

Chapter 6

Methodological Issues in Studying Mass Violence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a review of the literature of the nature of studying mass violence. It is often problematic, difficult, or nearly impossible due to small sample sizes, incomplete or inaccurate information, or discrepancies even deciding what exactly “mass violence” is. This chapter reviews the literature for methodological approaches, summarizes qualitative and quantitative methods and findings, and discusses the challenges of mass violence methodologies while also proposing solutions, suggestions, and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to a host of other criminal justice topics, there is relatively little research on active shootings in the United States. While drugs, gangs, mass incarceration, and reentry remain ongoing problems in society, the public often may view these issues as those that happen to “others.” However, active shootings as they have occurred in past decades have happened to those whom the public views as innocents—children at a school, employees working their typical shift, students at a university, or people attending movies or shopping at malls. These incidents have sparked debates about a number of issues including gun control, mental illness, bullying, and violent media. Yet, in a review of the literature, we see that despite many types of research studies, both researchers and the public know fairly little about the processes by which people become the active shooters we see in the news. At the most fundamental level, researchers cannot decide on a common definition of a mass shooting.

This chapter aims to identify the types of research in which academics have engaged and the various ways that they have studied the issue of active and mass shootings. The chapter begins by briefly outlining the definitional problems that plague active shooting research. It continues by examining prior research and the ways in which various academics have approached active and mass shooting research.

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The chapter closes by discussing the limitations of the prior research and the challenges of studying rare events to highlight what we, as academics, know and to drive future studies and begin a discussion about definitional issues in mass shooting research.

Definitional Problems

Like many other types of crime, mass murder, multiple homicides, and active or rampage shootings often create a definitional problem for researchers and practitioners. The term mass shooting is often used in the media, but researchers have debated a common definition that can be used in research studies. Such a definition could be based on the number of deaths, the number of those injured, location type, or motive. Yet, without an accepted standard definition, the results of research studies are unclear at best. While one researcher might choose a location-based definition and simply study school shooters, another may choose a minimum threshold for inclusion in a study and therefore capture school shooters as well as workplace shooters. In this scenario, the findings about the shooters may not be generalizable, as some may be included from one study but excluded in another. In order to better understand shooters, their motives, and their processes, academics need to agree upon a definition for inclusion and exclusion criteria so that findings can be analyzed and applied in a meaningful way for prevention and intervention. As Rocque and Duwe (2018) note, “A common definition is necessary to avoid contradictory conclusions, particularly with respect to trends and risk factors” (p. 29).

Much of the current debate centers on the number of deaths required for an incident to be defined as “mass shooting” or the offender to be classified as a “mass shooter.” The ambiguous use of the term “number” in this definition, however, leaves this definition open to interpretation. Researchers have operationalized the term mass murder to mean at least two (Palermo & Ross, 1999), three (Lankford, 2012; Holmes & Holmes, 2001; Meloy & Felthous, 2004; Meloy, & Felthous, 2004), or four deaths (Bjelopera, Bagalman, Caldwell, Finklea, & McCallion, 2013; Blau, Gorry, & Wade, 2016; Duwe, 2004; Fox & DeLateur, 2013; Fox & Levin, 2003). Dietz (1986) used the following definition for mass murder: “...the willful injuring of five or more persons of whom three or more are killed by a single offender in a single incident” (p. 480).

Some researchers and studies argue the need to consider the number injured as well as the number killed (Levin & Madfis, 2009), while still others simply deem “multiple victims...or at the very least multiple targets” (Newman & Fox, 2009) suitable for inclusion criteria in addition to other factors. Additionally, when the National Research Council (2003) completed an in-depth report on school violence, the committee selected cases “that had experienced incidents of serious school violence in which more than one person was killed or seriously injured in a single attack” (p. 3). Yet, as researchers continue to debate the definitional problem, Wright, Pratt, and DeLisi (2009) note, “It is unclear to us as to why or how [multiple homicide offenders] are defined by various minimum body counts” (p. 194).

To further complicate the definitional problem, other agencies focus on the actions of the offender, classifying an active shooter (preferring this term instead of “mass shooter”) as “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area, typically through the use of firearms” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013; Department of Homeland Security, 2008). The New York City Police Department’s Active Shooter Database (Kelly, 2012) utilized the same definition, further adding that they “limited this definition to include only those cases that spill beyond an intended victim to others” (1). By this standard, the intention to do harm and injure a number of people in a public place is sufficient for inclusion in a study of mass shooters. Similarly, Busch and Cavanaugh (1986)

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