

Family, friends say Uvalde shooter had troubled home life, was bullied for a speech impediment and lashed out in recent years

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The gunman in Tuesday’s elementary school massacre was a lonely 18-year-old who was bullied over a childhood speech impediment, suffered from a fraught home life and lashed out violently against peers and strangers recently and over the years, friends and relatives said.

And in the days after his May 16 birthday, he legally bought the weapons and ammunition he’d use to wage war on grade-schoolers in Uvalde, Tex.

Authorities said Salvador Rolando Ramos shot and critically wounded his 66-year-old grandmother. He then went on a shooting rampage at Robb Elementary School near his home, killing at least 19 children and two adults and injuring others.

In a Wednesday news conference, state officials said Ramos purchased a semiautomatic rifle at a local gun store on May 17, bought 375 rounds of ammunition the next day, then went back to the local gun store on Friday to purchase a second semiautomatic rifle.

Ramos was fatally shot by law enforcement officers at the scene, Gov. Greg Abbott (R) said. Lt. Christopher Olivarez, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety, said the gunman wore a vest used to store extra magazines — often used by tactical police units — without the armor plates that law enforcement officers typically wear.

Santos Valdez Jr., 18, said he has known Ramos since early elementary school. They were friends, he said, until Ramos’s behavior started to deteriorate.

They used to play video games such as “Fortnite” and “Call of Duty.” But then Ramos changed. Valdez said that Ramos once pulled up to a park where they often played basketball and had cuts all over his face. He first said a cat had scratched his face.

“Then he told me the truth, that he’d cut up his face with knives over and over and over,” Valdez said. “I was like, ‘You’re crazy, bro, why would you do that?’”

Ramos said he did it for fun, Valdez recalled.

In middle school and junior high, Ramos was bullied for having a stutter and a strong lisp, friends and family said.

Stephen Garcia, who considered himself Ramos’s best friend in eighth grade, said Ramos didn’t have it easy in school. “He would get bullied hard, like bullied by a lot of people,” Garcia said. “Over social media, over gaming, over everything.

“He was the nicest kid, the most shyest kid. He just needed to break out of his shell.”

One time, he posted a photo of himself wearing black eyeliner, Garcia said, which brought on a slew of comments using a derogatory term for a gay person.

Garcia said he tried to stand up for him. But when Garcia and his mother relocated to another part of Texas for her job, “he just started being a different person,” Garcia said. “He kept getting worse and worse, and I don’t even know.”

When Garcia left, Ramos dropped out of school. He started wearing all black, Garcia said, and large military boots. He grew his hair out long.

He missed long periods of high school, classmates said, and was not on track to graduate with them this year.

Ramos’s cousin Mia said she saw students mock his speech impediment when they attended middle school together. He’d brush it off in the moment, Mia said, then complain later to his grandmother that he didn’t want to go back to school.

“He wasn’t very much of a social person after being bullied for the stutter,” said Mia, who spoke on the condition that her last name not be used because her family does not want to be associated with the massacre. “I think he just didn’t feel comfortable anymore at school.”

He appears to have sought social connections online as in-person friendships with peers complicated and soured. Garcia said Ramos often used the Yubo app, a platform where users can swipe on each other’s profile, Tinder-style, or hang out in live-streaming rooms and virtually “meet” other users by playing games and chatting. Before the shooting, he posted a photo on Instagram of his new gun collection, tagging a young woman who later said she’d never met him in person but had previously accepted his follow request.

Valdez said Ramos drove around with another friend at night sometimes and shot at random people with a BB gun. He also egged people’s cars, Valdez said.

About a year ago, Ramos posted on social media photos of automatic rifles that “he would have on his wish list,” Valdez said. Four days ago, he posted images of two rifles he referred to as “my gun pics.”

Two months ago, he posted an Instagram story in which he screamed at his mother, Adriana M. Reyes, who he said was trying to kick him out of their home, said Nadia Reyes, a high school classmate who is not related to the family.

“He posted videos on his Instagram where the cops were there and he’d call his mom a b---- and say she wanted to kick him out,” Nadia Reyes said. “He’d be screaming and talking to his mom really aggressively.”

Multiple people familiar with the family, including Ruben Flores, 41, said Ramos’s mother used drugs, which contributed to the upheaval in the home. Ramos has an older sister. She is serving in the Navy, military officials confirmed Wednesday.

A woman who identified herself as Ramos’s mother declined to answer questions about her son on Wednesday. “I don’t want to talk about him,” Reyes, 39, said in a brief phone conversation.

She said her mother — Ramos’s grandmother — was “almost out of surgery,” adding “I believe so,” when asked if the older woman was expected to make a full recovery.

Flores said he lived next door to the family on Hood Street and tried to be a kind of father figure to Ramos, who had “a pretty rough life with his mom.”

He and his wife, Becky Flores, would invite Ramos to barbecues at their house and for sleepovers with their son, who was a few years younger. Ramos went by the nickname “pelon,” Spanish for bald, because his hair was often cut so short when he was younger, Flores said.

As he grew older, problems at home became more acute and more apparent to neighbors, Flores said. He described seeing police at the house and witnessing blowups between Ramos and his mother.

Ramos moved from the Hood Street home to his grandmother's home across town a few months ago, Flores said. He said he last saw the grandmother on Sunday, when she stopped by the Hood Street property, which she also owned. The grandmother told him she was in the process of evicting Ramos's mother because of her drug problems, Flores said.

Reyes, Ramos's former classmate, said she could recall about five times that Ramos had fistfights with peers in middle school and junior high. His friendships were short-lived, she said. Once, Ramos commented to a friend while playing basketball that the friend only wanted to join the Marines one day so he could kill people, Reyes said. The other boy, she added, ended the friendship on the spot.

"I don't think he was necessarily bullied. He would take things too far, say something that shouldn't be said, and then he would go into defense mode about it," Reyes said.

She and her Uvalde High School classmates had visited Robb Elementary School just a day before the massacre, wearing their graduation robes and high-fiving the grade-schoolers, who lined up in the hallways — a community tradition.

"Those kids were so excited to see us in our cap and gown," Reyes said. "They're looking at us like, 'I'm gonna be there one day.' It's surreal, like we're in a movie. It's horrible."

Olivarez, the state public-safety spokesman, said Ramos was found inside a fourth-grade classroom at the school with an assault rifle. The other rifle was later discovered in his truck near the campus. Investigators found "numerous ammunition" in a backpack the gunman dropped as he entered the building after shooting and wounding a school police officer, Olivarez said.

He told reporters that the gunman had no criminal history and no known gang affiliation.

Just a month or two ago, Garcia said, he called Ramos to check in on him.

But Ramos said he was going hunting with his uncle and didn't have time to talk. He hung up. Garcia later saw the photos of large guns that Ramos had posted online and wondered whether that was what they were for — going hunting, or to the shooting range with his uncle.

On Tuesday, Garcia was in algebra class in San Antonio when he started receiving a slew of texts with the news of what had happened in Uvalde. He didn't believe it at first. He opened his phone's browser and Googled the shooting and saw Ramos's name.

"I couldn't even think, I couldn't even talk to anyone. I just walked out of class, really upset, you know, bawling my eyes out," Garcia said. "Because I never expected him to hurt people."

"I think he needed mental help. And more closure with his family. And love."

Arelis R. Hernández in Uvalde; and Devlin Barrett, Alex Horton and Meryl Kornfield in Washington contributed to this report.