

OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS • Opinion, Opinion Columnist

## Opinion: The grim legacy of Columbine after 25 years

No other American shooting resonates as profoundly as Columbine High School



A rose is left beneath a placard along a stone wall that has quotes from those affected by the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, at the Columbine Memorial at Robert F. Clement Park on April 20, 2021 in Littleton, Colorado. 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School died. The thirteen victims of the massacre were: Rachel Scott, 17, Daniel Rohrbough, 15, Dave Sanders, 47, Kyle Velasquez, 16, Steven Curnow, 14, Cassie Bernall, 17, Isaiah Shoels, 18, Matthew Kechter, 16, Lauren Townsend, 18, John Tomlin, 17, Kelly Fleming, 16, Daniel Mauser, 15, and Corey DePooter, 17. (Photo by Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post)

By **DAVID PYROOZ** | Guest Commentary, **JAMES DENSLEY** | Guest Commentary and **JILLIAN PETERSON** | Guest Commentary

PUBLISHED: April 15, 2024 at 9:56 AM MDT

This April marks the 25th anniversary of the [Columbine High School massacre](#), a watershed moment in American history that has become emblematic of a harrowing chapter in our national narrative on gun violence and mass shootings. The tragedy of Columbine, where two students embarked on a meticulously planned attack, leaving 13 dead and 24 injured, was not just a moment of national mourning but a turning point that shifted the American psyche.

We are criminologists who study gun violence. This January, we surveyed 10,000 Americans about their experience with and exposure to mass shootings.

We asked each of them a poignant question: "Please name the first mass shooting that comes to mind that occurred in your lifetime?" The question was open-ended. There was no drop-down menu of options to choose from. We simply wanted to know the event they associated with a mass shooting.

Astonishingly, 35% of respondents — over 3,500 people — cited Columbine. No other event, not even the gut-wrenching school shootings at Sandy Hook (10%), Parkland (5%), or Uvalde (2%), which were the next most cited, respectively, came close to this level of recall, despite Columbine predating them by years. The deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, where 60 concertgoers were killed in Las Vegas in 2017, was listed by 2% of respondents.



A pair of young girls comfort one another during the Memorial Service for the victims of the Columbine High School shooting. An estimated 70,000 people attended the service at the Mann Theatre on Bowles Ave. on April 25, 1999, in Littleton. (Photo by Craig F. Walker/The Denver Post)

The significance of Columbine transcends its tragic tallies. It has become what social scientists call a framing event for how Americans perceive and process the horror of mass shootings, a shorthand for terror. Like the moon landing in 1969 or the attacks on September 11, people remember precisely where they stood on April 20, 1999; Columbine is a cultural anchor.

Part of the reason is that Columbine was among the first mass shootings in the digital age, receiving unprecedented media coverage that not only brought horror into every American living room but also set a template for infamy, inspiring a dark subculture that glorifies the perpetrators. As we document in our book, *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*, this phenomenon has led to a cycle of emulation, where subsequent shooters seek to replicate or surpass previous atrocities. The result is a chilling blueprint for violence that has been copied time and again.

[Read More](#)

00:00

02:00

Columbine both defines and distorts our understanding of mass shootings and school shootings. The myths that sprang forth from his tragic event, seared into the national consciousness, from the influence of violent media to the image of bullies and black trench coats, simplified complex motives, amplified fears, skewed public discourse, and ultimately obscured the path to genuine solutions.

Columbine catalyzed a seismic shift in how schools, communities, and law enforcement respond to the threat of mass shootings. It spurred a multi-billion-dollar school security industry and instilled a generation with the protocol to “run, hide, fight.” But our fortification of schools, unproven surveillance technologies, and “good guys with guns” have not stopped school shootings nor even slowed them down. There have been 394 school shootings since 1999.

Strikingly, our data highlight a generational divide in Columbine’s legacy. From Millennials to the Silent Generation, Columbine was listed anywhere from 3 to 10 times more often than any other mass shooting, but for Gen X specifically — in their 20s and 30s when the shooting occurred — Columbine came immediately to mind for 52% of respondents. For Gen Z — not yet alive for the shooting — it came to mind just 8% of the time, although still more than more recent tragedies at Parkland and Uvalde.

For Generation X, now navigating their 40s and 50s, the specter of Columbine looms large in their collective consciousness. But for their children, the legacy of that tragedy is not just a shadow in their minds—it’s a palpable part of their daily existence. This younger generation confronts the aftermath of Columbine through tangible, everyday rituals: participating in lockdown drills, walking through metal detectors, and shouldering bulletproof backpacks as they enter their schools. They bear the weight of a harrowing event they have no direct memory of, a chilling inheritance felt through the





A Chatfield High School student places flowers at the Columbine High School massacre memorial on Monday, April 20, 2020, at Robert F. Clement Park in Littleton, Colorado. (Photo by Aaron Ontiveroz/The Denver Post)

We must never forget Columbine – the victims, the survivors, the first responders, and the community forever altered by its shadow. But only by looking forward can we turn the page on the copycat violence, confusion, and consequential policy it spawned. We've learned a lot about the root causes of mass shootings since Columbine. Yet, these root causes—despair, trauma, isolation, the pursuit of infamy, and the ease of obtaining firearms—persist, largely ignored, and unremedied.

On this somber anniversary, let us confront the complexities of gun violence and make the changes necessary to relegate school mass shootings to history.

By developing systems for crisis reporting and intervention, providing strong mental health resources and support in schools, starving mass shooters of the oxygen of publicity, implementing measures for the safe storage of firearms, and limiting access to them, especially for teenagers and individuals in crisis, we can prevent the recurrence of such tragedies and leave the next generation with a new legacy.

*David Pyrooz is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder. James Densley at Metropolitan State University and Jillian Peterson at Hamline University are the co-directors of The Violence Project.*

[Sign up for Sound Off to get a weekly roundup of our columns, editorials and more.](#)

To send a letter to the editor about this article, submit [online](#) or check out our [guidelines](#) for how to submit by email or mail.