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Pop Culture Intersections

The Effects of Media Coverage on
Mass Shootings in the United States

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effects media coverage and media portrayal have on mass shootings in the United States. As the occurrences of mass shootings in the United States have increased, the depiction of these events through news outlets, media stories and journal articles have also increased. With these devastating events on the rise, the perceived public safety within the nation is at stake. By evaluating the effects of media coverage on mass shootings, we are able to uncover whether it may be encouraging the increasing trend. Through the examination of multiple news articles, scholarly journals, and books through a behavioral and psychological approach, we are able to further understand how media coverage and portrayal has changed the perception of mass shootings to future perpetrators and whether the discussion of media change surrounding perpetrators has actually occurred. As a result, we are able to conclude that media coverage on perpetrators does have an impact on the occurrences of mass shootings, as the amount attention surrounding perpetrators has been shown to be correlated with the number of shootings.

The Effects of Media Coverage and Media Portrayal on
Mass Shootings in the United States

Introduction

Context

Despite being home to only 4.4% of the world's population (U.S. and World Population Clock), around 31% of the world's mass shootings occur in the United States (Lankford, 2016). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the term "mass murder" has been defined as a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered, within one event, and in one or more locations in close geographical proximity (Krouse, 2015, p. 2). Although there is no set definition of what a "mass shooting" is, since a mass shooting is a type of mass murder, we are able to define a mass shooting as a mass murder through the use of firearms. From 1999 to 2013, the United States has seen on average of 31 mass murders per year, and of those incidents, 21 of them on average were committed entirely by firearms (Krouse, 2015, p. 2). The five deadliest public mass shootings in the United States have occurred since 2007 (Deadliest Mass Shootings, 2018) and the frequencies, along with number of fatalities is shown to be growing (Keller et. al, 2016). According to the Congressional Research Service, the annual number of public mass shootings in the 1970s had multiplied by four and a half times by the early 2010s (Krouse, 2015, p. 2). There has also been an increasing trend in active shooting incidents from 2000 to 2015, according to the FBI (Blair, 2014). As of 2015 to 2017, a mass shooting resulting in the death of four or more people occurred approximately every 12.5 days (Meindl & Ivy, 2017, p.368). With these alarming rates on the rise, the safety of the entire nation is in jeopardy.

Argument

Although there is current discussion surrounding gun control laws and mental health approaches, the one area that may lead to major progress in decreasing the number of mass shootings is changing the media coverage and media portrayal surrounding both the offenders and the events. With current media coverage often highlighting the perpetrator and operation of the event, future offenders have a clear incentive of becoming famous for both their identities and actions through news outlets. Some shooters have even gone as far as reaching out to media organizations themselves to gain the fame they seek. Those who may be looking to commit a future shooting may also look at past offenders and events reported in the news to gain knowledge on how they can emulate a similar crime, causing contagion, copycat effects, and imitation. As a result of competing for attention, these fame-seeking offenders are extremely dangerous as they often try to kill more victims than previous shooters. The attention the media places on these aspects of mass shootings has caused the increase in occurrences and fatalities. If the media were to place less attention on the perpetrators of these events and focusing more on the victims, future perpetrators may be discouraged from continuing this increasing trend. By removing names, pictures, and details of the event from the media, the increase in frequency and fatalities may begin to drop.

Significance

Although mass shootings may seem rare, there should still be a large concern surrounding this topic. Mass shootings not only cause multiple casualties and devastate families, but they also leave some survivors, bystanders, and community members with post-traumatic stress and create fear among the larger public. According to a Texas State University professor, J. Pete Blair, mass

shooting fatalities are often higher in large, crowded and confined spaces, making it difficult for people to escape (Keller et. al, 2016). As a result, gunmen often create hostage situations and are not stopped until hours after the event, causing deaths of victims who were in dire need of medical attention (Keller et. al, 2016). With the amount of deaths skyrocketing from mass shootings among public spaces, such as the workplace, schools, restaurants, and houses of worship, people are left feeling anxious and vulnerable due to the thoughts that “this could happen to me” (Krouse, 2015, p. 1). As human beings, coping with the loss of a loved one can be extremely difficult, but when the loss is unexpected and due to senseless violence, the sense of safety that was once had is taken away, leaving people feeling vulnerable, angry, and hopeless (Kamp, 2017). According to Sheila Rauch, an associate professor at Emory University, “Violent trauma steals the sense of safety that most people take for granted in their lives for themselves and those they care about” (Kamp, 2017). Both physical and mental trauma that is caused by shootings can be extremely detrimental to a person, as it can lead to depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, fear, insomnia, anger, rehabilitation, and medical interventions that can last a person’s entire lifetime (Lowe & Galea, 2017) . With shootings having such detrimental effects on everyone in the nation, it is critical to understand how these horrific events can be reduced.

