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COPS V. ASSAULT WEAPONS: A HOPELESS SITUATION

Even the speediest, most expert response may not suffice



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On May 26, clicking on the “gunshop” link at [Oasis Outback](#) produced a static, full-screen display of “[Our Hearts Are With the Families of Uvalde](#)” in large block letters. To get to the intended destination page we had to manually type in its [address](#). (Doing that worked. It also brought up a proud announcement that the store “Is Now a Class 3,” meaning it sells machineguns and silencers.)

Oasis’ redirection was certainly understandable. As the whole world knows, it’s the sporting goods store where eighteen-year old [Salvador Ramos legally purchased](#) the Daniel Defense, AR-15 style, .223 caliber semi-automatic rifle he used to murder nineteen students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School, which sits only three miles away. Ramos bought the gun on May 17. He went back the next day to get 375 rounds of ammunition, then returned two days later to buy a second assault rifle (he left it behind in his truck during the massacre.) And on May 24 it was time for a massacre!



Ramos was proud of his lethal new toys. He [posted photos](#) of the weapons and of an ammunition magazine on his Instagram account. He also [asked another user](#), whom he apparently picked at random, to repost the pictures on her account. But she refused. “What your

guns gotta do with me?” she demanded. He messaged her again early the morning of the attack. “I’m about to...I got a lil secret I wanna tell u.” He promised to reveal it before 11:00 am. And he did, but not to her. Instead, [he spilled the beans](#) to a fifteen year-old [FaceTime](#) chum in Germany. Days earlier he bragged to her about acquiring bullets that “would expand when they struck somebody.” This time his first message was about a dispute with his grandmother. A few minutes later he texted “I just shot my grandma in her head.” And seconds after that, “Ima go shoot up a(n) elementary school rn (right now).”

Ramos was by most accounts a troubled soul. A former classmate – Ramos had sent him pictures of his newly-bought guns – said that their gaming sessions [were frequently interrupted](#) by calls from Ramos’ mother, who complained that he was “doing nothing with his life.” Ramos would reply with expletives. He frequently wound up at his grandmother’s house, which is where he was living when he bought the guns and embarked on his attack.

Ramos had recently dropped out of high school. He took a job at a fast-food joint but soon walked out on that as well. A former supervisor called him a loner. “You know how my guys talk to each other and are friendly? He wasn’t like that.” His German friend thought him friendless and isolated. Their exchanges occasionally proved disturbing. Such as when Ramos bragged that he “threw dead cats at people’s houses.”

Another virtual acquaintance said that Ramos once streamed an image of himself holding a gun. There was blood on the ground, which Ramos attributed to a nosebleed.

Ramos’ world seemed wholly virtual. Until it wasn’t. About 11:30 am on May 24, 2002, after shooting his grandmother – she was struck in the face and critically wounded – he put both rifles and a bag of ammunition in a pickup truck and drove to Robb Elementary School. According to Texas DPS Chief Steven McCraw, [Ramos crashed his vehicle into a ditch](#) and exited with the Daniel Defense rifle and his ammo. After firing at two persons who were leaving a nearby funeral home he crouched behind a car and fired at a school building. A district police officer drove by but apparently didn’t see him. Ramos climbed a fence and entered the school through an open back door. As he reached classrooms 111 and 112 – they’re interconnected – he unleashed a barrage of “more than 100 rounds,” apparently firing through the walls. That, we assume, is how his victims met their horrendous fates.



Three local police officers entered the school “two minutes” behind Ramos. Four colleagues soon joined them. Ramos fired at them from the classrooms. Bullets pierced a wall and inflicted “grazing wounds” on two of his pursuers. Before long, nineteen officers [had staked out the hallway](#). And that’s where the school district police chief told them to wait.

Police evacuated all the students they could. But the surviving occupants of rooms 111 and 112 remained under Ramos’ control. Within minutes, several surreptitiously dialed 9-1-1 and in hushed tones reported that many classmates had been shot dead. They begged for police to come in. [Eventually, a tactical team was assembled](#). Using a ballistic shield for cover, an “elite Border Patrol tactical unit” and several local officers confronted Ramos. Gunfire broke out. Ramos was killed. Unfortunately, the shield didn’t offer perfect protection and an agent “was shot in the foot and grazed in the head.”

That entry happened about 12:50 pm. According to the ABC News timeline, that took place *one hour and fifteen minutes after* the first set of officers followed Ramos onto the campus.

