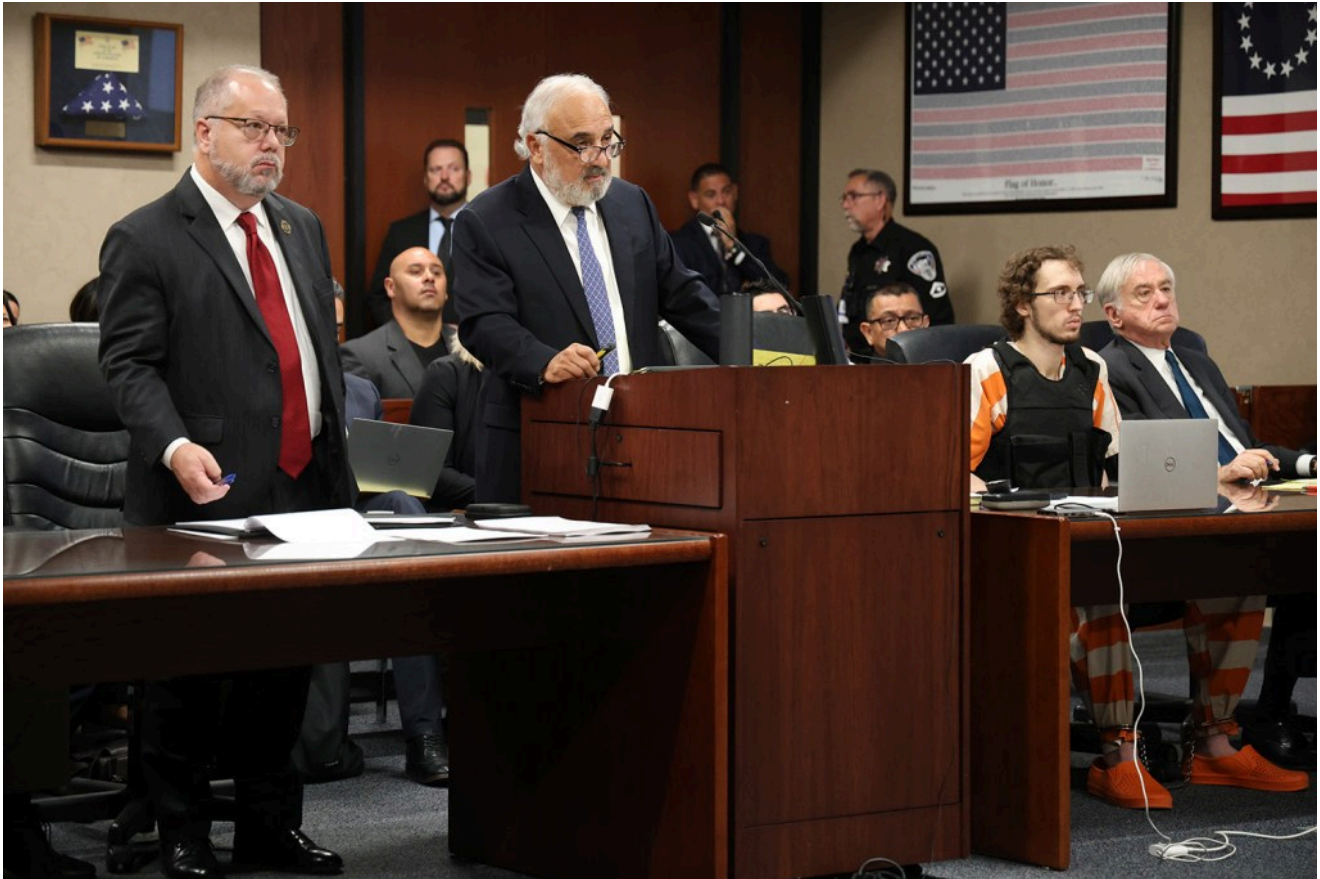


# Walmart gunman attacked El Paso ‘because that's what his president was telling him,’ defense attorney says

 [elpasomatters.org/2025/03/30/patrick-crusius-donald-trump-aug-3-2019-walmart-mass-shooting/](https://elpasomatters.org/2025/03/30/patrick-crusius-donald-trump-aug-3-2019-walmart-mass-shooting/)

