

## Chapter 73

# Deconstructing an Epidemic: Determining the Frequency of Mass Gun Violence

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### ABSTRACT

*The excessive media coverage of mass gun violence has contributed to the public perception of an epidemic. These sensationalized media accounts highlight statistics suggesting a dramatic rise of the phenomenon. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis and comparison of open-source datasets to identify methodological weaknesses and clarify the prevalence of the problem. Findings illustrate the definitional, temporal, and data collection issues impacting the accuracy of assessment. This deconstruction of research counters the perception of a substantial rise in mass gun violence and suggests rates will vary depending on the typological phenomenon being investigated. A discussion of findings illustrates the importance of continuing the examination of mass gun violence and provides comprehensive guidelines for future research assessing the frequency of the phenomenon.*

### INTRODUCTION

The cultural trauma (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004) produced by the recent Aurora, Sandy Hook, and Orlando shootings has driven public perception of a mass gun violence epidemic. Media accounts highlight these especially violent and sensational shootings (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017), and contextualize them with data illustrating the worst-case scenario (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Recently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published a report finding that since the turn of the century, active shooter incidents have increased at an annual rate of 16 percent (Blair & Schweit, 2014). News outlets including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *Business Insider*, and *BBC*

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seized upon this statistic and issued major headlines propagating the FBI's conclusion (Lott, 2015). The media provides the main source of information about mass gun violence and this coverage contributes to shaping public knowledge of the phenomenon (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016).

The issue with media coverage of mass gun violence is that it distorts the nature and pervasiveness of the problem (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017; Silva & Capellan, 2018). For example, research finds that mass gun violence receives disproportionate amounts of coverage in relation to other forms of crime and homicide, despite being far less common (Duwe, 2000; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003; Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002). The media driven assertion that mass gun violence is rising to epidemic proportions influences public opinion about safety and security (Burns & Crawford, 1999, Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Muschert 2007), as well as political discourse and subsequent policies surrounding the phenomenon (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Kleck, 2009; McGinty, Webster, & Barry, 2013). The considerable consequences related to these mediated public perceptions of mass gun violence stress the importance of research assessing the prevalence of the problem.

In the aftermath of the highly publicized FBI report, critics were quick to point out methodological weaknesses that severely compromised the validity of its determination that mass gun violence is on the rise (Lott, 2015). The relatively rare nature of mass gun violence means each research decision has the potential to limit confidence in findings and skew the reality of the phenomenon (Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2016). The decision-making process that scholars, media outlets, and government agencies use when researching the phenomenon has resulted in an increasingly contentious debate regarding the true prevalence of the problem.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for the divergent views regarding mass gun violence in an attempt to clarify the frequency of the phenomenon. Specifically, this chapter will first review the assertion that mass gun violence is increasing yearly at an alarming rate. This is followed by an in-depth examination of the methodological considerations impacting conflicting reports of the problem. This analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of datasets provides guidance for a set of best practices for student, scholarly, and practitioner assessment of mass gun violence. The implications of this exploration into mass gun violence research provide a balanced understanding of the hyper-mediated problem and offer comprehensive guidelines for future research of the phenomenon.

## **BACKGROUND**

The FBI identified 160 active shooter incidents over a fourteen-year period and suggested that these incidents increased from a single incident in 2000 to seventeen incidents in 2013 (see Figure 1). Esteemed publications reported the findings, with headlines including, *Mass Shootings on the Rise, FBI Says* (Barrett, 2014) and *FBI Confirms a Sharp Rise in Mass Shootings Since 2000* (Schmidt, 2014). These headlines illustrate the conflation of active shooter incidents (as reported by the FBI) and mass shootings (as reported by the media) in discourse surrounding mass gun violence. A significant problem with blending these terms is that they are operationalized according to distinctly divergent criteria.

The United States Department of Justice / Federal Bureau of Investigation defines an active shooter incident as an individual (or individuals) actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Notably, the FBI provided an important caveat regarding the active shooter report, stating that the contents did not encompass all mass shooting incidents in public places,

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