

Chapter 75

A Fifty-Year Survey: An Analysis of U.S. Mass Shooting Events, 1962–2013

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ABSTRACT

Recent and ongoing events have created national concern, fear, and dialogue about potential future acts of mass casualty violence. While much attention has been directed towards the creation of stricter gun control legislation as a means to prevent such acts, little has been mentioned about understanding the offender characteristics and motives for these horrific crimes. Many of the mass shooting offenders share similar features. More attention must be given to these commonalities as a way to understand the event itself, and for the formulation of preventive measures. This study examines mass shooting situations from 1962 to 2013 and analyzes the similarities amongst offenders. In addition, through the application of Identity Theory, it is argued that these acts are perpetrated due to identity conflicts that the violators possess. Through the commission of these acts, they are able to reassert their role and place within society

INTRODUCTION

American society has a history of violence (Alvarez & Bachman, 2014). Violence, in a very broad sense, is very complex as it encompasses many different acts of aggression. Of the various acts described as being violent, homicide or murder is often perceived to be the most severe form of violence (Lippman, 2013). Although murderous events are a relatively rare phenomenon, the United States has a high homicide rate in comparison to other industrialized countries (Schwartz, 2010). In spite of this, homicide seems to create a sense of intrigue and fascination among virtually every population regardless of whether the act involves a single victim or multiple victims (Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2017). Part of this heightened

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interest can be attributed to the fact that murders generally receive substantially more attention from the news media in comparison to other crimes, with homicides involving multiple victims (mass murders) receiving the most coverage (Duwe, 2007; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Stote & Standing, 1995).

There have been different perspectives, in terms of definitions, of what constitutes mass murders. For instance, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines mass murder as the killing of four or more people, excluding the offender, within a 24-hour time period (Krouse & Richardson, 2015). Others have argued that events where two or three people have been killed should be categorized as mass murders (Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 2012; Lott 2000). In 2013, following the Sandy Hook shootings, Congress changed their definition of what constitutes a mass murder by lowering their definitional victim count to three or more individuals (Fox, Levin, & Fridel, 2019). The frequent use of terms such as “mass shootings” and “active shooter” further complicates our general understanding and definition of mass murder (Fox et al., 2019). Traditionally, the FBI definition of mass murders has been the most frequently accepted and used (Krouse & Richardson, 2015).

Our history and fascination with these type acts can be witnessed through the evolution of various marketed merchandise related to homicidal events. The capitalistic trend of profiting from murder is often argued to have begun in the 1980’s with the creation of “Mass Murderer Trading Cards” by the *National Lampoon*, a parody publication (Fox et al., 2017). Soon after, other endeavors to capitalize on homicide began to hit the markets such as comic books featuring individuals such as Jeffrey Dahmer, sales of crime scene memorabilia, and sales of anything created by the killer themselves, such as drawings and painting. Even *People* magazine made a shift in the early 1990s by placing notorious murderers, such as Laurie Dann, Dylan Klebold, and Eric Harris, on their cover instead of featuring entertainment and popular culture celebrities, as was the case in prior years (Fox et al., 2017). With these transitions, American society has become saturated with stories, reports, and images of homicide. As exposure to these events have increased, public perception regarding these acts have been shaped, whether accurately or inaccurately, and a sense of panic has been formed due to the assumption that the attacks are reaching epidemic proportions (Fox & Levin, 2015).

With the tremendous interest that these acts of violence receive, it is rather ironic that research involving mass murder has routinely been ignored until recently (Bowers, Holmes, & Rhom, 2010; DeLisi & Scherer, 2006; Liwerant, 2007). This increased interest from researchers is timely as society has many unanswered questions regarding the perpetration of mass murders. Thus, research is needed to understand the underlying causes and consequences of these situations (Huff-Corzine et al., 2013). In addition, research efforts should also identify ways that law enforcement professionals, school officials, and others in our communities can prevent these acts from occurring and how to better respond to these attacks should they transpire.

The current study examines mass murder events in the United States from 1965 – 2013. The aim of the project is to provide an assessment of U.S. mass murder events from the past 50 years to detect potential commonalities. We do not presume to come to predictive conclusions. The identification of factors determined to be significant in the perpetration of mass murders will be critically assessed to better understand their influence and relevance in the commission of these crimes. Current legislative initiatives aimed at reducing the probability of these events from occurring will be examined and recommendations will be made in regard to factors that must be considered in the discussions on how to reduce the frequency of these attacks.

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