This delay has occasioned a lot of criticism. According to Texas DPS Director Steven C. McCraw, [“It was the wrong decision, period.”](#) His sentiments were echoed by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who declared himself “absolutely livid.” Even if Ramos had stopped shooting at students, prompt medical attention could have allowed more of the injured to survive. Alas, it’s not the first time that police have been accused of failing to



speedily intervene during a school massacre. Only four years ago, in February, 2018, a 19-year old former student used an AR-15 style rifle to kill seventeen persons and wound an equal number at [Marjorie Stoneman High School](#) in Parkland, Florida. Nikolas Cruz then blended in and simply walked away. Deputies were severely criticized for not promptly going in, and the Sheriff was ordered removed.

Similar concerns were voiced after the [1999 Columbine massacre](#), when two Colorado high school seniors gunned down twelve students and a teacher and wounded twenty-three others. While all that happened within twelve minutes of the initial 9-1-1 call, SWAT didn't go in for forty-five minutes. By then, both shooters had taken their own lives. In fact, Columbine is widely credited for leading to the development of the "[Immediate Action/Rapid Deployment Approach](#)." This technique, which enables ordinary officers to quickly assemble into teams and confront active shooters in a variety of settings, [has been adopted by police agencies throughout the U.S.](#)



Rapid deployment has reportedly succeeded on many occasions. But we recently discussed an “immediate action” response in Los Angeles that turned out poorly (“[Who’s in Charge?](#)”). In December 2021 a 24-year old man on felony probation burst into a large clothing store and began assaulting customers and staff. LAPD dispatchers (incorrectly) informed officers that the suspect had fired shots. Responding officers quickly gathered, promptly assembled into a column formation, and got to work (see bodycam image). And when they neared the suspect, the officer on point opened fire with an assault rifle, fatally wounding a man whom he assumed was armed (he wasn't.) Tragically, a police bullet also pierced an interior wall, killing a 14-year old girl who had taken refuge with her mother in a dressing room.

Humans are unpredictable. Getting them to voluntarily comply can be difficult. Throw in the extreme lethality of firearms available to the general public and the challenge becomes enormous. As we've mentioned in past posts (see, for example, “[An American Tragedy](#)”) assault rifle projectiles sail through walls and ordinary ballistic garments as though these obstacles don't exist. Should they strike flesh, the bullets indeed (as Ramos bragged) “expand,” creating huge cavities that pulverize blood vessels and destroy organs. It's why the team that ultimately went in at Robb Elementary took that special shield.

We suspect that Ramos' use of an assault rifle prompted the school police chief to adopt that "[barricaded subject](#)" approach. After all, Ramos' bullets had already wounded two officers. To be sure, slowing things down so that responders can be adequately briefed and equipped (again, that shield) makes sense. It's not only officer safety. After all, unless it's exquisitely well-placed, police gunfire can easily endanger innocents. Again, think back to that L.A. clothing store.

But *an hour*? Once they realize they're surrounded, "ordinary" criminals might simply give up. But individuals on a rampage – meaning school shooters and wackos who burst into clothing stores – are coming from a decidedly different mental place. In such cases, extending an ample opportunity to surrender can invite even more mayhem. On the other hand, hurried policing can, even if expertly delivered, prove tragically imprecise. Just ask LAPD.

No matter how well policing is done, it can't prevent mass shootings. Neither can it always mitigate the outcomes. So what about doing something about the killers' tools? We've repeatedly called for outright bans on assault rifles, which are essentially instruments of war (see, for example, "[Ban the Damned Things!](#)"). But even supposedly gun-unfriendly places like California have only managed to institute "pretend bans" that ignore what *really* counts: the weapons' fearsome ballistics (click [here](#) and [here](#) for our articles on point in the *Washington Post*.)

What about background checks and "[Red Flag](#)" orders? Certainly, screening buyers can help. But reliable ways that consistently and reliably prohibit questionable characters from buying guns are simply out of reach. Ramos had his foibles, but they were nowhere near what a judge would require to bar him from buying guns. And in an awful coincidence, his first gun purchase came only three days after another murderous eighteen-year old – [Payton Gendron](#) – gunned down ten persons at the *Tops* market in Buffalo, New York. That mass murder, which also drew the world's attention, was also done with an AR-15 style assault rifle that its mis-user legally bought. Gendron even had a seemingly substantial prior mental-health demerit. But it was never acted on, so he remained qualified to buy guns. And both sellers – Oasis Outback, Uvalde, TX; Vintage Firearms, Endicott, NY – reported that the transactions seemed perfectly routine.

Until, of course, they weren't.