



**NATIONAL CENTER FOR
HEALTH RESEARCH**
The Voice For Prevention, Treatment And Policy

Does Media Coverage Inspire Copycat Mass Shootings?

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National Center for Health Research

www.center4research.org

Who We Are

The National Center for Health Research (NCHR) is a non-profit think tank that conducts, analyzes, and scrutinizes research, policies, and programs on a range of issues related to health and safety.

- Violence is a public health issue
- We have no financial ties to this issue

My Perspective

- I'm trained in epidemiology, public health, and psychology
- Author of books and articles on the impact of media on kids
- Was on the faculty at Vassar and Yale; researcher at Harvard
- Staffer in the U.S. House and Senate
- Served in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy
- Former Fellow at the Center for Bioethics at University of Pennsylvania

My Goals Today

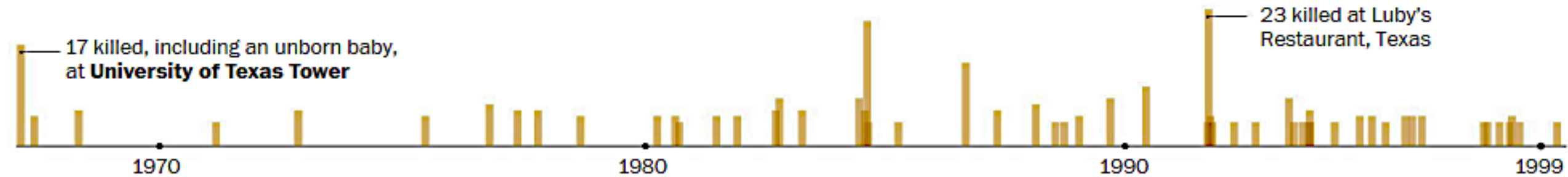
- Summarize research findings that can be useful to this Commission
- Put that research in the context of the numerous policies that you will be considering this year.
- Media coverage is only one of many factors that you'll want to consider as you come together to find solutions to reduce mass shootings. There is **not one cause and not one solution.**

Definitions

- ❖ A **public mass shooting** is defined as an event with **4 or more deaths** in a fairly public location with a shooter who selects victims somewhat indiscriminately
- ❖ FBI defines “**Active Shooter situations**” as one or more people engaged in killing or attempting to kill others in a specific area (such as a school or business).
- ❖ **Copycat shootings** are described in terms of being “**contagious**” (spreading like a virus) or as **imitations**.

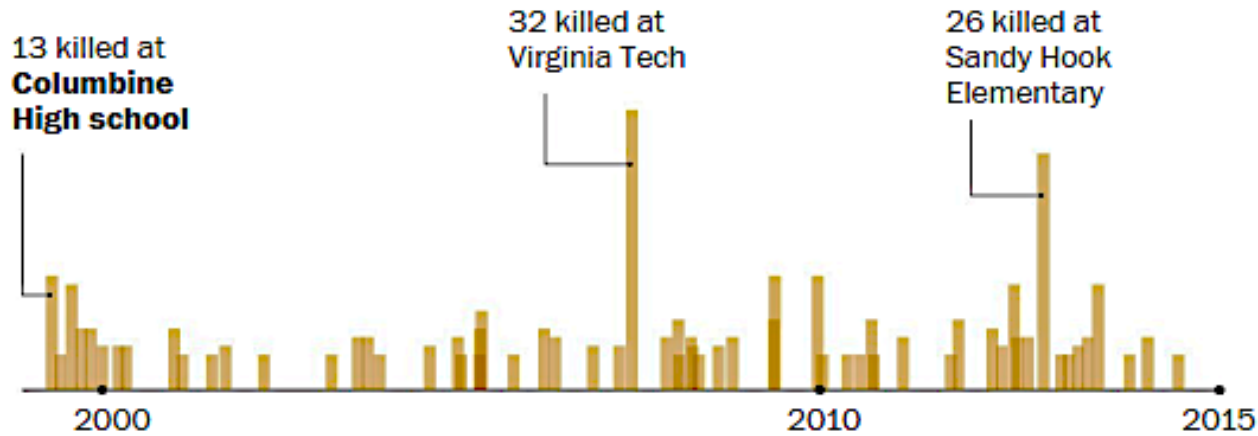
Mass Shootings August 1966 – April 1999

Between August 1966 and April 1999, there was, on average, a mass shooting event every **180 days**

