

Mass shooting in Texas primary school

Yesterday an 18-year-old teenager, Salvador Ramos, armed with two AR-15 assault rifles purchased earlier this month, quite legally, a few days after his 18th birthday, killed at least 22 people, including 19 primary school children and at least two teachers (some reports said three adults were killed) at the Robb Elementary School in southern Texas.

The killings were only the latest in a long and growing list of mass killings in schools. It was the worst since the Sandy Hook Elementary School killings a decade ago. The killings prompted predictable calls to tighten gun laws and the equally predictable push back from those who are determined to maintain the present freedom for almost anyone to buy heavy assault weapons.

Ramos started his murderous killing spree in the town of Uvalde, not far from the border with Mexico, when he shot his grandmother who is now seriously ill in hospital. He then got into a pick-up truck and drove to the Robb Elementary School, crashing the vehicle in a ditch by the school. He was seen entering the school with one of the assault rifles and was challenged by police, and exchanged gunfire with them, but evaded the officers and got into the school.

Once in the school Ramos started shooting at children and adults at random. He then entered and barricaded himself into a class of third and fourth grade children (eight to ten year olds). It was here that he shot and killed most of the children and the two teachers who also died.

The police at the school were soon joined by other police and Sheriff's Department deputies. A Customs and Border Protection tactical unit also responded to provide backup. As Ramos shot at them police broke down the barricade he had thrown up against the door while also trying to break in through the windows of the classroom. An agent from the Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC), which has specialised agents dispersed throughout the United States, managed to shoot and kill Ramos, while himself being injured by a bullet in the leg.

The original death toll was announced as 14 children and one teacher, but more died in hospital as the day wore on. The death toll may well rise further, police warned.

Who was the gunman?

A picture of the murderer, Salvador Ramos, has begun to emerge. He was a bullied loner, picked on at school because of a lisp, a habit of wearing eyeliner, his clothes and because he came from a poor family. Those who knew Ramos or his relatives say he was a 'nice' but 'quiet' boy who grew increasingly violent as he became older, amid relentless bullying both in school and online.

Santos Valdez told the *Washington Post* that he used to be friends with Ramos and played online shooter games such as *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty* with him, until the pair stopped talking as Ramos's behaviour "deteriorated." Valdez recalled Ramos turning up on one occasion with cuts all over his face. At first he claimed that he was scratched by a cat, later admitting that he had cut himself with a knife.

Stephen Garcia, who considered himself Ramos's best friend in secondary school, said he was "bullied by a lot of people" including for over a photo of himself wearing eyeliner which led to 'gay' taunts. Ramos later dropped out of school and did not intend to take part in graduation this summer. Instead, he got a job at a local Wendy's hamburger bar. A colleague there described Ramos as having an aggressive streak and sometimes menaced co-workers. He was particularly rude and aggressive towards girls, to whom he would send inappropriate sexual texts. Ramos was also active on social media, posting pictures of his guns and saying he would commit an atrocity. In one post just before his attack on the Robb school he said he was going to "shoot up an elementary school". Both his parents have criminal records.

This incident comes at a time of growing gun violence in America. Active shooter incidents have almost doubled in the last five years, from 31 in 2017 to 61 in 2021, according to the FBI. The number of Americans who own guns has been declining for years, but the number of guns that those who do own have has increased significantly. Gun ownership has got caught up with the culture wars, encouraged by Donald Trump with Republicans easing gun ownership laws at the same time gun crime has increased.