March 30, 2025





District Attorney Bill Hicks, left, and defense lawyer Joe Spencer, center, argued at a Sept. 12, 2024, hearing in 409th District Court. At left are Walmart mass shooting defendant Patrick Crusius and defense attorney Mark Stevens. (Ruben R. Ramirez/El Paso Inc)

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*This is the first of a two-part series on issues defense attorneys might have raised if Patrick Crusius had gone to trial for the 2019 Walmart mass shooting. Part two: [Long-standing mental health issues preceded Walmart mass shooting, defense attorney says](#)*

Patrick Crusius believed he was acting at the direction of President Donald Trump when he murdered 23 people and wounded 22 others at an El Paso Walmart in 2019, his defense lawyer told El Paso Matters.

“He thought he had to stop the invasion because that’s what his president was telling him, which is just not rational,” defense attorney Joe Spencer said in his first extended interview about the mass shooting that Crusius said was meant to stop “the Hispanic invasion of

Texas.”

“He thought, if he doesn’t do it, then nobody’s going to do it. He’s got to start,” Spencer said.

The White House did not respond to multiple requests for comment from El Paso Matters. On Aug. 5, 2019, two days after the El Paso shooting, [Trump condemned the attack](#) and the motives behind it: “The shooter in El Paso posted a manifesto online consumed by racist hate. In one voice, our nation must condemn racism, bigotry and white supremacy. These sinister ideologies must be defeated. Hate has no place in America.”

Trump visited El Paso on Aug. 7, ignoring pleas from much of El Paso’s elected leadership that he stay away because they felt his rhetoric may have played a role in the shooting.

Although numerous Trump critics said his constant anti-immigration rhetoric played a role in the El Paso shooting – an accusation Trump supporters have denied – Crusius and his defense team have not previously addressed whether Trump’s words played a role in motivating the gunman.



A volunteer lights a luminary in the Healing Garden, a tribute to those killed in the 2019 Walmart mass shooting, in preparation for a ceremony to mark the fifth anniversary of the attack on Aug. 3, 2024. (Corrie Boudreaux/El Matters)

Crusius, now 26, is expected to plead guilty April 21 to charges of capital murder and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. District Attorney James Montoya [announced on Tuesday](#) that state prosecutors would no longer seek the death penalty, meaning Crusius will be sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole. He also has been sentenced to 90 consecutive life terms after pleading guilty to federal weapons and hate crime charges.

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### [Most families of Walmart shooting victims wanted the case to end, District Attorney James Montoya says](#)

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District Attorney James Montoya had a news conference Tuesday to explain his decision against seeking the death penalty in the Aug. 3, 2019, racist mass shooting at El Paso Walmart

Spencer has not made extensive public comments on the case outside of the courtroom, in part because of directives issued by federal and state judges. He agreed to an interview with El Paso Matters on Tuesday, after 409th District Judge Sam Medrano dissolved a gag order he put in place in 2022.

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In the interview, Spencer detailed Crusius' mental health history – he repeatedly said his client had “a broken brain” – and the gunman's deepening spiral into extremist white nationalist websites such as 4Chan and 8Chan in 2018 and 2019. He said Crusius has a history of mental illness dating to childhood and has been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, an illness characterized by auditory and visual hallucinations.

Spencer said Crusius told him that a key event leading to the murderous rampage in El Paso occurred in May 2019 in Panama City Beach, Florida, when Trump [spoke at a rally](#).



"I mean, you have 15,000 people marching up and you have hundreds and hundreds of people and you have two or three border security people that are brave and great," Trump said, then added falsely that Border Patrol agents weren't allowed to use weapons.

"But how do you stop these people?" Trump said.

"Shoot them," someone in the audience shouted, drawing laughter from the crowd and a smile from the president.

"That's only in the (Florida) Panhandle you can get away with that statement," Trump said while shaking his head. "Only in the Panhandle."

Crusius said he saw video of that Trump rally and was motivated to act, Spencer said. In June 2019, a month after the Florida Trump rally, Crusius purchased a semiautomatic rifle online and had it delivered to a gun dealer in his hometown of Allen, Texas, near Dallas, according to court records.

