OVERALL TOLL

89 KILLED  
126 WOUNDED  
9 SHOOTER SUICIDES

95%

OF THE PLOTTERS WERE MALE. ONLY 4 CASES INVOLVED WOMEN ACTING ALONE—NONE RESULTED IN ATTACKS.

THEIR AVERAGE AGE WAS 17

13

CASES INVOLVED PLOTTERS WHO HOPED TO SURPASS THE CARNAGE OF THE COLUMBINE SHOOTING. PLOTTERS IN AT LEAST 10 CASES CITED THE COLUMBINE SHOOTERS AS HEROES, IDOLS, MARTYRS, OR GOD.

4 OUT OF 5 WERE WHITE (IN CASES IN WHICH RACE OR ETHNICITY WAS KNOWN).



PLOTTERS MADE PILGRIMAGES TO COLUMBINE WHILE PLANNING ATTACKS. 2 OF THEM LATER LAUNCHED ATTACKS. THE THIRD PLOT WAS THWARTED.

14

ATTACKS WERE PLANNED FOR AN ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLUMBINE ATTACK. 12 OF THESE PLOTS WERE THWARTED. 2 WERE ULTIMATELY CARRIED OUT ON DIFFERENT DATES.

53% OF THE CASES INVOLVED GUNS.

18% INVOLVED BOMBS OR EXPLOSIVES.

14% INVOLVED KNIVES.

Mother Jones

[20]

# The Columbine Effect

KNOWN COPYCAT CASES

74

53

PLOTS OR THREATS THWARTED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT

21

ATTACKS

THE OVERALL TOLL

89

KILLED

126

WOUNDED

9

SHOOTER SUICIDES

13

CASES INVOLVED PLOTTERS WHO HOPED TO SURPASS THE CARNAGE OF THE COLUMBINE SHOOTING. PLOTTERS IN AT LEAST 10 CASES CITED THE COLUMBINE SHOOTERS AS HEROES, IDOLS, MARTYRS, OR GOD.



PLOTTERS MADE PILGRIMAGES TO COLUMBINE WHILE PLANNING ATTACKS. 3 OF THEM LATER LAUNCHED ATTACKS





# 95%

OF THE PLOTTERS WERE **MALE**. ONLY **4 CASES**  
INVOLVED WOMEN ACTING ALONE—  
NONE RESULTED IN ATTACKS.

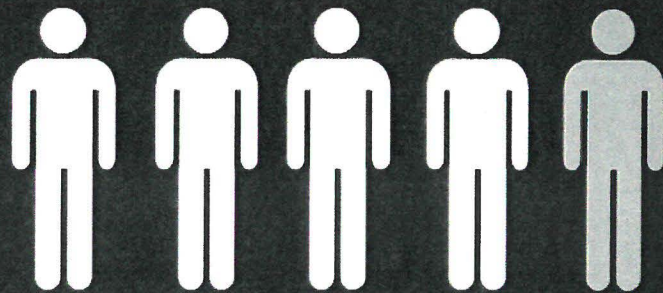
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THEIR AVERAGE AGE WAS

# 17

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**4 OUT OF 5**  
WERE **WHITE**  
(IN CASES IN WHICH  
RACE OR ETHNICITY  
WAS KNOWN).



**14**

ATTACKS WERE  
PLANNED FOR AN  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
COLUMBINE ATTACK.  
**12** OF THESE PLOTS  
WERE THWARTED.  
**2** WERE ULTIMATELY  
CARRIED OUT ON  
DIFFERENT DATES.

Mother Jones

JULY/AUGUST 2015 | PHOTO: JAMES W. HARRIS

[20]

At least three suspects made pilgrimages to Columbine High School—fulfilling the kind of "pseudocommando" mission that researchers have found mass shooters to be obsessed with. Two of them carried out rampages when they returned home—one at a college in Washington state and the other at a high school in North Carolina, using guns he'd decorated with pictures of the Columbine shooters. In another case, a 16-year-old from Utah flew to Denver without his parents' knowledge, hired a driver to take him to Columbine, and met with the principal under the auspices that he was writing an article for his school newspaper. He was trying to elicit information on lasting trauma, according to a law enforcement official familiar with the case. "All he wanted to know about was what the students and staff felt like—how long it took them to recover and if they still thought about it," the official says. The teen was arrested back home for plotting with a fellow student to bomb his own high school.

These publicly documented cases are just the beginning. "There are many more who have come to our community and have been thwarted," says John McDonald, the director of security for Colorado's Jefferson County school district, where Columbine High School is located. "They want to see where it happened, want to feel it, want to walk the halls. They try to take souvenirs." Some aspiring copycats have even come from overseas, says McDonald. "The problem is always on our radar."

