

## "COVID-19 poses an unforeseen concern: more mass shootings."

### Authors:

Shreya Nallapati, Founder, Neveragaintech

Monte-Angel Richardson, MSW - Social Worker and Violence Researcher

### Acknowledgments:

Claudia Perlich, Adjunct Professor, NYU Stern

Donalyn White, Director of Research and Public Policy, Strategy with Rox

### About:

*Neveragaintech (NAT) is a cohort of young data scientists, researchers, and business executives developing technological innovations to address the mass shooting epidemic in the United States.*

### Summary

Exorbitant rises in gun purchases, combined with growing economic uncertainty and extremist rhetoric, could result in a surge of mass shootings in the ensuing months after quarantine periods. 3.7 million background checks were conducted in March 2020, [the most the FBI has seen in a single month](#). Additionally, hate based rhetoric against Asian Americans [increased 900% on Twitter](#) beginning in February and over [26 million Americans have filed for unemployment](#). The amalgam of these three factors, amongst other conditions, shows that these succeeding months after quarantine are potentially more susceptible to mass shooting activity.

According to The Violence Project, a study funded by the Department of Justice, mass shooters have three commonalities, the most pertinent factors 1) [being access to firearms](#), 2) [an identifiable personal crisis](#) or specific grievance in the weeks or months leading up to the mass shooting, and 3) a clearly identified culprit to inflict violence upon. The study found that the number of shooters motivated by religious, racial, or misogynistic hatred has steadily increased in the past five years. The American Psychological Association highlighted the significance of hate, specifically hate based rhetoric, in mass violence scenarios by stating that [“social contagion — the spread of thoughts, emotions and behaviors from person to person and among larger groups — is real”](#) and that the “combination of ease of access to assault weapons and hateful rhetoric is toxic.”

**The COVID-19 epidemic introduces a distinguishable and alarming convergence of these aforementioned factors.** There has been a sharp uptake in the number of firearm purchases in the United States beginning in March 2020. The “personal crisis or specific

grievance” in this situation is the economic instability, specifically in the form of unemployment and subsequent isolation, as a consequence of the epidemic. As we will present later in the document, a study conducted by Northwestern University found that [multiple indicators of economic distress significantly correlate with increases in the rate of gun violence](#), specifically in school shooting environments. Lastly, hate based rhetoric has been directed at a new target: Asian and Chinese populations both within and outside the United States.

COVID-19 has fundamentally altered the American landscape and will continue to do so for months to come. As [gun violence continues to take its toll on communities across the country](#), we at NAT are considering the immediate and long-term impacts that COVID-19 may have on the future of mass shootings in the US.

### **Increase in Firearms Sales**

Most mass shooting perpetrators in the United States have obtained firearms legally. A report conducted by the [Washington Post in 2018 found that at least 77% of the total firearms used in mass shootings were obtained legally](#). Moreover, of the 114 mass shootings that have occurred since 1982, [74% of shooters obtained their guns legally](#). Additionally, background checks vary state to state, and some firearm purchases might not be subject to the federal background check system. 29 states allow unlicensed private sellers to sell [firearms without conducting background checks](#). Therefore, the number of firearm sales not subject to background checks from NICS might be greater than what the FBI reports.

Gun sales are known to increase following events that threaten the stability of American life. Spikes in firearm sales were identified in the 2005 aftermath of [Hurricane Katrina](#) and following [September 11, 2001](#). One explanation for these surges is the sense of comfort guns provide during tumultuous times. It was [NRA spokesman Amy Hunter](#) who once said, “Firearm sales go up in times of uncertainty because Americans know their safety is ultimately in their own hands.” During times when first responders are forced to take selective action, resources for survival are inequitably distributed. Such an environment engenders a sense of fear and uncertainty.

The COVID-19 quarantine has resulted in an unforeseen increase in firearm sales. In March, [3.7 million background checks were conducted](#) - the most since the NICS’ inception in 1998. Of those background checks, [2.5 million were conducted for the sale of firearms](#). States [including Arizona and Texas](#) reported the most drastic increases, ranging from 90-120% up from February.

What must also be considered is the dire lack of availability and vigilance of background checks in a system that [has failed to adhere to proper conduct policies in the past](#).

### **Individual Economic Stress**

Gun violence in the form of mass shootings and conditions related to economic insecurity have historically had high correlation. In 2019, a nationwide study examined the impact of economic instability on mass shootings. 3,144 counties were analyzed using regression analysis from 1990 to 2015. It was found that counties with growing levels of income inequality [were more likely to experience mass shootings](#).

One reason is that income inequality fosters an environment of anger and resentment that may ultimately lead to violence. [Dr. Robert Merton](#), an early forerunner in the study of economic inequality and anger, found that communities with large disparities in income prevailed with a sense of anger and hostility, referred to as goal blockage. Goal blockage originates from being unable to achieve economic and personal aspirations.

