

# School shootings: Should parents be charged for failing to lock up guns used by their kids?

The gunfire had lasted less than 10 seconds, but now hidden behind locked doors all across the rural campus, teenagers wept and bled and prayed.

Police would soon swarm Marshall County High's hallways on that chilly morning in January, and though the exact number of students who had been shot remained unknown for hours, it didn't take investigators long to find the boy they believed had pulled the trigger. His name was Gabriel Parker, a sophomore whose family lived near the banks of Kentucky Lake. Before word spread that two were dead and 14 were wounded, a detective headed south, in search of the answer to a question:

Where had Parker, who was 15, gotten the gun?

Beneath a wind chime topped with a metal cross, Parker's stepfather, Justin Minyard, opened the front door of their modest frame house, and the detective told him what had just happened. The 26-year-old's stepson, police alleged, had opened fire on hundreds of students gathered in Marshall's commons with a Ruger 9mm semiautomatic pistol. Minyard, according to court records, acknowledged that he kept one firearm in the home, stored in his bedroom closet. He walked back and checked the shelf.

His gun, Minyard told the detective, was gone.



Left: Alyssa Edging, center, embraces two Marshall County High students

following a prayer vigil the day after the shooting. Right: Gabriel Parker, then 15, has been accused of shooting 16 schoolmates, killing two. (Paducah (Ky.) Sun/Associated Press)

In the hours that followed, police say, Parker confessed to his interrogators that getting the weapon was easy. It hadn't been secured with a lock or sealed in a safe or even hidden somewhere secret. The night before the shooting, Parker explained, he carried a laundry basket to his parents' bedroom closet. He reached up to a shelf and grabbed the pistol, which was inside a case, then stuffed it beneath the clothes. Parker also took at least two magazines, along with the bullets he needed, leaving behind more than 400 rounds of ammunition that police would later seize. The next morning, he put the handgun in his bag and rode with his mom to the school of 1,400 students, where at 7:57 a.m., police said, he fired the first round.

Since 1999, the shooters in at least 145 acts of gun violence at primary and secondary schools have been under the age of 18, according to an analysis by The Washington Post. Discussions about how to curb shootings at American schools have centered on arming teachers or improving mental health treatment, banning military-style rifles or strengthening background checks. But if kids as young as 6 did not have access to guns, The Post's findings show, two-thirds of school shootings over the past two decades could not have happened.

While investigators don't always determine — or publicly reveal — the weapons' origins, The Post found 105 cases in which the source was identified. Of those, the guns were taken from a child's home or those of relatives or friends 84 times. The Post discovered just four instances when the adult owners of the weapons were criminally punished because they failed to lock them up.

When Commonwealth Attorney Mark Blankenship took on the Parker prosecution, his focus was solely on ensuring that the teen would be tried as an adult, making him eligible to receive a life sentence. But the longer

Blankenship thought about how Parker had gotten the weapon, the more it troubled him.

Parker wasn't a hunter and didn't hang out much with the high schoolers who were. The teen, a plump redhead who wore glasses, was quiet and shy. He had a small group of friends, mostly from Marshall's marching band, in which he played the tuba. The teen couldn't have persuaded another student, or anyone else, to give him a weapon without raising considerable suspicion, Blankenship concluded. To the prosecutor, that meant the only gun Parker could have used to ravage his high school was the one he took from his stepfather's closet.

Like almost everyone he knows, Blankenship, 65, owns a firearm. It's a shotgun his father passed down to him, and though he doesn't keep shells for it and has never considered himself an enthusiast, he's been around guns since birth. Blankenship also appreciates why someone would want to reach a weapon quickly during a break-in, so he researched gun safes online, and what he found were more than a dozen devices for under \$250 that had been designed to securely store pistols — just like Minyard's — and be opened in less than three seconds.

“That's when it really hit me,” Blankenship said, “that this was so easily preventable.”



In the weeks after the shooting, signs of unity appeared on storefronts and in yards all over Marshall County, a community of 31,000.

