

Thoughts and Prayers: The Role of Religion in Responses to School Shootings in the United States

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Background

Since the 1999 Columbine massacre, school shootings have continued to increase, taking hundreds of lives and impacting millions. In the 25-year span between 1997 and 2022, there were over 1400 school shootings, with the 2021-22 school year reporting the highest number at 328 (Rapa et al., 2024). In fact, the U.S. has had 57 times as many school shootings as all other major industrialized nations combined, suggesting this problem is uniquely American and needs to be addressed as a public health concern (Rapa et al., 2024). Exposure to school shootings impacts hundreds of thousands of students every year with negative impacts on mental health (Panchal & Zitter, 2025). The phrase “thoughts and prayers” in the context of a school shooting is traced back to the 1999 Columbine school shooting, although theories and origins have never been fully confirmed. The phrase has been criticized for being a form of passive engagement instead of inspiring action. However, that criticism has also been scrutinized for disregarding the power of prayer. “Thoughts and prayers” therefore call into question a wider phenomenon: the role of religion in responses (as opposed to causes or prevention) of school shootings, including how religion might be evoked or mobilized in the aftermath of these events.

Methods

The research was conducted using a combination of primary and secondary sources, including databases of gun violence and school shooting statistics, religious journals, published interviews, public statements, and op-eds. This research also includes two case studies on Parkland and Sandy Hook shootings, I used testimonials from survivors and articles written by family members.

Columbine High School Massacre: April 20th , 1999

- Location: Littleton, Colorado
- Number of Deaths: 14 (12 students, one adult teacher, one adult survivor in 2025)

Sandy Hook Elementary School Massacre: December 14th, 2012

- Location: Newtown, Connecticut
- Number of Deaths: 26 (20 students, 6 adult teachers)

Findings

- For *both* case studies, religion was mentioned by politicians, parents, survivors, and others affected including this phrase. Religion was also present in the mourning such as through the narratives about victims from both shootings and memorial constructions (Fast, 2001; Scott, 2017; Cooper, 2020; Rogers & Seaver, 2025).
- “Thoughts and Prayers” has a direct connection to intercessory prayer, which is praying to God on behalf of another (Thunstrom & Noy, 2022).
- People who positively value receiving an intercessory prayer from a stranger do so because they find emotional support and believe it will be answered by God. However, the value depends on the intensity of the hardship being experienced, meaning the benefit of prayers is dependent on context (Thunstrom & Noy, 2022).
- Christian nationalism is connected to opposition to gun reform, however, religious organizations overall support (to varying degrees) gun reform especially following gun violence incidents including school shootings (Siddiqi & Fleisher, 2021).
- Belief in supernatural evil like Satan is connected to attitudes towards gun policies with how people justify their gun ownership, identifying with a “religious duty” (Vegter, 2020).
- Lack of religion in schools has also been blamed for the rise in school shootings, as part of societal/cultural factors (Cherkis, 2017; Graham et al., 2022).
- Pargament’s Theory states religious coping methods are ways of dealing with negative life events that are related to the sacred. Positive religious coping includes finding community, seeking forgiveness, and connecting with others. Negative religious coping includes higher levels of guilt, shame, and hopelessness. Adverse effects can be mitigated. Research in this theory has found that people with stronger religious backgrounds are not only more likely to use religious coping methods but also more likely to benefit from this use (Pargament et al., 1998; Canda, 2005; Xu, 2015).
- Strength of faith or a strong religious background can provide a “buffer” for certain negative psychological impacts of being involved in a mass shooting but varies by person (Gowen, 2019; Galiatsatos et al., 2020).

Discussion

Regarding the “thoughts and prayers” discussion, there is tension between calling for action and religious support. Connecting the divisiveness of these arguments to intercessory prayer and religious activities overall helps paint a better picture of how religion is continuously present in the aftermath of school shootings. Using Pargament’s Theory and psychological research, we can better understand how religiosity can benefit and/or harm people affected by school shootings. The limitations of this research mainly revolve around most available evidence being focused on mass shootings in general, which includes but doesn’t specify school shootings. The mental health implications of school shootings are not readily or easily quantifiable. This also focuses on religiosity and faith without making distinctions among the religions involved.

Results

It’s been 26 years since Columbine, and unfortunately, the problem of school shootings has only continued to grow in death toll and impact. This research finds religion has complex psychological and sociological effects on people after the traumatic event of a school shooting. It can help individuals psychologically, by playing a role in the grieving and healing process after a traumatic event. It can also play a role in community formations. However, the evocation of religion through phrases like “thoughts and prayers” are more connected to arguments about inaction as opposed to benefitting the public. Widely, religious beliefs are connected to people’s beliefs and attitudes towards gun ownership and reform policies, both in support and opposition. Overall, understanding the social implications of religiosity can help influence future policies and courses of action including further research to address this issue.

References:

