

POLITICO

The wrong kind of normal

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GERMS, GUNS AND NOW WHAT? A Monday night shooting in Boulder, Colo., that left 10 dead is the country's seventh mass shooting so far this year, according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University, and the second in less than a week after a pandemic pause in spree killings. President Joe Biden called for a federal assault weapons ban today in response.

Nightly reached out to a group of experts to ask them: Why does the U.S. have so many mass shootings? Here are their edited answers.

“The U.S. has a lot more guns in private hands than virtually any other high-income nation and, perhaps, a lot more aggrieved individuals with histories of violence. Not only do we have a lot of guns per capita, but the laws that keep guns from people with violent histories or tendencies, require safe gun storage, or that regulate design features common to assault weapons (large capacity ammunition feeding devices, folding stocks, barrel shrouds) are largely absent or weak in the U.S. compared with other high-income nations.

“Mass shootings, like many acts of gun violence that injure or kill fewer people, are often sparked by a grievance and a person who feels justified in using a firearm in response to the grievance. Most mass shootings are not done at random against strangers, but more commonly directed at individuals or groups that are known to the shooter — family members, employers and co-workers, classmates, rival gangs. But the U.S. has average levels of non-lethal violence compared with our peer nations. What sets us apart is that our violence is far more lethal because it more commonly involves someone with a firearm.” — **Daniel W. Webster, director, Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Prevention and Policy**

“Let me flip this question around. Yes, the U.S. has a disproportionate number of public mass shootings — tragedies like what happened in Boulder, Parkland and Las Vegas — but it also has a disproportionate number of every other type of shooting. In fact, there are more than 100 deaths and more than 200 injuries from guns every single day across our country. Two-thirds of those deaths are suicides. Nearly 75 women are shot and killed by a domestic partner each month. Mass shootings are just the (very public, very scary) tip of the iceberg.

“So instead of asking why we have so many mass shootings, I would ask: Why is the United States' rate of firearm injury and death increasing across the board?

“The easy answer is ‘We have more guns.’ Yes, that's part of it, but it isn't the full story. We also have more cars, and yet our rate of car crash deaths isn't disproportionately higher than other nations.

“The real answer is that we have utterly failed to take on gun deaths as a health problem. We continue to think that we can ban all guns (we can’t) or stigmatize gun owners (that doesn’t work) or improve mental health care (important, but not the full solution) or arm everyone (as an ER doc, I will tell you what a bad idea this is). We cannot talk about gun deaths only when there are mass shootings, and forget about it every other day of the year when there are too many people dying because of guns.

“If we want to fix our problems with gun violence and injury — a uniquely American firearm injury epidemic — we must do the hard work of getting good data, creating partnerships (including, yes, with people who own guns), and funding the programs that can protect us all. Health is not built on policy alone. It also relies on community and data. And yet, we continue to underfund both research and interventions that can make a difference.

“We mourn the victims of these latest tragedies and offer condolences to their families. But we need to do more.” — **Megan Ranney, emergency physician and professor at Brown University**

An FBI investigations officer from the evidence response team takes photographs of the crime scene the day after a gunman opened fire at a King Sooper’s grocery store on Monday in Boulder, Colo. | Getty Images

“It’s not clear there are significantly more mass shootings in America per capita than other countries, as can be seen by this complicated [Washington Post fact check](#). Yet even if we do have more, we shouldn’t look at this as a gun problem.

“Until 1968, a person could purchase an AR-15 through the mail without any federally mandated background check. The Columbine killers created a ‘crime script’ that has had far too many emulators. Guns don’t ‘cause’ mass shooters. Is there realistically someone who has no intention of committing mayhem who then acquires an AR-15 and changes his mind? No. Guns don’t induce psychosis. Someone decides to commit mayhem and searches out the tools, whether that’s a gun, a bomb or a truck, and they’re very motivated. Some guns can be better at causing mayhem, such as semi-automatic weapons, but those are over half the guns in America.

“The Virginia Tech shooter showed that killers don’t need an ‘assault weapon’ to cause mass death. If there was a magic button that made every ‘assault weapon’ disappear — leaving behind at least 300 million other weapons — it wouldn’t change the number of mass shootings. The better question is not, ‘Why are there so many mass shootings in America?’, it’s ‘When it was so much easier to get guns, why didn’t this happen as much?’

