
MASS CONFUSION CONCERNING MASS MURDER

by

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When we first began investigating the patterns and characteristics of multiple homicide more than three decades ago (Levin & Fox, 1985), there was next to nothing in the literature of criminology, psychology, or psychiatry about the topic beyond a few isolated case studies. The lack of professional interest in mass murder at the time did not seem unreasonable. Under the mistaken belief that only the body counts differed from the typical homicide, it was widely accepted that if you understood single victim murder, you would also understand the situation in which multiple people are killed. Moreover, multiple homicide was perceived to be so rare that empirical research seemed undeserving of any expenditure of time and effort.

Of course, it wasn't long before serial murder, as a type of multiple homicide, emerged as a popular focus of inquiry among scholars and their students. The 1990s saw an acceleration in academic books and articles focusing on sexual sadists and repeat killers. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Holmes and Holmes, 2000; Duwe, 2007), however, criminologists continued to ignore killing sprees involving a single or short-term explosion of violence.

The Carnage of 2012

Devastating massacres at a Colorado theater and a Connecticut elementary school made mass shootings the top news story of 2012 (Associated Press, 2012), eclipsing a hotly-contested presidential race and a massive storm along the East Coast. After decades of relative disinterest, the topic suddenly had the full attention of politicians, pundits and professors alike.

As public anxiety mounted, many observers speculated about the possible reasons behind the surge in mass murder, and mass shootings in particular. Of course, perceptions are not always in line with reality, and are more strongly influenced by recent events than by those that occurred well in the past. Meanwhile, debate over the role of guns and of mental illness raged on, despite the relative dearth of hard data to serve as context.

It didn't take long for analysts from various professional sectors to attempt empirically to measure trends in mass murder and the contributing factors underlying them. Database projects were launched by news organizations (e.g., USA Today, The Washington Post, and Mother Jones), by advocacy groups (e.g., The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence and Everytown, formerly Mayors Against Illegal Guns), by law enforcement and government agencies (e.g., the FBI in conjunction with Texas State University, the NYPD, and the Congressional Research Service), as well as by research collaboratives at some prominent universities (e.g., Stanford and Harvard). Unfortunately, rather than adding clarity, these initiatives, by virtue of their varying definitions, time frames and data sources, created even greater confusion.

Active Shooters

Until very recently, the term "active shooter"—crafted shortly after the 1999 Columbine massacre—was relatively obscure, used mostly in law enforcement circles for SWAT training exercises. But within the past few years, fueled by a few catastrophic mass murders, "active shooter" has become widely feared as the modern-day boogeyman armed with a gun.

In a speech at the October 2013 IACP conference, Attorney General Eric Holder was anything but circumspect in describing the emerging trend almost in epidemic proportions. Reflecting on an FBI-sponsored report (in collaboration with the ALERRT Center at Texas State University) on active shooters, Holder noted that over a span of just four years, America had "witnessed an increase of nearly 150% in the number of people shot and killed in connection with active shooter incidents."

Unfortunately, there is much misunderstanding about what an active shooter is exactly. A CNN report, under the headline "Mass shootings on the rise," lamented that active shooter events had "become so common, that other examples roll off the tongue: Newtown, Navy Yard, Fort Hood, Virginia Tech." However, the four examples noted in the story are the far extreme, not the norm.

As defined by the federal government, an active shooter "is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area, typically through the use of firearms" (see Blair, Martindale, & Nichols, 2014). Even though they may wish to kill large numbers of victims, these assailants typically fall short of their objective.

Probing the active shooter data highlighted by Holder reveals a pattern far different from the impression left by the deadliest shooting sprees often used as illustrations. Among the 110 active shooter cases identified between 2000 and 2012, nearly three-quarters resulted in fewer than four fatalities, which is the standard threshold for mass murder. Moreover, nearly one-quarter of the

active shooter events were resolved without any victims losing their lives. While all of these episodes were undoubtedly frightening to those impacted directly or indirectly, the majority cannot be equated with the few catastrophic slayings that have grabbed the headlines and alarmed the nation.

Even the numerical threshold is now subject to debate. In December 2012, Congress passed legislation redefining mass shooting as three or more victims killed, compelling the FBI to modify its long-standing definition. In September 2014, the Bureau then released a revised and updated report based on the new definition and some additional cases uncovered since the earlier report (see Blair & Schweit, 2014). Even with the lower threshold, the majority of the 160 active shooter events described in the FBI report were not mass shootings, whether or not the assailants had had designs to kill at least three.

The interchangeable use of the terms “active shooting” and “mass shooting” by news coverage has created a good deal of public anxiety and confusion. Numerous media outlets reported on the active shooter study with the headline, “Mass Shootings on the Rise, FBI says.”

Besides the confusion surrounding terminology, evidence suggesting an increase in active shooters is suspect, at best. Unlike mass killings, there is no routine data source for active shooters. Many cases were identified by searching news archives, which have expanded in recent years. It is not clear whether the increase in active shooter events is completely related to the actual case count or at least partially to the availability and accessibility of news reports to identify such events, particularly those in which few if any victims died. In fact, there is some evidence that several cases from the more remote years were overlooked, which would have dramatically altered the trend (see Lott & Riley, 2014).

Undeniably, the focus on active shooters is important for law enforcement and its preparedness training. However, these events are exceptionally rare and not necessarily on the increase. It is critical that we avoid carelessly scaring the American public with questionable statements about a surge in active shooter events.