Gene Deisinger, a threat assessment pioneer who led Virginia Tech's police force from 2009 to 2014, explains that the copycat effect also plays out at sites like Virginia Tech and Fort Hood. "Lots of the places that have experienced high-profile acts of mass violence over the last decade or more face ongoing threats from outsiders who identify with the perpetrators, the acts, or the places," he says.

Major attacks motivate copycats in other ways. In April 2009, Jiverly Wong blocked the back exit of the building in upstate New York where he'd taken English classes and then used guns similar to those of the [Virginia Tech](#) [21] shooter to kill 14 people and wound four others before shooting himself. "There was evidence that he had studied the attack at Virginia Tech," a federal law enforcement official told me, "looking at the chaining of the doors there that had prevented both entry and exit."

## When I asked what might explain the recent rise in gun rampages, I heard the same two words over and over: social media.

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It's not just Americans who emulate the killers of Columbine or Virginia Tech. Shooters inspired by these events have struck in Brazil, Canada, and Europe—particularly in Germany, where nine school shootings occurred in the decade after Columbine. At least three German shooters drew inspiration from Harris and Klebold, including an 18-year-old who referred to them as God and [attacked](#) [22] his former school wearing a long black coat and wielding two sawed-off rifles, a handgun, and more than 10 homemade bombs.

When I asked threat assessment experts what might explain the recent rise in gun rampages, I heard the same two words over and over: social media. Although there is no definitive research yet, widespread anecdotal evidence suggests that the speed at which social media bombards us with memes and images exacerbates the copycat effect.

As Meloy and his colleagues noted earlier this year in the journal *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* [23], "Cultural scripts are now spread globally...within seconds."

In late August, this phenomenon reached its logical next step when a disgruntled former TV reporter [gunned down two former colleagues](#) [25] during a live broadcast in Virginia while filming the scene on a camera. As he fled, he posted the footage on Twitter and Facebook. The first "social media murder" went viral in less than 30 minutes, raising the grim prospect that others will aim for similar feats—knowing that the news media will put them in the spotlight and help publicize their grisly images. (The 26-year-old who would go on a rampage at Umpqua Community College in Oregon five weeks later [reportedly commented online](#) [26] about the Virginia shooting, "Seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight.")

But just as digital media has created platforms for dangerous people seeking a blaze of notoriety, it has also become a valuable tool for identifying them. "We're now seeing that shooters are announcing more frequently via social media just prior to attacking," Simons says, noting that potential killers can otherwise be conspicuously withdrawn. "When people express violent ideation, what we're looking for is: Who are they talking to? Who's listening?" These days, he adds, "it's possible they're living more vividly online than in the physical world."

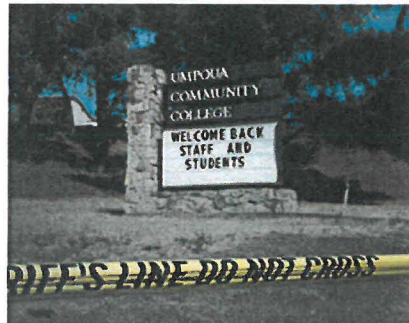
Erik Ayala could barely sleep. He hadn't worked for months. He hardly ever talked to his two high school buddies anymore, even Mike, with whom he now shared an apartment in Portland. In the three years since he'd moved there in 2006, he'd struggled to hold down a job or find a girlfriend. Now 24 years old, he was no longer in touch with the teams who had watched over him in his hometown for nearly five years. He had become increasingly withdrawn and often holed up in his bedroom playing [Resistance: Fall of Man](#) [27] and other first-person shooter games.

On the morning of January 24, 2009, Ayala scribbled a note apologizing to his family and bequeathing his PlayStation 3, his car, and what little remained in his bank account to Mike. "I'm sorry to put all this on you buddy," he wrote. "I know it's not much consolation but as my friend and roommate you are entitled to everything that I own. Good luck in this fucked-up world." Then he grabbed the 9 mm semi-automatic he'd bought two weeks earlier at a pawnshop and headed downtown.

Just before 10:30 p.m., a group of teens waited in line outside the Zone, an all-ages dance club. Ayala didn't know anyone at the club, but to him it was a hangout for the kinds of kids he despised. In a matter of seconds Ayala fatally [shot](#) [28] two teenage girls and wounded seven people, most of them also teenagers. As a security guard moved toward him, Ayala put the barrel under his chin and pulled the trigger one last time.

