On a quiet Friday morning in Newtown, Connecticut, 20-year-old Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 first-graders and six staff members, before ending his own life with a bullet to the head.

**Key Figures**


**The Event**

On what seemed like an ordinary day in December, less than two weeks before Christmas, the Connecticut town of Newtown was changed forever, when local resident Adam Lanza embarked on a shooting spree that left twenty children and six staff members dead at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Shortly before the rampage, 20-year-old Lanza shot and killed his mother at their home and drove the family car to the school. After the massacre, as police entered the school building, Lanza killed himself. The incident was one of the most deadly school shootings in U.S. history, second only to the massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007, in which a lone gunman killed 32 people and then himself.

Before the shootings, the quiet village of Sandy Hook, Connecticut (part of the town of Newtown), had seen only one murder in the previous decade. Newtown in general and Sandy Hook in particular are quintessential, all-American locales; people are friendly and helpful, and neighbors know each other by name. Like most schools in the United States, however, Sandy Hook Elementary School had security measures in place. These required all visitors to be identified via video before being allowed entry through the main doors, which were locked at 9:30 every morning. On December 14, Adam Lanza bypassed the safety protocols by shooting his way through the glass doors just five minutes after they had been locked. His weapon was a Bushmaster AR-15 assault-type rifle, taken from a cache his mother, Nancy Lanza, kept at home. In addition to the Bushmaster, it was later found that Lanza had a vest full of ammunition and two handguns.

The first ones to encounter Lanza as he entered the halls of the school were Dawn Hochsprung, the principal, and Mary Sherlach, the school psychologist. He shot and killed both women and moved on. The school public address system had been turned on, and students and teachers were able to hear screaming and gunshots over the loudspeakers; this served as a warning that something was terribly amiss. As a result, many teachers had the presence of mind to hide their students, saving most from a fate that twenty youngsters and six adults could not escape.

After shooting the two staff members, Lanza continued to a first-grade classroom, where he shot and killed the teacher, Lauren Rousseau, and fifteen of the sixteen children who were present. The lone survivor played dead, lying among her slain classmates until the shooting stopped and silence descended on the school. At that point, she ran out of the building, covered in her friends’ blood, into her mother’s arms.

After the massacre in the first room, Lanza moved on to another first-grade classroom, where teacher Victoria Soto was trying to protect her young charges. She and six students were killed; reports indicate that Soto died while trying to shield some of the children with her body. In addition, before Lanza entered her classroom, Soto hid some of her pupils in a closet, thus saving their lives.

Other stories of bravery were later revealed, and it became clear that a number of the adult victims had tried to protect the children, subsequently dying along with them. Other teachers successfully hid their students behind the locked doors of classrooms, bathrooms, storage rooms, supply closets, and the library. Many barricaded the doors with heavy pieces of furniture, staving off the killer’s advance and saving many lives in the process.

Mere minutes after Lanza started his shooting spree, he ended it. In the roughly ten minutes of his rampage, he fired close to a hundred rounds, reloading often and shooting all of his victims many times. When he realized that police had arrived on the scene (calls to 911 were recorded almost immediately after the first shot was fired), he killed himself with a gunshot to the head. In all, six adults—all women—died at his hand along with twelve girls and eight boys, all first-graders. All but two died at the scene.
The adults who were killed in the school were Dawn Hochsprung, principal; Mary Sherlach, school psychologist; Lauren Rousseau, teacher; Victoria Leigh Soto, teacher; Rachel D’Avino, teacher’s aide; and Anne Marie Murphy, teacher’s aide. The first-grade victims—all six or seven years old—were Charlotte Bacon, Daniel Barden, Olivia Engel, Josephine Gay, Dylan Hockley, Madeleine Hsu, Catherine Hubbard, Chase Kowalski, Jesse Lewis, Ana Marquez-Greene, James Mattioli, Grace McDonnell, Emilie Parker, Jack Pinto, Noah Pozner, Caroline Previdi, Jessica Rekos, Avielle Richman, Benjamin Wheeler, and Allison Wyatt.

When police investigated the massacre, they determined that Adam Lanza’s mother, Nancy, was his first victim. She had been a gun enthusiast, and it was her collection of weapons that the shooter raided for his rampage. In addition to the Bushmaster rifle with which he shot and killed all the victims, Lanza brought a 10mm Glock handgun and a 9mm Sig Sauer handgun with him to the elementary school. (Police also found three more rifles at the Lanza home.) He had a huge amount of unused ammunition with him inside the school building.

