

## **Broken Systems: The Urgency of Gun Reform and Mental Health in Schools**

**By Monica Mardones**

On September 4, 2024, [Apalachee High School](#) in Georgia became another site of a devastating school shooting. Four students were killed, and nine others left injured. A 14-year-old student carried out the attack using an AR-15 rifle that had been legally purchased by a family member. This incident is part of an ongoing epidemic in the U.S., where [2024 has already seen more than 20 shootings in K-12 schools across the country](#).

The Apalachee High shooting follows a troubling and all too familiar pattern. The shooter, Colt Gray, demonstrated [red flags](#) in terms of psychological distress in the weeks leading up to the event, with his parents expressing concerns. Unfortunately, these warnings were not appropriately or effectively addressed. The failure to intervene essentially mirrors past school shootings, such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and Uvalde, where warning signs were overlooked and firearms were too easily accessible.

This urges us to ask: How many more school shootings will it take before we take decisive action? Despite repeated instances of mass casualties and violence, meaningful change remains difficult to make. After each tragedy, we grieve and express outrage, but we fail to implement comprehensive reforms. How many more lives will be lost before action is finally taken?

Gun control is rather significant, but it is only part of the solution. The Apalachee shooting highlights deeper issues related to mental health and school safety. According to the National Institute of Justice, in 2020, nearly all individuals who carried out a K-12 mass shooting ([92%100%](#)) of school shooters were found to be suicidal before or during the shooting. Unfortunately, schools and mental health systems lack adequate resources to provide early intervention.

In Colt's case, his family expressed concerns about his behavior, but the support needed was not available. This is a consistent problem in many schools across the country. To top it off, school counselors often face overwhelming caseloads, with [student-to-counselor ratios far exceeding recommended levels](#). Schools require more resources to support students academically, emotionally, and mentally. Avoiding the mental health crisis in schools is no longer an option.

Despite calls for reform, efforts to pass meaningful gun control legislation have faced stiff resistance. After the [Parkland](#) shooting in 2018, there was a national outcry for stricter gun laws, but momentum has waned. Even though public support for measures like universal background checks remains high, Congress has failed to pass significant reforms. If universal background checks, red flag laws, and [assault weapon bans](#) were in place, it is hard to imagine how a teen like Colt Gray could have obtained such a weapon. But, powerful lobbying groups like the [NRA](#) continue to employ disproportionate influence over lawmakers, withholding progress.

The rights of gun owners cannot continue to outweigh the safety of children. Data from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) states that firearms are now the leading cause of death for children and teenagers in the U.S., passing up car accidents and cancer. This is a significant public health crisis and addressing it should be a top priority.

In the wake of the Apalachee shooting, we have both an opportunity and an obligation to enact change. Comprehensive gun reform, including universal background checks, mandatory waiting periods, and assault weapon bans, is critical. At the same time, investment in mental health services within schools is essential to help students in need before they reach a breaking point. The time for "thoughts and prayers" has long passed, as our children deserve better.