It was the worst mass shooting in Portland's history. Experts also cite it as a prime example of both the promise of threat assessment and its limitations. "Ayala ended up acting out his ideas from high school on a similar, if not the same, target population almost a decade later," Van Dreal says. That may suggest the two Oregon teams prevented Ayala from going on a rampage when he was younger, but it also reflects the daunting challenge of managing a potentially dangerous person over the long haul. Even if a troubled kid can be turned away from violence, how do you ensure he becomes a well-adjusted adult? What happens when he moves beyond the reach of those who have helped him? When is a case really over?

Others have fallen through the cracks, including James Holmes, who [underwent](#) [30] threat assessment and psychiatric care at the University of Colorado-Denver before he dropped out, cut ties with the school, and carried out the movie theater massacre in Aurora. Jared Loughner, who shot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others in Tucson, Arizona, in 2011, had been booted out of Pima Community College after its threat assessment team looked at his disruptive behavior. Many mental health professionals still lack the training to evaluate potentially deadly people, says Deisinger, who is a psychologist as well as a cop. And they may be resistant to threat assessment's tactics and urgency.



[29]

[Listen to National Public Radio's Robert Siegel interview Mark Follman about this investigation](#) [29]

"There's nothing more frustrating than hearing people say there's no way to stop these mass shootings from occurring," says Russell Palarea, a forensic psychologist and veteran of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service who now consults for private corporations. Like many in his field, Palarea believes the key is helping more people understand what threat assessment is and how it works—similar to the "see something, say something" campaign meant to help foil terrorist attacks. "The methodology is in place," he says. "We just need to train the public, law enforcement, prosecutors, hospital clinicians, and other professionals on their roles in helping to manage the threats."

The science behind threat assessment is still young, but it is attracting growing interest; last year the American Psychological Association launched the *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. The ranks of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals are rising, and since Sandy Hook, more corporate leaders have taken an interest in the strategy. Three states—Virginia, Illinois, and Connecticut—now mandate threat assessment teams in their public colleges and universities. Virginia was the first to do so (after the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007) and now also requires them in all [K-12 public schools](#) [31]. (Read more about [its model here](#) [32].)

[24]

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**"There are so many firearms out there, you just assume everybody has one."**

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But should a huge investment in threat assessment really be our only serious effort to stop mass shootings? Australia, another frontier culture with a deep attachment to guns, endured a slew of mass shootings starting in the 1970s. After a disturbed young man killed 35 people and wounded 18 others in 1996, the country invested heavily in gun buybacks and enacted stricter gun laws. Suicides and murders with guns declined dramatically, and Australia has had [only one](#) [33] public mass shooting in the two decades since.

"This new report from *Mother Jones* will make silence just a little harder from now on."  
 —Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), on our April 2015 investigation, "What Does Gun Violence Really Cost?"

We're digging deep and connecting the dots on the epidemic of gun violence.  
 It's not easy.  
 And it's not cheap.  
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Possession of a firearm, of course, is not a meaningful predictor of targeted violence. But at the conference in Disneyland, virtually everyone I spoke with agreed that guns make these crimes a lot easier to commit—and a lot more lethal. "There are so many firearms out there, you just assume everybody has one," Scalora says. "It's safer to assume that than the opposite." The presence of more than [300 million guns](#) [34] in the United States—and the lack of political will to regulate their sale or use more effectively—is a stark reality with which threat assessment experts must contend, and why many believe their approach may be the best hope for combating what has become a painfully normal American problem.

In a sense, threat assessment is an improvisational solution of last resort: If we can't muster the courage or consensus to change our underlying policies on firearms or mental health care, at least we can assemble teams of skilled people in our communities and try to stop this awful menace, case by case.

Kyle Alexander remembers how he and Erik Ayala met as freshmen in the high school marching band: They were both introverts who loved video games and commiserated about being misfits. Hours before Ayala carried out his attack in Portland, his roommate, Mike, called Alexander, who was living in Seattle. "He'd found the note and he sounded very frantic," Alexander recalls. "He wanted to see if I knew Erik's whereabouts." Alexander was worried but didn't know what he could do from so far away. Mike was also at a loss. "At the time we thought Erik was just going through another bad cycle of depression," Alexander says. "We never saw it coming."

Only recently did Alexander learn the full details of Ayala's case, including that he had once been on Ayala's hit list. "It was surprising, and scary to think about," he says. "Erik would go through very dark moods, but given the special relationship we had I was often able to help him turn things around." Alexander wishes he'd stayed closer with Ayala after high school. "The social relationship piece of it is big," he says. "I think it could've made a difference in his life."

Alexander is now 32 years old and lives in Salem, Oregon, where he works as a school psychologist. He is trained in threat assessment and works with school-based teams in his district. His passion is helping at-risk kids.

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