

How Walmart Helped Make Newtown Shooter's AR-15 the Most Popular Assault Weapon in America

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When Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School on Friday, December 14, inexplicably bent on ending as many lives as possible, he was carrying a Bushmaster AR-15 assault rifle and several high-capacity magazines. Sadly, this isn't the first time the country has had to deal with the aftermath of a horrific shooting spree, nor is it the first time we've encountered an AR-15 in this context: only days earlier, it was the weapon of choice for a shooting at an Oregon mall that killed two people. Five months earlier, it was used by James Holmes in an attack that wounded fifty-eight people and killed twelve in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater. And several years before that, a man and his teenage accomplice used a Bushmaster AR-15 to terrorize the Washington, DC, area with a series of random shootings.

Although it is not yet clear where the Bushmaster AR-15 used by Lanza (and registered to his mother) was purchased, the model is familiar to many Walmart shoppers. It's on sale at about 1,700 Walmart stores nationwide, though the retail chain pulled the weapon from its website early this afternoon. While last week's deadly rampage in Connecticut has finally and unmistakably highlighted the madness of making these weapons so readily available, it's a concern many people with a Walmart in their community have been trying to address for much longer.

Earlier this year, the Rev. Greg Brown had a troubling conversation with two members of his youth group from the northwest side of South Bend, Indiana. "They were honor roll students and little young folks that love the Lord," Brown recounted. "One of the kids came up to me and said, 'Rev, you ain't gonna believe what happened the other day at Walmart.'" The kids went on to describe how, on a recent visit to the big-box store, a man asked them to fill up a gym bag with ammunition and sneak it out of the store for him. □They declined.

Walmart's ammunition sales have troubled Brown since at least 2009, when two teenagers shoplifted bullets from the local Walmart, shot at an employee who tried to stop them in the parking lot, and then embarked on a citywide robbery spree in which one man was seriously injured. When Brown headed down to the store to see how easy it would be to steal ammunition, he was shocked. Not only were there bullets arrayed on the unlocked shelves; there were rows of guns as well, including assault rifles.

South Bend has the most violent crime per capita in Indiana and well more than double the national median. Brown was outraged that Walmart was even selling these weapons, let alone that they were unlocked and under the supervision of hourly employees without specific training in firearm handling and sales. (Brown says a former Marine handles the gun sales at a nearby Dick's Sporting Goods.) "It's totally wrong, and it's totally unacceptable," he said. "You look back there and see a dad holding a gun, his son pulling on his pocket. And the son knows the gun is going home. The son's going to know where the gun is."

South Bend isn't the only place where Walmart is stocking guns, including tactical or combat-style weapons and gun-related paraphernalia. The big-box chain at one point sold guns in only about a third of its stores, mainly in remote rural areas where hunting is popular. But in 2011, without much fanfare, Walmart expanded gun sales to half of its 3,982 stores nationwide, including those in more urban areas like Albuquerque and Spokane.

The expansion of gun sales at Walmart came after a five-year slowdown. In 2006, the chain announced that it was rolling gun sales back, citing declining profit margins on the relatively expensive weapons, which even at Walmart can retail for hundreds of dollars. But in 2011, company executives were looking at eight straight quarters of declining sales at stores open for a year or more—the worst slump in Walmart's history.

They must also have noticed that Barack Obama's inauguration had sparked a rally in gun sales, which have steadily increased every year since 2008. The government isn't allowed to track firearm sales, but the FBI does release figures on how many retailers ask it to run background checks—a relatively reliable indicator of total gun sales, although likely a lowball estimate, since a person can buy multiple guns on a single background check, and many gun shows aren't required to perform such checks. In 2007, retailers asked the FBI for just over 11 million background checks; by the end of 2009, 14 million checks were requested—a 27 per-cent increase.

In April 2011, Walmart began stocking guns in more and more stores, expanding the sales to 1,750 outlets nationwide. By the end of that year, the FBI received 16.4 million background check requests; the number is 16.8 million this year. Overall Walmart sales figures are back on track after the 2011 slump, and executive vice president Duncan Mac Naughton told shareholders at a meeting in October 2012 that gun sales in particular are a staple of the chain's strategy to continue boosting its numbers. He said that over the past twenty-six months, gun sales at Walmart stores open for a year or more were up an astonishing 76 percent, while ammunition sales were up 30 percent. Walmart is now the biggest seller of firearms and ammunition in America.