“For those motivated to commit mayhem, going after guns in a country flush with them will do little except create criminals of innocent gun owners, most of whom will likely be African American. Yet too often — as with the Parkland shooter, the Aurora theater shooter, the Virginia Tech shooter and others — officials ignored clear warnings. Heeding clear warnings is a better strategy than going after guns.” — **Trevor Burrus, research fellow in the Cato Institute’s Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies**

“Because we allow mass shootings to happen. Smart gun policies will save lives in all settings — mass violence, suicide, intentional and unintentional shootings. We advocate background checks on all gun sales, extreme risk protection orders, safe storage education, disarming domestic abusers, funding for research on all gun-related issues, mandatory reporting of lost and stolen

guns, making lying on a federal background check form a state offense, improving Texas' child access prevention law and national action on assault weapons.” — **Gyl Switzer, executive director of Texas Gun Sense**

“I conducted a cross-national study of public mass shooters across 171 countries, and found it was not the countries with the most murders or suicides that had the most mass shooters. It was the countries with the most firearms per capita. The U.S. has more than 40 percent of the world's civilian firearms and more than 30 percent of the world's public mass shooters, and sophisticated statistical analyses show these two factors are directly related. However, this does not mean that we should simply blame America's gun owners for becoming mass shooters.

“Many public mass shooters were not lifelong gun owners, hunters or ‘sportsmen,’ and many decided to get a firearm only after they became interested in killing a large number of people. The problem is not that owning a firearm makes someone want to commit a mass shooting. The problem is that in the U.S., almost anyone who wants to commit a mass shooting can easily obtain a firearm, even after exhibiting multiple warning signs and ‘red flags.’ By comparison, it is much more difficult for at-risk individuals to access firearms in many other countries around the world.” — **Adam Lankford, a professor of criminology at the University of Alabama**

Welcome to POLITICO Nightly. “You have to start with the right bra.” More about Selena's legacy, fashion and otherwise, ahead of what would have been her 50th birthday in Texas Monthly. Reach out with news and tips at rroyasam@politico.com and mward@politico.com, or on Twitter at [@renurayasam](https://twitter.com/renurayasam) and [@myahward](https://twitter.com/myahward).

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FIRST IN NIGHTLY

MASKS OFF, PARTY ON — Gov. Ron DeSantis gave a warm welcome to millions of spring breakers descending on his state, touting earlier this month that “there are no lockdowns in Florida.” But the rule-averse Republican left local city leaders hamstrung in their efforts to control unruly crowds and the spread of the virus, Arek Sarkissian writes.

DeSantis abolished fines on people and businesses for violating local pandemic orders, launching his latest push to convince pandemic-weary tourists that Florida is safe. The governor had already rolled back restrictions on bars and restaurants — even as new coronavirus variants were predicted to drive up the rate of new Covid infections through spring break.

The DeSantis ban on fines came to the forefront over the weekend in Miami Beach, where a surge of spring break visitors filled the city well beyond its capacity. Officials in Miami Beach, which relies heavily on tourism dollars, were forced to impose an 8 p.m. curfew on the city's entertainment district in the middle of its most lucrative season of the year after police clashed with party-goers.

FROM THE HEALTH DESK

SAD ASTRA — A confounding dosing mistake in a key clinical trial. A blood clot scare (which health authorities have deemed a false alarm). And now a serious dispute about whether AstraZeneca flubbed the PR game — or gamed the data to get FDA authorization of its coronavirus vaccine. [Joanne Kenen](#) and [Sarah Owerhohle](#) email Nightly:

The AstraZeneca/University of Oxford shot, once deemed the frontrunner in the vaccine race, is now lagging behind rivals. Doubts about its safety or efficacy could set back the global effort to wipe out fear of coronavirus vaccines — which is what it will take to wipe out the virus itself.

“This is an unpleasant situation we are facing. That could create vaccine hesitancy,” said Albert Bourla, the CEO of Pfizer, maker of the first vaccine to get the U.S. regulatory go-ahead and a business rival of AstraZeneca. Bourla [made the remarks](#) at a Wall Street Journal Health Forum.

“We are in a global crisis made worse each time confidence in vax data is eroded. The @AstraZeneca vax in particular is central to our coming out the other side,” [tweeted](#) Peter Bach, a physician and health researcher at Memorial Sloan Kettering. He suggested it might be time for AstraZeneca chief Pascal Soriot to step down. AstraZeneca defended its decision to release data in a statement today, saying the older results were “consistent” with a new analysis — but that it will provide an update within two days.

The new controversy centers on whether AstraZeneca’s clinical trial data tells the whole story, or whether the company is cherry-picking good data. Sarah lays out the [messy details in](#) her story today. Any whiff of something amiss is exactly what is not needed to build the confidence required to get the United States — and the world — to herd immunity. In Europe, where the AZ shot is already in use, [“European citizens seem spooked.”](#) as the Economist put it, summing up recent survey results.

But a few experts we talked to pointed out that the damage might be restricted to AstraZeneca — not the whole vaccine enterprise. People are paying an awful lot of attention to the vaccine race, and can distinguish between Pfizer and Moderna and Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca, which are all now basically household names. (Don’t worry Novavax, your time will come.)

So it’s not a certainty that distrust of one vaccine spills into distrust for all. For the slice of the population that is firmly anti-vax — yes, this gives them more reason to dig in and defy. But for the people who are hesitant, but persuadable, the AZ doubts might get cordoned off, said Liz Hamel, who is tracking U.S. attitudes toward vaccination for the Kaiser Family Foundation.