Article Overview

This journal article will give a background on the current discussion surrounding alternative approaches to reduce mass shootings, including gun control and mental health approaches. The importance of media coverage and how it plays a vital role in molding the public’s opinion on certain events will also be discussed. Focusing on the relationship between

the media and mass shootings will allow us to understand how focusing on perpetrator of these events in news stories may be causing the increase in occurrences and fatalities. The examination of how the media plays a role in transferring news to the public, due to its ability to shape the public's perception will give us a further understanding of how it can inspire undesired effects of future shootings. These undesired effects will be discussed through how the current state of media coverage surrounding shootings may be seen as a fame incentive or inspire copycat gunmen. Researching current news articles surrounding recent mass shootings will illustrate whether or not change among the media coverage has taken place. By looking at current media coverage, consequences of the media coverage, and whether implementation of change has occurred, we will be able to gain a further understanding of the possibility and plausibility of changing in media coverage surrounding these incidents.

By taking a psychological and behavioral approach I will be able to gain a further understanding of why media reporting of perpetrators, may influence the number of shootings and fatalities. Through the examining of current news articles surrounding recent shootings I will also be able to understand why the increasing trend of mass shootings have continued to increase. Looking at other media reports will also give me a chance to understand how difficult it would be to change the media coverage of perpetrators.

Current Discussion and Background

Current Discussion Part 1: Gun Control

Although a ban on guns may often be the first topic of discussion when discussing how to reduce these fatal events, the actual removal of these weapons used by perpetrators may be nearly impossible. This is due to the fact that Americans appear to be dramatically split about

gun control, as many citizens own a gun or multiple guns themselves. This split opinion on gun control within the citizens can be seen through the Washington Post-ABC news poll conducted on October 15-18, 2015 with a sample size of 1,001 U.S. adults. 82% of respondents answered that gun violence is a very serious problem in the country, with 46% responding that enacting new laws to try and reduce gun violence should be a higher priority, and 47% responding that protecting the right to own guns is a higher priority (Washington Post-ABC news poll, 2015). Respondents were also asked how strongly they felt about their opinion, and 78% of them selected that they felt strongly (Washington Post-ABC news poll, 2015).

Another problem with gun control that may arise is the amount of firearms that are present within the nation. U.S. citizens currently own 40% of all the guns in the world, which is more than the next 25 top ranked gun ownership countries combined (Schaeffer, 2018). With a total of 393 million guns for a population of around 326 million, it is estimated that there is gun ownership of 121 firearms per 100 civilians (Schaeffer, 2018). Being one of the only two countries in the world that have “the right to bear arms” written into their constitution, the removal of the ability to purchase firearms would be in violation of the constitution (Lemieux, 2014, p.76). As a result, removing this absurd amount of guns from the population is both physically unlikely and politically unfeasible.

Current Discussion Part 2: Mental Health

Mass shooters have also been shown to have some common psychosocial characteristics including problems with self-esteem, a persecutory/paranoid outlook, narcissism, depression, suicidality, and a perception of being socially rejected (Knoll, 2012). In the same Washington Post-ABC News poll mentioned previously, respondents were asked if they believed mass

shootings in the country are more a reflection of problems identifying and treating people with mental health problems or inadequate gun control laws, while 63% selected the former and 23% selected the later (2015). As a result, the discussion of taking a mental health approach to target perpetrators with these psychosocial problems in reducing mass shootings has also been a topic for discussion.

However, this approach also seems highly unfeasible, as actually being able to identify future attackers can be extremely difficult. This is due to the fact that the majority of people that are mental health issues are not violent and do not pose a threat to anyone. It has been shown that individuals with serious mental illness are associated with less than 3% of all violence (Fazel & Grann, 2006). It has also been found that there is generally a minimal relationship between psychiatric disorders and violence in the absence of substance abuse (Martone et al., 2013). Even with recent innovations within the field of mental health, it is often difficult to diagnose attackers who have a mental health problem because many mentally ill people do not visit the doctor to get diagnosed and/or are diagnosed incorrectly. A study conducted to examine perpetrators of public mass shootings between 1983 and 2012 has shown that perpetrators who have had a history of mental illness are no more dangerous than those without mental illness, as there is no association with the number of victims, the number of weapons or, the perpetrator outcome of the incident (Lemieux, 2014, p. 89). Therefore, the assumption that all persons with mental illness are a “high-risk” population in relation to mass shootings lacks supportive evidence and a mental health approach to reduce these events is not feasible.