Economic instability due to the global pandemic is intensifying. Over [26 million](#) Americans have filed for unemployment in the months of March and April 2020. Bankruptcy rates are predicted to reach unprecedented highs as well. Economists from 3 Federal Reserve banks portend that coronavirus related bankruptcies could increase by 200,000 to [reach an overall rate of almost 1 million in the next year](#). This means that job displacement for most Americans over the next several months will escalate exponentially. For small business owners especially, the psychological impact of bankruptcy is much more immense than job loss for others. It can result in immense frustration, depression, anxiety, and trauma that is hard to treat without proper psychiatric resources.

Hopelessness and anger over the economy is intensifying as demonstrated in [protests against stay-at-home restrictions](#) spreading across the US. Areas like Washington, Arizona, and Colorado have seen emotionally charged demonstrations and rallies against lockdown restrictions. A few protesters in Lansing, Michigan were seen [holding Confederate flags and posters with Nazi phrases and symbolism](#).

### **Increase in hatred towards Asian and Asian American Communities:**

Twitter, a mainstream media type serving as a general window into popular sentiment, recently saw a 900% growth in traffic to hate speech [directed towards Chinese Americans and nationals](#) beginning on February 2nd. When referring to such rhetoric however, it is imperative to acknowledge the role that fringe outlets like 8kun (formerly known as 8chan) and 4chan play in perpetuating hate based rhetoric. In public media, these fringe communities are largely viewed as a minimal threat, however it must be noted that three of 2019's biggest mass shootings [began with the perpetuation of extremist ideologies revealed through manifestos](#). 8kun specifically became notorious last year as a [means to spread the manifestos of several perpetrators of mass shootings](#), and despite its temporary disbandment, vitriolic language remains as pervasive as ever in its threads. Now, Asian American communities are emerging as a potential new target.

*NAT's* data science team actively monitors forums where fringe communities populate, most significantly 8kun and 4chan. In an analysis of over 20,000 posts under the Coronavirus General (CVG) board in 8kun, the team found that derogatory terms towards Asians were very prevalent in responses. Posts using phrases like “gook” and “chink” occupied around 11% of the average text corpus we analyzed (consisting of about 800 posts). References to Chinese peoples as “bugs” or “insects” occupied about 7.9% of the same text corpus.

Whereas 4chan threads [focused on conspiracy theories about the originations of the virus](#), models of 8kun posts revealed more extremist rhetoric towards Asian American communities. A majority of the posts blamed Chinese communities and the Chinese government for their incompetence and resorted to racial stereotypes when conversing about the origins of the virus. The most extreme posts resorted to calling the virus a “rightful ethnic cleansing” of these populations. Several other users referred to the deaths in Wuhan as “rightfully deserved” and expressed desires to see “100 of millions die”(in reference to Chinese populations).

The first tangible threat of violence came from an Instagram post at the beginning of April. The post advocated for [consolidating guns and conducting a shooting in Chinatown](#).

### **Opportunities for Intervention**

While in quarantine, it is essential that everyone contribute to defusing dangerous rhetoric online. [Bystander intervention](#) involves recognizing a potentially harmful situation or interaction and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence

the outcome. In online spaces, this means addressing hateful comments using the four D's of bystander intervention: Distract, Delegate, Direct, and Delay.

Distraction is a subtle way to intervene. Using this method, the bystander distracts either the perpetrator or the target with conversation unrelated to the harassment to derail and deescalate the situation. Online, this may take the form of changing the subject of a thread or sharing an unrelated story.

Using delegate, the bystander brings in a third party to help, preferably someone with more perceived authority. Online, this may mean reporting a post or comment to a moderator or using the site's reporting system.

It is also possible to respond directly to the aggressor and intervene if necessary. Using this method, it is important that the bystander be confident, assertive, and calm. Online, this may take the form of speaking with the abuser through direct message or another one-on-one environment, but only if the bystander feels confident in doing so.

If it isn't possible to intervene at the moment, a bystander can delay. This means checking in with the person being harassed afterwards to see if anything can be done to support them. Doing so illustrates that they are not alone.

If we are going to curb the threat of more mass shootings, we also need policymakers to pay attention. State officials need to be aware of these potential risks and identify strategies to protect against a potential surge in mass violence. As our society begins to articulate the consequences of actions taken during quarantine, policies that increase general social welfare and bolster protections for vulnerable communities will be invaluable.

Of additional concern is protecting areas where large groups of people will congregate following quarantine. Specifically, policymakers must be ready to offer protections to places where Asian Americans congregate, such as culturally specific neighborhoods and religious institutions. While determining how best to safeguard these locations, lawmakers must consider that [over-policing does not always equate to safety for marginalized communities](#).

The United States will emerge from quarantine into an unprecedented new normal. Following the mandated quarantine to halt the spread of coronavirus, millions of Americans will rejoin society unemployed and uncertain about the future for themselves and their country. Mass shootings have steadily increased over the last twenty years, and

it's unlikely to change after quarantine. People will continue to gather, and we will continue to face this nation-wide epidemic. As many states prepare to exit quarantine, we must pay attention and be ready. If we are going to stop mass shootings, it's going to take all of us.

#### NAT Contact information

Email/phone number:

Social media links: Instagram: [neveragaintech](#) Twitter: [NeverAgainT](#)

Website: [neveragaintech.org](#).

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