

Therapy dogs have a specialty in the US: mass shootings

Uvalde (Texas), May 28

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They are not expert psychologists in traumas, but with their mere presence they manage to calm tense environments and reduce sadness. They are the "comfort dogs" (dogs of comfort or therapy), which in the United States have a specialization: mass shootings.

So far this year they have been, among other places, in Monterey Park, where a man killed 11 people in a dance studio in January, and in Allen (Texas), where another attacker murdered eight people three weeks ago in a shopping center.



A woman pets a therapy dog, on May 24, 2023, in the Plaza in Uvalde, Texas.

Adam Davis / EFE

This week, a group of about ten golden retrievers went to Uvalde, in the state of Texas, where on Wednesday one year was commemorated since the attack on Robb Elementary School, in which 19 children and 2 teachers died.

Among the deceased were two friends of Adalyn, 10 years old, who on the day of the anniversary went with her parents and her little sister to the memorial that was installed in the central square of the municipality after the tragedy.

Embracing her mother, she cried for a while, while looking at the crosses with photographs of the children, toys and flowers, which were left by dozens of citizens or relatives throughout the day.

But when Gideon appeared, in her scarf around her neck and a harness embroidered with the word "pet me" she began to pet him lying on the grass and the sadness disappeared from her face completely.

"Stroking a dog calms them down and helps them, for a moment, to forget about whatever is on their minds," Bonnie Fear, coordinator of the project belonging to the Lutheran Church Charities, a Lutheran organization based in Northbrook, Ill.

It is the third time they have gone to Uvalde. "We were here last year (when the shooting took place) and September when the school year began to welcome the children," says Fear, who explains that they always come at the invitation of the Lutheran churches in the area.

Due to the therapeutic properties of petting the dogs (they lower blood pressure and help alleviate anxiety, according to numerous scientific studies), dogs are used in numerous therapies in many countries, but in the United States this use has a particularity: intervention in areas where mass shootings take place.

To do this, Fear explains, they are "highly trained" from puppies to be "trained to respond to a crisis." "Most of the training is for calm because in an environment like this, we want the dogs to be calm and for people to just pet them and feel free," she details.

In total they have 130 dogs, all golden retrievers because "they look different, they are special." They belong to the religious organization but in their day to day they are cared for by families who live in 27 of the states where this project is present.

In the interventions, each one is accompanied by a person who holds the leash and who also receives crisis training because he is the one who usually maintains conversations with those who come to pet the dogs.

"We are trained to listen and talk to children and adults. We listen to them when they want to vent, but many don't want to talk, they just want to pet the dog," Fear details.

When they do talk, he adds, it's usually about "questions about the dog. We never try to ask how they're doing because it's obvious."

In the years that the project, created in 2008, has been in existence, they have gone through the bloodiest events the country has experienced, including the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, in which 58 people died, the worst massacre in the United States since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Also in the second deadliest, the massacre of the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, which caused 50 victims in 2016.

When they are not dedicated to attending these tragedies, Fear points out, they go to hospitals or schools, where their therapeutic benefits are also revealed.

"We have been to hospitals and seen how a patient, when he starts to pet a dog, the monitor shows that his heart rate drops and his blood pressure goes down," she says as she watches another group of children playing with a dog, stepping aside for a moment, the sight of the crosses that remind us of the horror that the city experienced a year ago.