Gun rights are revered in Marshall County, a community of 31,000 where 3 in 4 voters backed Donald Trump in 2016. Generations of cattle, corn and tobacco farmers throughout this nearly all-white swath of countryside have long viewed their rifles and shotguns much the same way they do their rakes and shovels: essential tools that, on their own, could do no harm. In fact,

many people still find it more unseemly to drink a beer in public— Marshall was dry until 2015 — than to wield an AR-15 rifle in public — legal in almost all of Kentucky thanks to its open-carry law.

Blankenship, in office since 2008, was on the verge of beginning his reelection campaign and knew that scrutinizing the pistol's owner would be unpopular, but he just couldn't shake how much trauma one gun in the hand of one 15-year-old had caused.

There were the teachers who'd been covered in their own students' blood, the officers whose kids were begging them not to go back to work, the paramedic who could no longer stand large crowds, the young siblings of high schoolers who imagined they would be shot next, the two couples who had outlived their children, and the teenagers — so many that Blankenship couldn't fit everyone's parents into his office — who had bullet holes in their arms and legs and chests and stomachs and faces.

So, about a week after the shooting, in a meeting with investigators, the prosecutor finally said it out loud: "I'm seriously thinking about going after the stepfather."



Commonwealth Attorney Mark Blankenship understands how difficult it would be to prosecute Parker's stepfather in Kentucky.

Every year, state lawmakers across the country propose bills to hold adults criminally liable for negligently storing guns where children can reach them, and every year, for various reasons, legislatures decide not to pass those bills.

Only 14 states and the District have approved such laws, according to the [Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#), but even those statutes, researchers say, are often not enforced, are too limited or carry weak penalties, rendering them ineffective.

The issue drew national attention in May after a 17-year-old in Santa Fe, Texas, was accused of killing 10 people at his school with a handgun and a shotgun that belonged to his dad. Although the state has a negligent-storage law, the father could not be charged under it because Texas defines a child as 16 or younger.



Left: Officers run toward Santa Fe High after a shooting on May 18 in Texas. Right: Guadalupe Sanchez, a junior, cries in the arms of her mother. (Houston Chronicle/Associated Press)

Russ Hauge didn't think he needed a special law when the former Washington state prosecutor took on what he called a case of "gross, gross negligence" in 2012.

A third-grader, he said, had found a .45-caliber semiautomatic handgun in the home of his mother's boyfriend, Douglas L. Bauer, who kept firearms — loaded, unlocked and in some cases cocked — throughout the place. The boy, then 9, put the weapon in his backpack and took it to school, where it accidentally fired, leaving a bullet lodged near the spine of an 8-year-old girl.

The prosecutor knew he could charge Bauer with reckless endangerment, he said, but a misdemeanor wouldn't strip the man of his right to own a gun, so Hauge charged him with third-degree assault, a felony.

