**VCU homeland security expert William V. Pelfrey Jr. answers this question and more.**

**Why does this keep happening?**

It’s a simple question, but the answers are extremely complicated. There are some political overtones to it. Guns are ubiquitous in the U.S. There are more guns than people. The U.S. population is about 334 million and the number of guns in the U.S. is more than 390 million. We have the highest civilian gun ownership in the world by a huge margin. That’s an extraordinary number relative to the rest of the world.

Another element is school safety is not as high as it should be. It’s easy to maintain basic school safety but not everybody does a good job of that.

A third element is social media, a component that revolves around how people make it OK on social media to act on violence.

**How do you categorize mass shootings?**

Some are artifacts of bullying. A victim of bullying decides they are going to respond with extreme violence, and it’s usually not against their perpetrators. It’s a show of force to demonstrate they won’t be bullied again. They can stand up for themselves. That describes Sandy Hook and Columbine and some other shootings.

The second category of mass shootings is domestic terrorism. Those people had been self-radicalized on social media and believe their actions represent a higher good. What they are doing is for a bigger purpose than themselves. They are willing to die, almost like a suicide terrorist, to further the goals of the theology they support.

A lot of people don’t fit into either category. The mass shooting era began with Charles Whitman in 1966 when he climbed a bell tower at the University of Texas and started shooting people. He did that because he had a tumour in his brain. There was no kind of pattern, but it created a behavioural matrix that has been followed by any number of people in the U.S.

**How easy is it to buy a gun?**

In the U.S., you can walk into a gun store and buy as many assault rifles as you want if you have cash and are over 18 and you meet just a couple of other loose criteria. Guns are so easily obtained that it’s easy to commit violent crime. We don’t do a good job in our criminal justice system of prohibiting people that probably shouldn’t have them from securing guns.

**What types of guns are especially dangerous to own?**

Assault weapons — assault rifles and assault pistols. We don’t track who buys them. You go into a gun store and buy a gun. A criminal background check is run, but no one keeps track of what you bought or how much you paid for it or what you do with it when you walk out the door. You could buy 20 assault rifles, drive to Washington, D.C., and sell them and nobody knows it because there is no reporting mechanism to identify that you sold the guns.

**What is the role of social media in all of this?**

It has a powerful role because of far-right extremism. The Buffalo shooter was a self-radicalized domestic terrorist. He had a strongly held belief about the infringement of races on the Caucasian race. He was an avid follower of far-right extremists’ diatribe and used some of what he found as rationalization to act and commit violence.

I believe one of the most dangerous threats to the U.S. is far-right extremists, which inspired far-right violent extremists. Social media has a tremendous role in that. There is no single bad guy we can legitimize or take out. There are hundreds of podcasts and thousands of self-proclaimed thought leaders and they write really nasty, vicious stuff and have followers. Some of those people act on what they read. No government entity does a good job counter-messaging extremists.

**How does bullying play into this?**

Schools don’t do a great job with bullying prevention. Schools don’t do it until it’s too late. Schools need to adopt bullying and cyberbullying identification measures and then practice them. The best tactic I’ve seen is analogous to the “see something, say something” messaging that was rampant in New York after 9/11. That same logic can be applied in schools to enable citizens to get involved in terrorism prevention. Students can be empowered to identify bullies and then the school can come in to support fellow students.

**What predictions do you have for the future when it comes to gun laws?**

I expect there will be some change in gun laws, but they won’t be substantial. It will provide political cover for some people to say we are doing things, we are making things safer, but they won’t make things safer. I expect gun sales will go up even more because people now feel like they have to protect themselves and their family members because the government isn’t doing that.

***CAE reading and use of English*** *Part 5 – multiple choice comprehension questions*

**1. The reason for school shootings lies in….**

A. the high number of civilians who are affected by social media

B. the fact that there is no school safety

C. the fact that the guns are omnipresent in the USA

D. the fact that nearly everyone has a gun in the USA

**2. Domestic terrorism forms part of mass shootings because shooters**

A. want to put a stop a bullying

B. believe that it can be justified by higher purpose

C. often have some kind of disability

D. want to stop the spread of beliefs they do not support

**3. Buying a gun in the USA…**

A. is relatively easy for children

B. has to comply with some strict criteria

C. is strictly prohibitive to some people by criminal justice system

D. leads to violent crime with ease

**4. Far-right extremism…**

A. can result in domestic terrorism

B. is inspired by rationalization of crime commitment

C. can be nominally found on social media

D. isn’t battled by Government at all

# **TED: I Was Almost A School Shooter | Aaron Stark**

video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azRl1dI-Cts>

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. **00.43** Describe his family background. Why was he constantly changing schools?

2. **1.25** Why, where and how was he bullied?

3. **3.00** Describe the events during his teenage years.

4. **4.54** What led him to buying a gun, how did he get it and what were his intentions?

5. **5.53** What saved him from committing the mass shooting?

6. **end** How can we all help to prevent this kind of crime?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Are some people naturally bad or does their upbringing and environment lead them to commit crimes? How much should we blame society and how much should we blame the person?

2. At what age are we fully responsible for our actions? What is the youngest age that a criminal should be punished as an adult?

3. How can we reduce crime? With harsher punishments or better education?

4. Is the overall crime rate increasing or decreasing where you live? Do you think the world will be safer or more dangerous in the future?

**KEY:**

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