Background

Seeking truth and informing audiences of current events is a fundamental responsibility of media reporters. When significant events occur within the nation, the public often turn to the news and media reports to gain information about the unfolding events and to see the relevant images. It is up to the media to report mass shootings and inform the audience about the grim reality and tragedy of these events. Although reporting the “who” is a standard journalistic practice when reporting the news, some journalists have discussed how their reporting may be inspiring future perpetrators, leading them to question how these stories are covered (Morris, 2018, p. 10). However, many U.S. print and online journalists remain unaware of the research done surrounding mass shootings and how their reporting’s may be consequential to the increase in mass shootings (Dahmen, 2018, p. 164). As a result, intense and frequent news coverage given to the perpetrators of mass shootings can have both contagious and incentivizing effects on future mass killers.

Analysis 1: Images Surrounding Mass Shootings

Current media stories, often cover mass shooting incidents using an extensive amount of images surrounding the perpetrators rather than victims, which may spark attention seeking and contagion effects. Newspaper and online article photographs play an important role in the transferring news to the public, as images are easier to recall than words to the human mind (Paivio et al., 1968). Through news images and visuals, the media can have agenda-setting effects. As a result, extensive news media coverage of mass shootings gives the audience a topic to discuss, causing the event to gain an even larger public presence. It has been shown that news stories that contain photos receive more attention from audiences compared to those without photos (Adam et al., 2007). The use of photos on certain topics within the media article can also

affect which elements of a specific news story receive the most public attention, interest, and discussion (Adam et al., 2007). The same or similar images seen multiple times across the news media can allude to the audience which aspect of a news story is the most important. Even with overall newspaper sales declining, front page photos can still influence people who do not purchase newspapers because these photos are not only visible in public places where many people see only the front page, such as newsstands, grocery stores, and convenience stores, but are also apparent on the internet through online articles and social media (Dahmen, 2018, p. 164).

A study was conducted that examined the U.S. newspaper photographic coverage following three major school shootings. Through the analysis of 4,934 photos from 9 days of newspaper coverage, this study made many findings about the prevalence of photo use, changes in photo use during the 3 days following mass shootings, and comparisons between number of photographs between perpetrators and victims. As a result, the study found that news coverage gave more attention to perpetrators than to individual deceased victims by a ratio of 16 to 1 (Dahmen, 2018, p. 163). Even though some use of photos in reporting information is appropriate and necessary, the findings from this study raises serious concerns about the current practice in news media surrounding mass shootings. The main job for the news media is not only to report news to the public, but it is also important to balance the public's need for information against potential harm. Although the responsibility for the acts of mass shootings is not solely on the media, they do hold the responsibility of spreading these behaviors. Bringing in revenue and viewers is a powerful incentive for the media to continue reporting and sensationalizing these

tragic events, however there needs to be a line drawn at which the future safety of the public is more important.

Analysis 2: Consequence of Media Coverage

The coverage of perpetrators given by the media can have detrimental effects, including fame seeking offenders trying to cash in on their prize and media stories sparking contagion, copycat, and imitation effects. Many attackers explicitly admit that they want fame and directly reach out to media organizations to get it. For example, the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooter stated, “Seems the more people you kill, the more you’re in the limelight” and the 2012 Sandy Hook gunman wrote in an online forum, “Just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers” (Dahmen, 2018, p.11). It was found that on average, fame-seeking offenders kill and wound more than twice as many victims as other active shooters, and this seems to be positively correlated with the amount of media coverage they receive (Lankford, 2016). Many fame-seeking offenders deliberately kill and wound high numbers of victims because they know it will help them get more media attention. Media coverage of mass shooters rewards them by making them famous, and provides a clear incentive for future offenders to attack. Many of these at-risk attackers recognize from past media coverage of offenders that murdering large numbers of men, women, or children will guarantee them fame. They believe their names, faces, and actions will be seen worldwide on newspapers, television, movies, magazines, and the internet. Unfortunately, these beliefs are correct, due to the media’s predictable pattern of behavior by giving more attention and publicity to offenders who kill more victims. These offenders are not only being rewarded for committing mass killings, but they are also getting a strong incentive to kill as many victims as possible.

