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**The Endless School Shooting Scourge in the USA: An Exploration Exemplified
by the Columbine High School and the Sandy Hook Elementary School
Shootings**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial
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Before anyone else, I dedicate this work to myself and my partner and precious friend,

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Abstract

The gravity of school shootings in the United States has reached a point where it demands urgent attention and action at all levels, especially when adolescents are involved as primary participants. The present study delves into the rising incidents of school shootings and the debate surrounding gun legislation by providing an in-depth overview of the issue while also examining the nature of American culture and the theory behind gun violence on school grounds in the country. People's safety remains compromised because the government continues to grapple with the challenge of effectively addressing and mitigating gun violence. This research investigates the reasons behind these recurrent happenings and the motivations that drive the perpetrators, often adolescents, to carry out these attacks. This dissertation examines the impact of the shootings on the government and people. Next, it provides a detailed overview of the most prominent cases of school shootings which are the Columbine High School shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the changes they left on the U.S. This study concludes by the country's current impasse regarding how to best curtail or at least minimize the damage caused by this dreadful issue.

المخلص

بلغت خطورة عمليات إطلاق النار في المدارس بالولايات المتحدة نقطة تقتضي اهتمامًا وعملاً عاجلين على جميع المستويات، خاصة عندما يكون المراهقون هم المشاركين الأساسيين في الجرائم. يتعمق هذا البحث في تزايد عمليات إطلاق النار في المدارس والجدل الواقع على "تشريع الأسلحة" من خلال تقديم نظرة دقيقة حول القضية المدروسة على ضوء طبيعة الثقافة الأمريكية وفحص النظرية الكامنة وراء استخدام العنف المسلح في الحرم المدرسي في البلاد. لاتزال سلامة المواطنين محفوفة بالخطر بكون الحكومة تستمر بمواجهة التحدي المتمثل في معالجة مشكل العنف الناتج عن استخدام الأسلحة والتخفيف من حدته. يدرس هذا البحث الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الأحداث المتكررة والدوافع التي تؤدي الجناة، غالبًا المراهقين إلى تنفيذ هذه الهجمات. كما تهدف أيضا إلى معرفة مدى تأثير الحكومة و الشعب بهذا النشاط مع الاستشهاد ببعض الحالات نذكر منها: إطلاق النار في ثانوية كولمباين و ابتدائية ساندي هوك مع الإشارة إلى جل التغيرات التي خلفوها في الولايات المتحدة. في الختام، تبيّن هذه الدراسة الوضع المروع الذي تعيشه البلاد فيما يتعلق باتخاذ قرارات صائبة التي من المفترض أن توفّر أو على الأقل تحد من الضرر الناجم عن هذه الجرائم الفظيعة.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CNN	Cable News Network
CODE	Center of Prevention and Evaluation
DOE	Department of Education
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NPSC	National Prevention Scientific Coalition
NRA	National Rifle Association
NYSPI	New York State Psychiatric Institute
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
WHO	World Health Organization

List of Figures

Figure 1. Random/rampage, targeted, and other school shooting incidents by year, United States, 1990-2012.....	30
Figure 2. An Image of Dylan Klebold last entry in his journal.....	54

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Crossroads of America’s Complex Relationship with Guns	7
1.1. Gun Culture in the USA	7
1.2. The Tragic Reality of Gun Violence in the USA.....	10
1.2.1. Understanding the Root Causes of Gun Violence.....	11
1.2.2. The aftermath of Gun Violence.....	13
1.3. A Comparison of Firearm Homicide Rates in the U.S. with other Developed Countries.....	14
1.4. The Second Amendment on Gun Ownership, Use and Control.....	15
1.5. The U.S. Stance on Gun Ownership.....	17
1.6. The American Dilemma of Restricting Firearms.....	20
1.6.1. The Debate over the Restriction of Guns.....	22
1.6.2. States’ Policies on Gun Control.....	24
Chapter Two: The Widespread Incidents of School Shootings in America and the Risk Factors that Contribute to them	27
2.1. Unveiling the Phenomenon of School Shootings.....	27
2.2. The Evolution of School Shootings in the USA.....	30
2.3. An Exploration of School Shootings’ Root Causes.....	33
2.3.1. Direct Reasons.....	34
2.3.1.1. Availability of Guns.....	34
2.3.1.2. Bullying.....	36
2.3.1.3. Mental Health Issues.....	40
2.3.2. Indirect Reasons.....	42

2.3.2.1. Violent Media.....	42
2.3.2.2. Family Problems.....	44
2.3.2.3. Violent Regions.....	45
2.4. The Impact of School shootings.....	46
2.4.1 The Impact of School Shootings on Students.....	46
2.4.2 The Impact of School Shootings on the Government.....	47
Chapter Three: From Columbine to Sandy Hook: The Tragic Turning Points of School Shootings.....	50
3.1. A Breakdown of the Columbine Shooting.....	50
3.1.1. The Journey of Eric and Dylan.....	51
3.1.2. The Columbine Shooting: Unfolding the Events.....	53
3.2. The Columbine Shooters’ Motives.....	55
3.2.1. The Impulse of Taking Revenge.....	55
3.2.2. Eric and Dylan’s Relationship with Guns.....	57
3.2.3. The Desire to Seek Prominence.....	58
3.3. A Breakdown of the Sandy Hook Shooting.....	60
3.3.1. The Journey of Adam Lanza.....	60
3.3.2. The Sandy Hook Shooting: Unfolding the Events.....	62
3.4. The Sandy Hook Shooter’s Motives.....	63
3.4.1. Mental Illness and Social Isolation.....	63
3.4.2. Interest in Previous Mass Shootings.....	65
3.4.3. Adam Lanza and Pedophilia.....	65
3.5. Governmental Changes after the Columbine and Sandy Hook Shootings.....	66
Conclusion.....	70
Appendices.....	73

Works Cited.....76

Introduction

“I have the fear of guns now because I’m scared someone might shoot me.” these are the words of 8-year-old Edward Timothy that apply to every kid across the USA. American children are traumatized by the fact that their classmates can turn on them at any given moment and shoot them to death. The fear of becoming the potential next victim is consuming them. Every day at school may be their last and this nightmare is a tragic reality that does not seem to cease to exist, at least not any time soon.

The USA is considered one of the leading countries in the race for development and human evolution. The free land, as it is known today, offers its citizens a great number of rights. Nonetheless, not all those rights have resulted in a beneficial outcome for the individual or society. As interpreted by the Supreme Court, the constitutional right to bear and keep arms is a self-defense right which ensures people’s safety. Yet, some individuals have used this right as a tool to harm others, and that is evident in crimes involving guns.

School shootings are firearm-related attacks that target educational institutions, regardless of their nature or level of education. It is regarded as a mass shooting due to the number of casualties that it leaves behind. Although this phenomenon has occurred all over the world, it has been strongly associated with the United States due to the country’s widespread occurrences, which have resulted in the greatest number of casualties.

The occurrences of these incidents are constantly rising and the major reason behind this increase is the easy access to guns in the USA. This availability of lethal weapons was granted to the people by their Constitution. The latter, being the heart of the U.S. political system, states that “a well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” In other words, this right to possess weapons is a hurdle to the Congress’s efforts to regulate gun ownership.

The weapon industry serves more than its original purpose, which is the safety and security of the country, as it plays an important role in funding politicians' campaigns for power. One of the reasons that gun control is often rejected, particularly in the South, stems from the belief that it could potentially jeopardize the safety of government officials in the long run. Despite the community's attempts to limit the number of weapons bought, individuals including adolescents have had and still manage to get easily access to them, leading to horrific mass shootings on school grounds.

When looking back at the history of school shootings in the U.S. over the past two decades, one cannot ignore the deadly cases of the Columbine High School and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings. These two incidents have taken the United States by storm, leaving the highest number of casualties. Multiple American news outlets have reported that after having mass murdered dozens of souls, the shooters died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound; they committed suicide at the crime scene after their rampage. The existence of inadequate gun laws is mainly the cause of the many lives lost during those horrifying occurrences.

The work presented aims to shed light on two of the most prominent school shooting incidents in U.S. history through studying the nature of American culture and its development through time. This research also seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the prolonged debate surrounding gun ownership and use. Moreover, it is intended to monitor school shootings by constructing a thorough overview of the notion and inspecting its factors. Next, it scrutinizes the events and the change that came with them spanning from the shooters' upbringing until the present day.

A variety of questions are raised when having to treat the issue of school shootings in the USA. Despite the complicated nature of the topic, the current research attempts to answer

these frequently asked questions: What characterizes American culture? To what extent is gun violence deeply rooted in American society and what does contribute to its occurrences? What is the Second Amendment and what are the different interpretations of it? How did gun control become a debate in America and what are the key arguments with and against it? Do the states adhere to common policies governing firearms ownership? What defines a school shooting? When and how did school shootings become a problem? What leads to these happenings? In which ways do they impact the USA? How did the Columbine and Sandy Hook school shootings influence the United States' gun control laws? And what are the additional measures that can be taken in the future to reduce the frequency and severity of school shootings?

School shootings are undoubtedly one of the most intriguing issues to be addressed in a scientific setting. This is based on the complexity of the occurrences and the variety of viewpoints that might be utilized to analyze it. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, it is vital to shed light on the insights shared by academics, journalists, politicians, lawmakers, researchers and first hand witnesses who have contributed to the discourse surrounding this issue.

Marcel Lebrun in his book titled *Books, Blackboard, and Bullets: School Shootings and Violence in America*, looks at the issue of school violence as a multifaceted, multilayered, complex problem that has emerged and become more evident in the current educational system. He goes further to question whether instilling a sense of loyalty and pride in the students would prevent school violence from happening. He then emphasizes that a lot concur that having a tie to and feeling like you belong in a place or with someone reduces your likelihood of causing harm or destruction to them. Lebrun also argues that despite the decline in crime rates, the media and press always exaggerate the cases of school shootings to

demonstrate how out of control the epidemic of school violence is. Additionally, out of the twenty-six biggest economies in the world, the United States is reported to have the highest rates of juvenile homicide, suicide, and firearm-related mortality.

In the United States, the issue of youth gun violence in the context of school shootings is alarmingly grave, often characterized as an epidemic that inflicts a huge portion of the population. According to subsequent accounts, the age at which minors commit crimes and become victims keeps getting younger and younger. Moreover, juvenile criminality is escalating in the United States at a considerably faster rate than adult crime. The President of the American College of Emergency Physicians, Dr Jack Allison, states that in the United States, gunshot wounds are the second most common cause of death among children aged 10 to 19, surpassing the likelihood of contracting measles (Ogle and Klemp 171). Notwithstanding the efforts made by both the federal and state governments, the problem of armed violence in the United States remains a multidimensional one, making it almost impossible to fully resolve.

In essence, professionals from different fields and domains have paid particular concern to the regularly appearing issue of school shootings in an effort to better grasp the phenomenon and attempt to offer suitable remedies for it. On the one hand, psychologist Peter Langman in *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* argues that psychological challenges are one of the main factors that push students to commit heinous crimes. According to him, the shooters fell into one of three categories: psychopaths, psychotics, or traumatized. He then uses persuasive evidence to prove how each attacker had prior symptoms of neurological instability before he carried out his scheme. On the other hand, a research team at Columbia University Irving Medical Center and the New York State

Psychiatric Institute (NYSPI), after examining dozens of mass murderers, discovered that the vast majority of spree killers and mass shooters did not possess any mental illness symptoms.

The US Department of Education tackled this issue in its report *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*, stating that these incidents were not random and done on an impulsive basis. The report explains in its findings that the attackers have been carefully planning for the attack, which mostly occurred in the schools they attended. They further specified the types of the shootings according to the aims behind them as some are targeted and others are reported to be a rampage.

This dissertation will use other sources concerning American gun culture, the gun control debate, and school shootings to guarantee a real coverage of the topic. Hence, a variety of sources from books, journals, newspapers, reports, to websites and documentaries are used in this work.

The present research is conducted through a combination of the historical, descriptive and analytical methods. The historical method is adopted to explain the history of how American culture became a gun culture from the time that the Second Amendment was ratified until present day. The descriptive method is employed to look at the evolution of gun violence and school shooting occurrences in the United States throughout the past two decades. The analytical method, however, is used to explore the motives that drove the perpetrators of both Columbine and Sandy Hook to execute their attacks.

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters, each dedicated to examining a pivotal aspect of the research. The first chapter under the title “The Crossroads of America’s Complex Relationship with Guns” explains the concept of American gun culture and then moves to investigating the issue of violence in association with firearms. The chapter explores the historical development of gun policies, which differ from one state to another, tracing

back to the inception and application of the Second Amendment. Additionally, it offers a comprehensive overview of the ongoing contentious discourse surrounding gun control that has deeply divided the United States.

The second chapter which is entitled “The Widespread Incidents of School Shooting in America and the Risk Factors that Contribute to them” explores the phenomenon of school shootings by providing an overview of its definition and historical context. Next, it examines the factors contributing to these incidents, categorizing them into two groups: “direct reasons” and “indirect reasons”. It also uncovers the wide-ranging impacts left in the aftermath of these incidents.

The last chapter is entitled “From Columbine to Sandy Hook: The Tragic Turning Points of School Shootings”; it examines both the Columbine and Sandy Hook school shootings and the profiles of the attackers by providing general background information of the incidents. It also investigates the motivations that compelled the shooters to carry out their attacks and it discusses the impact that these cases have had on the gun control dilemma of the United States.

Guns occupy an important role in American culture that is characterized by a profound and enduring connection. Policies surrounding guns in America are complex; they vary across states and have their roots in the inception and interpretation of the Second Amendment. This strange connection with firearms resulted in the existence of gun violence. The surge of incidents is a matter of concern that cannot be overlooked and the impact goes beyond what one can predict.

Chapter One

The Crossroads of America's Complex Relationship with Guns

The United States is one of the most developed countries in the world leading in several areas such as education or economy. This first world country suffers from an issue that can be found in other third world countries which is the excessive use of firearms; this is not a new phenomenon as it has started since the U.S. gained its independence. However, the present-day circumstances have escalated gun violence that is happening all across the country. U.S. history has known some important figures that tried to put this issue under control, but they were met with failure. With multiple tries from both the politicians and people, the gun dilemma is yet to be halted.

