

Posted 6/3/24

KIDS WITH GUNS

Ready access and permissive laws create a daunting problem



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. As our unimaginably conflicted Presidential campaign picks up steam, it's probably inevitable that even the most gut-wrenching examples of America's struggle with gun violence will be consigned to the back-burner. So when a married couple recently [drew fifteen years in prison](#) for their son's vicious behavior, hardly anyone (other than his victims' families, of course) seemed to notice.

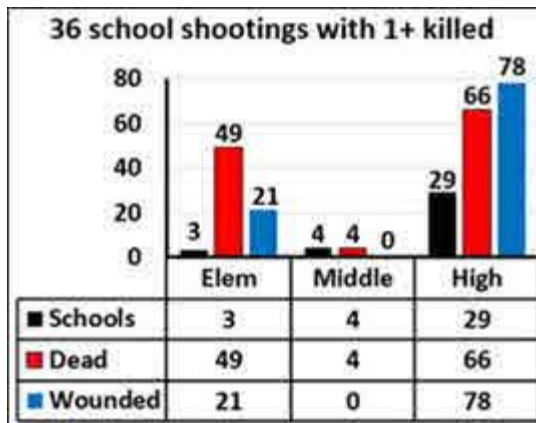
In November 2021 Ethan Crumbley – he was then only fifteen – gunned down four classmates and wound seven other persons at Michigan's Oxford High School. Earlier this year Jennifer and James Crumbley were each convicted at separate trials on four counts of voluntary manslaughter for recklessly furnishing the 9 mm. pistol that their deeply-troubled son used in the massacre. This tragic event came only four days after James Crumbley purchased Ethan's asserted "Christmas present" at a gun store. It probably didn't help the parents' cause that Ethan had tagged along. Nor that his mother once [posted an open letter on Twitter](#) thanking President-elect Trump for, among other things, "allowing my right to bear arms [and] be protected if I show a home to someone with bad intentions."

[Ethan pled guilty](#) to first-degree murder and terrorism last December. He told the judge that "any sentence that they ask for, I ask that you do impose it on me". Although seventeen, thus still not technically an "adult", he drew life without parole.

His parents will be eligible for release in ten years.

Troubled youths often act out their demons at school. And if a gun's readily available, so much the worse. We've covered a host of these tragedies. Here are the worst four:

- [1999 Columbine High School massacre](#) (Columbine, Colorado). Two twelfth-grade students, one eighteen, the other seventeen, used assault-style pistols and shotguns acquired through friends to murder twelve students and a teacher and wound twenty-one others.
- [2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre](#) (Newtown, Connecticut). A twenty-year old former student killed his mother, then used her assault-style rifle and 9 mm. pistol to shoot his way into the school. He gunned down twenty children and six adult employees, then committed suicide. [Police Issues post](#)
- [2018 Marjorie Stoneman High School massacre](#) (Parkland, Florida). A nineteen-year old former student used an AR-15 style rifle that he legally bought in a gun store in 2017 to murder fourteen students and three teachers. He was later arrested without incident. [Police Issues post](#)
- [2022 Robb Elementary School massacre](#) (Uvalde, Texas). An eighteen-year old former student shot his grandmother in the face, then used an AR-15 style rifle that he legally bought (he left a second rifle in his vehicle) to murder nineteen students and two teachers and wound seventeen others. He was shot and killed by SWAT while still inside the school. [Police Issues post](#)



Here our objective is to explore the youthful misuse of guns, and particularly by younger teens. While we didn't intend to focus on school shootings, these deplorable events helped us explore how children became murderous gunslingers. Using Wikipedia's [List of school shootings in the United States \(2000–present\)](#), we selected all shootings at K-12 schools between 2012 and 2024 where the shooter was under 21 and killed at least one person. That

yielded 36 episodes, one at each of three elementary schools, four middle schools, and 29 high schools. In all, 119 persons were killed and 99 were wounded.