What was not found among Lanza’s belongings at the home he shared with his mother was a suicide note or any indication that he was planning an attack. At some point before he left his house to drive to Sandy Hook Elementary School, Lanza destroyed his computer’s hard drive, further hampering the investigation into a possible motive. Reports and stories about the shooter paint a picture of a troubled young man who was an honors student in high school before being home-schooled by his mother. Former teachers and classmates described a strange teenager with a personality disorder who was bright but nervous and may have suffered from some form of Asperger syndrome. His parents were divorced, and he was not in touch with his father.

In the week following the massacre, Newtown was the focus of the world’s attention as funeral after funeral was held in the town. Sandy Hook Elementary School was closed after the shooting with no plans to reopen. This was due, in part, to the fact that it is the scene of an ongoing police investigation and partially because it is unimaginable that students who had witnessed the blood and experienced the terror of the rampage would ever be able to go to school there. However, the students of Sandy Hook Elementary did return to classes on January 3, 2013, at Chalk Hill Middle School in Monroe, Connecticut.

Impact of Event

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook killings, the country and the world watched in grief and horror as first-graders and their teachers were eulogized, remembered, and buried. Flags at all federal buildings were flown at half-mast, and President Barack Obama traveled to Newtown to meet with relatives of the victims.

Very quickly, though, the national discussion turned to gun control. Speaking on the day of the shooting, President Obama declared, "We're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics," thus opening up one of the most contentious topics in U.S. discourse. Less than half a day after the massacre, more than 100,000 U.S. citizens signed an online petition requesting that the Obama administration address the issue of gun control. As a result, the president, who had just weeks before won reelection to the White House, announced that he would indeed make gun control a central issue of his second term. He publicized the establishment of the Gun Violence Task Force and appointed Vice President Joe Biden to lead it.

Referring to the long road ahead, the president said, "This will not happen unless the American people demand it. If parents and teachers, police officers and pastors, if hunters and sportsmen, if responsible gun owners, if Americans of every background stand up and say, 'Enough, we’ve suffered too much pain and care too much about our children to allow this to continue,' then change will come.”

Underscoring the contentiousness of the national debate and the deep divide that gun control represents, the National Rifle Association (NRA) announced the formation of the National School Shield Program with the goal of protecting the country’s schools. Wayne LaPierre, vice president of the NRA, said the goal of the program was to arm and train school guards, including retired police officers and volunteers. The NRA blamed violent video games, the news media, and law enforcement (not guns) for recent mass shootings. LaPierre went so far as to say that if armed guards had been at the Newtown school, "twenty-six innocent lives might have been spared that day.”

At the beginning of January, Gabrielle Giffords, the former Congresswoman who herself was a victim of an assassination attempt and who had survived a near-fatal gunshot wound to her head, launched a campaign in favor of gun control. Giffords announced the establishment of Americans for Responsible Solutions, an initiative that aims to raise funds for gun control.

Five weeks after the shooting, California Senator Dianne Feinstein announced legislation that would "ban the sale and manufacture of 157 types of semiautomatic weapons as well as magazines that hold more than ten rounds of ammunition." (Not included in the bill were hunting rifles; more than 900 models of guns would be exempt for hunting and sporting.)

A previous ban on assault weapons had lapsed in 2004; since then, the issue of gun control has languished, surfacing in the public consciousness whenever a shooting spree like the one in Sandy Hook made headlines. The powerful gun lobby often cites evidence that a ban on weapons would probably be ineffective in warding off bloodbaths like the one in Newtown. The NRA countered the proposed legislation, leaning away from gun control, by saying, "Senator Feinstein has been trying to ban guns from law-abiding citizens for decades. It's disappointing but not surprising that she is once again focused on curtailing the Constitution instead of prosecuting criminals or fixing our broken mental health system.”

In sharp contrast to the stance of the NRA, the "Sandy Hook Promise” was created by members of the Newtown community. Their goal is to honor the children and teachers who were killed by doing whatever they can to not let "this type of tragedy stand as just another in our country’s history.”

"Our hearts are broken,” the organization’s Web site begins. “Our spirit is not.
"This is a promise to truly honor the lives lost by turning our tragedy into a moment of transformation. This is a promise to turn the conversation into actions. Things must change. This is the time."


Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Gale Document Number: GALE|BT2359030537