



A compilation of the 19 students and 2 teachers slain in the Uvalde, Texas school shooting.



Reflections of a River Rat:

Too many guns and too many ‘thoughts and prayers’

The Facebook post arrived from the wife of a former newsroom colleague just as the chilling details of the Texas school shooting emerged. She explained her routine as a second- and third-grade substitute teacher. Check the lunchroom list. Learn the fire drill exit. Arrange morning bell work on desks.

Then she came to the prep that wrenches her emotions each day – she finds the spot where she will hide the children in case an active shooter enters the school.

“I often say that every adult in America should have to go through a lockdown drill,” she wrote. “As I am sitting on the floor with them, trying to explain they can’t talk, but reassuring them that everything is OK, they all want me to put my arms around them and hug them. They are babies. It takes all I have to not cry.”

Her posting lays bare the emotional trauma contemplated by all teachers last week after 18-year-old Salvador Rolando Ramos bought two assault rifles, shot his

grandmother in the face, crashed her truck outside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, then marched into a classroom and murdered 19 children and two teachers before he was killed by law enforcement.

That tragedy overwhelmed the substitute teacher's emotions. She begged for easier access to mental health care. She demanded tighter gun laws. She pleaded for politicians to act. She wanted all the reasonable responses that Americans have sought for years.

But it won't happen. The cycle of "thoughts and prayers" had already begun. The shooting has been blamed on (pick as many as you like):

- a). lack of mental health services
- b). inadequate police response
- c). the acts of a single deranged individual
- d). crisis actors
- e). not arming classroom teachers

The real problem won't be addressed. However, the solution was on display for a nation to see less than 300 miles away. The Secret Service didn't allow any guns inside the building while former president Trump spoke at the National Rifle Association convention in Houston.

Eureka! There it is. Limit guns.

This nation has too many guns. Four years ago, the international Small Arms Survey reported that Americans owned 393 million guns, more than our population of 330 million people. Then, over the past two years, Americans went on a gun-buying spree of 78 million more. The closest country to our gun obsession is India whose 1.4 billion people own 71 million guns.

Sure, we should have hunting guns and sporting guns, but we don't need assault rifles to hunt deer. We don't need concealed guns to go shopping. We don't need dimwits showing up at the grocery store carrying their guns as a show of force. We don't need kooks on TV spreading preposterous fears that the government is out to take your guns, nor can we promulgate this "good guy with a gun" premise to thwart mass shootings. The Uvalde school was armed, as were so many others. It rarely works.



A Texas law enforcement official walks past the memorial at Robb Elementary School.

Instead, we will leave our children and teachers exposed to the random violence within a society overrun with guns. We made roads and automobiles safer; we protected teen-agers by raising the drinking age. Twenty-three years after Columbine, and almost 10 years since Sandy Hook, we remain paralyzed on any limits on guns such as waiting periods, universal background checks and red-flag prohibitions.

Nothing will happen in Congress while the NRA is doling out cash. For the record, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence reported in 2019 that the NRA gave over \$1 million each to 16 Republican senators, with Mitt Romney of Utah leading at more than \$13 million and Mitch McConnell 15th at \$1.2 million. It's going to take a groundswell of support from parents, teachers, working men and women, voters and, sadly, victims' families to make common-sense change happen.

Teachers worry about their students every day. I did. Did I motivate them? Were the lessons sharp enough? Am I zeroed in their academic and social needs? Very few teachers will discuss the sleepless night when they tossed and turned over tragic news events and let their mind wander to the moment they feared most -- the loudspeaker warning "the eagle has landed." In my building, that meant a dangerous intruder was in the hallways. Lock the classroom door, hide your students in the cloak closet at the best angle away from the entrance,

maintain absolute silence. On those sleepless nights, your mind wandered to which girls would shush everyone and which boys would blurt something out. Then you tossed and turned some more.

I vividly recall the day after Sept. 11, 2001, when a blue suitcase was found below the gas mains at my elementary school. Someone deliberately penetrated the fenced cage to place it there. We had to assume it was a live bomb, not a prank. You don't endanger the lives of 450 children, so we marched them a mile up the street to another school and waited to hear the outcome of a bomb squad investigation. It proved to be a dud, but it further frayed the nerves of several staff members, still reeling from terrorists crashing four airliners the previous day. Still, it doesn't compare to the fears children are exposed to during active shooter drills.

Coincidentally, my wife relayed the story of a colleague who shared how she was unsettled by the Texas tragedy, then pulled up to her son's daycare location.

"I dropped him off," she said, "and I cried all the way to work."

We need fewer tears, fewer "thoughts and prayers," and fewer guns.

Jim Holleran, a Morristown native, is a retired teacher and registrar for the Rochester City School District, and former sports editor of the Democrat and Chronicle. Reach him at jimholleran29@gmail.com or view past columns under "Reflections of River Rat" at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.com/blog/>