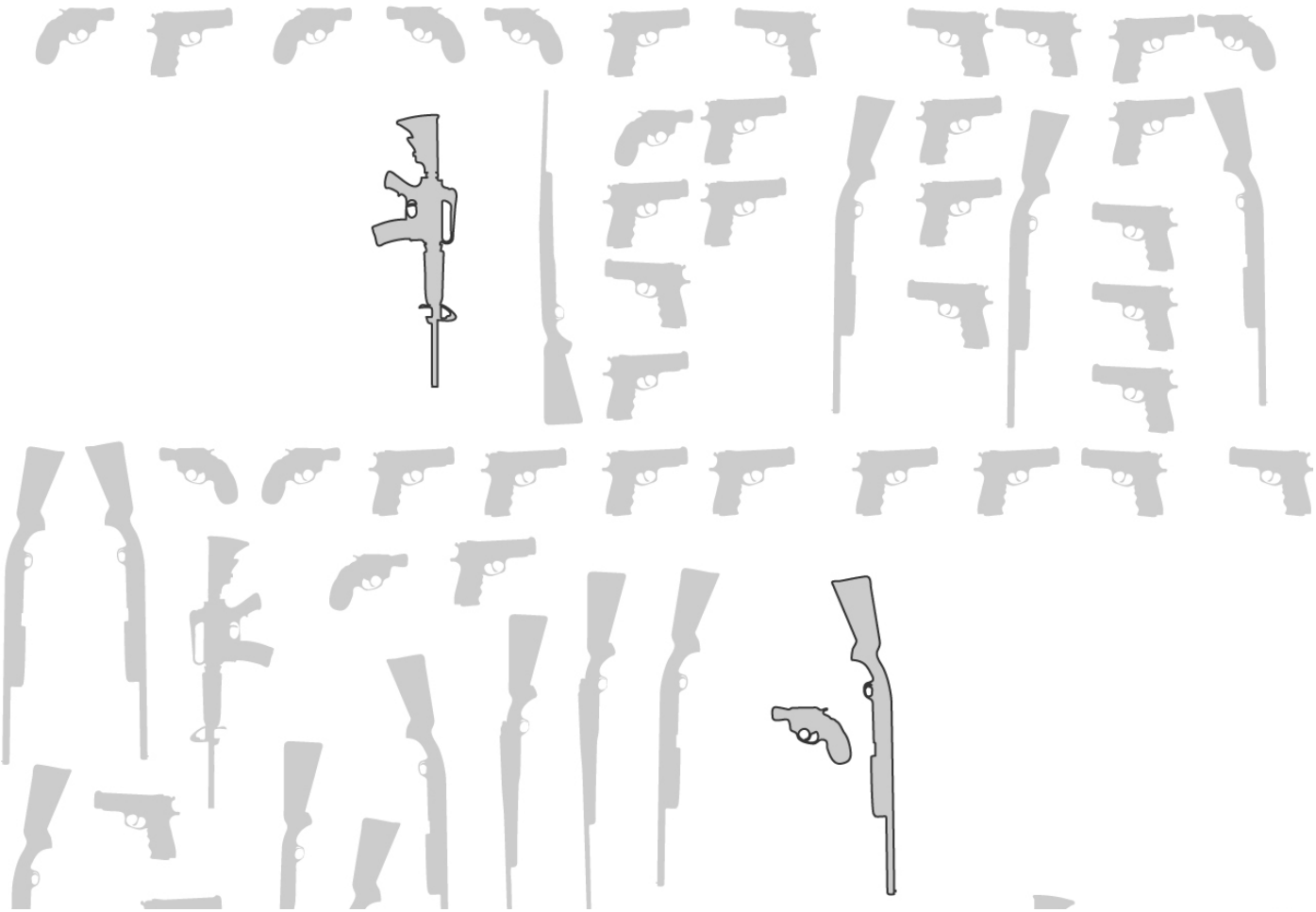
Hauge believed Bauer's actions perfectly fit the definition of "criminal negligence" that "causes bodily harm to another person by means of a weapon." The state Supreme Court, however, disagreed, deciding the law was too vague to sustain the charge.

Hauge, who left office in 2014, said he owns several firearms and is a firm

supporter of the Second Amendment, but he just as strongly believes that every state in America should require gun owners to secure their weapons.

Instead, thousands of children have used unlocked pistols, shotguns and rifles to kill themselves or accidentally shoot others. And they've wielded them again and again to target classmates.

In 2000, a 13-year-old boy in Florida found what he thought was a cookie tin in his grandfather's bedroom that instead held a .25-caliber handgun and several rounds of ammunition. The teen loaded the weapon and killed a teacher at school. The grandfather was never charged.





Where they got their guns

The Post identified the source of the weapon in 105 school shootings committed by juveniles. In most cases, the gun belonged to one of the child's immediate family members. Some shooters acquired more than one weapon.

71 guns from parents and siblings

A 15-year-old boy used his brother's AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle during a June 2014 school shooting in Oregon.

A 15-year-old boy used his father's shotgun and .22-caliber revolver during a September 2006 school shooting in Wisconsin.