This chapter first explores the fight against guns that is happening in American society as it begins with an inquiry into the complex and controversial concept of gun culture. Additionally, it digs deep into the problem of violence that is surrounded by those firearms; an examination of the causes and the effects of those incidents will follow next. This chapter also inspects the history of laws about guns starting from the time that the Second Amendment was born and applied. Besides, it provides a clear explanation of the ongoing, heated and controversial debates on gun control that divide the United States.

1.1. Gun Culture in the USA

In the opening of his groundbreaking article "America as a Gun Culture", Richard Hofstadter states that the United States "is the only modern industrial urban nation that persists in maintaining a gun culture". Gun culture is usually defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors which are associated with the existence of firearms in a particular society or community. It covers a broad range of practices, principles, and views regarding the ownership, use, and control of firearms (*Collins English Dictionary*).

Gun culture may be firmly embedded in some nations or regions as a component

of either the national or regional identity in which guns are regarded as emblems of liberty, individuality, self-defense, or hunting (Parker et al.). In these kinds of situations, the use and ownership of firearms may be believed to be a constitutional right or a valued tradition.

Indeed, this is the case for America.

In their journal article “What Is Gun Culture? Cultural Variations and Trends Across the United States,” Boine et al. mention that Hays’ definition of culture “a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities and externalized in institutions” leads to the understanding that the term “gun culture” refers to the deep, social and long-lasting pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are embedded in firearms, which serve as both cultural artifacts as well as cultural vehicles. Gun culture also gets to cover how people and organizations engage with firearms both consciously and unconsciously through the beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes, social and legal standards along with the social structures that they project onto them. It involves the social interactions brought about or changed by the availability of firearms as well as the corresponding influences between individuals, groups, and organizations regarding the ownership and use of firearms (2). Originally, the term “gun culture” was first used in 1970 by the American historian Richard Hofstadter, who considered it to be a monolithic reflection of Americans’ peculiar conviction in the “notion that the people’s right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy.”

As a matter of fact, another American historian Clayton E. Cramer argues, “Gun ownership appears to have been the norm for freemen, and not terribly unusual for free women and at least male children, through the Colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic periods” (236). This means that, although guns back then were not as symbolic as they are

currently, they have always been part of American social history. Another point mentioned by Boine et al. which was originally remarked by Jessica Dawson, an Academy Professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, is that at the very time Hofstadter published his article; the National Rifle Association (NRA) had not yet become the political lobby we know today and still included many members open to firearm regulation. Hofstadter's definition, which was restricted to a particular political opinion, overlooked a variety of different views, values, attitudes, norms, and institutions. Many following academics have likewise described gun culture in a narrow and monolithic manner (2).

Within any culture exist subcultures, defined here as "a set of modal beliefs, values, norms, and customs associated with a relatively distinct social subsystem (a set of interpersonal networks and institutions) existing within a larger social system and culture" (Fischer 6). One of the various subcultures that form up American society is gun culture. As mentioned by Andrew Stover, Kohn states that subcultures are identified as groups that utilize common language, signs, and symbols concerning the use of firearms. Many researchers have attempted to break down gun culture into various elements. Yamane for example, outlined the differences between two aspects of gun culture, recreation or serious leisure such as target shooting, hunting and collecting and the second aspect being self-defense (qtd. in Stover 5).

Anderson and Taylor highlight the concept of "serious leisure" which was first introduced by Stebbins in 2001 who originally differentiated between casual leisure and serious leisure. Casual leisure involves mundane activities that require little specialized training, while serious leisure is complex and specialized and requires a greater level of commitment and training (36). Through observation, Yamane came to the conclusion that although the recreational gun subculture which he labeled as Gun Culture 1.0 is on the decline, the self-defense subculture which he referred to as Gun Culture 2.0 is constantly on

the rise (Boine et al. 2). On the one hand, the former subculture is declining because the society of the U.S. continues moving forward; hunting, for example, has evolved from being a survival practice to a recreational activity. John W. Grandy et al. in their work “The Science and Sociology of Hunting: Shifting Practices and Perceptions in the United States and Great Britain” also argued that although many still hunt to harvest game meat, not many people in the U.S. hunt for subsistence (107). On the other hand, Gun Culture 2.0 which concentrates on the use of arms for self-defense is increasing due to the majority of gun owners’ claim that they feel safer and secure for owning and carrying a gun with them.

In their book *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know* Cook and Goss argue that notwithstanding the fact that gun ownership is both considered a threat and is threatened by emerging or possible future legislation or gun restrictions or by other phenomena thought to be attenuating personal protection, gun sales are still growing considerably (8). It is said that increased rates of gun ownership by private individuals is associated with increasing crime rates, more media coverage of that crime, and the proliferation of gun control laws at the same time (Stover 10).

1.2. The Tragic Reality of Gun Violence in the USA

The United States is a densely populated country with hundreds of millions residing in it; the melting pot country has evolved into a dominant power in the world. Unfortunately, this population faces some life-threatening issues, most significantly violence in all its forms.

As defined by the *Meriam Webster* dictionary, violence is the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy (“Violence”). In its website, the World Health Organization (WHO) provides the most used and appropriate definition of violence as it is regarded as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual. They further specify that this violence can be performed on oneself, another person or a group that results in physical or mental harm. This concept of violence is deeply ingrained in American society; with their

freedom of gun ownership, they are faced with gun violence more regularly than other first-world nations.

The most dangerous type of violence that the USA has encountered is gun violence. Due to Americans' freedom of owning guns, they have a deeply ingrained view of violence. The Gun Violence Archive denotes that gun violence is the outcome of all gun-related incidents involving death, injury, or threat without passing judgment. Without taking into account intent or consequences; this means that both a defensive use of force and an officer-involved shooting are considered acts of gun violence. The act itself, no matter the reason for it, is violent in nature. Cook and Ludwig in their book *Gun Violence: The Real Costs* have compared gun violence to a contagious virus that requires immediate care from the authorities (48-49). This unprecedented analogy sheds light on the severity of the issue that results in a crime that hinders the development of society.

The USA has positioned itself on top of the pyramid regarding gun ownership in the world; this easy access to firearms has led the society to be met with a higher rate of gun crimes than their neighboring countries. The Gun Violence Archive's records show that the USA had an outbreak of gun violence in 2021; that year, which is known as the outburst of the pandemic, is also the year of a plague called gun violence. A rough number of 43,538 has been reported as gun violence, with a repercussion of 22,937 deaths and 21,601 injuries. These numbers are only a fraction of the real numbers that have not resulted in damage or been reported to the authorities.

1.2.1. Understanding the Root Causes of Gun Violence

Gun violence is not a direct problem of one cause; it is a multilayered issue that needs to be broken down layer by layer. Those layers or causes are not arbitrary as they are closely linked to some slices of society more than others which raise speculation about how gun violence can relate to the condition of life in American society.

Some scholars believe that socioeconomic welfare is the main factor of gun violence; in an inquiry conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there is a clear increase in overall gun homicides as the rate went by 34.6% from 4.6 to 6.1 per 100,000 persons. Ethnic groups such as Hispanics and African Americans suffer more gun violence than other groups. The lack of proper living conditions for children makes them more likely to experience gun violence. Beardslee et al. express that children who come from broken families or live in dangerous neighborhoods are more likely to have developmental issues, such as abandonment of education and joining gangs. Therefore, these children are prone to having a higher rate to affiliate with guns and gun violence (326-336).

The factor that cannot be dismissed is access to guns; the Second Amendment gives Americans the right to bear arms, and the latter is the main cause of gun violence. Gun laws can vary from one state to another where some states are more permissive of guns and ownership while others are more restrictive. Everytown Gun Safety, a nonprofit organization that deals with gun violence prevention, after comparing state policies regarding guns and the rates of gun violence, reports that states with strict laws tend to have a lower rate of gun ownership such as Rhode Island which has one of the lowest gun violence rates in the country; on the contrary, States like New Mexico and Nevada are on the higher end of the spectrum as their gun laws can be of below average expectations. These results are supported by different investigations. Reeping et al., state that the state's laws on gun ownership are the direct reason for mass shootings and any other kind of violence. They continue to point out that states that are more permissive with guns are the ones where gun violence occurs more than in restrictive states (see "Appendix A"). This further implies that the government cannot control access to guns by federal law as each state has its own laws that are considered rigid to change. This denotes that a solution to gun violence cannot be guaranteed unless a change is made on both the national and state levels.

1.2.2. The Aftermath of Gun Violence

Gun violence is detrimental for both the government and the society who continue to struggle with its outcomes in different ways. Everytown Gun Safety explains in its report *“The Economic Cost of Gun Violence”* that gun violence has cost the USA around \$577 billion in 2022. This sum of money comes in different forms: immediate cost are costs that the government spend on the spot of the gun violence incident; it may contain police investigations, besides that there are other subsequent costs which are long-term costs such as mental or physical care and quality of life cost that deal with the degree of pain and wellbeing lost by victims and their families. This money has put pressure on policymakers to strengthen laws. The funding for the victims can decrease the funding of other areas in each state such as education and social services. In consequence, living conditions are neglected.

Firearm violence instigates both mental and physical damage to the community. Children are the slice of society that is most affected by exposure to gun violence which, in turn, leads to developmental issues. The Child Welfare League of America supports this idea and claims that this affiliation with guns can result in multiple mental health problems, mainly stress and trauma. In the long run, gun violence creates a never-ending loop of violence that passes into future generations (Collins and Swoveland). The number of deaths is always on the rise; data provided by Gun Violence Archive estimates that in 2023 around 9700 deaths were registered so far while in 2022 there were over 44,000 death cases (“Past Summary Ledgers”). One may deduce that this escalating casualty count continues to pose a threat to America and its society.

Gun violence is a tragic reality that hunts Americans each day. An approach to stop gun violence or even minimize it should be found to restore the quality of life that was there before the issue became wildly spread. The government’s efforts to stop gun violence are yet to be seen, and the only way to deal with this issue is to either implement more severe

punishments to the criminals who commit gun violence or to push for gun control to limit the access to guns. The fight to stop gun violence from harming the people and the government's resources is a long and tiring one that will remain active until serious changes are made.

1.3. A Comparison of Firearm Homicide Rates in the U.S. with other Developed Countries

The U.S. has a higher rate of firearm-related homicides than other developed countries. This can be attributed to multiple causes, with the most important one being the violent nature of its culture that tends to embrace violence as a solution to conflicts and disputes. Out of 64 high-income countries and territories, the United States is known for having one of the most elevated levels of gun violence; it is ranked eighth out of 64 in terms of age-adjusted firearm-related homicides. In the category of high-income countries and territories with populations of 10 million or more, the United States holds the top position. When comparing age-adjusted firearm homicide rates, the United States exhibits rates that are 13 times higher than those in France, 22 times greater than the European Union as a whole, and 23 times greater than Australia (Leach-Kemon and Sirull).

The causes of this variation in firearm homicide rates are complex and diverse, they most likely result from a mixture of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. The availability of guns, lax regulations on guns, high levels of income inequality, social and racial tensions, high rates of violent crime and the limited access to mental health care are the factors that usually lead to the extremely high firearm homicide rates in the United States (Grinshteyn and Hemenway).

Based on a study conducted by researchers at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, that assessed firearm-related mortality between 1990 and 2016 for 195 countries and territories by age and sex, the United States had a gun death rate of 10.6 per 100,000 people in 2016. This rate was considerably higher compared to

countries such as Canada (2.1 per 100,000), Australia (1.0), France (2.7), Germany (0.9), and Spain (0.6). The United States ranked 20th in terms of its gun fatality rate during that particular year (“Six Countries in the Americas”). This shows the serious extent of harm that guns can lead to.

In summary, American culture is a gun culture. The United States has a longstanding and tight connection with firearms as the firearm was a crucial tool in the founding, development, and expansion of the country. Since they have been part of American society from the beginning, guns continue to be a source of pride for many Americans. However, this right to bear arms which some claim makes them feel safer could be a major threat to others’ existence or right of life which should also be protected at all costs. This American reality leaves room for a variation of extremely divided opinions on the ownership, use and control of firearms to exist.

1.4. The Second Amendment on Gun Ownership, Use and Control

The Second Amendment to the Constitution which was ratified on December 15, 1791, as written and recorded in the Bill of Rights is “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The Second Amendment has been a motivating force in American politics since at least the 1960s (Dawson 2). However, it has also been the most contentious of all the amendments in American politics and society because of the various interpretations that it had been subject to. People supporting gun control argue that putting it in the context of a well-regulated militia, which back then were neither armies nor official government military forces, but private groups of citizens who volunteered to take up a cause, the Second Amendment says that the national military should not have exclusive access to all guns and that the government cannot abridge the right of those citizens to own and carry guns. While

anti gun control activists argue that this right is meant to be shared by every American citizen.

The Bill of Rights enhanced the Constitution by outlining specific individual rights, placing restrictions on governmental power, and adding even more groundwork for American freedom. As interpreted by the U.S. Constitution, the Second Amendment states that every citizen of the United States has the right to keep and bear arms regardless of the city or state one resides in. The amendment goes further to make it clear that the government is not permitted to violate that right (“NRA-ILA what is the Second Amendment”).

Despite the fact that it is well recognized that gun violence is one of the issues that reduce the quality of life for everyone in the United States, gun ownership is still deeply ingrained in the complicated concept of American liberty (Cook and Ludwig viii). It was singled out early and has been continually emphasized as an instrument and a symbol of individual and political liberty, rather than just one type of physical property that can be lawfully owned. Gun ownership has evolved to become a distinctive symbol and varied manifold tool of private freedom stated throughout the Constitution in the most comprehensive way. Although there are people who oppose what the Second Amendment stands for, the amendment is still crucial for defending the rights of law-abiding gun owners today (Parker et al). Simply put, although the Second Amendment normalizes and legalizes gun ownership, some people are against this legality of firearms. They hold the belief that firearms result in no good; they only cause destruction and losses. However, because the USA values individual freedom, prohibiting citizens from owning firearms is still not one of its options, yet.

Culturally, guns are viewed as symbols and part of what some people think is part of the American identity, but others believe that cultural legacy is outdated and gun culture is toxic as guns have been more destructive than useful. On the political side, some people are

attached to their right to have guns; they view it as a basic guarantee of personal freedom and that is why they will never vote for anyone who suggests that fewer guns for individuals would be better. A third party thinks guns have gotten so dangerous and harmful that it is past the time to restrict their use. Finally, the most important point in this debate is about how the Second Amendment can be interpreted in a modern context that can generate better good for the United States.

