

America mourns another school shooting. Why is it so difficult to strengthen US gun laws?

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The murders of at least 19 children and two teachers at a Texas elementary school have led to more demands for a coherent approach to

gun and mental health reforms in the United States.

Shortly after his 18th birthday this month, the school shooter bought two assault rifles and 375 rounds of ammunition, according to a Texas state senator. One of the rifles was found with the gunman Tuesday after he was killed in a classroom at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, a town of 16,000 people 80 miles west of San Antonio.

It was the 212th mass shooting in the U.S. this year involving four or more deaths, and the 27th shooting at a U.S. school. It came 10 days after the racist mass killing of 10 people at a [grocery store](#) in Buffalo, New York.

"When in God's name are we going to stand up to the gun lobby?" President Joe Biden said Tuesday night, hours after the Texas shooting. "Why are we willing to live with this carnage? Why do we keep letting this happen?"

Jack McDevitt, a Northeastern professor who helped drive a new package of gun laws in Massachusetts, says a starting point for overhauling U.S. firearm laws should include mandatory licenses for guns, much the same as driver's licenses are demanded of anyone who operates a motor vehicle.

"This kid in Texas could just walk into a store and buy assault weapons, and he wasn't required to get a license," says McDevitt, a professor of the practice in criminology and criminal justice as well as director of the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern. "We in Massachusetts have demonstrated—as well as in New York, Hawaii and other states—that requiring a gun license provides a whole lot of things, including a background check so that you know that the person is someone who should be able to get a gun."

In response to the 2012 killings of 20 children and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut, McDevitt was asked by Massachusetts House Speaker Robert DeLeo to lead the effort to strengthen the state's gun laws. DeLeo, who is now the University Fellow for Public Life at Northeastern, passed 43 of the 44 proposals offered by McDevitt's commission, which were signed into law in 2014.

"As a result, Massachusetts became the safest state in the country in terms of gun suicides as well as gun homicides," McDevitt says. But those efforts failed to spread throughout the U.S., he acknowledges.

The need for a comprehensive approach to gun ownership is critical, says James Alan Fox, the Lipman Family Professor of Criminology, Law, and Public Policy at Northeastern. In 2020, [more than 45,000 people](#) in the U.S. died from gunfire, representing a 25% increase from 2015.

"That's the reason we need to enact stricter gun control," Fox says. He adds, however, that mass shooters are difficult to identify and stop in advance. "These individuals generally will be able to get a gun, regardless of what [obstacles] we put in their path."

Fox notes that legally purchased guns were used in Uvalde and Parkland, Florida, where a shooter killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018.

"Do we need to expand background checks? Yes," says Fox, a principal leader of the Associated Press/U.S. Today/Northeastern University Mass Killing Database. "Would they have prevented those two shootings? No."

The complexity of America's contentious relationship with guns is underlined by school shootings, says Fox, who argues that the responding safety measures—which have included the arming of teachers and

surprise intruder-alert drills—can themselves be traumatic to children.

"Since 2013, a total of 73 students in K-12 schools have been killed in a mass shooting with at least four total victims by injury or death," Fox says. "I don't wish to minimize in any way the pain to the families and the communities who endure these tragedies. But given that there are over 50 million schoolchildren in America, the probabilities are small."

"The irony is these sorts of cases create the most impetus for gun legislation," Fox says of school shootings. "But they are the least likely to be impacted by that legislation."

DeLeo says he developed an understanding for the resistance to gun laws after Sandy Hook, when he devoted more than a year to strengthening the Massachusetts regulations.

"I learned very quickly that it wasn't going to be as easy as I thought it was going to be," DeLeo recalls. "I couldn't understand where people were coming from. I had visions of these poor second-grade students hovering in the corner with their teacher and being just slaughtered. I learned later on that some of the students were unrecognizable, that they could only be identified as a result of the clothes they were wearing."

Though a majority of Massachusetts residents were in favor of gun legislation, DeLeo says they were in danger of being drowned out by a vocal minority with the political backing of the National Rifle Association.

"I decided to take it more to the people," DeLeo says. "I worked with the churches, the synagogues, the schools—wherever people would have me, I would get out there to try to stir them up. It was a silent majority with a really good piece of legislation, and to pass it, a lot of folks who were sort of quiet became loud. They were active in terms of reaching out to

their legislators and giving them the feeling that they were representing their constituents if they voted in favor of legislation."

Instead of waiting for federal legislation that may never come, McDevitt says he would like to see a grassroots drive throughout the U.S. to help people who may be vulnerable.

"If you think someone in your family is going through a difficult time, we should care about that person enough to take guns away from that person for a short period of time, until everybody's satisfied that they're not going to be a danger to themselves or others," McDevitt says. "We need an educational campaign and additional mental health services to help people in that time when they might be dangerous."

Provided by Northeastern University

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