A 15-year-old boy used his stepfather's 9mm semiautomatic handgun during a January school shooting in Kentucky.

A 17-year-old boy used

his father's 9mm semiautomatic handgun during a March school shooting in Maryland.

22 guns from friends and other relatives

A 6-year-old boy accidentally fired a .380-caliber semiautomatic handgun, which belonged to a parent's friend, during an April 2011 school shooting in Texas.

A 16-year-old boy used his grandfather's shotgun and .40-caliber semiautomatic handgun during a March 2005 school shooting in Minnesota.

18 guns from other sources



A 15-year-old boy accidentally fired a 9mm semiautomatic handgun he found on the street in an April 2007 school shooting in Illinois.

A 16-year-old boy used a .380-caliber semiautomatic handgun, which he had stolen, during a January school shooting in Alabama.

Note: Other relatives also include family members who did not live with the gunman at the time of the shooting. Gun icons are abstract illustrations and do not reflect the exact make and model.

In 2003, a 15-year-old boy in Minnesota opened a dresser drawer in which his father stored nearly a dozen guns and picked out a .22-caliber pistol that he'd fired before at a shooting range. He used it to kill two classmates at school. The father — a sheriff's deputy — was never charged.

Both states had already passed laws that require adults to keep their guns away from kids, but each statute includes significant caveats that limit prosecutors' ability to use it.

In fact, none of the four successful prosecutions identified by The Post resulted from charges related to negligent-storage laws. The harshest penalty among those cases was a 29-month term behind bars for involuntary manslaughter. In that instance, a man in Michigan had used a shoe box to store his .32-caliber semiautomatic handgun, which a 6-year-old visitor found and took to school, then fatally shot a first-grade classmate.

To effect real change, Hauge argues, adults must face felonies.

“We’re looking at a class of crimes where deterrence might actually work,” he said. “If there was a clear law that says felony punishment will ensue if you don’t handle your weapons safely, I think we could get some people’s attention.”



Missy Jenkins Smith plays with her sons Logan, 10, left, and Carter, 8, at their home in Western Kentucky.

In Western Kentucky, Missy Jenkins Smith has been trying to get people's attention for two decades.

On the morning of Dec. 1, 1997, Jenkins Smith had just finished a prayer circle at Heath High — 30 miles northwest of Marshall — when she watched a schoolmate get shot in the head. A moment later, a round struck her in the chest.

In all, three people died and five were wounded. At the age of 15, Jenkins Smith was paralyzed from the chest down. She later learned that the shooter, then 14, had stolen the .22-caliber semiautomatic pistol from the garage of a neighbor, who'd left the gun outside his safe.

Jenkins Smith, now a school counselor, has written two books about her experience and emphasizes in speeches that no campus is immune from an attack. Like Hauge, she has no issue with guns; her husband, a hunter, owns several. But when she heard how authorities say Parker had gotten his weapon, she realized how little had changed in Kentucky over the past 21 years.

The owner of the pistol that left her in a wheelchair was never charged. Instead, police said, he got his gun back.



Left: Hannah Dysinger posed for this photo taken by Bailey Holt minutes before the shooting began. Right: Hannah and Bailey attend a Marshall County High dance. (Courtesy of Hannah Dysinger)

Hannah Dysinger was already waiting for her best friend when the girl arrived at Marshall High on the morning of Jan. 23.

“You look so cute,” Hannah told Bailey Holt, who was wearing jeans, trendy dark-rimmed glasses and, as she did almost every day, a pair of Converse sneakers.

Hannah and Bailey, both 15, occupied their usual spot near one entrance in Marshall’s commons, a wide, open room with a two-story-high ceiling where hundreds of teens gathered each day before classes. Hannah liked the way her makeup looked, so she insisted Bailey take a photo with her new iPhone X. Hannah grinned for the camera, revealing her braces as she held up a McDonald’s frappe.

It was spirit week at Marshall, and each day had a certain theme, so as the commons swelled before first period, many students were sporting red, white and blue for that Tuesday’s motif: America.