1.5. The U.S. Stance on Gun Ownership

In comparison to other countries, the United States has a peculiar stance on gun ownership. The number of guns produced and owned in the United States is extraordinarily high. American gun manufacturers produce approximately 4 million long guns (rifles and shotguns) and two million handguns annually. Firearm ownership and use for recreation and personal defense purposes have long been an integral part of the United States' culture. However, the persistent use of firearms in the U.S. continues to pose serious public health concerns (McClain 299). In 2019, it was reported that there were 393 million firearms in civilians' hands in the United States, which is more guns than the entirety of the population. The report adds that there were roughly 94 million shotguns, 120 million handguns, and 160 million rifles at the time ("Firearms Commerce in the United States: Annual Statistical Update 2019"). This explains why the United States is regarded as the top producer of firearms in the world.

To elaborate more, sociologists and public health experts alike tend to agree that gun culture in the USA is a serious gun ownership issue that remains quite contentious as there are two categories of Americans: Those who own guns and those who do not. The vast majority of people who own guns follow a culture that is endorsed by the NRA, the Republican Party, and the U.S. Constitution. Whereas numerous non-gun owners usually tend to adhere to a culture that is shaped by social organizations such as Everytown for Gun

Safety, social movements like #NeverAgain, and the Democratic Party. Michael Kocsis in his work “Gun Ownership and Gun Culture in the United States of America” mentions that for many Americans, owning a gun is one of their most prized civic rights, while for others it is the least appealing aspect of modern American life. Many Americans support the unrestricted right to own firearms, whereas others want a society free of gun violence; that is, free not only from the increased rates of homicide and suicide that are unmistakably associated with gun ownership, but possibly even free from the very existence of guns (155). This shows how widely varied public opinion is on this issue.

The authors of “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns” have asserted that, throughout historical eras and data sources, it has been discovered that there are various characteristics that legal gun owners share even if they came from different backgrounds and even if they had dissimilar motives for owning guns (Parker et al.). Previous research results have shown that legal gun owners are more likely to be Southerners from small towns and rural areas who are also white, male, and Protestant. Other traits of typical gun owners include being married and a Republican. Age, too, is regarded as a factor in gun ownership with middle-aged people having the highest rates. Even though income correlates strongly with gun ownership rates, education is found to be an unreliable indicator of gun ownership (Celinska 232).

Regardless of the variety of arguments for legal gun ownership, two main ones are generally provided by gun owners: defensive and recreational purposes. Research indicates that even with the hunting heritage being on the decline, most people who purchase weapons do so for recreational purposes which includes sporting, hunting, and collecting. It has been stated that those who own guns for recreational needs can be separated from other gun owners since they belong to a different sporting gun culture. The recreational subculture is passed down from generation to generation and is positively linked with living in the South

and owning defensive firearms. The other category of weapon ownership includes individuals who own guns for protection purposes. Two theoretical grounds for possessing defensive weapons are proposed: acute fear of crime and past victimization experience as well as lack of faith in collective security. The first explanation has not received the support needed; the support was mixed. However, the second explanation gained a lot more support and can be seen as a representation of individualistic principles (Celinska 233).

Gun ownership rates are known to be extremely high in the southern area of the United States. Brennan et al. in their article “Guns, Southernness and Gun Control” have mentioned that some sociologists claim that higher rates of weapon ownership in the South are related to the high violent crime rates of that region. Southerners are also known for their passion and preference of owning shotguns specifically and not just any other gun, generally, because of the significant historical role they represent to them; they were used in hunting and farming (290-291). Another reason which explains the high rates of gun ownership in the south is the widespread recreational activities in the area (291). In contrast to the first claim, high gun ownership rates in the south are attributed to a variety of reasons and not only the violent nature of the zone.

In recent years, there have been several high-profile mass shootings in the United States which have revived the debate about gun control laws and regulations. There are continuous discussions in which people are debating different specific policy measures. Some of them are very restrictive; others are just minor hurdles to gun ownership. The diverse nature of these discussions reflects the complexity of finding common ground on the issue while striving for effective solutions to prevent further instances of mass shootings. Some people call for universal background checks for all gun purchases while some others seek to restrict gun ownership for people accused of domestic violence. There is also another debate which concerns the legality of certain firearms because a group of people insist upon banning

all semi-automatic guns. Finally, people have different opinions on each policy because they stand on different sides.

1.6. The American Dilemma of Restricting Firearms

Gun control is not a newly introduced concept to the United States; it has existed for a quite long time. American politics, in general, are very polarized and gun policy is no different. In his article titled “Gun Control Explained,” Pérez-Peña, a journalist in *The New York Times*, defines gun control as the regulation of the purchase and use of guns. Its main goal is to decrease gun violence. Gun control requires some special measurements to be taken; one of them is background checks on the owner and the prohibition of some types of firearms such as rifles.

Gun control and gun reforms are often used interchangeably. However the two terms indicate two different meanings in the legal arena; they represent distinct concepts in the realm of firearms regulation. While gun control is strictly limited to the legal measures performed to govern guns, gun reforms exceed those legal boundaries and are concerned with anything related to the decrease of guns and the diminish of gun violence. It also initiates policies to treat the issue from its roots by making efforts to reduce poverty, social welfare and promote safer environments. Hence, gun control is a narrower range of actions compared to gun reforms (Cook and Goss 72).

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms classifies in its website the most important gun control laws in the history of the United States. The first encounter with gun control laws was during the 1920s when the Supreme Court issued the ban on mailing firearms or the Non-Mailable Firearms Act. The 1930s era, known as the era of heavy gangster wars, pushed the government to pass the National Firearms Act in 1934 where taxes were enforced upon a few types of firearms, mainly the ones that concern gangs. These taxes were not only applicable to the machinery itself, but also to individuals involved in the

manufacturing, distribution, and purchase of those arms with the obligation of legal registration. Moreover, the laws went into a stricter approach as the Federal Firearms Act of 1937 forbade the sale of guns to any individual with a prior criminal history (“National Firearms Act”).

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Gun Control act was signed in 1968. It was an expansion of the previous laws and more regulative of gun ownership in terms of the type of firearms being purchased and the person who intended to buy them as it became illegal for any individual under 21 to own a gun as well as any person who suffered from mental illnesses or linked to any illegal business such as drugs or gangs (“Gun Control Act”). However, this law was later amended by the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act in 1993 that requires any purchase of a gun to take five days to run a background check on the buyer. In 1998, it was replaced by a database that makes a thorough search on people who wanted to purchase firearms; it was called National Instant Criminal Background Check System (“Brady Law”).

The *District of Columbia v. Heller* case in 2008 was a turning point in gun laws as the Supreme Court stated that guns are considered individual rights handed to people by the Second Amendment. Even the government is not entitled to ban individuals from keeping a firearm in their home although they specified that certain types of firearms, in particular, rifles are prohibited to be owned without special need. This has influenced the upcoming laws that different states act upon concerning guns (Lund 1343-1345).

To recapitulate, gun control laws or acts are the results of a series of events that span across several centuries and are shaped by a variety of economic, social and political factors. Throughout American history, laws were proposed to restrict guns on every level of the legislative branch from local regulations to Supreme Court decisions. From the colonial period until the present day, guns have started a heated debate over them, sparking the

implementation of new laws and the abolishment of others in response to differing perspectives. This ongoing battle over guns serves as a clear indication that the issue remains far from reaching a definitive resolution, ensuring that it will persistently influence and shape various aspects of American life every day.

1.6.1. The Debate over the Restriction of Guns

This issue is a rift in American society as there is no consensus on gun control. Some individuals consider themselves pro-gun control and others anti-gun control. Any enhancement of previous laws is hindered by the opposite side of this dilemma. Each side argues for the advantages and the disadvantages of guns; this debate exceeds the political arena and moves to every aspect concerning American life.

The pro-gun supporters assert that by prohibiting guns or banning their purchase there will be greater damage. They urge that gun control will compromise the right to bear arms which is mentioned in the Second Amendment. They claim that the absence of guns will jeopardize their safety; they further explain that restricting guns will leave citizens unable to defend themselves against criminals who obtain their guns in the black market (Cook 1:359-377). Those supporters add that the right to bear arms is essential to balancing the government as it is a barrier between the people and any kind of government tyranny (Kopel 136).

Furthermore, the idea of guns killing people is heavily rejected as they strongly believe that those firearms cannot control the intentions of people but only obey them and people are the leading cause of violence (Braga et al. 148). In addition to the arguments that they spread, they possess the support of the NRA, the largest gun rights organization and lobbying group, in an article published by this institution they declared their clear opposition to gun control law as they criticize it for killing the American weapon market and infringing their rights. This lobbying group affects the restrictions placed on guns behind the scenes as it

jeopardizes any upcoming lawmaker's position that supports gun control and sets a clear agenda against him in elections. Thus, this group advocates for their cause as they claim it to be for the greater good and promotes for electing individuals who are on the same page as it (Musa 2-6).

In opposition, there are a large number of people who are in favor of gun control. They, unlike the other group, insist that guns kill people (Braga et al. 148). Any person can be harmed by guns that they either own or even be in the same environment. They predict that the more restrictions on guns the less violence and death will occur and it will only be beneficial for society and help with its development (Reeping et al.). These advocates are encouraging the classification of guns as other commercial products. The commerce clause in the U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power to regulate commerce nationally and internationally and by turning guns into commercial products like cars they will become strictly regulated and thoroughly monitored as firearms have evolved from simple mechanisms to complex technology which aligns with modern commerce regulation whether it is an online sale or in person; this further makes guns more difficult to transfer through states as some states don't have the same commercial laws as the others (Barnett and Koppelman).

Cook et al. suggest a classification of gun law into laws that aim to decrease total gun ownership, laws that ban criminals and dangerous people from obtaining guns, and laws that influence the usage of those guns (259). The main argument of pro-gun groups is the Second Amendment which is the same for the supporters of gun control as they analyze it differently by viewing the right to bear arms as collective rather than an individual right which limits the possession of guns and even the individual right is subjected to severe regulations. The difference in both time and society makes the original meaning of it not appropriate to use in the light of the current situation and cannot be applied to the cases that are occurring in the

present (Nourse 7). This group continues to affirm the intensity of gun violence and that gun control will attempt to stop it.

This debate is not only limited to people but to states as each one has its own separate gun laws which make it harder for the national government to issue a general law that affects the whole country. Thus, it is a complex process that cannot be achieved easily unless radical changes are made at the level of the Constitution which is most likely impossible to happen any time soon.

1.6.2. States' Policies on Gun Control

Gun laws have the potential to influence the occurrence of mass shootings as well as some other hideous crimes. States which have less strict gun laws and higher rates of gun ownership are usually where occurrences of mass shootings often take place, and a widening gap between states with tight gun restrictions and those with laxer or less strict gun laws appears to be developing (Reeping et al. 5). For example, a 2017 study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* mentioned that states that had applied the universal background checks regulation for all gun sales were experiencing a decrease in the rates of suicide and homicide involving firearms (Barry et al.).

Gun control policies in the U.S. vary by state; each state has its own set of gun laws. Some of the states are more restrictive than others such as California which is known for having one of the strictest gun laws in the country. It limits the number of firearms that an individual may purchase in a month, demands background checks for all gun sales, and prohibits assault weapons and high-capacity magazines ("Bureau of Firearms"). Some other states have more lenient regulations like Texas which does not ask for any background checks of private gun sales and allows open carry of handguns with a permit ("Regulatory Services"). This implies that how and when one can practice their Second Amendment rights may differ depending on where they live. Nonetheless, the Second Amendment preserves the

individual's right to keep and bear weapons regardless of city or state if he is able to lawfully purchase and own a gun. In simple terms, every American citizen has the privilege of using firearms for lawful purposes. Once understood, the Second Amendment is not hard to grasp, but many state laws make purchasing and owning a firearm a little bit more complicated ("NRA-ILA What Is the Second Amendment").

In the past, while States regulated firearms during the founding era, blacks were usually forbidden from owning guns, and militia weapons were frequently registered on government rolls. For example, the goal of Georgia's gun laws was to disarm freedmen, slaves and black Georgians. The General Assembly passed down laws to make using firearms illegal for Black people even when their purpose was to combat the racism and discrimination they were experiencing. Georgia's gun regulations were not intended to deter crime. They were a strategy the state used to uphold white supremacy, racism, and other forms of oppression (Menkus). Gun laws have changed, now they are broader and detailed as well as controversial. Moreover, the Fourteenth Amendment's adoption was another significant legal development. Initially, only the federal government was covered by the Second Amendment, giving the states freedom to implement whichever gun laws they deemed appropriate. Although there is solid evidence that the Privileges or Immunities Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was intended to defend individuals' right to keep and bear arms from state infringement, the Supreme Court rejected this interpretation in *United States v. Cruikshank* (1876) (Lund and Winkler). From this, one can understand that the U.S. is constantly witnessing changes in its law system.

In conclusion, the right to gun ownership has been associated with the American values of individual liberty and freedom from government interference. Throughout centuries of social evolution, this set of principles has instilled itself in the public and private lives of many Americans. However, even though this constitutional right

endangers people's safety, the many attempts of activists as well as regular citizens to prohibit gun ownership are regarded as an infringement of it. Hence, different parties are always debating this problem and how to achieve a middle ground solution which works in everyone's favor, or maybe a solution that does not have to satisfy everyone, but at least one that benefits the wellness of all people.

Chapter Two

The Widespread Incidents of School Shootings in America and the Risk Factors that Contribute to them

School shootings are violent incidents that occur at the level of an educational institution, usually on primary or secondary school grounds, but this does not mean that they are uncommon on college or university campuses. These incidents take place when an individual who, in most cases, is a student or a graduate of the same school decides to arm himself and show up to school to kill his fellow schoolmates, teachers, school officials, or any other person who accidentally gets in his way. School shooting incidents typically lead to devastating consequences that may leave permanent scars on people, families and communities.

This chapter delves into the phenomenon of school shootings by explaining the nature of the term and its historical background. Then it will elucidate and dissect the factors that lead to these happenings. Those factors are split into two categories, the first being “direct reasons” because when comparing previous school shooters’ profiles, they have been found responsible for almost every case, and the second being “indirect reasons” because they are secondary factors that could never result in a school shooting without the presence of a direct reason. Finally, this chapter will also unravel the various impacts that these incidents leave behind.