People might just wait a bit longer, waiting for more information and possibly more freedom to pick and choose their vaccine as supply improves. Jarrett Lewis, who specializes in health at Public Opinion Strategies, said he’s learned from focus groups that people’s trust builds when family members or friends are safely vaccinated. And then they want what she (or he) had. And that may turn out to be one of several vaccines — but maybe not AstraZeneca. “It’s not the efficacy rate,” he said. “It’s word of mouth.”

AROUND THE NATION

ON THE GROUND IN ATLANTA — In the aftermath of last week’s mass shooting in Georgia that killed eight people — six of them women of Asian descent — activists, political leaders and the Asian American community are grieving and calling for justice. In the [latest POLITICO Dispatch](#), [Maya King](#) and [Catherine Kim](#) report from a rally and a prayer service held in Atlanta over the weekend.

WHAT'D I MISS?

— **Duckworth vows to oppose Biden nominees:** Long-simmering Democratic tensions over a lack of Asian American representation in Biden’s administration boiled over when Sen. Tammy Duckworth [vowed to block future Biden picks without a White House plan](#) to tap more nominees of Asian American descent.

— **DHS looking at tracking travel of domestic extremists:** The discussions are part of the Biden administration’s [strategy of treating domestic terror as a national security threat](#), and not just a law enforcement problem. They’re also part of broader conversations in government about how to use tools developed for the Global War on Terror to combat domestic extremism.

— **Senate Dem moderates push for minimum wage compromise:** Moderate Senate Democrats are [pushing their leaders for a more modest approach](#) to a minimum wage hike, arguing for a compromise that can attract broader support after the defeat of a \$15 hourly wage proposal.

— **Biden needs ‘clean break’ on antitrust after FTC’s Google failure, activists say:** Nearly 30 progressive groups urged Biden to [nominate aggressive antitrust enforcers for key posts](#) in the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department, saying he should “make a clean break from past leadership” of the tech-friendly Obama administration.

— **Judge detains alleged Capitol rioter who sported Hitler mustache to job at Navy facility:** A U.S. Army reservist charged with storming the Capitol on Jan. 6 who was [subsequently identified by numerous military colleagues as an overt white supremacist](#) has been ordered detained pending trial. Federal district court Judge Trevor McFadden said he wrestled with whether Timothy Hale-Cusanelli’s “odious” beliefs were enough to justify pretrial detention, given that he isn’t charged with committing violence at the Capitol.

ASK THE AUDIENCE

Nightly asks you: Have you gotten vaccinated? Or are you struggling to sign up on your state’s website? Are you still ineligible? [Tell us your vaccine story on our form](#), and we’ll include select responses in Friday’s edition.

NIGHTLY NUMBER

The number of Texas military posts the Department of Health and Human Services has [requested for use as temporary housing for unaccompanied minors](#) who arrive at the southern border, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said today, as the Biden administration deals with a migrant surge.

THE GLOBAL FIGHT

‘BE VERY CAREFUL’ — German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged the EU today “to be very careful” with vaccine export bans and stressed that EU leaders will “seek dialogue” with the U.K. over a vaccine dispute.

The cautious remarks come before a virtual meeting of EU leaders on Thursday, where they plan to discuss possibly cutting off vaccine exports to countries that refuse to share their own vaccines — a threat primarily aimed at the United Kingdom. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen first raised the prospect of such a ban last week as part of her effort to secure more vaccine doses from AstraZeneca, which has fallen far short of its promised deliveries to the EU.

The move has sparked anger in Britain and raised fears of a potential EU-U.K. trade war.

PARTING WORDS

WHAT COLORADO DID LAST TIME — A tragically familiar pattern: Senseless deaths, followed by expressions of sympathy and prayer, followed by demands from gun-control advocates that the government do something — followed by resignation, and weary explanations of why random gun violence is the sort of thing Americans just have to live with.

Yet the experience of Colorado itself, where Monday’s shooting took place, offers at least some suggestions that this time might be different, writes Seth Masket, professor of political science and director of the Center on American Politics at the University of Denver. The state was the site of a horrific mass murder nine years ago, when James Eagan Holmes opened fire in an Aurora movie theater, killing 12 and wounding 70. In a state that bore deep scars from the Columbine High School shooting of 1999, calls went out among political leaders in Colorado for something to be done.

Though not originally an enthusiastic backer of gun reform, Colorado’s then-Gov. John Hickenlooper came to endorse some gun control measures, including universal background checks and limited magazine sizes. Just after Hickenlooper expressed his support for these measures, Adam Lanza murdered 27 children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut. The combination of these two shooting sprees further galvanized Hickenlooper and Colorado’s other gun control supporters. The two measures passed through the Democratic-controlled statehouse on party-line votes, and Hickenlooper signed them into law on March 20, 2013.

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