

OPINION

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Trump's shooting and the lack of red flag laws



AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar

Donald Trump is helped off the stage after being shot at a campaign rally in Butler, Pa. on July 13.(AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



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Every day last year, 118 people died from gun-related violence in our country. That is almost five people an hour. More than half of those deaths were not violent crimes; they were suicides — and they were entirely preventable.

Two of America's most pressing, solvable problems — gun violence and suicide — are often connected. The number of suicides-by-gun has increased to its [highest level ever](#) in recent years as depression and suicidal ideation have spiked dramatically, especially among young people.

It seems likely that the most high-profile recent example of this is the 20-year-old who was killed by the Secret Service while attempting to assassinate former President Donald Trump. Those who choose to take their own life — or the lives of others — with a gun act quickly, sometimes within five minutes. Suicide ideation and behavior is a global stress signal that things are not OK.

We may never know the shooter's intentions. Regardless, this country has to get serious about keeping firearms out of reach for individuals suffering from mental health crises. If we don't, it will continue costing us thousands of lives a year.

There is a simple solution: combine firearm safety and suicide prevention efforts. We can start doing this right now on the state and local level through new policy, laws, and investments.

The Columbia Protocol, also known as the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS), is a system used in every state in the country and around the world to screen for suicide risk through a series of six simple questions that anyone can ask. The answers determine if the respondent is a risk to themselves or others.



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According to Stand With Parkland, this is one of the things to interrupt the pathway to violence. [80% of mass shooters](#) are suicidal. Sometimes those folks acquire a gun with the intention of harming others, looking to share their pain or hoping they themselves will be killed in a shoot-out. C-SSRS would help detect those who are suicidal earlier – and prevent harm.

Major health care systems in two states that began using this method in 2019 reported a 50% reduction in suicide. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security found the protocol so useful that they [developed a customized app](#) allowing employees to access the Columbia Protocol at all times. Yet very few states and local governments actually pair this protocol with gun prevention initiatives.

Imagine if we applied this to the risk protection orders (known as red flag laws) that are already used in states to ensure dangerous people do not have access to guns. About a third of the time, the shooter exhibits warning signs beforehand. Gun violence would drop significantly. Not only would suicides decrease, but deaths and injuries related to suicides – when suicidal people do harm to others as well – would also plummet.

If, for instance, Florida had had such a program in place in 2017, when the Parkland shooter – who had [documented](#) signs of suicidal behavior – easily bought a gun, he may have been stopped. People concerned about his behavior and mental health could've used the Columbia Protocol and got him the mental health care he clearly needed.

In Trump's shooter's case, his employer or any officials at his schools who noted concerning behavior could have voiced their concerns. And that action could have then led to his parents' removing the AR-15 he used to shoot the president from their home or not purchasing it years earlier. In fact, it was a [Secret Service report of 67 averted mass shootings](#) that found threat assessments and tools like the Columbia Protocol are the best practice for preventing targeted violence.

Suicide is often visible and preventable. Highly successful methods of risk detection – like the [Columbia Protocol](#) – can be administered by anyone regardless of medical knowledge or training. For example, when police in Connecticut are doing a search, they are able to ask a person a series of questions to determine imminent risk to know if a weapon should be taken away. With this information at the fingertips of more people, suicide risk can more easily identified and mitigated.

It's no coincidence eight states with the lowest suicide rates have red flag laws in place. Combining the tool with proper laws would allow loved ones and law enforcement to act on their instincts in a safe and responsible way.

Sometimes all a person has to do is ask a question. It might just save a life. It could have saved a former president from being shot.

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