

# Assault Weapons Makers Testify They Bear No Responsibility for Gun Violence

A House panel found that the companies have thrived in the past decade by selling and marketing military-grade weapons to civilians, specifically young men.



By Annie Karni

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WASHINGTON — Two top executives whose companies make the assault weapons that have been used to perpetrate some of the deadliest mass shootings in the country testified to Congress on Wednesday that they bore no responsibility for the surge in gun violence that has taken hold in the United States, even as their revenues from the sales of such weapons have soared.

With the parents of a 10-year-old girl shot and killed with an AR-15-style rifle in the Uvalde, Texas, elementary school massacre looking on, the gun manufacturing executives said the military-grade weapons they make and market to civilians had nothing to do with the increase in violence in recent years.

“Mass shootings were all but unheard-of just a few decades ago,” Marty Daniel, the chief executive of Daniel Defense, said, testifying remotely before the House Oversight and Reform Committee. “So what changed? Not the firearms. They are substantially the same as those manufactured over 100 years ago.”

Mr. Daniel, whose company manufactured the weapon used in the Uvalde massacre, called the mass shooting there “horrible.” But he said any response to the rise in such events had to focus “not on the type of gun, but on the type of persons who are likely to commit mass shootings.”

Mr. Daniel’s company and the four other leading manufacturers of assault rifles in the United States have brought in a combined total of at least \$1.7 billion in revenue from AR-15-style weapons over the past decade as gun violence across the country has surged, according to an investigative report the panel presented at the hearing on Wednesday.

“I cannot even imagine what those innocent children had to go through,” Mr. Daniel said. But he avoided answering whether he felt any personal responsibility, saying, “These murders are local problems that have to be solved locally.”



Marty Daniel, the chief executive of Daniel Defense, testified remotely and called the mass shooting in Texas “horrible.” Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

The findings underscored how the gun industry has thrived by making and selling weapons of war, specifically targeting and playing to the insecurities of young men, while some have made thinly veiled references to white supremacist groups.

The committee opened its investigation of the gun manufacturing industry in May after the Uvalde massacre, which killed 19 elementary school students and two teachers, and a racist mass shooting in a Buffalo supermarket that killed 10 people.

The panel requested that the country's top five gun manufacturers share information on their sales and marketing strategies, as well as any efforts they make to track safety data related to their products.

“The business practices of these gun manufacturers are deeply disturbing, exploitative and reckless,” Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, Democrat of New York and the chairwoman of the committee, said in a statement. “We found that none of these companies bothers to keep track of the death and destruction caused by their products.”

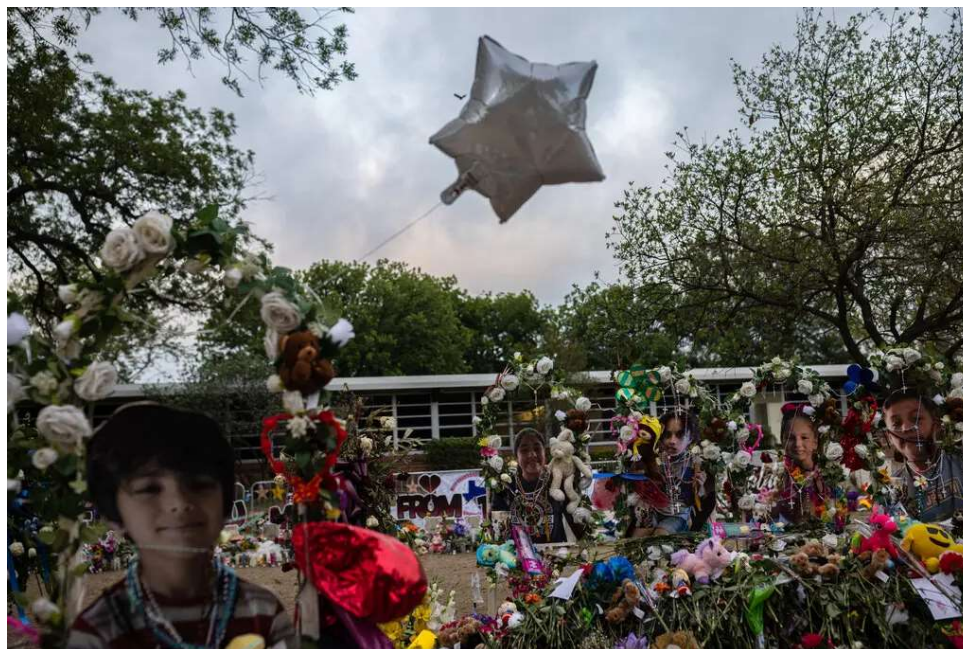
The hearing came weeks after President Biden signed into law the first substantial gun safety bill in decades, the product of a bipartisan compromise that beefed up background checks for gun buyers under the age of 21. Yet more sweeping measures, such as a ban on assault weapons, have gone nowhere amid solid opposition by Republicans.