2.1. Unveiling the Phenomenon of School Shootings

With the upsurge in rates of gun violence, the American community is faced with a new kind of terror that comes from within their own borders. Gun crimes are constantly escalating to more severe cases, mainly mass shootings. They are defined in several ways, the most prominent one being the definition issued by the U.S. Congress which specifies that for an incident to be considered a mass shooting it must result in three casualties or more than the

attacker (see “Appendix B”). The data collection and research group, Gun Violence Archive, supports this claim as they classify any shootings that kill or harm more than four people excluding the attacker in the approximate geographical location within the same time frame. These definitions are the standard that outlines mass shooting instances, differentiating them from other attacks that may appear similar.

Although mass shootings are closely linked to school shootings due to the nature of the killing and the method, school shootings are given more precise definitions due to the atrocious state of these incidents. Jeane F. Gerard et al. provide the most common definition of a school shooting which is “A school shooting incident consists of at least one person intentionally using a firearm and shooting at least one other person on school ground” (23); this definition sets the criteria of any incident to count as a school shooting which is the presence of a shooter, casualties and motive alongside the use of a gun. In the book *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, the author particularizes school shootings from other incidents that involve gun violence by stating that school shootings occur only in academic premises with the intention of either harming an individual or a group of students that are enrolled in that institution. She further mentions that the attacker is either enrolled in that establishment or graduated from it (Newman 50). In light of the existence of different definitions for the term, it is safe to say that there is a general consensus that most people agree on which denotes that such incidents include the use of guns for the purpose of committing deadly crimes in educational settings and that they are a dangerous continuous problem that calls for proactive intervention from authorities, lawmakers and the public as a whole.

Peter Langman adds that incidents that are linked to gang activities should not be put under school shootings as he further investigates that the motive behind them is not related to the school but to gang entanglement inside the school which may take place anywhere else

(2). This view was illustrated by Professor Glenn W. Muschert who provides more explanations regarding school shootings by drawing a clear line between rampage shootings and targeted shootings as they fall under the umbrella of geographical location which is schools. He points out that rampage shootings and targeted attacks are sometimes mistaken as one another because they stand on a common ground which is the same characteristics of the shooter being either a current or former member of the establishment like student, teacher or employee (63). Overall, this indicates that the attackers could possess distinctive intentions to pull the trigger where some are arbitrary and others are precisely planned out. Howsoever, they all lead to the same end which is the loss of innocents' lives.

Muschert highlights that the difference between the two is the motive. Rampage shootings are oriented towards groups or the school itself as it tries to acquire power or execute revenge from them for a symbolic meaning, the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton is considered as one of the most famous cases of rampage shootings in the United States. While targeted shootings are calculated to harm an individual or a group by seeking revenge of mistreatment or neglect, they are not designed with any symbolic aim (63-64). CNN named the 2003 shooting in Red Lion, Pennsylvania, where a student fatally shot a school administrator as the case that fits targeted shootings the most (“Police Search for Motive in School Shooting”). These incidents are on the rise each year where their severity increases notably (See fig.1 on page 30).

Indeed, rampage shootings and targeted attacks are not the same because they differ in their motivation, planning and execution. Although those who commit targeted attacks could be current or former students of a certain school just like those who carry out rampage shootings, the former type of shooters targets specific individuals for specific motives, while in rampage shootings the attacker does not have any specific person to target; they kill whoever crosses their path.

Fig.1:

Random/rampage, targeted, and other school shooting incidents by year, United States, 1990-2012.



Source: Shultz, James M. et al. “Fatal School Shootings and the Epidemiological Context of Firearm Mortality in the United States.” *Disaster Health* vol. 1,2 84-101. 1 Apr. 2013, doi:10.4161/dish.26897

As can be observed in the chart above, the occurrences of targeted shootings are extremely high in comparison to those of random/rampage shootings. Random/rampage shooting incidents in schools have remained rare, with only 0 to 3 occurrences each year, while the frequency of targeted shootings ranges from 1 to 24 occurrences. However, it is important to note that despite targeted shootings being more frequent, they usually result in less human casualties than random/rampage shootings which, in most cases, have left behind a great number of victims. Illustrating the two examples mentioned previously, the Columbine shooting which is categorized as a rampage shooting, resulted in the death of thirteen people and the wounding of over twenty others. On the other hand, the Red Lion shooting incident in which the attacker had a specific target to murder caused the death of one

person. These two examples show that despite having a lower occurrence rate, rampage/random shootings tend to cost more human lives than targeted shootings do.

2.2. The Evolution of School Shootings in the USA

Unquestionably, the concept of school shootings gathered attention worldwide during recent years, yet it is not a new issue on the plate of the American community. The first recorded emergence of school shootings as a national phenomenon is dated back to the 1980s despite existing since the early 1800s. In 1853, brothers William and Matthew Ward killed William's teacher William Butler in school premises over a class dispute; the news of the incident spread across the country as it made Americans aware of what the possession of firearms can do to their children in school. The decades after that were infiltrated with school attacks but it was not until the 1960s that the course of history was changed (Cornell). This entails that even though school shootings were a thing starting from the 1800s, the severity of these incidents only began to escalate significantly from the 1900s onwards, marking a turning point in the gravity of the issue.

On August 1, 1966, the University of Texas was targeted by former student Charles Whitman. An article issued by the Austin History Center mentions that the former marine went on a rampage and killed 16 members of the university on campus and injured 34 alongside his wife and mother at his home. His motives varied from his insecurities to his failure in life alongside his medical health as his autopsy showed signs of tumor in his brain ("Looking back: 50 Years after the UT Tower Shooting"). Hence, this is the deadliest case of school shootings planned by a member of an academic institution at the time.

Historically, the USA recorded a series of school shootings in the 1970s and 1980s that resulted in many deaths and injuries. Each one of the shooters had a different motive, for instance, in an article published by the *New York Times* it was mentioned that some shooters displayed clear signs of taking their lives among them the Orlean shooter who was

demonstrating suicidal thoughts and was an outcast in his school. The Orlean shooter wrote: “I guess I wanted to kill the person that I hate the most, myself.” The paper also reported on Charles Allyway who was a librarian in the library of California State University. Suffering from Schizophrenia, Charles killed 7 people and left 5 others injured (Fessenden). Alongside these incidents, several other shootings occurred in the span of this decade leading to the doubling of violent crimes prevalence during the 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that America faced the explosion of school shootings.

From 1990 until present day, school shootings keep on escalating becoming a ticking threat to Americans. In fact, it was reported that 220 fatal incidents with 253 casualties took place in educational settings between 1994 and 1999; “202 events involved 1 death and 18 involved multiple deaths, 172 were homicides, 30 were suicides, 11 were homicide-suicides, five were legal intervention deaths, and two were unintentional firearm-related deaths” (Anderson et al.). Since children were not innocent anymore as some can be considered cold hearted murderers, people were questioning what kind of future this generation is heading towards.

The Columbine High School shooting is considered a turning point in American society; the incident which left 12 students and a teacher dead and over 20 other injured victims. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire in their school on April 20, 1999. Prior to the event, they were investigated by their school as they showed signs of disturbing behavior that indicated a potential for violence. Unfortunately, at that time, there was a lack of understanding and recognition about mental issues and the warning signs associated with such extreme acts (History.com Editors). Accordingly, the Columbine High School massacre led to a series of transformative changes in both the political landscape and social attitudes regarding mental health awareness. The incident triggered the implementation of multiple

measures aimed at limiting and preventing school shooting occurrences throughout the 21st century.

Compared to the 1980s and 1990s, the amount of deadly violent incidents in schools was minimal prior to the 1970s, with the exception of a few instances. The term “school shootings” gained more traction in the 1990s because it is then that the issue reached its peak. The historical context of school shootings generally emphasizes the urgent necessity to confront this recurring problem and engage in real action to prevent any possible similar future instances. This entails that addressing the primary reasons that lead to school shootings and coming to effective solutions is how schools can become safe for everyone and how the government can ensure the security of the whole country.

2.3. An Exploration of School Shootings’ Root Causes

It happens to be the case that a lot of individuals believe that the problem of school shootings has its roots in the current social structure. Although that may very well be the circumstance, the issue is not a new one (Steele 6). There are several causes which may lead to the happenings of school shootings, but there is not a single dynamic that is able to adequately describe all these occurrences, or even a portion of them. In “Research in School Shootings,” Muschert highlights that individual causes, community contexts, and social/cultural contexts in which the events occur can all be the source from where the phenomenon originates. Individual factors and community contexts can be viewed as direct causes of school shooting incidents, whereas the social and cultural contexts may be considered less immediately responsible for school shootings which makes them the indirect causes. He goes further to note that even though an obvious causal connection may not always be established, culture still provides a general setting for school shooting incidents (67-68).

2.3.1. Direct Reasons

The availability of guns, bullying and mental health issues were among the significant factors that were discovered to be directly related to all of the studied school shooting cases. The important direct risk factor that poses the greatest threat and calls for extremely careful examination is the availability of guns. As justified by Muschert, while it is possible to recognize that all the other factors frequently contribute to the occurrences of school shootings, unlike gun availability, they are still not sufficient to result in a school shooting on their own (68).

2.3.1.1. Availability of Guns

All the already investigated school shootings have, in reality, been linked primarily to easy access to guns. Whether accessed legally or illegally, shooters do not seem to struggle with obtaining a gun. Usually, most of them get their weapons directly from their residences or those of family members, some purchase the weapons lawfully while some others either steal them or obtain them illegally from an acquaintance or a stranger. Therefore, the mere existence of this issue poses a huge threat to people's lives.

In the eyes of many activists, the only way that school shooting attacks in the United States could be controlled and possibly stopped is by placing a ban on gun possession laws, but this utopian solution is a far reach since bearing and keeping arms is a constitutional right for all Americans that cannot be infringed. There are lots of American organizations that advocate for stricter gun control laws, and this serves as more evidence that the Americans themselves are aware of the severity of the dangers that stem from the availability of guns. Some of the active campaigns that can be mentioned are: Everytown for Gun Safety, Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, Stop Handgun Violence and National Gun Victims Action Council. They all believe that the high level of youth mortality in the U.S. is linked to easy access to guns. That is why they are convinced that in order to save lives and reduce the odds

of deadly incidents, stronger restrictions on guns are required and ought to be given top priority to, even if the Second Amendment expands to individuals. As an example, the 1974-founded Brady Campaign describes gun violence as “a disease, and guns and bullets are the pathogens.” This serious disease needs to be treated, but the only treatment for it is the destruction of the infectious cell, in this case, guns (Pathology of Gun Violence). In the long run, the proponents of this view are constantly spreading awareness to other Americans about the risks that accompany owning guns and the price innocent civilians have to pay for existing in a society that glorifies guns. They also demand that the U.S. government implements real strict legislation for guns.

The anti-gun control preachers contend that the regulations governing the ownership as well as the use of guns can make it more difficult for people to protect themselves from potential criminal attacks. The current Senior Advisor for Research and Statistics at the US Department of Justice John Richard Lott, Jr., who also happens to be a world-recognized American economist, political commentator and an expert on guns and crime, in his book *The Bias against Guns: Why almost Everything You've Heard about Gun Control is Wrong* mentions that, in his previous work *More Guns, less Crime*, through examining the change in crime rates in different states over time by comparing changing gun ownership and concealed handgun laws, the obtained statistics concluded that gun control disproportionately disarmed law-abiding citizens compared to criminals, leading him to believe that, in this case, criminals were less afraid of victims.

Any restriction on the right to own and carry arms is regarded as a violation of the Second Amendment by pro-gun advocacy groups, particularly the NRA. They claim that the right to bear and keep arms is “a birthright confirmed by the Constitution.” (Howard). Therefore, there should be absolutely no limitations because any restraint would be deemed unconstitutional and even tyrannical. One may conclude that this group of people firmly

refuses to submit to the other group's ideals which suggest banning guns for all regular citizens of the U.S. Instead of thinking of guns as being destructive, they believe that humans are the threat and not the weapon.

In conclusion, the majority of Americans hold that easy access to guns disrupts public safety by encouraging violent crimes and unplanned shootings, so, they advocate for gun control. Some other American gun rights supporters believe that such availability of guns strengthens public safety and that there should be no restrictions at all when it comes to gun ownership, especially that it is deemed a constitutional right (Donald and Kahan 570). One can deduce that this ongoing debate over gun legislation in the United States continues to be a real struggle between safeguarding citizens and preserving personal freedom of the same citizens.

2.3.1.2. Bullying

Within the scope of this study area, there is not a single widely recognized definition that encompasses bullying or school shootings. However, it was determined that the most useful definition of bullying is that of Marcel Lebrun from his book *Books, Blackboards, and Bullets: School Shootings and Violence in America* who defined bullying as:

The act of intentionally causing harm to others through verbal harassment, physical assault, or other more subtle methods of coercion such as manipulation. Bullying is an act of repeated aggressive behavior in order to intentionally hurt another person. Bullying is about power. Bullying can take many forms: name calling, verbal or written abuse, exclusion from activities, exclusion from social situations, physical abuse, and coercion. (33)

Lebrun also elaborates on how students have been silently bullied for years. The victims remained silent out of great fear of the outcomes, allowing the bully to carry on with very little to no punishment at all. Their tendency of choosing silence instead of standing up for

themselves is what nurtures the bully's conviction that bullying is a socially acceptable behavior, and a victim should just find ways to cope and live with it (33). In other words, bullying is a shameful act that is being swept under the rug which makes the victims afraid to express their true feelings. Those bottled feelings become the activator of their murder instincts; some act up on those instincts which results in dreadful events.

Michael B. Greene, chair of the Violence Prevention Workgroup at the National Prevention Science Coalition (NPSC) and Randy Ross, a compelling communicator, craftsman of culture and bestselling author of multiple books have stated that since the year of 1999, there has been a greater emphasis on youth bullying as an active response to school violence, which is frequently either directly or indirectly related to bullying. The Columbine High School massacre in 1999 was the first of several well-publicized instances of violent conduct that were ostensibly linked to bullying as the foundational motive or root cause. It gave birth to new legislation to be passed by state legislatures with the intention of reducing incidents of bullying on school grounds (99).

