

We've Known How To Prevent A School Shooting for More Than 20 Years

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The following is an updated version of [this article](#), published in 2018.

The horror in Uvalde, Texas, last week was horrifyingly familiar to Mary Ellen O'Toole. Part of a small group of academics, law-enforcement professionals and psychologists who published some of the first research on mass shootings in schools more than 20 years ago, O'Toole knows the patterns these events and perpetrators all follow — and the opportunities for prevention that seem to just keep being missed.

I first spoke to her in 2018, after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, but she has been studying school shootings for more than 27 years. In that time, she and other experts say little has changed. The risk factors they identified

12,000 — were homicides, but hardly any were due to mass shootings.¹ [If you define mass shootings](#) as an event where a lone attacker indiscriminately kills four or more people, in a public place, unrelated gang activity or robbery, then mass shootings account for a tiny portion of all gun homicides — probably a fraction of a percent. School shootings are an even smaller subset

In 1995, when O’Toole began to study school shootings, they seemed like even more of an outlier than they are today. “I couldn’t even call it a phenomenon,” she said in 2018. “Prior to Columbine, there was no indication that it was going to become one of those crimes that just becomes part of the culture. It looked like it could have faded away.”

These uncommon but high-profile tragedies had also drawn the attention of Marisa Randazzo. In 1999, she was the chief psychologist for the Secret Service and became a part of a joint effort between the Secret Service and Department of Education to better understand school shooters and how to prevent attacks before they happened. Randazzo had previously worked on [the Exceptional Case Study Project](#) — a Secret Service project designed to better understand people who threaten the president and other public figures. Like school shootings, assassinations are extremely rare events that have a huge impact on society. That rarity makes them hard to study — and makes it hard to tell blowhards from real threats. But their impact makes them important to understand.

Randazzo found that the project’s findings echoed what she was learning about school shootings. For instance, the Secret Service had once focused its energy on threats made by people with a history of violent crime or who had a mental illness that caused them to act irrationally. But the Exceptional Case Study Project analysis showed that most people who actually carry out attacks didn’t meet either of those criteria. Instead, a better way to figure out who was really a threat was to talk to friends, family and coworkers — most attackers had discussed their plans with other people.

[Randazzo’s](#) and [O’Toole’s](#) parallel reports came to remarkably similar conclusions.



While all the experts I spoke with said that policies that keep guns out of the hands of teenagers are an important part of preventing mass shootings, they all also said it is crucial to set up systems that spot teens who are struggling and may become dangerous. You can't predict violent events or who will go from threatening behavior to murder, O'Toole said. But it is possible for us to look around and see the people who are having problems and need intervention. Interventions can prevent violence, even if we can't predict it, she told me. For example, at least four potential school shootings that were averted in the weeks after Parkland all stopped because the would-be killers spoke or wrote about their plans and someone told law enforcement.

And there's usually time to spot these things coming. While homicides in general are almost never premeditated, mass shootings — including school shootings — almost always are, said Adam Lankford, a professor of criminology at the University of Alabama. That makes sense, O'Toole said, because it takes time for a person who is drowning in self-pity and anger to decide their misery is someone else's fault, to dehumanize those other people to the point of being able to kill them and to isolate themselves from any reality checks that could break through these dangerous thought patterns.

But time also erodes the systems that schools have implemented in the past to prevent violence. Randazzo told me that her team had trained numerous school districts in school shooting prevention back in the early 2000s and that, as of 2018, many of those districts no longer had prevention systems in place. Thanks to staff turnover and budget reprioritization, such institutional knowledge simply withered away. And ironically, that happens precisely *because* school shootings are so rare. "It takes time and effort for a school to create a team and get training," Randazzo said.