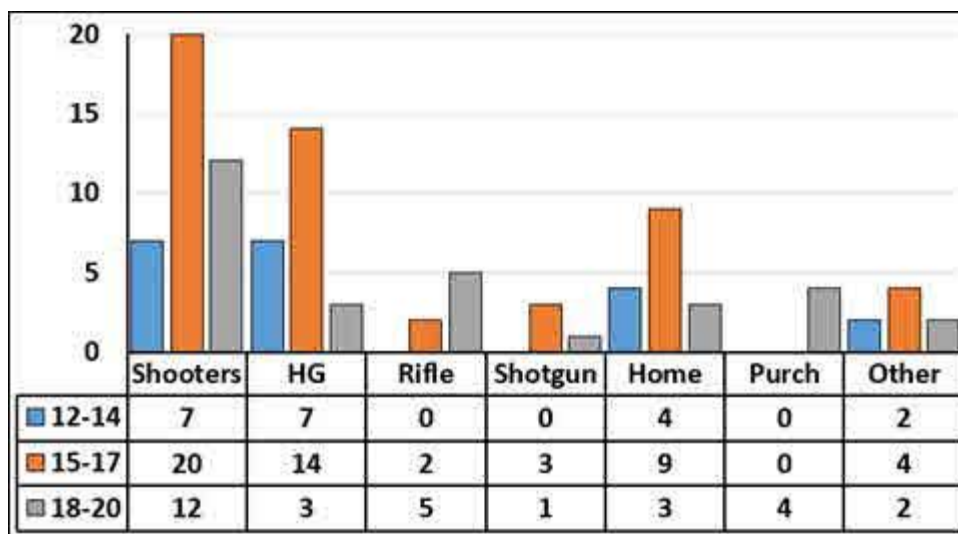
There were two unique groups: thirty-two shootings with one to four persons killed other than the shooter, and four shootings with ten to twenty-six:

Deaths	Shootings			Victims		Shooters	Weapon type				
	#	Targeted	Untargeted	Killed	Wound.	Avg. age	Handg.	Shotg.	Rifle	Comb.	Unk.
1-4	32	22	10	45	50	15.7	23	3	4	2	4
10-26	4	0	4	74	49	18.5	1	1	3	1	0

22 TARGETED SHOOTINGS				
Victims		Firearm type (18 shtgs)		
Killed	Wounded	Handgun	Shotgun	Rifle
24	9	15	2	1
14 UNTARGETED SHOOTINGS				
Victims		Firearm type		
Killed	Wounded	Handgun	Shotgun	Rifle
95	90	9	2	6

Shooter intent and gun type were key determinants of the human toll. Twenty-two episodes in the one-to-four killed group were “targeted” on specific antagonists, often someone who supposedly had bullied the shooter. ([In a middle school shooting](#) that involved three 13-year olds, the shooter was the bully, while his victim was a youth who was defending the child being bullied.)

Handguns were used in nearly all targeted shootings. Per-shooting casualty counts were accordingly limited: twenty had one death, and two had two deaths each. In contrast, eight of the fourteen “untargeted” episodes, where shooters had no specific victim in mind, caused more than one fatality. Their greatly disproportionate overall toll is attributable to four episodes that involved long guns: the [2018 Santa Fe High School \(TX\) shooting](#), where a 17-year old armed with a handgun and shotgun took ten lives, and the massacres at Sandy Hook, Marjorie Stoneman and Robb Elementary, where rifles were used to murder sixty-four.



Our thirty-six episodes had forty shooters. Thirty-nine were between the ages of twelve and twenty; one was twenty-one. Handguns were by far their most common

weapon. After all, they're easy to conceal, and firepower isn't as much at issue when there is a specific "target" in mind. Handguns were also the *only* firearms used by the younger shooters. Unable to legally buy a gun of any kind, they usually turned to weapons that belonged to adult family members and were kept at home.

	Handgun	Rifle	Shotgun
Home	12	4	2
Store	0	2	1
Priv	0	1	0
Stolen	2	0	0
Ghost	1	0	0
Unk	9	0	1

In our lead-off example a fifteen-year old's parents were imprisoned over the lethal consequences of gifting a pistol to their deeply troubled son. News accounts don't suggest that family members purposely granted such ready access to any of the other young shooters. Two of their handguns actually came from other teens' homes. In a [2022 Seattle-area high school shooting](#) a 14-year old boy used a pistol that another 14-year old supposedly stole from his father's handbag. Six years earlier, [a 15-year old Arizona high school student](#) borrowed a handgun from a classmate who brought it from home, supposedly without permission. After the killing, the shooter committed suicide. He was one of ten in our sample to do so.

	Handgun	Rifle	Shotgun	Comb.	Unk.
Episodes	21	6	2	3	4
Killed	32	68	2	12	5
Wounded	30	45	1	23	0

Rifles were of mixed origin. Two massacres – at Marjorie Stoneman and Robb Elementary – were committed with rifles that

shooters legally purchased at gun stores. The rifle used at Sandy Hook belonged to the youth's mother. He took it, along with a handgun, after shooting her dead. We've often commented on the killing power of assault rifles (see "[Ban the Damned Things!](#)"). Here their effects proved truly devastating. Used on only six occasions, they accounted for more than half the total deaths and nearly half the woundings.

Schools continue to be beset by armed youths. On May 1, 2024 [Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin police shot and killed a 14-year old](#) who was about to enter his middle school while armed with a rifle. He reportedly pointed the weapon – it turned out to be a Ruger .177 caliber pellet rifle – at responding officers and didn't drop it when ordered. His disturbing online chatter (he posted "my last morning" earlier that day) revealed a fascination with guns.