Then came the first gunshot.

Hannah looked into Bailey’s eyes for what felt like a long time, but wasn’t, because then Hannah heard another shot and another and another. She turned and ran for the door, fleeing across the parking lot toward the school’s football field as dozens of other panicked students stampeded alongside her.

Hannah’s phone rang. It was her boyfriend, who’d been with them inside.

“Where are you?” she asked, and as he told her he was safe, Hannah felt something warm and wet inside her black Timberland shirt. She looked down, then she saw it. There was a bullet hole in her chest.

“I’m bleeding!” she shrieked. “I’m bleeding!”

The commons had gone quiet by the time Superintendent Trent Lovett, 52, arrived minutes after the shooting. He’d also attended Marshall, the county’s only public high school, which opened in 1974.

He already knew his daughter, a freshman, was safe in the tech center. But two other teenagers, a boy and a girl who’d been shot, were sprawled on the floor in front of Lovett, and across the room was another teen with a wound to his stomach. A nurse who taught health education was running triage with school staff.

“Where’s the shooter?” Lovett asked.

“We don’t know,” someone replied, so the superintendent pulled an aluminum bat from a nearby baseball bag and set off down a hallway, guiding terrified students to safety before he returned to the commons.

Lovett stared out over the speckled tile, littered with deserted backpacks and abandoned plastic cups. Eight columns bordered the room’s center, each inscribed in bright orange letters with virtues the educators tried to instill in students: “PATIENCE” and “FAIRNESS,” “RESPECT” and “CARING.”

Now, amid streaks of their blood, dozens of the teens’ phones rang and blinked and vibrated all over the floor. One was next to Preston Cope, a lanky sophomore who played second base on the junior-varsity baseball team. He had been shot in the head.

“Dad,” read the caller ID.

Lovett, who has known Preston’s family for years, stared at the screen. Nothing could compare to the loss of a child, he knew. A 2012 car accident had left his older daughter in a coma at the age of 19. Six months later, Lovett and his wife had to take her off life support.

Now here he was, answering Preston's phone.

"What's going on?" the boy's father asked.

"It's not good," Lovett said. "Get here as fast as you can."

"Don't let them leave with him," Preston's dad pleaded, but Lovett couldn't promise him that.

By then, Investigative Sgt. Trey Green of the Kentucky State Police was pulling up to Marshall, where his daughter was a sophomore. On his way, he'd missed a call from an unfamiliar number.

"Oh my gosh. What if that was my daughter?" Green thought, because he knew she hadn't taken her phone to school that day. He called back and someone answered, but he heard nothing. He begged for a response, but still, nothing.

Green, dressed in a shirt and tie, strapped on his tactical vest. Officers from the sheriff's office and city police were already outside the school.

"Where's the shooter?" he asked.

"We don't know," someone said.

He drew his handgun and, with a team of three others, ventured into the building, clearing corners until they reached the commons. He first saw the two boys, then spotted the girl, who was surrounded by school staff. His breath quickened.

She had brown hair, just as his daughter did. Her jeans and eyeglasses, on the floor nearby, looked just like the ones his child wore, too. Then there were the dark Converse sneakers, shoes he'd seen on her so many times before.

"I think this is my daughter," he told the nurse caring for her.

Green was so overwhelmed by fear and adrenaline that even when someone removed the CPR mask from her face, he couldn't be sure.

Then the nurse showed him the girl's bag. Green didn't recognize it.

"How do you know that's her backpack?" he asked.

"Because I took that backpack off of her," the nurse said, and just as a tide of relief washed over him, he was stricken with guilt.

Someone else's daughter, he knew, was not going to make it.



Superintendent Trent Lovett shows the weight room at Marshall County High, where Parker hid with fellow students until his arrest.

The other teens who were shot had scattered throughout the sprawling 130-acre campus, as frantic radio calls among first responders captured the scope of the carnage.

"One male subject at the board of education shot."