Although in the legal context "harassment" is defined as "a prohibited conduct...that is motivated by characteristics of the targeted victim", the term is one which can be used interchangeably with "bullying" despite their existing legal differences. Given the fact that harassment violates the federal civil rights laws that shield people from all forms of segregation (race, color, national origins, sex and disability), it is regarded as an unlawful act of discrimination (Stuart-Cassel et al. 17). Regardless of the reality that laws against harassment existed before the term bullying ever existed, school officials found it troublesome to make the distinction between harassment and bullying as incidents of school bullying escalated. So, many states often treat the two terms as being synonymous when drafting their laws in an effort to avoid similar confusions (18). Simply put, this mosaic of actions can be interpreted differently but falls under the same roof which is to torment others.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) warned that “bullying in schools has become widely viewed as an urgent social, health, and education concern that has moved to the forefront of public debate on school legislation and policy” (Stuart-Cassel et al. IX). In fact, it has been found that there are approximately 2.1 million bullies and 2.7 million victims in American schools. It is believed that every day, up to 160,000 students skip class because they are intimidated and afraid of being attacked (Lebrun 34). Bullying has been proven to be the cause of school shooting incidents too many times and with the government’s continuous effort to contain the phenomena, the latter is intensifying in both speed and degree where the welfare of the society is at jeopardy.

The East Carter High School shooting was performed by a 17-year-old student named Gary Scott Pennington who shot and murdered two people at his school. Scott was bullied from an early age for being a momma’s boy as well as for his greasy-looking hair and what some of his peers considered a girlish haircut, but he was mostly teased for his stuttering (Fast 137). Next, the shooting at the Townville Elementary School was carried out by Nathan Ferris who is known to have been subjected to bullying because he was overweight. When he could no longer tolerate being bullied, Nathan decided that he would carry a gun with him to school and whoever teased him would have to die. After killing the bully, he took his own life too (Gordon 8). Finally, Asa Coon, the perpetrator of the shooting at Success Tech Academy was reportedly the focus of bullying because of his gothic appearance. He shot four people and then ended the attack by committing suicide (Maag and Urbina). All in all, the shooters committed those crimes on the basis that they were discriminated against; that inferior stance that they were put on due to their looks or interest is the main factor of the shooting.

School shooting expert and psychologist Dr. Peter Langman has mentioned in his book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* that “The fact that some shooters were teased does not mean that they were innocent victims. Some triggered their own

harassment by behaving in provocative or antagonistic ways. They were arrogant, obnoxious, or insulting. When other kids told them to “knock it off” or threw insults back at them, they ended up feeling like victims”(13). This kind of cases can be exemplified with Mitchell Johnson, shooter of the 1998 Westside Middle School, who enjoyed acting tough and using his intimidating demeanor to exert pressure on his peers. He felt victimized when his classmates ridiculed him for being a “wannabe” gangster and did not believe his stories about being a gang member (Newman 62-63). This implies that the shooters are not always as innocent as they are portrayed through the media; some of them usually tend to put themselves in a situation where they became an outcast. The facade of being preyed on provided them the entitlement of seeking revenge. They have painted the mask of villainous on the people who they perceived to be their bullies and decided to give them a taste of their own supposed medicine.

Concisely, incidents of school bullying can range from being extremely severe to being unreal or insignificant when faked or when the so-called victim builds such a reputation for himself that makes him receive backlash from his surroundings. Regardless of its severity, school bullying acts can lead to deadly school violence incidents and that is why the implementation of serious and effective prevention programs to combat the phenomenon is called for to be regularly revised and applied correctly. Government forces, school officials and families of students should all work together to create a healthier environment for children to grow and live in. The government and school staff must make sure that schools are a safe place for students to learn in, while parents and other responsible family members are ought to keep an eye on the kids in case of any possible mental health issues which are also considered as another separate direct risk factor that may lead to school shooting occurrences.

2.3.1.3. Mental Health Issues

In general, reports indicate that over “60% of perpetrators of mass shootings in the United States since the 1970s, displayed symptoms including acute paranoia, delusions, and depression before committing their crimes” (Metzl and MacLeish 240). In other words, it has been found that most of those who launch school shooting attacks tend to suffer from various mental illnesses, and a great number of the shooters end their attack by committing suicide either at the same scene of their crime or elsewhere. It is important to note that not all attackers who ended their crimes by committing suicide were said to have had mental health problems, there are some exceptions, and not all attackers who had intended to commit suicide the day of the attack actually did so. Some individuals believe that medications like antipsychotics or antidepressants, which are increasingly taken to treat mental health issues, maybe partially to blame. These medications occasionally induce suicidal and aggressive thoughts in people (Steele 9).

With more reference to his book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*, psychologist Peter Langman examined the psychological traits of many shooters and concluded that those students indeed suffered from mental illness, he categorized them into psychopathic, psychotic, and schizophrenic. Andrew Golden, one of the perpetrators of the Westside Middle School massacre in 1984, and Eric Hariss, one of the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, were both categorized as psychopaths. This categorization was backed up by the fact that both of them were narcissistic, sadistic, lacking in morality and empathy, and having anger management issues. It was elucidated that each of the above characteristics is a trait of a psychopath’s personality (21). Likewise, Dylan Klebold, the second shooter of the Columbine high school massacre, was labeled as a psychotic shooter because of his hallucinations and delusions, which caused him to be “out of touch with reality” (50). Michael Carneal, Andrew Wurst, Kip Kinkel, and Seung Hui Cho, have all been identified as having schizophrenia. This condition is similar to psychotic

conditions, but schizophrenics experience more vivid and profound hallucinations and delusions (73). These categorizations offer insight on the psychological profiles of each individual which may facilitate the understanding of their motives.

Since many school shooters had homicidal and/or suicidal thoughts before the shooting and many of them were on antidepressants before or at the time of the shooting, parents began to wonder about the true impact of these pharmaceutical drugs. They questioned whether the drugs that were supposed to help their kids were in fact making them more violent. To this, prominent American critic of psychiatric drugs and founder of the International Center for the Study of Psychiatry and Psychology, Dr Peter Breggin, expressed his concern regarding how antidepressants might have the reverse effect, harming children rather than helping them. He clarified that kids taking antidepressants to treat their depression, were developing increased levels of violence and suicidal thoughts (“Why Psychiatric Drugs are more Dangerous than you ever Imagined”).

Dr. Breggin asserted that these medications have a number of unsettling side effects for both users and those going through withdrawal. He wrote: “In [His] book *The Antidepressant Fact* [He] warned that stopping antidepressants can be as dangerous as starting them, since they can cause very disturbing and painful withdrawal reactions” (“Are Meds to Blame for Cho’s Rampage?”). For instance, Kip Kinkel, the shooter at Thurston High School in Oregon in 1998 who killed his parents and then went on a killing rampage, was prescribed Prozac for depression and was withdrawing from the drug only months prior to the murders (“Who Is Kip Kinkel”). This clearly demonstrates that these medications are in a state of controversy as they can provoke the person under them to act in ways which they normally would not behave in. Consequently, this made individuals develop a prejudice against the drugs that are supposed to heal them. Finding a healthy balance between the

advantages and disadvantages of such serious medications remains a challenging matter in both medical and public discourse.

Certain occurrences of school shootings are likely to be caused by mental illnesses which are also likely to be exacerbated by antidepressants. Although it is not necessarily lethal, as not all adolescents with psychiatric issues go on to commit murder, this group of students needs special attention owing to their susceptibility and the threat they can pose to themselves, their families, and their peers. That is why adolescents who have psychological disorders need to be under constant parental supervision and close educator supervision.

The three direct factors: availability of guns, bullying and mental health issues have all been found to be closely connected to almost all of the school shootings that have been studied. Yet, it has also been discovered that they are not the only causes of such incidents. There exist other indirect reasons which may motivate the occurrences of such cases.

2.3.2. Indirect Reasons

Besides the direct reasons mentioned above, some attackers are exposed to more factors than others that lead them to carry out a shooting. Experts consider these factors less significant than the direct ones and that is due to the fact that these secondary factors can never result in a school shooting on their own; they accompany the direct reasons as supporting ones.

2.3.2.1. Violent Media

One of the contributing causes of school shooting attacks is violent media. Within the disciplines of psychology and criminology, there is considerable controversy about the connection between violent media and school shootings. It is crucial to emphasize that while the consumption of violent media, such as violent movies, video games, or music, might have an effect on consumers; it is only one of many factors that may lead to the occurrences of school shootings. In fact, following the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, many

politicians and media specialists blamed violent entertainment as the main cause of the tragedy. A good number of the school shooters who had been researched took pleasure in playing violent video games and watching violent movies.

To mention a few, the shooter of the Virginia Tech University in 2007, Cho Hui Seung, who is believed to have been influenced by the violent Korean film “Old Boy” because a photo of him, which was included in one of the documents obtained by NBC News, showed him clutching a hammer in a pose reminiscent of the antagonist in the movie (Coyle). Another case is the Parkland High School shooting whose attacker, Nikolas Cruz, was diagnosed with some mental health illnesses and was known for his violent behavior and obsession with playing violent video games like Call of Duty and Battlefield. Even though his exposure to these games may have contributed to his decision to attack the school, the extent to which it motivated him cannot be measured. Another indication of his violent tendencies was his social media presence as he made aggressive comments across different platforms as well as threatening to commit a school shooting multiple times online (Chen). This sets off a conflict in analyses as millions of people play those same games without feeling the need to reenact them in real life which shows that these individuals initially had unawakened murderous urges unlike normal human beings.

Taking into consideration that several perpetrators have been shown to have an addiction to violent media, whether consciously or unconsciously, it can be said that violent media does play a role in some school shootings. Some experts back up this view due to their strong belief that violent media is directly related to violent behavior while some others disagree. The latter group of individuals thinks that this type of entertainment is not harmful but rather advantageous because it may actually be of help since it gives some children the chance to release their anxiety and negative energy and to not perform the same actions in real life.

2.3.2.2. Family Problems

It has been widely acknowledged that family issues play a significant role as one of the contributing factors to so many school shooting incidents. Among the family problems which can greatly affect children are divorce, domestic violence, sexual abuse, fragile family ties and absence from children's life (Newman 61). Taking Jeffrey Weise, the attacker of the Red Lake massacre in 2005 and the child who grew up in the unhealthiest family environment as an example, one may see how extreme the child's suffering was. He was raised in very unstable conditions in which he suffered abuse from his alcoholic mother, and then had to face the loss of both his parents and his siblings while he was still really young. As a result, Jeffrey also experienced early homicidal and suicidal thoughts. He once wrote: "Most people have never dealt with people who have faced the kind of pain that makes you physically sick at times, makes you so depressed you cannot function, makes you so sad and overwhelmed with grief that eating a bullet or sticking your head in a noose seems welcoming" (Langman 118-119). This shows that ignoring any signs, whether minor or major ones, can lead to catastrophic consequences. These issues should be acknowledged instead and dealt with in proper ways to create a safer and more nurturing environment for children.

The instance of Mitchell Johnson who committed the Westside Middle School massacre alongside Andrew Golden in 1998, likewise paints a clear image of family issues as an important contributing cause of school shootings. The boy lived in extreme anxiety because of the troubled relationship he had with his father and his parents' divorce. On top of that, people have speculated that Mitchell's attack was actually "a displacement of the anger and frustration he felt" because he allegedly endured sexual abuse from a local youth in Minnesota (Newman 62-63).

Overall, school attackers come from different familial backgrounds. While some of them had to experience growing up in harsh family environments, some others had perfectly

fine families and they still became criminals. Therefore, instability in the family contributes to certain school shooting attacks, yet the effect is neither predictable nor lethal.

2.3.2.3. Violent Regions

School shooting incidents may occur in any state; however, some states have higher rates of the occurrences than others. The United States' southern region is known to be more violent in nature. Several researchers, including social psychologist Richard Nisbett and psychologist Dov Cohen, maintain that southerners' violent past has had a significant influence on their personalities today, making them more likely to respond violently and engage in violent behavior. This conclusion was made based on a study conducted by the aforementioned psychologists, who found that southern students were more inclined to react angrily due to the highly valued concept of 'honor' in this region. This can also be traced back to the era of slavery during which blacks used to get mistreated by their masters who treated them in the most brutal and cruel ways just to have control over them (Newman 67-68). This view argues that due to the South's unique historical experience with the use of force and authority, violence is naturally accepted in the region for social control and self-defense.

Some critics have challenged the idea of the "American southern culture hypothesis" on several occasions. In the documentary "Bowling for Columbine," renowned American author and filmmaker Michael Moore rejects the notion that the high rate of gun violence in the United States is solely a result of its violent history. Moore points out that countries like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom also have violent pasts, yet they do not experience comparable levels of gun violence. Instead, Moore argues that a pervasive "culture of fear" in the United States leads to a tendency for Americans to arm themselves and resort to violent behavior. This view highlights the role of societal anxieties and broader cultural influences in shaping individual attitudes and actions. In brief, while the southern

violent culture can be seen as a plausible explanation for some school shootings in southern states, it may not always hold true, especially when trying to comprehend school shootings that have taken place in other regions.

2.4. The Impact of School Shootings

The epidemic of mass shootings in schools has struck the nation with an overwhelming sense of fear and vulnerability leaving them without any protection or security. Its consequences are by no means minor; they are life changing impacts that involve several parties that can be directly involved to the event like students, or indirectly, for instance, the government. Students have to live with permanent physical and emotional scars while the government struggles to enact useful measures to prevent future school attacks.

2.4.1 The Impact of School Shootings on Students

School shootings leave a trace behind them more than dead bodies. With every school shooting happening, American children are left terrorized. These massacres move beyond the school premises to affect their daily life and even their future with their families and peers. The impact of school shootings damages their psychological well-being on several different levels as they begin to suffer from mental issues that usually can also appear in soldiers during or after wars.

These traumatic school shooting experiences are not easy to forget and move on from, students are hindered by a set of challenges which are made by a school shooting. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most prominent effect on students who experienced those incidents; it is an event-related disorder triggered by exposure to a significant traumatic event and proceeds to develop symptoms that shape the human experience, those individuals tend to become vulnerable to mood swings, intrusive memories or flashbacks, and in some cases even amnesia (Wynn et al.499); these alterations to human cognition are often apparent in children and teenagers thus it is most likely to hinder the

development of their cognitive abilities (Terr 12). This entails that to help students navigate and heal from such traumatic events, families, teachers, the government and everyone included in this should provide the necessary assistance for them.

According to Joy Osofsky, a professor in psychiatry, students will be more isolated from each other as they will be less likely to form any relationship due to their trust issues (782-8). While Linda Heath et al. point out that students will form a psychological bond between themselves and shooting victims, which can alter their perception of being victims of the same crime. In addition to this notion and the ongoing increase in school shootings, students are more likely to live in fear all their academic and even real life (4-6). These incidents impact students in different ways. Hence, they are least likely to react in the same manner. It can be easy for some to move on and carry on living normally while others are always stuck in that train of events and cannot escape.

School shootings can damage the lives of the survivors as much as those who passed away; they need a lot of attention and care to overcome all the effects of that trauma. An approach to handle school shootings and prevent any further damage happening to American children is necessary or else the country will keep losing its youth to death and trauma.

2.4.2 The Impact of School Shootings on the Government

School shootings' influence is an issue that goes beyond local boundaries; they have become a nationwide problem. When it occurs, it initiates a series of acts on the national level; these changes are not limited to policies but also to the government body itself. These terrorizing experiences alter the normal system as they require for both the government and students to adjust to new changes that can seem impossible to adhere to in real life and are only applicable in paper.

One of those changes is the new culture of education, after the recent shootings that happened in 2010s school introduced new measures to protect them from any active shooter.

According to a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), majority of schools implemented mandatory drills for students such as fake shooting incidents to train them on their reaction in case of the real emergency; most schools set an agreement to take physical reaction as they started to secure buildings and classrooms and provided locks that can be only opened from the inside; additionally they have installed cameras around the school and handed badges that allow for students to access the school campus in a restrictive method (King and Bracy 278). These reactions are proven to be necessary after the events of school shootings.

State governments are gradually acting against school shootings, after the recent events that took place in an elementary school in Texas the U.S. Congress pushed forward a legislation that is considered groundbreaking where guns are going to be bought on severe restriction for any individual under the legal age. This is also accompanied by a national database check for any buyer and prohibition of selling guns to any person that may cause harm (Cochrane). Nevertheless, this was rejected by few groups that advocated for the prevention of violence; they firmly advised for the complete ban of assault rifles that can be used by active shooters. To stop this problem from scratch, research must be conducted to better understand the issue in hand. This is what the congress is funding for the first time since the 1990s as they provided the \$25 million to both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health to analyze the issue of gun violence in a detailed scientific way (Roubein). These small actions are the ground basis for finding a definite solution to the pervasive problem of school shootings. The eradication of a severe issue such as school shooting is not a fast-paced journey and it requires a change in some important aspects of American life like the Constitution and the amendments. School shootings' impact on the government is on a larger scale than simple policies and prevention programs.

To conclude, school shootings are a series of multilayered tragic events that lead to many losses, some of them are intended to harm specific individuals while others are random. These terrifying incidents date back to the 1900s when American society was met with a new fear that involved its own children; they remain an issue that the United States suffers from up to present day. The existence of these happenings is tied to many factors which can be either direct or indirect. The weight of these events is not only carried by the victims and their families but the government too. These devastating incidents are a wakeup call to Americans to take action immediately.

Chapter Three

From Columbine to Sandy Hook: The Tragic Turning Points of School Shootings

School shootings have increased frantically in the United States where these tragic incidents keep happening without any halt. While the USA has a packed history with these kinds of events, some of the most outstanding cases are the Columbine High School shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. These two school shootings shook the American community to the core, galvanizing the interest of the entire country. After the school shooting incident of Columbine, both the society and government have attempted to find solutions that could help them curtail these occurrences. However, a decade later there appeared so many new shootings on different levels of school grounds, remarkably that at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

This chapter discusses the shootings that took place in Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School. It unravels the shooters' journeys and the incidents in details to provide a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding them. Next, it examines the motives of the shooters that pushed them to commit these crimes. This chapter also investigates the changes that these two cases provoked, mainly the debate over guns and limiting them.

3.1. A Breakdown of the Columbine Shooting

To the rest of the world, April 20, 1999 appears to be an ordinary day, but for America, it marks a terrible catastrophe. On this day, Columbine high school started its routine like any other day until the school was under attack by none other than its own students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. The two shooters changed the course of history not only in Colorado but the entire country. Their wishes to be well known came true as the whole country learned about the cold blooded murders; their whole life became exposed to every individual in the USA.

3.1.1. The Journey of Eric and Dylan

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold carved their names in the history books of the United States as the teenagers who impacted the debate of guns the most. The picture of a shooter started to form at an early age; their upbringing and interests shaped their state of mind to become the criminals that they have become. The boys who were once known as normal kids became heartless monsters who visited every American parent's nightmares making them the number one public enemy even in the eyes of their own families.

Eric Harris was born in Wichita, Kansas on April 9, 1981. Eric was the definition of a military base child as his father Wayne was an air force pilot, his job required for them to move around a lot. They finally settled down in Columbine after his father's retirement (Briggs and Blevins). This constant moving from one state to another resulted in Eric becoming unable to form a long-lasting relationship, becoming an outcast at a new school and a new environment has affected the mentality of Eric as he stepped more into the shadows.

He showed severe aggressive behavior across all aspects of his life especially school and online presence as he often turned to violent writing whether it was in his personal journal or school assignments (Cullen 146). The latter was a concern for his teachers; in an essay by Eric written about the Nazis and their culture. He was fascinated by them and projected that in his essay that depicted the Nazi mindset in his own school as he opened his essay by "How many people can a football stadium hold? Can he hold fifty, Sixty thousand?" He continues to depict the Nazi culture as organized and functional ("Eric Hariss Nazis Essay"). This obsession was a clear foreshadow that the teenager was affected by the crimes of Hitler and tried to follow his principles in real life as he closely related to Hitler's ideologies of a superior kind that was not in the same standard as the others.

His online presence was more severe than the school projects; the freedom of

expression on the internet gave him room to express his bottled aggression against his school and even people in general. On his website “What I Hate?” He listed a few items that he completely loathed and others he loved; he specified that he loves the concept of natural selection as it eliminates any weaker link in the society (“Transcripts from Eric Harris’ Web Page”). This implies that Harris was not a normal kid but a teenager who had a superiority complex and believed that he was better than the rest; his violent behavior towards other students was an indication of his narcissism and lack of empathy to other people.

Unlike Eric, Dylan Klebold was a native to the town born on September 11, 1981 in Colorado. His parents came from different religious and social backgrounds which made the household a strange combination for him as he was required to accommodate both parents’ wishes. Dylan was known to be one of the most intelligent students as he was enrolled into a gifted program (Simpson et al.). Dylan’s adapting to his parents’ mold made him lose any personality trait that he has, this made him more isolated than before and caused him to have little to no friendships at all. Dylan was more complex than Eric; “The Reluctant Killer” an article published by The Guardian, in which Dave Cullen explains that Dylan was indeed shyer than Eric and subjectively less handsome however he was not by any means a loser or an outcast, he even got a prom date which further shows that he was normal in his interactions (Cullen). While Eric showed clear signs of violence and aggression, Dylan was the complete opposite with little evidence on his intentions prior to meeting Eric. This is an indication of the state of loneliness that Dylan lives in as a gifted and mixed background, he may have felt less related to his peers.

Klebold’s passive personality was very evident in his writing; his creative writing class gave him the opportunity to express his place in the form of a story. The killing preps, a story written by Dylan, was a foreshadow of the shooting, he narrates a killing spree as a bystander and even mentions their exact details of their plans such as the trench coats, the

parked cars, the duffel bags. He describes the killing as the vicious thing that happens to the city (Klebold 1). His essay states that he saw himself as a bystander and Eric was the whole focus of the killing and the attacker; Dylan is nowhere as violent as Eric but only a follower of his actions.

3.1.2. The Columbine Shooting: Unfolding the Events

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered the school premises and changed the history of this small town. The school day started normally until the clock struck 11:19 a.m. and chaos erupted. Bullets were flying and bodies were falling to the ground; no one was spared from their rampage and those who survived by a miracle continue to live in the shadow of that day. The scars of that day served as a reminder to fight against the tools that had made it possible. The shooting was revolutionary and led to a series of changes in the government.

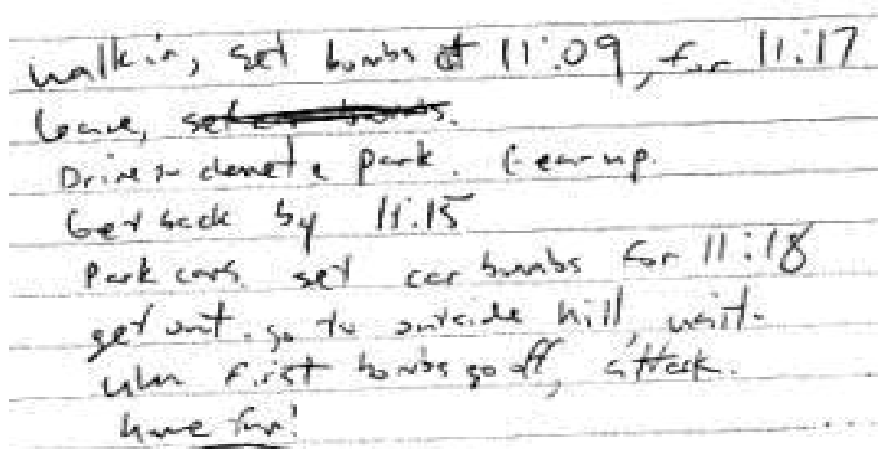
This shooting is not a mere spur of the moment, it was carefully planned. The plan was a little different from what actually happened; they had planned to bomb the school then to shoot anyone who got out alive. The school cameras have recorded sightings of Eric and Dylan entering the school cafeteria at 11:05 and setting two bags then exiting. According to the plans in Dylan's journal, they would put the bombs and then go to gear up in a nearby park and station themselves in the hills near the school entrance to shoot anyone who tries to escape from the explosion ("Columbine Massacre").(see fig.2 on page 54). This plan shows that the pair intended to harm more people and would have left a greater mass of bodies; their ambitions of murder exceeded any limit and would have been considered a terrorist attack.

Their plans did not go as planned as the bombs failed to detonate, making them accelerate their pace. The pair was first noticed by a few students sitting outside the school entrance. One of their first victims was Rachel Scott, she was brutally shot then stomped over by them (Obmascik). Melissa Miller was one of the first students to notice the strange duo as they had guns in hand. She wrote in her survival story that she thought that they were pulling

a prank on them, and the guns were just paintball guns. The sound of flying bullets made her realize that something serious is happening; she rushed to get help making her save more students from being shot (Miller 1). Another student shared the same experience, Anne Hochhalter, who was sitting outside of the school when she saw the attackers nearing the school; in an interview she mentioned that she thought the sounds of bullets were a part of seniors' prank that took place each year. They shot her twice, first in her back making instantly paralyzed and the other in the chest (Calefati).

Fig.2:

An Image of Dylan Klebold last entry in his journal



walk in, set bombs at 11:09, for 11:17
 leave, set ~~bombs~~
 Drive to denet a park. (ear up)
 Get back by 11:15
 Park cars, set car bombs for 11:18
 get out, go to outside hill, wait.
 when first bombs go off, attack.
have fun!

Source: “Dylan Klebold’s Writing - Journals, Diaries and School Papers.”

Acolumbinesite.com, 2009, www.acolumbinesite.com/dylan/writing.php. Accessed 9 May 2023.

Upon entering the school, the two parted ways, with Eric beginning his murderous rampage by first shooting a teacher and a student he encountered in the hallway while Dylan went to the cafeteria to check on the bombs. They opened fire from their first step of the stairs leading to the second-floor and. They carelessly fired at the building when the halls

were empty and they continued into the library. They open fire randomly, forgetting about any specific target (“Events of the Shooting”).

Around ten minutes later, the pair took their own lives in the same library as their former classmates. The police forces were heavily criticized for their slow response as they entered only after the shooters were dead. If they had gone in sooner, probably more students could have been saved (Martaindale and Blair 343). Consequently, the police changed its methods upon any call concerning mass shooting and limited their time of response.

3.2. The Columbine Shooters’ Motives

One of the bloodiest mass shootings in American history, the Columbine school shooting remains a topic of discussion and investigation. The attack, which was diligently planned and executed by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris ultimately led to the deaths of 13 people and the injury of many more. While many different nuanced and complex circumstances could have motivated the two attackers, a few major ones have come to light. These include the impulse to take revenge on their classmates, an obsession with violence and firearms, and a desire for prominence and an eternity of fame.

3.2.1. The Impulse of Taking Revenge

In *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine High School*, with the help of journalist Rob Merritt, Brooks Brown, a friend of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who attended Columbine High School with them, talks about his friendship with the two and offers insights into the motives he thinks made his friends commit the attack. Brown contends that both Klebold and Harris were an unhinged, unhappy and troubled duo who carried a great deal of rage and resentment towards their peers and society as a whole. In his account of Klebold and Harris, Brown details how they had been victims of bullying and harassment at school, which had caused them to shut down and isolate themselves with each passing day. Their feelings of alienation and exclusion served as fuel for their desire to exact revenge on

their fellow classmates and teachers (Brown and Merritt). However, it is crucial to note that this is not the only interpretation of this motive. Although Brown's narrative offers valuable insights, it remains a personal opinion of his that should be considered and analyzed together with other resources and academic studies on this issue.

The duo was teased because of their exasperating and provocative acts. They "both had bad tempers, with Eric frequently erupting with anger, punching walls, and picking fights, and Dylan cursing at teachers, throwing things across the classroom," (Langman 13). In the notes they left behind, the shooters have attempted to rationalize their attacks by sharing that they were no longer able to take the rejection and persistent bullying from their peers, but this could never justify the murderous rampage they went on (14). The reasons for such a hideous incident are complicated, and different specialists may provide different conclusions depending on the evidence at hand and the opinions they hold.

David Cullen, a renowned journalist and the author of *Columbine*, asserts that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' motivations went beyond simple acts of retaliation against their schoolmates. He disagrees with the idea that bullying significantly influenced their choice to carry out the attack. Instead, he contends that Harris and Klebold were inspired by a variety of psychological disorders, such as a desire for notoriety, an unhealthy obsession with violence, and unresolved mental health problems (236–248). Cullen also claims that Klebold struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts. To prove that, he quoted what Dylan Klebold has said, "I get more depressed with each day,' ... 'wanna die,' he repeated. Death equaled freedom now; death offered tranquility. He began using the words interchangeably." (198). While Harris showed symptoms of being psychopathic (236). Clearly, the two shooters have both experienced bullying and harassment to some certain degree, yet that is not reasonable enough for them to want to murder over five hundred people. Besides their desire

to take revenge for what their schoolmates have put them through, their decision was influenced by other factors, one of them being their obsession with firearms.