"This gun thing, it's really just a nightmare," says Bertha Lewis, president of the Black Institute, which has been organizing Walmart workers this year to protest wages and working conditions. Given its aggressive gun sales, Walmart's logo "shouldn't be a smiley face; it should be an automatic weapon," she adds.

Nearly 400 guns are available in Walmart's catalog. And even if your local store doesn't sell a particular model, you can special-order it (assuming you pay half the cost ahead of time). With the exception of its stores in Alaska, Walmart doesn't sell handguns, though it does sell ammunition for them, along with a wide variety of semiautomatic long-barrel weapons. For example, at half the Walmarts in America, you can buy a semiautomatic Colt M4 OPS .22 rifle; it carries a thirty-round magazine, which you can also purchase in the store. Or perhaps a Sig Sauer M400 semiautomatic assault rifle, advertised on Walmart's website as "designed for use in law enforcement, military operations...as well as competitive shooting," which is just one of several AR-15 assault rifles for sale.

In keeping with the store's pitch as a one-stop destination for shoppers, with everything from gas to groceries, gun enthusiasts can also obtain a wide range of gun accessories—including the 360 types of ammunition listed on Walmart's website. You can buy a 555-pack of Winchester hollow-point bullets, which the website advertises as "great for plinking and varmints," but which would cause extensive damage should they enter a human body and expand, as they are designed to do. There are full clips of ammunition for assault rifles, including "quiet ammo" that makes only a quarter of the noise of regular bullets. Laser-pointing sights for handguns are also available, as are belts for holding shotgun shells (only \$4.97 at select stores).

Walmart, which declined to comment for this story, has said elsewhere that its stores will always respect local laws and ordinances on gun sales. But in 2005, Walmart was busted by Bill Lockyer, then the California attorney general, for thousands of state gun law violations—including selling to people that the AG’s office had notified Walmart were prohibited from owning firearms; delivering guns to customers before they passed a background check; and sometimes failing even to ascertain a customer’s identity. The company settled the suit for \$14.5 million.

And, of course, Walmart has contributed to efforts to change state gun laws and make the possession and use of firearms even easier. It was one of the key backers of the American Legislative Exchange Council when the group aggressively pushed “stand your ground” laws in states across the country. (Walmart has since dropped out of ALEC under public pressure.)

In 2008, the store reached an agreement with Mayors Against Illegal Guns to adopt tough new standards for sales above the federal requirements for gun retailers. But even if every regulation is adhered to, the mass sale of weapons and ammunition will undoubtedly contribute to this country’s horrifying gun violence problem.

In fact, Walmart is increasingly popping up in court documents. In 2011, on the morning that he killed six people, including a federal judge, and injured thirteen others, including Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Jared Lee Loughner went to two Walmarts in Tucson in search of ammunition. He was turned away at one store for “strange behavior,” according to police, but got what he was looking for at the next Walmart. (“We share in the sadness for those people whose lives were ended too soon,” the store said in a statement at the time.)

In November, a disturbed 20-year-old in Missouri was arrested for planning mass shootings at a screening of the new Twilight movie and at the local Walmart—the latter because he could reload there. “He decided that he would go and shoot people at Walmart in Bolivar,” according to the court documents. “He would walk into the store and just start shooting people at random and if he ran out of ammunition...he would just break the glass where the ammunition is being stored and get some more and keep on shooting until police arrived.”

Local news reports are rife with stories of gun thefts at Walmart stores, often apparently because of lax oversight of the weapons inventory. In October, a man and a woman cracked open a display case at a Walmart store in Tyler, Texas, “while a clerk wasn’t looking,” according to local reports, and stole four assault rifles. The two have yet to be apprehended.

A week earlier, at a Walmart in Missoula County, Montana, a clerk was showing a Sig Sauer semiautomatic rifle to a man who then “grabbed it and ran for the store’s entrance,” according to the charging documents. The police nabbed him a short time later, after he had tossed the AR-15 from his car. In early November, police in Summerville, South Carolina, were on the lookout for suspects in incidents at two separate Walmarts, where display cases had been smashed with a hammer and the AR-15s and other assault rifles inside them stolen. And these are just a few of the incidents involving guns or ammunition at Walmart in the past two months. Since the start of 2012, there have been at least fifty shootings in a Walmart store or parking lot, incidents tracked on a blog called Walmart Shootings [1].