"I've got one gunshot wound up here at the vocational school, to the knee."

"I got a kid out here ... just out from the commons area. Been shot in the leg, I think."

"I need an ambulance to the weight room here at the stadium, we have a possible gunshot wound."

Meanwhile, Lovett learned that the suspected gunman had been caught in the football stadium's weight room, where he had hidden with other students. The superintendent headed outside and saw a pair of officers escorting a handcuffed teen across the parking lot.

“Who is that?” Lovett asked, but they didn’t know, so he demanded that the boy tell him.

“Gabriel Parker,” the student said, his expression and tone void of emotion.

Lovett couldn’t place the name, so he asked who his parents were. Parker said his mother was Mary Garrison Minyard, a name the superintendent recognized right away. She was a reporter for the Marshall County Daily who had covered school board meetings.

One of the officers asked the teen where his gun was, Lovett recalled, and Parker said it was outside the performing-arts center.

“Which side’s it on?” Lovett asked, his voice rising.

“By the band room,” Parker told him, and that’s where the superintendent found it, on the sidewalk, next to a magazine.

Amid the mayhem, Hannah was rushed to the hospital, where an X-ray showed a bullet lodged under her left arm, pressed against a rib. The round had missed her heart by just inches — and the girl still didn’t know what had happened to Bailey.

She was the first close friend Hannah had made when she moved to the area at the end of eighth grade. In a rural community where most families had deep roots, Hannah was an outsider, but Bailey never made her feel that way. They talked about boys, often, but also shared the same retro sensibility, rattling off dialogue from “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” and swooning over 1980s hair bands.

*Where are you?* Hannah messaged her.

*You’re making me super worried.*

Then, at last, she heard the news: Two students, both 15, had been killed.



Hannah Dysinger, left, and Bailey Holt take a selfie together. (Courtesy of Hannah Dysinger)

One of them, Preston, had died on the way to the hospital, just after his parents told their boy they loved him as he was wheeled to a helicopter.

Bailey, in her dark Converse sneakers, was the only one who didn't leave the commons alive. A black tag was placed on her wrist, a white sheet draped over her body.

Most parents had been directed to a middle school four miles away, where children were being bused, but some, including Heather Adams, had driven straight to the high school. It was there that she came upon a distraught woman who thought her son might also be among the victims.

“What’s your son’s name?” asked Adams, whose own child had already texted that he was okay.

“Gabe Parker,” the woman, Mary Minyard, replied.

Adams texted her boy, asking if he'd seen Parker. He hadn't. Overcome, Minyard slumped to the ground. As Adams held the woman's blond hair away from her face, she vomited.

Minyard's phone rang.

“Why are the police at the house?” she asked the caller, panicked.

After she hung up, Adams guided her to the back of an emergency vehicle.

“She needs help,” Adams told a first responder as she held Minyard, who was struggling to remain upright. “She’s going into shock.”

Then the phone rang again.

“Why would he do that?” Adams overheard her ask. “Why would he do that?”



And then: “Go look in the closet and see if it’s in there.”

And then, Adams recalled, she heard what the man on the other end said in response: “The gun’s not in the closet.”



Parker allegedly took the gun from this home in Hardin, Ky., where he lived with his mother and stepfather.

A week had passed, and with “#MarshallStrong” signs spreading across Facebook pages and storefronts, Blankenship was meeting with investigators, saying he might prosecute Parker’s stepfather.

The state police were reluctant, he later recalled. One officer mentioned that he was a firearms-safety instructor. “I don’t even teach parents to lock their guns up,” Blankenship remembered the man saying.

The investigators told him that if he wanted to pursue the case, he’d have to send them a letter, requesting that they open an investigation. Blankenship wasn’t deterred. If he concluded that a law had been broken, they’d get their letter.

The prosecutor, though, needed to identify a specific charge, and Kentucky’s statutes provided few options. That’s when another attorney in the room suggested an idea. What if they waited to see whether a mental health expert, presumably hired by the defense, found that the teen had psychological issues his parents could or should have recognized?