3.2.2. Dylan and Eric's Relationship with Guns

The Columbine school shooters had a serious obsession with guns which played an essential part in instigating their attack and understanding the important role of this obsession gives the opportunity to comprehend what led to this scenario. The two individuals had an intense curiosity regarding guns; they actively sought out, bought, and spoke about firearms. They felt powerful, in control, and had a way to vent their rage and need for wrath through their fascination with guns ("Zero Hour").

Klebold and Harris did not keep their passion for the possession and use of firearms a secret. They always talked about it in their journals, diaries and even videos sharing their admiration for the destructive capabilities of guns. Jeff Kass in his book, *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, provides heavy details on how the two boys cherished guns. Kass mentions a research paper that Eric had written which was titled "Guns in Schools", Eric wrote: "it is just as easy to bring a loaded handgun to school as it is to bring a calculator." He adds: "Students bring guns to school for many reasons, some for protection, some for attacking, and even some to show off. However, a school is no place for a gun. Solutions for this problem are hard to come by and often too expensive for most schools to even consider. However, metal detectors and more police officers are two very good solutions" (141). In his writing, Eric did not show any signs that he could be talking about himself, and the things he said sounded very normal.

Harris and Klebold's interest in guns served as a catalyst and allowed them to execute their violent schemes. In his diary, Eric shared his opinion on the Brady bill which he was dissatisfied with. He aggressively protested: "All I want is a couple of guns ... Come on, I'll have a clean record and I only want for personal protection. It is not like I'm some psycho

who would go on a shooting spree...” (199). Ironically, that is exactly what Eric has turned out to be. Robyn, a friend of the duo who had revealed some of the facts she knew about the shooters to the police, shares that she was not surprised when she found out that Dylan and Eric had guns, she thought that they obtained them for hunting purposes although they never discussed hunting (203). Many more people who knew Eric and Dylan personally have testified that they seemed to have been engaged in some illicit affairs.

The two shooters were also obsessed with playing violent video games. One of the notable games that they were frequently found to be engulfed with is “Doom” which seems to have influenced their way of thinking. Eric Harris, shared the impact that the game had on him as follows: “Doom is so burned into my head my thoughts usually have something to do with the game ... What I can’t do in real life, I try to do in Doom.” and to further connect the attack to the video game, Eric said: “I have a goal to destroy as much as possible so I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy, or any of that, so I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from Doom ... so it’s either me or them. I have to turn off my feelings” (Langman 151). Looking back at Eric’s statements, it can be observed that an unhealthy connection between his virtual experiences and his distorted perception of reality is existent. Consequently, that is why he was probably unable to differentiate between real life and the game world. Harris and Klebold’s interest in firearms was tied to their yearning for fame. They diligently prepared for the attack to cause the most damage and garner greater media coverage in an effort to outdo prior acts of terrorism and become notorious historical figures.

3.2.3. The Desire to Seek Prominence

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s motivation went beyond seeking revenge or expressing anger; it stemmed from a twisted aspiration for infamy. They aspired to be recognized, to draw attention to themselves, and to leave an everlasting imprint in the world.

Their fascination with the celebrity cult and their misguided view of power were the driving forces behind their quest for glory. The two shooters were convinced that their heinous deeds would make them more important than they actually were in history archives. Thus, they carefully planned the attack so as to gain extensive coverage in the media while leaving a permanent impact on society to fear and remember them for (“Massacre at Columbine High”). One can understand that this pursuit for notoriety exposes the alarming signs of their unhealthy psychological conditions. It also emphasizes their malformed moral principles and the delusional sense of self-importance they cultivated. They wanted to be the center of the spotlight by trying to make a spectacle out of violence, which they enjoyed. Eric was desperate for acknowledgment and recognition because he was ignored by his audience and brutalized by his peers; it was inevitable that he felt undervalued. So, he tried to achieve what he could not achieve in life through death (Larkin 130-131).

It is safe to assume that Eric and Dylan idolized McVeigh, the terrorist who launched the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people. In fact, Eric even boasted about surpassing McVeigh in his journal. Both Eric and Dylan referred to their operation as the Judgment Day during which Columbine high school would explode, too (Cullen 33). Eric and Dylan gravitated toward people who had engaged in atrocious acts of violence, for example, Dylan wrote a twelve-page paper entitled “The Mind and Motives of Charles Manson” during his senior year. Manson was hailed by the movie characters of “Natural Born Killers”, which the duo was infatuated with. He was a serial killer who targeted and murdered those who angered or offended him. The death of Sharon Tate and her friends and LaBiancas in August of 1969 were meant to spark a racial conflict between whites and blacks that would result in a social revolution, Dylan and Eric believed that if they did the same; kill people that would make other oppressed children revolt against

bullies. Dylan's interest in Charles Manson was most likely sparked by both his violent actions and him being a social outcast (Larkin 143).

Dylan related to Manson's experience and viewed his violence as a protest against an unfair world. He also appeared to have adopted Manson's theory that high-profile violence would lead to a revolution, which in Manson's case that was not the outcome (144). Their keen interest in these people and violent crimes is a reflection of their warped worldview and their determination to attain a greater level of fame and acknowledgement. Additionally, looking up to such individuals is an indicator that they themselves are not healthy people with healthy mindsets.

3.3. A Breakdown of the Sandy Hook Shooting

A decade of shootings went unnoticed by Americans until December 2012 when Adam Lanza went on a shooting spree in Sandy Hook Elementary School. This specific shooting grabbed the interest of people around the world due to the sheer brutality of the crime and the young age of the victims. The media coverage of this case stirred the whole nation and triggered the debate of gun control to start again clearly showing that Adam Lanza was the wakeup call that Americans needed to fight for their safety against guns again.

3.3.1 The Journey of Adam Lanza

Adam Lanza, known as the shooter of Sandy Hook, was born on April 22, 1992, and he grew up in Exeter, New Hampshire with his so-called normal family. The latter was the plain American family except Adam, growing up with developmental issues made him less social than normal kids. His neighbors hardly saw them out and described them as normal and nice families (Misur et al.). Adam's lack of social life caused to be isolated from reality and living up in his fantasy world in his room.

His first acquaintance with the Sandy Hook Elementary school was when he moved into town in 1998. There are hardly any memories of him as he kept to himself and did not

interact much with his peers. One of his former classmates remembered him as the introverted kid who was always anxious (Stoller and Dorell). This entails that Adam's habit of being closed off was not restricted to specific people but he was the same shy kid to everyone.

Adam's middle school journey was bumpier than the elementary school, the constant change of class and teachers have triggered his anxiety episodes and even resulted in him being admitted into the hospital, due to the continuous struggle of being in school his mother decided that he shifts to being homeschooled (Halbfinger). He later on joined the Connecticut University at the age of 17 where he behaved the same as before, little to no contact with others and awkward personality all through his short time in university ("Connecticut Shooter Went to College at Young Age"). Adam's record of being socially distant may have resulted in him having little to no empathy with the others and not even putting himself in the same category as others in his society.

Unlike Eric and Dylan, Adam had no prominent evidence of his actions. The only traces that could be found of him were some games he played and edits he made in some Wikipedia pages. The games were normal games that everyone at the time played and enjoyed. However, Adam had destroyed his hard drive and other electronic devices prior to the shooting (O'Harrow). This may entail that he had something hidden that he liked to remain a secret even after his death Adam was very interested in computers as he was enrolled in courses related to computer science both in his early education and university. He was the stereotypical image of a nerd with interest in games, roleplay, computers, and difficult materials in school; his brother admits that Adam was a nerd and even other acquaintances view him as a genius and a very bright kid that just happens to struggle with mental issues (Solomon). Adam was a prisoner to the confines of his own mind. He had no social life presence and this extends even to his own family; he isolated himself from the

outside world as he retreated into the seclusion of his self-created world within the borders of his room.

3.3.2. The Sandy Hook Shooting: Unfolding the Events

Unlike Columbine, Sandy hook was quick and deadly in the matter of minutes. The killing did not start in school as a matter of a fact Adam killed his mother then made his way to the elementary school; his mother's death was the starting point of the killing spree. He then took off to Sandy Hook Elementary School, he made his way through the school's doors after firing at the door and crawling inside. At that moment a meeting was being held in room 9 where the principal, school psychologist, parent and other staff members were present. They were the first ones to notice the sound of guns outside their door. Unfortunately, his first victims were the school's principal and psychologist. He then opened fire in the school hallways before entering classrooms eight and ten and fatally shooting two teachers and twenty students (Gorosko). As far as known, his killing spree is unjustified and was just a projection of his desires to shoot and kill people.

Even at the time of the incident, Adam was true to his usual persona as a quiet and closed off person, a student that was present at the time of the shooting, stated that Adam did not utter anything after he entered the room and killed the teacher (Celona et al.) Lanza's weapon of choice enabled him to shoot as many people as possible in the span of seconds, there were at least two dozens of rounds shot from the semiautomatic gun; the school was covered in bullet holes after the shooting which means that Adam could have killed more people with the arms that he had. Following the completion of his mission, Adam directed the gun towards his own head and took his own life in the very classroom where the mass murder took place (Cowan). His death has left many questions unanswered about the reason behind his crime as he left no records that could have explained the reasons behind his criminal acts.

The response to Sandy Hook was almost immediate. After the first round of bullets

was shot, the staff member that was present in the meeting crawled back to room 9 and informed the police at 9:35. The police forces left the station instantly and took five minutes to reach the school. Although the police enforcement arrived quickly after the call, Adam was able to result in a great number of casualties due to the machinery that he used in the shooting. Due to the huge risk that was in the school, the police took another six minutes to secure the premises and help any student that could be evacuated before taking care of the murderer. Before the police reached Adam, he took his life (“Conn. Elementary School Shooting”). Unlike Columbine, Sandy Hook response time was very short and managed to save innocent children from more traumas.

3.4. The Sandy Hook Shooter’s Motives

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting is one of the most devastating mass shootings in American history. 26 innocent souls were lost in this tragic shooting which was performed by Adam Lanza. Although identifying the precise reasons for Lanza’s actions continues to be difficult, a handful of factors have been delved into. These consist of symptoms of mental illness, social isolation, a keen interest in past mass shootings and a possible interest in children that could be categorized as pedophilia.

3.4.1. Mental Illness and Social Isolation

Adam Lanza has displayed symptoms associated with severe mental health issues throughout the entirety of his life. In a CNN report, it has been stated that Lanza “had significant mental health issues that affected his ability to live a normal life and to interact with others ... What contribution this made to the shootings, if any, is unknown as those mental health professionals who saw him did not see anything that would have predicted his future behavior” (Smith). The aforementioned statement of Lanza’s personal experience emphasizes how difficult it is to precisely predict someone’s future actions solely based on their present symptoms and the complicated nature of their mental health conditions.

Generally, in the reports and interviews that the FBI has released, Lanza has always been portrayed as an extremely introverted and isolated person. Adam Lanza's mother decided to withdraw him from school during his teenage years due to the bullying he was subjected to because of his social awkwardness and underweight condition. It is also known that Lanza had received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, and accounts suggest that he faced serious challenges in accepting and treating his condition. Because of this autism spectrum disorder, Adam struggled to establish and sustain meaningful relationships, even with individuals who shared the same interests as him at the computer technology club in his previous school. ("Sandy Hook Shootings").

To explore this in deeper details, it is important to mention that there were worries about Adam ever since he was just a few years old. He "fell well below expectations in social-personal development." The person who evaluated him for three years since birth could not understand anything that he tried to communicate, that is why they needed his mother to interpret for him throughout testing. Evaluators concluded that Adam Lanza presented with "significantly delayed development of articulation and expressive language skills" (Egan et al. 16). This clearly shows that he could not talk like normal healthy kids.

Lanza's examination indicated that he was capable of following adult instructions and had a good attention span in addition to creative play skills. In order to enhance communicative development, the report suggested speech and language therapy, as well as regular attendance at preschool to "stimulate development in all domains" (16). Even with all these efforts, Adam continued to struggle and develop more issues while growing up. He suffered from severe anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and a possible undiagnosed anorexia which could have affected his mental stability (Cowan). Consequently, he had trouble communicating and expressing himself which made it impossible for him to form genuine connections with others his age or in the same

environment as him.

3.4.2. Interest in Previous Mass Shootings

Adam Lanza is said to have shown a huge interest in past mass shootings, there is actual proof that he indeed researched and studied some previous school shooting incidents (“Sandy Hook shootings”). When he joined a small community of individuals that had the same interest in mass murder as him, Adam was no longer surrounded by people who positively influenced him. This small cyber group of virtual friends was unable and unwilling to have a constructive influence on him or to warn him about his inclinations, further aggravating his isolation and detachment from society at large (Egan et al. 100). That is why it has always been important to monitor such communities and individuals, especially teenagers, to intervene on time in hopes of avoiding the occurrence of any potential future tragic incident.

Authorities discovered his obsessive fascination with past mass shootings and killing sprees, such as the 1999 Columbine High School shooting through his online activities (“Newtown Gunman”). Some documents mention that there is an undisclosed woman, who had an “online relationship” with Adam that lasted for over two years after meeting him in a website where users play the roles of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine shooters. Despite interacting only under nicknames and never knowing Lanza’s real identity, she described him as “the weirdest person online” who devoted almost all of his time to studying and discussing mass murders (“Sandy Hook shootings”). This piece of information not only highlights how alarming Lanza’s enthusiasm for matters like school shootings was but also underlines the possible impact it may have had on his ways of thinking and acting out the crime.

3.4.3. Adam Lanza and Pedophilia

The FBI has released over 1500 pages of documents when investigating the Sandy Hook shooting. In these documents, they have concluded that there is proof about the Newtown school perpetrator harboring pedophilic inclinations toward children, but there is no evidence he ever acted upon those interests before the massacre (“Sandy Hook Killer”). The woman Adam regularly talked to for two years claimed he had shared a few facts regarding his sexuality with her, including the likelihood that he was asexual. Among the things she told the investigators is the fact that he had sent her “at least one lengthy email” detailing his perspectives on pedophilia in which he clearly shows how much hatred he felt towards pedophiles. However, he also said he thinks adult and child sexual relationships can be “beneficial to both parties” she adds (“Sandy Hook shootings”). The conflict in Adam’s words makes it difficult to assume his true thoughts and beliefs.

Lanza’s thoughts concerning children extended beyond the sexual realm. According to the same woman, there was speculation that he carried out the act of murdering children as a means to protect and save them from what he perceived as the “brainwashing” and “harmful influences” of adults. On his blog, Lanza expressed concerns about excessive control exerted by teachers and parents over children (“Newtown School Shooter”). What one can say about this is that he apparently pitied children so he wanted to save them.