The possibility that South Bend could end up on that list once again is what has Reverend Brown so alarmed. For forty-eight years, he has lived with his mother, Bertha, a retired schoolteacher, in a house less than a mile from a Walmart. The neighborhood is a rough one, and he’s seen it get worse; Brown said that the locals sometimes call it Babylon, “because ain’t nothing righteous.”

Bertha, who has lived in South Bend for sixty-five years, says the violence is the worst she’s ever

seen. "It's real sad, because we've got a lot of young people, and people are getting killed—every time you look, someone is getting shot," she says. "Every time you pick up the paper.... I don't know who's doing it, and they can't seem to catch these people, but the guns are out there."

For four months last summer, Reverend Brown's prayer group, nicknamed the God Squad, walked around town sticking three strips of tape (symbolizing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) with anti-violence messages onto telephone polls. The group was "praying that we could cease the violence, cease the drama. And it worked in some areas," Brown said. "But I'm going to be honest with you: we're at an all-time high."

So when he saw the weapons for sale at Walmart, Brown took action. He called the chief of police and members of the City Council, who in turn applied pressure on local Walmart managers. In response, the chain promised the city in writing, in June, that it would no longer sell tactical weapons in South Bend.

Brown thought the problem was solved. Then, this fall, his phone rang: "I had a parent call me and say, 'Mr. Brown, they're selling them.'" He went back to Walmart, and indeed, the weapons were still on display—without much in the way of security. "I saw the glass unsecured," Brown said. "The employee who worked there said, 'I only work part-time back here.' He opened the glass.... This guy left the cabinet open and walked away."

This time, Brown came prepared: he'd brought a police officer and a reporter for the local ABC station with him. They took pictures, and the reporter did a story that made waves in South Bend. Walmart apologized and promised to fix the error.

A month later, Brown said he'd heard from a police officer that the combat-style weapons were being sold inside the packed store on Black Friday. He said he'll keep up the fight and plans to visit the City Council again to ask for tougher action. "I'm not against guns; I'm not trying to go against the NRA," Brown said. "But I'm against the way they sell them. You can go in Walmart at 3:30 in the morning and you can't buy a can of beer. But you can walk in there to the ammunition [counter] and buy as many boxes as you want. I have a problem with that."

Other anti-violence activists are disturbed by Walmart's much-ballyhooed expansion into urban markets like Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, Reno, Detroit and other cities. That, combined with the increased gun sales, could be a recipe for disaster.

The chain says it won't sell guns at those stores—a condition of approval for a new Walmart in Washington, DC—but Bertha Lewis is wary. Even if that turns out to be true, the guns are likely to be sold at a Walmart somewhere else in the area. "Guns are a scourge in black and brown and low- and moderate-income communities," Lewis says. "And here comes Walmart with Mr. Smiley Face: 'Here, here's a \$5 sweater—and, oh, by the way, you can get this gun.'"

Lewis thinks the gun sales will soon be a new front in the activist campaign against Walmart. "You're going to see it more and more and more as folks organize against Walmart," she says. "One of their vulnerabilities is their stance on guns. Don't try to sell me an apple and a gun at the same time. Don't tell me that you're trying to give fresh fruit and vegetables to people so that they can have a healthy life, and then you turn around and on the next counter you have instruments of death."

Walmart has become the top seller of firearms and ammunition nationwide. Here are five assault rifles you can pick up with your groceries.

George Zornick

P.S.

* December 17, 2012:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/171808/how-walmart-helped-make-newtown-shooters-ar-15-most-popular-assault-weapon-america>

* George Zornick grew up in Buffalo, NY and holds a B.A. in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Prior to joining The Nation, George was Senior Reporter/Blogger for ThinkProgress.org. He worked as a researcher for Michael Moore's SiCKO and as an Associate Producer on "The Media Project" on the Independent Film Channel. His work has been published in The Los Angeles Times, Media Matters, and The Buffalo News.

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Footnotes

[1] walmartshootings.blogspot.com