“That registered with me,” Blankenship said later, aware that he would probably need that evidence to get a conviction in Marshall County for something like wanton endangerment, a crime of “extreme indifference to the value of human life” that comes with a sentence of up to five years in prison.

“I think if I got a son at home, and he’s got problems, and all he has to do is

open the door and reach up there and grab a semiautomatic weapon, that's showing a gross indifference," he said, then paused — "in today's world."

Because, in today's world, teenagers shoot their schoolmates for no reason or any reason, and to Blankenship, Parker was proof. The boy had done it simply as an experiment, he'd told sheriff's Capt. Matt Hilbrecht. The officer testified at a preliminary court hearing that Parker, stoic throughout the interrogation, said he had become an atheist and decided that life had no purpose, so he wanted to see how students, then police, then society would react to the attack.



How some states enforce laws to prevent children's access to guns

Fourteen states and the District have statutes that hold adults criminally liable for negligently storing guns where children can reach them. However, the details of those laws vary widely.

States that can charge adults under a child-access prevention law...

...only if a child uses or carries a gun:

...for allowing a child access to a gun, regardless of whether the weapon is used:

...when a child “may” or “is likely to” gain access to a gun:

Source: Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

Justin Minyard, according to court records, told a detective that he’d noticed no changes in his stepson’s behavior leading up to the shooting. School staff, classmates, a neighbor and people who had known Parker’s family for years described him as an awkward, reserved kid who was smart and enamored with band. In a since-deleted Instagram post that appeared on a number of news sites after the shooting, he shared an adaptation of the Marine Corps’s “Rifleman’s Creed,” replacing “my rifle” with “my tuba.” He liked violent video games and sometimes seemed sad, though, at least to most people, he never appeared dangerous.

But Parker, who told investigators he once considered using Minyard’s gun to take his own life, had shared memes with friends that depicted SpongeBob SquarePants and school shootings, police say, and in an Instagram post from last June, he wrote, cryptically, “sorry for the kids that I may hurt in 42.”

Inside the brown satchel Parker had when police arrested him, they allege, was a large Winchester knife and a copy of “The Communist Manifesto,” and in his bedroom at home, they found Adolf Hitler’s autobiography, “Mein Kampf.” Parker was an avid fan of the multiplayer online video game Roblox, in which he created an avatar, clothed in a Nazi uniform, that he appeared to

have used to gun down other Lego-like characters.

What Parker's mother and stepfather knew of his troubled mind remains unknown. They declined repeated requests for comment, and Parker's public defender, Tom Griffiths, wouldn't discuss his client's past but said that he was "not looking to cast blame in any way on Gabe's family. They've been through a lot."

Mary has been divorced from Parker's biological dad, who now lives in another state, for a decade. She met Justin Minyard several years ago after moving to Mississippi, where she was an editor at a pair of small publications from about 2013 to 2015.

For a time, Justin worked for her. He was initially a page designer before Mary made him a reporter, said Donna Summerall, who knew both of them at the Daily Times Leader near Starkville, Miss. The two often took smoke breaks together, and though Mary, now 38, was a decade older than Justin, they grew close. Both of them, Summerall said, shared liberal beliefs in communities that were largely conservative, though Mary was far more vocal than Justin, a slight, soft-spoken, bespectacled man whom co-workers and a neighbor described as friendly but meek.

Shortly after Justin took a job at a TV station in Mississippi, Mary got pregnant, Summerall said, and about three years ago, they had a daughter together. It was around then that the couple moved to Marshall, where Mary still had family and owned a home. She again worked as an editor at a small paper, and Justin returned to designing pages at the nearby Paducah Sun. According to an online wedding registry, they married in 2016.

One former colleague who has known Mary for years said she was "very anti-gun" and had supported calls for stricter laws, which made news of the weapon's origin astounding to people who knew the family.

"I was shocked that he would even own a gun, much less a good bit of

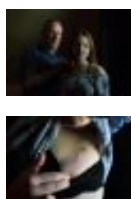
ammunition, because he was not the type. Not at all,” Summerall explained.

