

Chapter 13

Where There's a Will There's a Way:

Examining the Possible Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Incidents of Mass Violence in the USA

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ABSTRACT

“Where there’s a will there’s a way” is a proverb that simply means if someone is determined to do something, he or she will find a way to accomplish it regardless of obstacles. Unfortunately, this is very true for those who wish to commit acts of violence wish to commit acts of violence. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the possible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on incidents of mass and multiple victim violence in the US. More specifically, what impact did efforts such as stay-at-home/shelter-in-place orders, telecommuting options for workers, school closures, cancellation of large public events, and the suspension of non-essential travel have upon the extent and characteristics of mass violence.

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to argue that the quality of life for most Americans has not weakened and declined since the arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020, probably 2019. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted many different aspects of daily life including social wellbeing, mental health, and the economy. But while prosperity in the United States has been on the rise for more than a decade, it remains unevenly distributed in that many factors that have been at play have greatly been exaggerated during the pandemic. These factors were things such as increases in unemployment rates, suicides, drug overdose deaths, and poor self-reported mental health. This appears to be the backdrop with an unprecedented increase in the number of mass shooting beginning in January of 2021.

During 2020, mass shootings had largely been absent from headlines during the coronavirus pandemic, those deaths unfortunately replaced by victims of the virus. But during the same time, gun violence in general killed nearly 20,000 Americans, according to data from the Gun Violence Archive (retrieved from <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>), more than any other year in at least two decades. An additional 24,000 people died by suicide with a gun. This type of death in 2020 outpaced the next-highest recent year, 2017, by more than 3,600. So, gun violence remained a major issue, it's face just changed, for the time being.

Many argue that the pandemic more than likely fueled increases in gun related violence in several ways. The spread of the virus hampered many anti-crime efforts, and the required shutdowns compounded unemployment. This all occurred at a time when schools and other community programs were closed or forced to move to an online format. While beyond the scope of this chapter, the apparent growing collapse of public confidence in law enforcement that followed the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota and myriad other high profiles examples of police brutality also contributed. These issues (Khubchandani and Price, 2021) also contributed greatly to a massive surge in firearm sales.

On average (retrieved from <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/>), there was one mass shooting of some type every 73 days in 2020, compared with one every 36 days in 2019 and one every 45 days in 2017 and 2018. The slowdown interrupted what had been a five-year trend of more frequent and more deadly mass shootings. That gun violence increased overall even as mass shootings declined underscores the fact that those high-profile events account for a relatively small share of firearm deaths.

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