3.5. Governmental Changes after the Columbine and Sandy Hook School Shootings

In response to the tragedies at Columbine and Sandy Hook, there was a pressing demand for the government to take a definitive stance. The shooters had easy access to firearms as Harris and Klebold got their guns from an acquaintance, who purchased them without a license, and Lanza stole his from his mother who was a gun enthusiast. These dangerous guns are available for everyone and people want to make sure that they are protected from any gun related crime, especially school shootings. So, a widespread call for

change was demanded to be implemented nationwide to ensure better safety and security for all.

The Columbine shooting resulted in many casualties in a short period of time due to the nature of the weapons that were used in performing the crime. Dylan and Eric carried out their shooting with several illegal guns. The guns of Columbine varied some are second hand and others are brand new. These guns were considered lethal yet they were available for purchase to any American in gun shops across the USA. However, Eric and Dylan were minors when the shooting happened, which means that all the four guns that they had were not supposed to be in their possession. There were no records of sales to the teenagers, no sign of any background checks or a document proving the sale (Olinger). One can assume that the crimes would have happened in any case as the tendencies to kill were already there, it was the easy access to guns that resulted in the numbers of lives lost.

After Columbine happened, citizens tried to advocate for gun control as much as they could, unfortunately there were only a few laws that were passed by the government to control guns. Out of 800 bills that are concerned with guns, only a few ones were passed by the government. The National Rifle Association provided money to the Colorado State legislators to hinder the passing of laws that ban guns purchase (Cbsnews.com Staff). The clear obedience to the NRA will not allow any gun laws to be passed because controlling guns will hurt the NRA's business.

The Clinton Administration tried to pass laws that limit guns, but they did not succeed entirely as those laws were in favor of gun owners such as protecting them from the police arrestment when they possess a gun. President Clinton suggested some laws but only two of them were supported by lawmakers which are selling child safety locks with all new handguns, and banning guns with high ammunition such as semi-automatic guns, the ones used at the Columbine massacre ("Clinton Pushes Congress to Pass New Gun Control

Legislation”). Parents, anti-gun lobbyists, and reporters fought hard to prevent kids from accessing guns so that the nightmare of Columbine does not happen again. However, the reactions to the Columbine shooting show that limiting guns is most likely not going to happen anytime soon.

The Sandy Hook mass shooting proved that those little changes made after Columbine were not enough and the government needs to push for a stricter approach. Back then, President Obama launched a special task force that focuses on gun violence. This agency was concerned about limiting gun violence. The NRA opposed the agency’s views since they regarded them as a violation of the Second Amendment (Tapper et al.). He took it on himself to strengthen the existing gun policies by signing 23 executive actions, which cannot be implemented without the approval of the congress. Some of those actions are background checks on all who purchase guns, publicly or privately, and banning the sales of advanced weapons like the ones used in the military with more than ten rounds (Bash et al.).

Obama’s view was not welcomed by the republicans and the NRA as they believe that guns are not necessarily responsible for the crime, it is the criminals who make them harmful. The NRA has made the same opposition after Columbine stating that these guns regulations are a threat to the Second Amendment (Madhani). Colorado managed to pass six bills the year following the 1999 Columbine shooting which included the banning of “straw purchases,” or firearms purchases made on another person’s behalf, the reinstatement of the state’s background check system, and the inclusion of juvenile records in background checks. In addition, even though then-Governor Bill Owens suggested five more important pieces of legislation aimed at prohibiting access to guns by children, only the background check system passed into law (Schildkraut and Hernandez 365). This clearly demonstrates the complexity of finding a middle ground solution in enacting meaningful gun control measures that would possibly balance between protecting the rights which were granted by the Second

Amendment and improving public safety. It also highlights the slow progress of the government in reducing the frequency of school shooting occurrences and protecting children's right of life.

The United States is infected by a contagious virus that continues to get more dangerous through time changing the lives of Americans forever. The incidents at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School are a turning point in the history of school gun violence. They sparked a debate over gun control which can only be achieved if limitations on the sales of guns were to be placed. It is important for a series of solutions and prevention programs to be implemented to stop the crimes from happening in the first place. These measures should encompass raising awareness about mental illnesses, encouraging seeking help, and enhancing security measures in educational institutions. The government needs to invest more efforts into curtailing violent occurrences in general including school shootings. This commitment is essential for ensuring the well-being and security of future generation.

Conclusion

The United States continues to mourn over its children's death. Every time a school shooting happens; the question of the government's reaction is raised again. The fact that school shootings keep occurring, it means that the prior reforms are not as effective as they should. The nation is split into those who want to control guns in order to stop gun shootings, especially in schools and others who believe that guns are a mere tool that can be confiscated and the result will remain the same; they think that the problem lays in human beings themselves and not guns.

The Constitution is regarded as the stepping stone of modern-day America. The Second Amendment differs from the other amendments; it has been made for the sole purpose of protecting the people. What once was a law for safety has become a law that endangers the safety of citizens. This law has a direct link to the violence on the streets, especially the violence that involves guns. The existence of this problem is not arbitrary but is the outcome of many factors. The most prominent is the easy access to guns which is allowed by the Second Amendment. Another factor that cannot be ignored is the lack of proper life conditions; gun violence tends to be tied to people who live a less than decent life. Gun violence extends its roots across the U.S. affecting both the society and government on different grounds, among them the financial, physical and mental. Gun control causes a rift where some argue that guns are there to protect while others claim they need to be protected from guns. A middle ground which can ensure individual freedoms and the security of the nation is yet to be found.

The news of school shootings never leaves the television's screen; the frightening incidents have no limits and no end. Gun violence in educational institutions has been a problem that the United States endured from the 1800s and still does. School shootings are distinct from other shootings in the number of casualties; the use of guns and the motive to

harm people in the school. Even school shootings are set apart by the aim as they can be rampage or targeted. What differentiates between the two is the motive as the targeted school shootings are meant to hurt other students or facility employees with no symbol while rampage shootings occur to seek revenge for a symbolic aim. The access to guns is the main reason for a school shooting. However, it is not the only reason to commit a terrible atrocity. Other reasons are reflected in mental illnesses, bullying, family issues, exposure to violent media, and living in a violent area. The blood spilled on the school floor and the bullets in the corridors are not the only damage done. School shootings result in a bubble of trauma and isolation that survivors may not be able to break free from forever. They become stuck in the same moment for the rest of their lives. A new culture is introduced where kids practice shooting drills and schools have metal detectors.

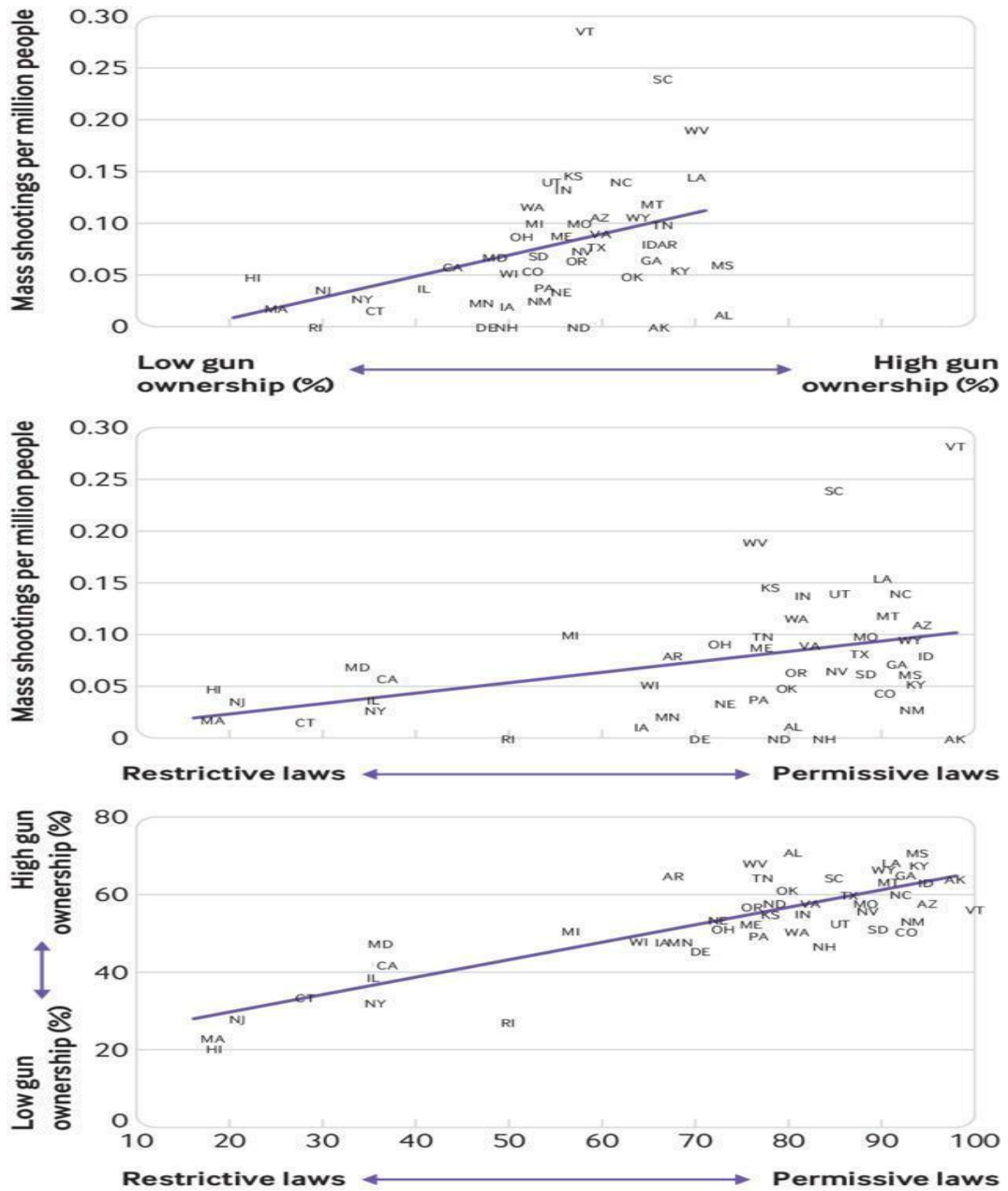
The Columbine and the Sandy Hook school shootings are a stain that cannot be washed away from the minds of Americans. The country wept for the lost lives and called for a change in the ways that school shootings are being dealt with. The shooters were monsters who ignored seeking help and decided to unleash their wrath on innocent kids. They were nothing but selfish and narcissistic boys who loved to watch people suffer. Schools became game-like battlefields in which innocent victims could easily be eliminated. The future that was stolen from the kids made Americans realize that they need change. All of the government's efforts to make change have been ineffective and all policies that have been implemented so far have failed to prevent shootings. The failure of the American government to effectively protect its children from school shootings is evident despite its timid attempts to challenge the current phenomenon that is manifestly expanding rapidly.

No matter what solution the government tries to make, a party of the gun debate will oppose it. Unless the USA chooses a clear side on this moral battle, guns will end up in the criminal's hands and they will leave a trace of bodies behind them without any remorse.

Amending the Second Amendment is the only method to solve gun violence especially school shootings, but this solution does not seem to happen anytime soon. The real question is whether the government is taking a risk to halt this endless loop of school shootings or will abide by the constant opposition of pro-gun advocate groups.

Appendices

Appendix A



Source: Reeping, Paul M, et al. "State Gun Laws, Gun Ownership, and Mass Shootings in the US: Cross Sectional Time Series." *BMJ*, 6 Mar. 2019, p. l542, doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l542.

Appendix B



PUBLIC LAW 112–265—JAN. 14, 2013

126 STAT. 2435

Public Law 112–265
112th Congress

An Act

To amend title 28, United States Code, to clarify the statutory authority for the longstanding practice of the Department of Justice of providing investigatory assistance on request of State and local authorities with respect to certain serious violent crimes, and for other purposes.

Jan. 14, 2013
[H.R. 2076]

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012”.

Investigative
Assistance for
Violent Crimes
Act of 2012.
6 USC 101 note.

SEC. 2. INVESTIGATION OF CERTAIN VIOLENT ACTS, SHOOTINGS, AND MASS KILLINGS.

(a) ATTORNEY GENERAL.—Title 28, United States Code, is amended—

(1) in section 530C(b)(1)(L)(i), by striking “\$2,000,000” and inserting “\$3,000,000”; and

(2) in section 530C(b)(1), by adding at the end the following—

“(M)(i) At the request of an appropriate law enforcement official of a State or political subdivision, the Attorney General may assist in the investigation of violent acts and shootings occurring in a place of public use and in the investigation of mass killings and attempted mass killings. Any assistance provided under this subparagraph shall be presumed to be within the scope of Federal office or employment.

“(i) For purposes of this subparagraph—

“(I) the term ‘mass killings’ means 3 or more killings in a single incident; and

“(II) the term ‘place of public use’ has the meaning given that term under section 2332f(e)(6) of title 18, United States Code.”.

(b) SECRETARY OF HOMELAND SECURITY.—Section 875 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 455) is amended by adding at the end the following:

“(d) INVESTIGATION OF CERTAIN VIOLENT ACTS, SHOOTINGS, AND MASS KILLINGS.—

“(1) IN GENERAL.—At the request of an appropriate law enforcement official of a State or political subdivision, the Secretary, through deployment of the Secret Service or United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, may assist in the investigation of violent acts and shootings occurring in a place of public use, and in the investigation of mass killings

Definitions.

126 STAT. 2436

PUBLIC LAW 112–265—JAN. 14, 2013

and attempted mass killings. Any assistance provided by the Secretary under this subsection shall be presumed to be within the scope of Federal office or employment.

“(2) DEFINITIONS.—For purposes of this subsection—

“(A) the term ‘mass killings’ means 3 or more killings in a single incident; and

“(B) the term ‘place of public use’ has the meaning given that term under section 2332f(e)(6) of title 18, United States Code.”.

Approved January 14, 2013.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY—H.R. 2076 (S. 1793):

HOUSE REPORTS: No. 112–186 (Comm. on the Judiciary).

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD:

Vol. 157 (2011): Sept. 12, considered and passed House.

Vol. 158 (2012): Dec. 17, considered and passed Senate, amended.

Vol. 158 (2013): Jan. 1, House concurred in Senate amendment.



Source: United States, Congress. PUBLIC LAW 112–265—JAN. 14, 2013. 126 STAT. 243.

Authenticated U.S. Government Information (GPO)

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