“That just blew me away,” said Donna Harris, who also worked with him at the Daily Times Leader.

Reached by phone at his newspaper office, Justin refused to answer questions, asking that a reporter not call him at work again.

Why had he left the gun unlocked in his closet?

“You have a great day,” he said, then hung up.



Left: Jeff Dysinger and his daughter, Hannah, pose for a portrait in their home. Right: Hannah shows the scar where a bullet was surgically removed from her rib cage.

Jeff Dysinger doesn't blame the gun for what it did to his daughter.

Not for the two-inch scar along Hannah's ribs from where surgeons removed the bullet that spiraled through her chest, and not for the nightmares in which, for some reason, she's the shooter now. Not for how she dug her nails into her mom's arm after someone at Walmart slammed a cart into the wall. Not for taking away her best friend.

Dysinger's belief in the right to bear arms has never wavered. A U.S. Army veteran and staunch conservative, he used to own an AR-15, and he still has a shotgun for hunting and a pistol for protection.

He likes firearms but also respects them, which is why Dysinger blames the Minyards — not just Parker — for all that Hannah has endured.

“I think the parents ought to be 100 percent liable, too,” Dysinger said.

“Whoever that gun is registered to ought to get the same sentence he’s about to get.”

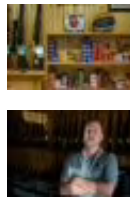
But even if evidence surfaces that Parker had obvious psychological problems, a case against Minyard would be difficult to win in Western Kentucky, said Jamie French, a former police officer who owns a gun store 20 minutes south of the school.

And without that evidence?

“You’d never get a conviction on that. Never,” he said. “Almost everybody sitting on that jury would be able to say, ‘I have a gun at home. What if my kid takes it? What if my grandkid takes it? Should I go to jail for that?’ ”

In French’s store, there’s a poster tacked to the front counter, just beneath the register, that federal law mandates gun retailers display. In bold white letters, it reads: “Youth Handgun Safety Act.”

“Safely storing and securing firearms away from children,” the sign warns, “will help prevent the unlawful possession of handguns by juveniles, stop accidents, and save lives.”



Left: Guns and ammunition are on display at Personal Security Firearms in Benton, Ky. Right: Store owner Jamie French said most in the community would resist any new gun laws.

French, whose son was a senior at Marshall, agrees with that message and wishes all gun owners would adhere to it, but he can’t envision Kentucky ever enacting a law that makes those who don’t criminally liable. One restriction, many of his customers fear, would lead to others.

More than a decade ago, French said, he worked a case in which a 9-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed his 6-year-old sibling with a loaded shotgun he'd found in his parents' closet. French had the couple indicted, a decision some people he knew didn't like.

“We all have loaded guns,” one person told him.

The case, he said, went nowhere, and the charges were eventually dropped.

Blankenship suspects he could face the same outcome with Minyard, but the prosecutor has never stopped thinking about how simple it would have been to keep the gun out of Parker's hands in the first place.

Earlier this year, a judge ruled that Parker, now 16, will be tried as an adult, allowing Blankenship to pursue the maximum punishment, life in prison. He's still not sure whether he'll be able to hold Minyard legally accountable. He is sure of one thing: The laws in Kentucky, and every other state, need to change.

“You've got kids in the house — you've got to lock up your guns,” he said. “I don't see why that's so unreasonable.”

On a recent summer day, at the home where the Ruger 9mm semiautomatic pistol wasn't locked up, the wind chime adorned with a metal cross still dangled above the front door. In the yard, a child's weathered plastic swing hung from an American red maple. The blinds, though, were all shut, and the Minyards had used a towel to cover the inside of the front door window.

A few feet away, dug into the weedy grass, stood a sign: “FOR SALE.”



Parker's mother and stepfather put their home up for sale in the months after the shooting.

*Reis Thebault and Julie Tate contributed to this report.*