

Weapon Acquisition and the Pathway to Violence

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source article

Thomas J. V. Williams, Calli Tzani, and Maria Ioannou, "Time to Bear Arms: An Exploration of Time Suspensions Between Lone Mass Shooting Attacks in the US and When the Perpetrator Acquired Their Weapons," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (Aug. 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2389571>.

Key Takeaways

- On average, mass shooters purchased their firearms 54 days before committing an attack, indicating that weapon acquisition is one step in a longer preparation process—not necessarily an immediate precursor to violence.
- Short time gaps between purchase and attack were rare and mainly occurred in states with little or no waiting period for firearm purchases.
- Practitioners should treat firearm purchases as one of several early warning signs, not as a definitive indicator of an imminent risk; there may be ample opportunities for upstream intervention between purchase and attack.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Mass shootings* in the United States have increased drastically in the last decade, with an average of two per day from 2020 to 2022. These attacks, by definition, always involve a firearm. An attacker might choose a firearm over other weapons for several reasons, including tactical advantages (e.g., the ability to attack quickly from a distance), accuracy, and ease of access. If an attacker selects a firearm as their weapon of choice, they will need to obtain one to carry out the attack. Accordingly, most research has focused on *how* attackers acquired firearms. However, few studies have looked at *when* attackers acquired them.

The researchers for this study sought to better understand the timing between when an attacker legally acquired a firearm and when they carried out a mass shooting. In particular, the authors wanted to see whether a pattern emerged and, if so, how that pattern might relate to the pathway to violence.

* The study defined a *mass shooting* as a "multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms—not including the offender(s)—within one event, and in one or more locations relatively near one another."

Methodology

The researchers examined 16 mass shootings that met five inclusion criteria: (1) the attack was recorded as a mass shooting, (2) it was committed by one perpetrator, (3) it occurred in the United States, (4) the perpetrator purchased a firearm legally and used it in the attack, and (5) information on when the perpetrator acquired the firearm was publicly available. For each perpetrator, the researchers calculated the number of days between the firearm purchase and the attack.

Findings

- **On average, attackers bought their firearms 54 days before the attack.** The shortest time suspension was 4 days (Uvalde, 2022) and the longest was 368 days (Parkland, 2018). This finding suggests that weapon acquisition is often part of a longer preparation process, not an impulsive act.
 - **Short time gaps were rare and occurred in states with very short or no waiting periods for firearm purchases.** In three cases in Texas, Florida, and Colorado, firearms were purchased four to seven days prior to the attack; these states have waiting periods of three days or fewer.
 - **Most attackers used a single firearm, and handguns were the most common weapon.** Of the 16 attackers, 9 used handguns, 6 used semi-automatic rifles, and 1 used both. Five modified their weapons in some way (e.g., suppressors, high-capacity magazines).
- **A weapon purchase is not the final step before an attack.** There is usually a gap after a purchase, meaning other preparation activities likely happen during that period.

How can practitioners working in early-stage intervention and threat assessment use these findings?

- Monitor firearm purchases as one potential indicator of risk, but do not treat them as definitive signals of imminent risk.
- Be aware that shorter intervals between purchases and attacks may occur in states with short or no waiting periods for firearm purchases.
- Inform community partners that weapon acquisition is just one step in a broader pattern of preparatory behaviors and emphasize that additional indicators often emerge after a purchase.

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