## The Crusius manifesto

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On Aug. 3, 2019, Crusius drove 10 hours from Allen to El Paso, and attacked the Walmart with the semiautomatic rifle, records show.



Patrick Crusius enters the courtroom for a hearing before 409th District Judge Sam Medrano on Sept. 12, 2024. Defense attorney Joe Spencer is at right. (Ruben R. Ramirez/El Paso Inc.)

When you're a person with a "broken brain" hearing comments like those from Trump, "you think you're getting direction from your commander in chief that you've got to stop the invasion," Spencer said.

Christine Reyna, a psychology professor at DePaul University in Chicago who researches white nationalist extremism, said desensitizing or dehumanizing rhetoric – especially from authority figures – can inspire violence in isolated, vulnerable young people undergoing radicalization online, regardless of their mental health. She said mental illness is not a contributor to most acts of extremist violence.

"That vulnerability can make a person desperate for a last grand act or an act of glory or an act of heroism in their mind. And in the case of Crusius, if he feels like, 'I could be this noble warrior in this cause to save America that the president is calling for,' he may be just vulnerable enough," Reyna said.

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES: Read our past coverage of the Walmart shooting case**

In his “manifesto” posted on the extremist chat forum 8Chan shortly before the attack, Crusius said people would try to link Trump to the attack, but denied that was the case.

“I am putting this here because some people will blame the president or certain presidential candidates for the attack. This is not the case. I know that the media will probably call me a white supremacist anyway and blame Trump’s rhetoric. The media is infamous for fake news. Their reaction to this attack will likely just confirm that,” Crusius wrote.

Spencer said he believes Crusius compiled the manifesto largely by copying and pasting text from other sources. But he said Crusius resisted answering his questions about the manifesto, including Trump’s impact on his beliefs and actions.

“He was not comfortable going there. I remember at one point I even suggested, you know, we may have to subpoena Trump, and boy, he did not like that at all. So I left that subject matter alone. I said we’ll deal with that at another time if we ever have to,” he said.

Spencer said Crusius sometimes shapes his statements out of concern for what people might think of him. For example, Crusius would answer mental health questions from clinicians at the El Paso County jail differently from what he told defense psychiatrists and psychologists.

“I said, Patrick, when they come and visit you from the jail and they ask you, are you seeing things, are you hearing things, and you say no, no, no. Why do you tell them no? ‘Well, I don’t want them to think I’m crazy.’”

### **The impact of words**

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Spencer said the influence of extremist rhetoric, and Trump’s frequent description of unauthorized border crossings as an “invasion,” don’t excuse Crusius’ culpability in mass murder.

But he said the El Paso shooting is a painful reminder that political speech can lead to violent consequences, and he believes Trump bears responsibility in the shooting.

“I absolutely believe that words matter, and especially someone who’s a ... president of the United States. When he makes a statement like that, he should be very careful of how it’s going to be received, not only by those of us that are rational, but by those of us that are not, that think that this is a message from the president,” he said.

## See Also

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### [5 years after El Paso Walmart shooting, gunman's once-extremist language has gone mainstream](#)

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As the victims and survivors are remembered on the 5th anniversary of the shooting, community leaders, human rights groups and political experts say the gunman's words are also not to be forgotten.

