News



Messages hang on a fence as hundreds of students and parents arrive for campus orientation Feb. 25, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. (CNS/Reuters/Angel Valentin)



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Four congregations of Catholic sisters filed suit against the board of gunmaker Smith & Wesson Tuesday in Las Vegas, the day before a shooter killed three people and critically wounded a fourth on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus five miles away.

The Adrian Dominicans, Sisters of Bon Secours, Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia and the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary filed what's known as a derivative lawsuit, where shareholders in the company sue corporate boards for allegedly failing their responsibilities to shareholders. The sisters say corporate directors at Smith & Wesson Brands have exposed the company to massive liabilities by its manufacture, sale and marketing of AR-15 style rifles.

Reuters, which first reported the lawsuit, said that if successful, the lawsuit would hold the company's directors liable for any costs associated with the allegedly illegal marketing of assault rifles and any damages would be paid to Smith & Wesson, not the plaintiffs. The sisters' attorney told Reuters this lawsuit is the first derivative case against a corporate board over assault rifles.

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"Much like the pharmaceutical companies being hammered by civil judgments and fines after enjoying years of profits from the sale of dangerous opioids, Smith & Wesson's Board willfully ignores the potentially ruinous exposure the company faces from its marketing and sale of weapons designed specifically for mass killing," attorney Jeffrey Norton said in a written statement announcing the lawsuit. "We are proud to partner with these congregations of Catholic sisters who have long sought corporate responsibility through their shareholder activism."

Police have not said what type of gun or guns were used in the UNLV shooting, but the lawsuit lists several mass shootings that involved Smith & Wesson AR-15-style rifles:

- 18 dead and 13 injured in Lewiston, Maine, in October
- Seven dead and 46 injured at a parade in Highland Park, Illinois, in July 2022
- 17 dead and 17 wounded at a high school in Parkland, Florida, in 2018
- 14 dead and 21 wounded at a community center in San Bernardino, California, in 2015

- 12 dead and 70 injured at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, in 2012.

The sisters said in a joint statement that AR-15 rifles are only designed to kill humans.

"As Catholic Sisters and women of faith who believe in the sanctity of life, our hearts ache at the exponential rise in gun deaths and mass shootings in our country that have ravaged the lives of so many children, women, men, their families, and communities. AR-15-style rifles, like those manufactured by Smith & Wesson, have been the weapon of choice for killers responsible for the deadliest mass shootings in American history," the statement said. "By design, they inflict the greatest number of casualties with maximum bodily harm in the shortest amount of time and are easily modified for automatic fire. These rifles have no purpose other than mass murder."

> "These rifles have no purpose other than mass murder."
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> — Congregations of Catholic Sisters statement
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The lawsuit notes that AR-15 style rifles made by other manufacturers have been used in some of the worst mass shootings in the nation, including one that took 21 lives at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, in 2022 and one that killed 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019.

The lawsuit, filed in a Nevada District Court where the company is incorporated, notes that five highly-publicized mass shootings involving Smith & Wesson's AR-15-style rifles were perpetrated by males between the ages of 19 and 28, and alleges the company specifically marketed to them "to take advantage of young men's impulsive behavior and lack of self-control," despite a previous settlement.

Reuters reported that for many years, gunmakers enjoyed broad immunity for liability from mass shootings under a 2005 federal law. But last year, rival gunmaker Remington agreed to pay $73 million to settle claims by families of the victims of the 2012 shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, which has encouraged others to sue over mass shootings. Smith & Wesson warned in its 2022 annual report that it might have to pay significant damages due to legal proceedings

against the company.

The lawsuit is the latest in a series of actions filed by Catholic sisters; usually they take the form of shareholder resolutions.