The House was expected to vote on such a ban in the coming weeks, but the bill has no chance of passage in the evenly divided Senate. The vote had originally been expected on Friday but was delayed as House Democrats haggled among themselves over whether to tie it to a broader public safety bill that would increase funding for the police, according to a person familiar with the plans.

On Wednesday, the committee heard testimony from Mr. Daniel and Christopher Killoy, the president and chief executive of Sturm, Ruger & Company — the first time in nearly two decades that the chief executives of gun manufacturers have testified before Congress about their business practices.

But the questions from lawmakers produced little beyond the standard talking points from manufacturers defending their products.

Mr. Killoy, who also testified remotely, said that “a firearm, any firearm, can be used for good or for evil. The difference is in the individual possessing it.”



A memorial outside of Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

Ahead of the executives' appearances, Ms. Maloney played video testimonials from survivors of gun violence and from family members who have lost loved ones in mass shootings, all demanding answers from the gun manufacturers.

"What are you going to do to make sure your products don't get into the hands of a white supremacist mass shooter ever again who will take a child's father away," said Tracey Maciulewicz, whose fiancé, Andre Mackniel, was shot and killed at Tops supermarket in Buffalo on his son's third birthday while buying a birthday cake.

Kimberly and Felix Rubio, whose daughter Alexandria "Lexi" Aniyah Rubio was killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, attended the hearing as observers but did not speak. Since the shooting, the Rubios have been pressing Congress to pass an assault rifle ban and other gun control measures.

The manufacturers that were investigated — Bushmaster, Daniel Defense, Sig Sauer, Smith & Wesson, and Sturm, Ruger & Company — all marketed their weapons to young men as a way to "prove their manliness," according to the report, and sold "guns to mass shooters on credit" while failing to take basic steps to monitor deaths associated with their products.

The report found that, as the country has struggled to cope with an epidemic of gun violence that has plagued schools, churches, supermarkets, concerts and shopping malls, firearms manufacturers have been enjoying ballooning proceeds from the sale of the weapons used to carry out mass shootings.

Daniel Defense's revenue from AR-15-style rifles tripled from 2019 to 2021, to more than \$120 million from \$40 million, the report said. Its revenue from AR-15-style rifles since 2012 was \$528 million.

Ruger, the country's largest maker of rifles, reported that its gross earnings from AR-15-style rifles also nearly tripled from 2019 to 2021, increasing to more than \$103 million from \$39 million, with sales revenue from such guns over the past decade amounting to \$514 million. The company's AR-15-style rifle and pistols were used by mass shooters in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in 2017 and Boulder, Colo., in 2021.

Smith & Wesson's revenue from all long guns, which include AR-15-style rifles, more than doubled between 2019 and 2021, to \$253 million from \$108 million. The company sold the weapon used in the July 4 massacre in Highland Park, Ill., as well as the Parkland school shooting in Florida in 2018. The report said the company made at least \$695 million from AR-15-style weapons since 2012.

Sig Sauer, the company that sold the AR-15-style rifle used in a mass shooting in 2016 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., and three of the weapons used by the gunman in Las Vegas in 2017, refused to disclose its revenue.

And Bushmaster, which made the weapon used in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, said it had no financial data from previous years because it was recently purchased by a new company.

Representative Jody B. Hice, Republican of Georgia, said gun sales had risen because more law-abiding citizens were purchasing weapons to protect themselves amid worries about rising crime.

But as their business has expanded, the gun manufacturers have also made covert references to white supremacist groups like the Boogaloo Bois, according to the report.

The Boogaloo movement is a group of anti-government extremists that believes a race war, or a second Civil War, is on the horizon. Members of the group often dress in Hawaiian-style floral print shirts and military fatigues. The Palmetto State Armory, a firearms company, markets a "Big Igloo Aloha" AK-47-style assault rifle adorned with such a floral print, which the report said was a clear reference to the Boogaloo movement.

Daniel Defense has also posted photos of an assault rifle with a similar floral pattern.

One Daniel Defense inventory catalogue from 2017 also featured an image of a shooter with a tattoo of a Valknot, a Norse symbol closely associated with transnational white supremacists. The Valknot has been identified as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League.

The gun manufacturers also made appeals that played on male insecurities, claiming that owning their weapons would put customers "at the top of the testosterone food chain," the report said.

A Bushmaster ad for an AR-15 used the slogan "Consider your man card reissued."

The companies that did not participate in the hearings did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Ms. Maloney said she planned to issue a subpoena for documents from Smith & Wesson's chief executive, "so we can finally get answers about why this company is selling assault weapons to mass murderers."

Antonia Okafor, the national director of women's outreach for Gun Owners of America, a gun rights group, appeared at the hearing at the invitation of Republicans to defend the AR-15. She called it the firearm of choice for female gun owners who want to protect themselves, giving examples of women who used the rifle to stop armed attackers in their homes.