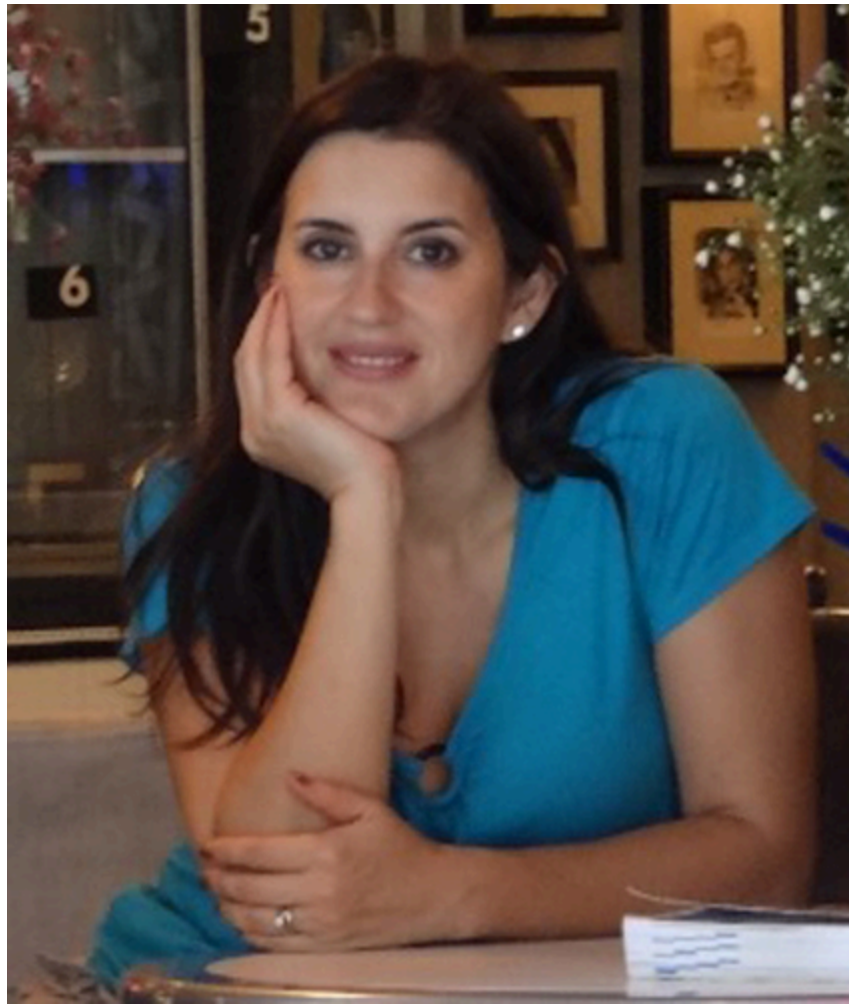
by [Cindy Ramirez](#) August 2, 2024August 2, 2024

Spencer is a longtime donor to Democratic political candidates, especially in El Paso judicial races. He said his views on Trump's responsibility aren't shaped by partisan beliefs.

"I am a Democrat, but I just follow the evidence. My position on why Patrick did what he did is based on the review of all the evidence and the hundreds of hours that I've had visiting with Patrick and all of the experts about his thoughts," he said.

Reyna, the DePaul psychology professor who researches white nationalism, said what was viewed in 2019 as extremist rhetoric on immigration has become more mainstream in conservative politics and media. She pointed to the "great replacement theory," which holds

that malign forces are bringing immigrants into the United States and other Western countries to replace white people.



Christine Reyna

Crusius invoked the great replacement – a common trope in 2019 in the darkest corners of the internet – in his manifesto. In the years since the attack, the conspiracy theory has been increasingly prominent among conservative media figures like Tucker Carlson, and among some right-wing politicians, Reyna said.

“The idea of the great replacement becomes much more mainstream, and that’s extremely dangerous,” she said.

Dehumanization of certain groups has long been a tool used by authoritarian governments, she said, and that approach resonates with white nationalist extremists.

“When you dehumanize the target, what you do is you exclude them from consideration. They do not deserve your moral care. And then, you harm them as existential threats,” Reyna said.

Increasing and normalizing anti-immigrant rhetoric that seemed extreme when used by Crusius before his attack increases the risk of further violence on immigrant and Hispanic communities, she said. Potential white nationalist terrorists are further emboldened by Trump's pardons for people who participated in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, according to Reyna.

"Because what that signal is, is that if you commit violence on my behalf, you're going to get a pass," Reyna said.

As part of her research, Reyna monitors online conversations among white nationalists, where Crusius is frequently invoked.

"He's one of the big heroes now. ... Crusius is one of the icons. Then the question is, who's going to be the next person to be the next hero. And that's what's frightening," Reyna said.

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Robert Moore is the founder and CEO of El Paso Matters. He has been a journalist in the Texas Borderlands since 1986. [More by Robert Moore](#)