Media coverage of mass shooters also leads to contagion and copycat effects. Some key terms to be defined when looking at the impact of media on mass shootings are contagion and imitation, also known as the copycat effect. “Contagion” is a term borrowed from epidemiology to explain how behaviors can spread across a group of people. It refers to the ways that some people who are exposed to a given behavior may become more likely to behave similarly themselves and that behaviors can essentially go “viral” (Gould et al., 2003). On the other hand, imitation or the copycat effect is more straightforward, and typically refer to peoples’ imitation of an original actor’s modeled behavior. Although social contagion can include copycat effects as one way that behaviors spread, it can also be less direct. As with diseases, not everyone who is exposed to a given behavior becomes afflicted; some may be “carriers” who transmit information about that behavior to others, who then have an increased risk of exhibiting the behavior themselves (Meindl & Ivy, 2017, p. 368).

It has been found that contagion and copycat effects are often prevalent in various types of aggressive behavior, violent crime, mass killings, and terrorism. The most well known example of contagion caused by the media is the finding that when suicides are highly publicized, that it can lead to a temporary increase in suicide rates (Gould et al., 2003). Although the belief that media coverage of suicides could produce contagion and copycat effects was once doubted by many media organizations and outlets, it is now largely accepted as an established fact. The World Health Organization, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Poynter Institute, and Society of Professional Journalists have all published warnings that media

coverage of suicide can increase the risks of subsequent suicides and, therefore, must be handled with extreme care to minimize potential consequences (Lankford & Madfis, 2018, p. 3).

These findings about media coverage being correlated to the increase of suicides is relevant to mass shootings because these offenders are often suicidal as well. Nearly 50% of active shooters in the United States commit suicide or refuse to surrender and are killed by police (Lankford 2015). Additionally, those offenders who survive often intended or expected to die, but change their minds after attacking or failing to complete their suicide attempts (Lankford, 2015).

When mass shooters receive large amounts of media attention, it can turn them into role models for other impressionable high-risk individuals. As a result, these individuals may be more likely to commit mass shootings of their own. Although imitators are not always fame-seekers, there may be some persons who empathize with the original attackers' claims that violence is a justifiable response to their feelings of mistreatment and marginalization. Thus they believe have validation to imitate a similar attack. Others may be attracted to the sensationalized, dramatic, or powerful ways the original attackers were portrayed by media outlets, and therefore commit attacks of their own.

Some researchers have found that active shootings, school shootings, and other mass killings are now so "contagious" that a single incident can increase the risk of future attacks for the next two weeks, while others have documented even longer term copycat effects. For example, it was found that the Columbine school shooters inspired at least 21 copycat shootings and 53 prevented plots in the United States over a 15-year period (Follman & Andrews, 2015). It was also found that at least 32 attackers identified the Columbine shooters as role models, and at

least 8 attackers who considered the Virginia Tech shooter to be a role model (Langman, 2017). As a result, it can be seen that many copycat killers are not just copying criminal behavior from previous offenders, they are following the actions of famous criminals that they may see as celebrities. The fame and glamorization of these criminals is given to them by the media.

Analysis 3: Problems with Current Reporting

Even with dozens of journal articles advocating for the change of how the media portrays mass shootings, there is still no current change to be seen. There has been discussion surrounding portraying the shooter's action in a negative light and portraying the shooter's behavior as shameful (Meindl & Ivy, 2017, p.369). Another method involves avoiding in-depth descriptions of the offender's reason for committing the crime, so those who feel similar to them do not feel drawn to imitate their behaviors. Reducing the overall duration of news coverage could also deter the motive for fame, as some shootings are often reported for weeks after the event. The live press that immediately follows the events can also be removed, as it would take away from the excitement of the event and overall interest of the event, decreasing the desire for imitation. Presenting the facts of the events in a manner that is dull and avoiding dramatic digital re-creations can help minimize interest and reduce sensationalism many offenders desire. Removal of the photos and the names of current and past perpetrators has also been discussed to deter future offenders by removing the aspect of fame to both their name and image (Lankford & Madfis, 2018, p. 4).

With these plans being discussed by authors and scholars, there is still not any change to be seen. The most recent mass shooting that has been broadcasted all over the nation is the one that occurred on August 27, 2018 at a Jacksonville, Florida video game tournament. By just

searching up the event on Google News, we are able to find the name of the offender with the simple click of the button. Cable News Network (CNN) is a popular American news-based cable and satellite television channel, and is one of the top articles when I search for the event. The article includes an extensive amount of pictures and videos highlighting, the event and even goes as far to include the live broadcast at the time, where the shots can be heard (Levenson, 2018). Almost a third of the article's content discusses what the gunman David Katz had done and highlights his previous Madden tournaments. They also go as far as including a picture of a previous Tweet from the the Buffalo Bills, congratulating Katz for winning the Championship in the previous year. There is no actual text mention of the victims' names in the article, and if the reader was to even want to know how many fatalities there were and what their names are, they would need to click into one of the videos displayed. Just by simply typing in the tournament name into the google image search we are also given an array of photos of the offender, with only a couple of pictures of the two victims who were murdered. There is no further information about any of the other victims as each article seems to focus on what the perpetrator was doing at the time of the attack, and even what he was doing a year before the attack.