A Public Menace

The moral panic and sense of urgency have been fueled by various claims that mass murders, and mass shootings in particular, are reaching epidemic levels. For example, the Mother Jones news organization, having assembled a database of public mass shootings since 1982, reported on a sharp increase in incidents and fatalities, including a spike in cases and a record number of casualties in the year 2012 (Follman, Pan, & Aronsen, 2013).

Analysts at Mother Jones and others (e.g., see Cohen, Azrael, & Miller, 2014) have focused selectively and narrowly on only certain types of mass killings—those considered to be indiscriminate and senseless rampages in public places, where, as it happens, middle-class Americans are perceived to be most vulnerable.

Gang-related killings and robberies were excluded, even though their victims are every bit as dead as those individuals whose lives are taken while shopping, sitting in a classroom, or going to a cinema. In effect, marginalized Americans who are victimized in large numbers do not seem to count as much as their more affluent counterparts. Yet some of the largest mass killings have been perpetrated by gang members for the purpose of committing robbery (e.g., a 1983 massacre at a Seattle gambling club in which 13 were executed by gunfire).

These studies have also excluded family annihilations, even those with double-digit death tolls, ostensibly because they occur in a private setting where non-family members can feel safe from violence. Another possible reason is more psychological: many people believe they can control what happens in their own homes and thus are more unnerved about crimes committed by strangers than by intimates.

Yet some massacres in private homes are actually perpetrated by intruders. Also, family annihilations don't always remain in the family. Mass murders can begin behind closed doors at home but then spread to outsiders in public places. In 1987, for example, an Arkansas man murdered his 14 family members, after which he drove to several other locations to kill a former co-worker and a young woman who had spurned his romantic advances. Sixteen victims were shot to death in total, but this case—the largest family annihilation in American history—would not be found among the mass shootings recorded by Mother Jones.

Broadly Defined

How do the findings of Mother Jones and the FBI group hold up when the full range of mass shootings and even mass murders more generally are considered? Simply put, not very well.

For years, we have tracked trends in mass shootings (incidents and victims) using the Supplementary Homicide Reports (Fox & Levin,

2015). Although these data are not without their limitations in terms of missing information, they at least are relatively consistent over a long time frame. When considering all mass shootings with four or more slain, there has been an average of about 20 per year since the mid-1970s with no real upward or downward trajectory. The only pattern is a slight rise recently in victim count, largely attributable to a few large-scale cases (e.g., 32 killed at Virginia Tech in 2007, and the 2012 massacres of 27 in Newtown, CT and 12 in Aurora, CO).

What is abundantly clear from the full array of mass shootings, besides the lack of any trend upward or downward, is the largely random variability in the annual counts. There have been several points in time when journalists and others have speculated about a possible epidemic in response to a flurry of high profile shootings. Yet these speculations have always proven to be incorrect when subsequent years reveal more moderate levels.

Not Just Guns

With the attention on mass shootings largely driven by the debate over gun control, it is important not to lose sight of the many incidents—nearly one-third of the mass murders reflected in the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR)—that involve weapons other than firearms. In fact, some of the largest incidents have been perpetrated by fire or explosives (e.g., the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing).

Although the SHR is the most consistent and long-term source of data on multiple victim homicide, it certainly has its issues in terms of accuracy. Some cases are missing (including the Sandy Hook school massacre and mass killings in Florida for several years), although these problems are not insurmountable. Also, some small jurisdictions have inappropriately included all their homicides for the year in one record, making it appear as if there had been one incident with multiple victims.

With great care, a team of analysts at USA Today verified each and every SHR mass murder incident from 2006 onward and filled in missing cases based on news reports. Unfortunately, extending the data verification and augmentation further back would have been especially challenging. At least over the past eight years, there has been absolutely no increase in the incidence of mass murder, those involving a gun and otherwise (see Overberg, Hoyer, Upton, et al., 2013).

Thinking in the Extreme

Contrary to the relatively flat trend line in mass murder, media reports leave a different—and much more terrifying—impression. Even the most extraordinary and unrepresentative episodes have been treated by cable television outlets and news websites as though they were reflective of massacres generally and therefore deserving of prolonged publicity.

Although highlighting certain headline cases may attract large audiences, it does not necessarily lead policy responses in the best direction. Extensive coverage of massive shooting sprees, for example, tends to center the debate on gun availability while ignoring critical factors such as social isolation and the eclipse of community. Emphasizing the need to protect schools and workplaces from armed intruders overlooks problems related to bullying, harassment and other forms of mistreatment of students and employees. Limiting the scope of research to indiscriminate attacks in public places focuses attention on mental illness, but fails to address issues involved in the larger pool of mass murders, such as financial despair, family discord, or hate and prejudice.

A Final Word

Although there has been no increase in mass murder over the past few decades, the incidence hasn't declined either, even as the U.S. homicide count has fallen by one-half since the early 1990s. Clearly there is more work to be done in examining this divergence.

In future research efforts, it is important to remain broad-based and inclusive in defining mass murder. It is certainly appropriate to maintain a typology of mass murder (e.g., family-related, school-associated, workplace-involved, felony-related, hate-inspired, and fully indiscriminate) and to compare characteristics across these classifications. However, research which purports to encompass mass murder in total should not arbitrarily include only those cases that fit some preconception. Ignoring certain incidents of multiple homicide, even fairly devastating ones in terms of scope, not only fails to tell the whole story of mass killings, but unreasonably trivializes their importance and adds insult to injury for those victims.

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