

OPINION

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE MESSENGER

To Address Mass Shootings, First Take the Fear Out of Firearms

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Law enforcement officials gather at the Lewiston High School as they continue a manhunt for suspect Robert Card. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

On Oct. 25, a [man entered a bowling alley and a restaurant, fatally shooting 18 people](#), with over one dozen more injured. The man had a [mental health history](#) that elicited concern when he served as an [army reservist](#). He was also a [firearms instructor](#). Except for one charge of [operating under the influence](#), he had no other criminal record.

Mass killings stir the interest, and anxiety, of the nation. Every such event draws out analysts seeking some common factor across all the other mass killings in the nation so far this year. We had gone 62 days since the last one, which occurred on Aug. 24, based on data in the [Gun Violence Archive](#). A new incident brings tears, fears and concerns: Could anything have been done to prevent such a tragedy? Would different [gun laws](#) have prevented this incident?

The factor that drives such questions is fear. Each of us who has entered a bowling alley or a restaurant thinks that this could have been them. This is a natural and understandable thought.

[Firearm policies represent one of the most polarizing issues in America.](#)

There are those who tout the [Second Amendment](#) and claim their legal right to own a firearm. They want to retain the right to [defend themselves](#) and have firearms of their choosing available for hunting and sport shooting.

There are others who bemoan the number of firearms in private citizen hands, now [estimated to be over 400 million](#), and cite the growing number of [mass killings and mass shootings](#) reported in the media. This becomes particularly sensitive when children are involved.

The [Gun Violence Archive](#) provides a repository of data on firearm deaths, tracking the number of events, the number of fatalities and the number of injuries.

Placing this data in context provides an informative picture of the impact of firearms in America.

[In 2022, the gun violence archive reported 44,368 firearm deaths](#). This was down from 45,109 firearm deaths in 2021 and up from 43,743 deaths in 2020. The largest proportion of such deaths were suicides, representing around 55% of the total. Given that [most suicides involve a handgun](#), they represent the most lethal firearm available.

[Mass killings](#), defined as events in which four or more people are killed, excluding the assailant, are far less frequent. In 2022, there were 36 such events, with 28 in 2021 and 21 in 2020. The number of victims killed in such events has steadily increased, from 96 in 2020, 142 in 2021 and 187 in 2022. Given the small size of such numbers, any trends must be observed over an extended period of time before conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, these years coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult to tease out causes and effects.

The media has a propensity to report [mass shooting](#) statistics, defined as four or more people shot, excluding the assailant, when a mass killing occurs, which elicits fear and misrepresents the situation.

In 2022, there were 646 mass shootings, resulting in 642 victims and 2,660 people injured. This was down from 688 mass shootings in 2021, resulting in 665 victims and 2,780 people injured, and up from 609 mass shootings in 2020, resulting in 490 victims and 2,519 people injured. Such numbers represent a steady number of such events and consequences, with random variations across the three years.

So, what is the purpose of reporting all such data?

As much as some [politicians exhort for greater gun controls](#) based on mass shootings and mass killings, often focusing on semi-automatic weapons, the population impact of such a ban would be minimal. Moreover, how the media presents mass killings and mass shootings is not congruent with the impact of such events on the total number of firearm deaths.

This does not minimize the tragedy of such events. Every time a person is killed, a life is lost prematurely that is grieved by parents, siblings and friends. It just recognizes the reality of the environment and places all such events in the appropriate perspective.

What remains clear is that the firearm controversy is rooted in fear, on both sides of the aisle.

For those who support firearm rights, they fear losing such rights and having the Second Amendment overturned, something that is highly unlikely to occur anytime soon.

For those who support firearm restrictions, they fear the most negative consequences of firearm ownership, which are avoidable premature deaths. Every time a mass killing or a mass shooting is reported in the media, they fear that the next event could involve them or people they know.

Some of the people with the most fear are politicians, on both sides of the aisle, who will pander to their constituents to keep their support and retain their political power.

Yet, if our nation is to foster a civil relationship with firearms, fear must be removed. That leaves what I call "IRMS."

"I" means taking the "I" out of the issue and removing our own self-interests, focusing on what is best for the nation.

"R" means demonstrating restraint rather than attacking those who differ with our views.

"M" means moderation rather than taking extreme views.

"S" means safety, focusing on improving the situation and prioritizing firearm safety for all.

If we as a nation are to move forward on reducing premature deaths by firearms, it demands IRMS, by all stakeholders. If not, business as usual will persist, with more conflicts, more suffering and more deaths. That is something that we should all fear.

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