Future Steps and Conclusion

Future Steps Part 1: Media Changes and Mass Shootings

Since it is shown that media outlets have not yet changed to reduce the amount of airtime the perpetrators receive, the first step would be to negotiate with the media organizations and illustrate to them how the content they are producing can possibly be increasing the safety risk within the nation. There are already limitations news outlets and media organizations have set on certain events, such as not showing people who run onto the field during professional baseball or

football games. It had become an entertaining trend for fans to run the on the field during these games and have police chase them down while being broadcasted on television. Since they did not want to continue providing fame to those who were seeking it by running on the field, they have adopted policies to not show those who decide to run the field. An ESPN sports producer specifically said that “We’re not looking to glorify someone running onto the field” (Osgood, 2016). If this could be implemented in the same way toward mass shooting perpetrators that would be a huge success for the nation. By putting offenders on the big screen we are glorifying them and giving them the fame that they seek.

It is now standard operating procedure for media organizations and online information sources to no longer publish the names of sexual assault victims. Even though the media is free the print the names of these victims, they have decided to abstain from the practice because individuals are more likely to come forward and report their own victimization if they can remain anonymous, enabling the criminal justice system to take care of these crimes (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2016). If the media is able to remove the names of sexual assault victims, why are they unable to remove the names of mass shooters? They have decided to allow the criminal justice system take care of the crimes of sexual assault cases, so why not allow protect the greater safety of the nation by removing media incentive for perpetrators?

Future Steps Part 2: Media Changes and Smaller Shootings

Another future step that should be taken to target and tackle the increase in mass shootings is changing the news media regarding smaller shootings that are often unheard of. Since they are often not reported on the news, many of the U.S. citizens are unaware of this epidemic that has taken place within this nation. As of the date August 29th, 2018, there have

been a total of 291 shootings that have occurred in the year, while in 2017 as of the same date there was a total of 303 shootings (Mass Shooting Tracker, 2018). Although this may be a slight decrease, the number of shootings may begin to rise again by the end of the year.

With the absurd amount of shootings that have already occurred in the year, many of these shootings have been unheard of due to the lack of reporting from the media. This is because the media often does not report shootings that are not considered “mass murders”, which by definition means at least 4 victims need to have been murdered. With this current definition many shootings do not fall under this category as many victims of shootings can survive due to luck. Some victims of shootings are injured and left with life long disabilities and trauma, but by definition these events are not categorized as a mass shooting because there were not at least 4 people murdered. Even though decreasing the reporting’s on perpetrators may help the decrease mass shootings, there also needs to be an increase in reporting all shootings that are not considered “mass shootings”.

These news outlets should continue to focus on the victims, rather than the perpetrator, while also reporting smaller shootings in order to raise awareness in the nation. If the news began reporting on both mass and small shootings with the same amount of coverage, attackers who are incentivized by the media coverage that often surrounds mass shooters may be deterred to committing such large crimes. There would no longer be the reward of more fame for maximizing victim fatalities. By also beginning to report the extensive amount of smaller shootings, media organizations will no longer have enough time to focus as much as weeks, months and sometimes years that currently surrounds mass shooters. As a result, with less

coverage on these mass shooters, their actions may become jumbled up with all the other shooters that are reported, deterring them from committing a mass shooting.

Conclusion

With shootings being such a prevalent event in the United States, it is extremely important to understand how they can be decreased. Although gun control and a mental health approach may not seem like the best suited solutions to the current problem, changing the media coverage is the most possible and probable solution. Since the media is such a large part of our everyday lives, it is important for those organizations to not only report the truth, but also look out for the citizens in the United States. By consistently reporting mass shootings for weeks on end with a high focus placed on the perpetrators, rather than the victims, we are unable to understand the full extent of the epidemic. It is clear that media coverage of mass shooters provides a clear incentive for future offenders by making them famous and that the attention the media is placing on perpetrators of these events is causing the increase in occurrences. These gunmen are not only being rewarded through the spotlight being placed on them, but are also inspiring possible future attackers. Being actually able to implement a media change and solution to this problem is extremely important to our nation, as adverse psychological effects, increase in fears, and declines in perceived safety are all consequences that may continue to rise. Although being able to stop all mass shootings may seem unlikely, being able to prevent increasing occurrences should be a priority through the limiting of media coverage of perpetrators.

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