Two days later, [a 17-year old Washington D.C. high school student was wounded](#) by a bullet that pierced her classroom. Two students, ages seventeen and eighteen, were arrested for "assault with a dangerous weapon, carrying a pistol without a license and endangerment with a firearm."

Might lawmaking offer a solution? [Not according to Iowa's Governor:](#)

This was a horrible tragedy. It's certainly nothing that any governor wants to wake up to in the morning and hear what's happened. No additional gun laws would have prevented what happened. There's just evil out there.

Gov. Kim Reynolds was reacting to the [January 4, 2024 shooting at Perry High School](#). Reportedly upset over being bullied, a 17-year old student opened fire with a handgun and a shotgun, killing two and wounding six. Authorities haven't identified the weapons' source. But the teen was too young under either [Iowa](#) or [Federal](#) law to buy a gun of any kind at a store. Iowa law also bars giving handguns to persons under twenty-one, and long guns to anyone under eighteen. Parents, though, can permit underage youths to possess long guns. They can also allow supervised access to handguns by those at least fourteen.

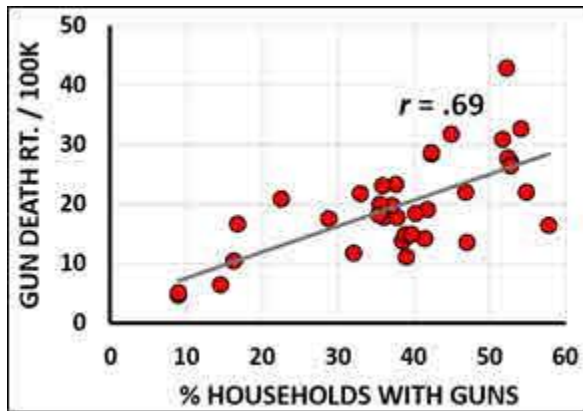
[State gun possession and purchase laws](#) vary. Hawaii and Illinois are the most restrictive, with a minimum age of twenty-one for both firearms purchase and possession. At the opposite extreme, Missouri, Montana, Ohio and Texas set no minimum age for possessing any type of firearm. Florida reacted to the Marjorie Stoneman massacre by increasing the minimum age for buying a rifle from eighteen to twenty-one, the same minimum that applies to handguns. Natch, gun enthusiasts were unhappy. Earlier this year, the State's House chamber [approved a bill](#) that would return the minimum age for long-gun purchases to eighteen. [But it died in the Senate](#).

Teen firearms misuse is by no means limited to school grounds. [A fourteen-year old Los Angeles girl was recently charged with murder](#) for gunning down a 20-year old woman who was standing on a streetcorner. Why the teen fired and where her gun came from are still to be revealed. But the March 21st. killing took place in the State [with the strongest gun laws in the nation](#).



Last year, "[Are We Helpless to Prevent Massacres?](#)" explored the issue of prevention. It was inspired by the March 27, 2023 massacre at Nashville's Covenant Christian School, where a 28-year old armed with assault rifles unleashed a fusillade, killing three nine-year olds and three adults. Check out the essay and its related posts, say, "[Our Never-Ending American Tragedy](#)" for more. It's subtitled "A murderous rampage in Nashville suggests that lawmaking is not a solution."

Our views about that haven't changed. Yet some steps *are* possible. While we don't promote the notion of imprisoning careless parents, encouraging safe gun storage can help. Ditto, holding gun makers to account for recklessly marketing their wares. Check out the recent story about the lawsuits [filed by families of the victims of Uvalde](#).



Problem is, firearms have great cultural significance. Our society’s attitudes about gun ownership and possession have inevitably led to their abundant (over-abundant?) presence. So half-steps – and that’s clearly all that many (most?) of our fellow-citizens seem willing to do – are unlikely to substantially lessen the mayhem. Our graph uses [CDC data](#). While we don’t claim that gun density is the *only* “cause” of gun deaths, it clearly

matters. *A lot*. Even when we “control” for our favorite evil-doer, poverty, the “*r*” only drops to .61. (For more, see [“Policing Can’t Fix What Really Ails.”](#))

Let’s close with a bit of self-plagiarism from [“Our Never-Ending American Tragedy”](#):

Given the nature of our society and its body politic, tweaking the rules seems the only option. But even the hardest legal response (e.g., California’s) has had at best only a limited effect. What would work – drastically shrinking the number of guns in citizen’s hands and sharply curtailing the lethality of what remains – seems well out of reach. We’re not Britannia! That’s why when it comes to gun control, *Police Issues* tends to despair. Yet there’s been some momentum. Hopefully the final chapter of Reasonable Americans v. Guns is yet to be written.

Couldn’t have said it better ourselves!