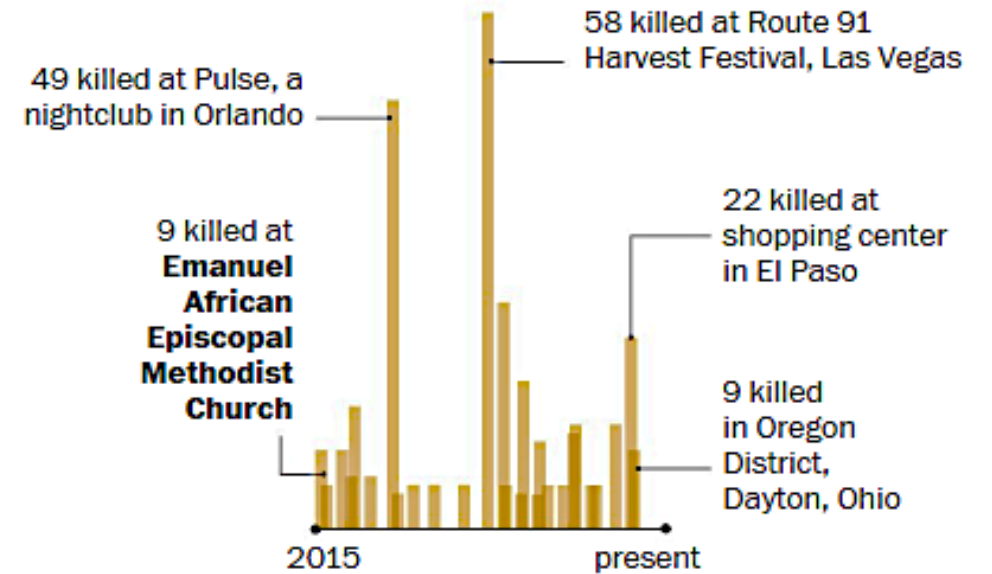


Mass Shootings April 1999 – August 2019

Between April 1999 and June 2015, there was, on average, a mass shooting event every **84 days**

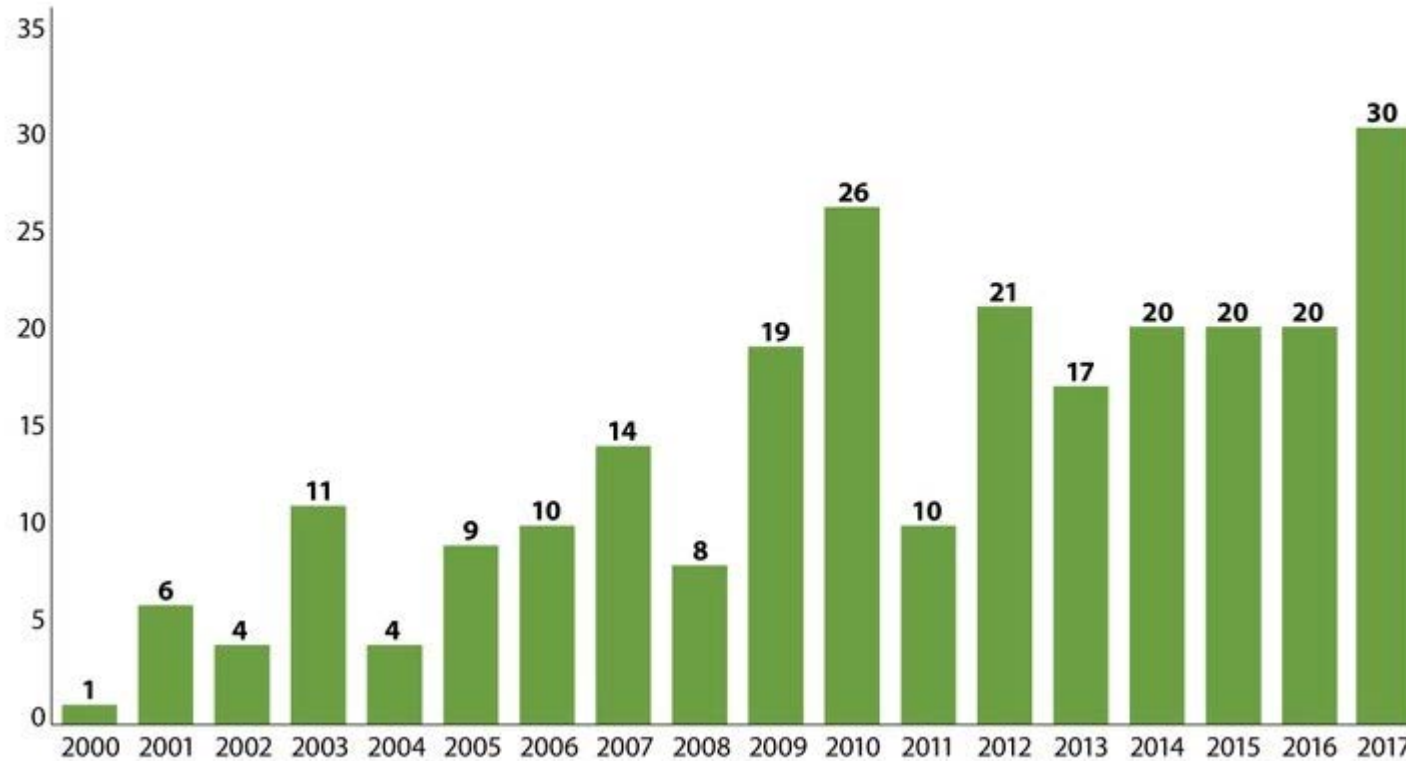


From June 2015 until now, there has been, on average, a mass shooting event every **47 days**



FBI Stats on Active Shooters 2000-2017

Quick Look: 250 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States From 2000 - 2017
Incidents Per Year

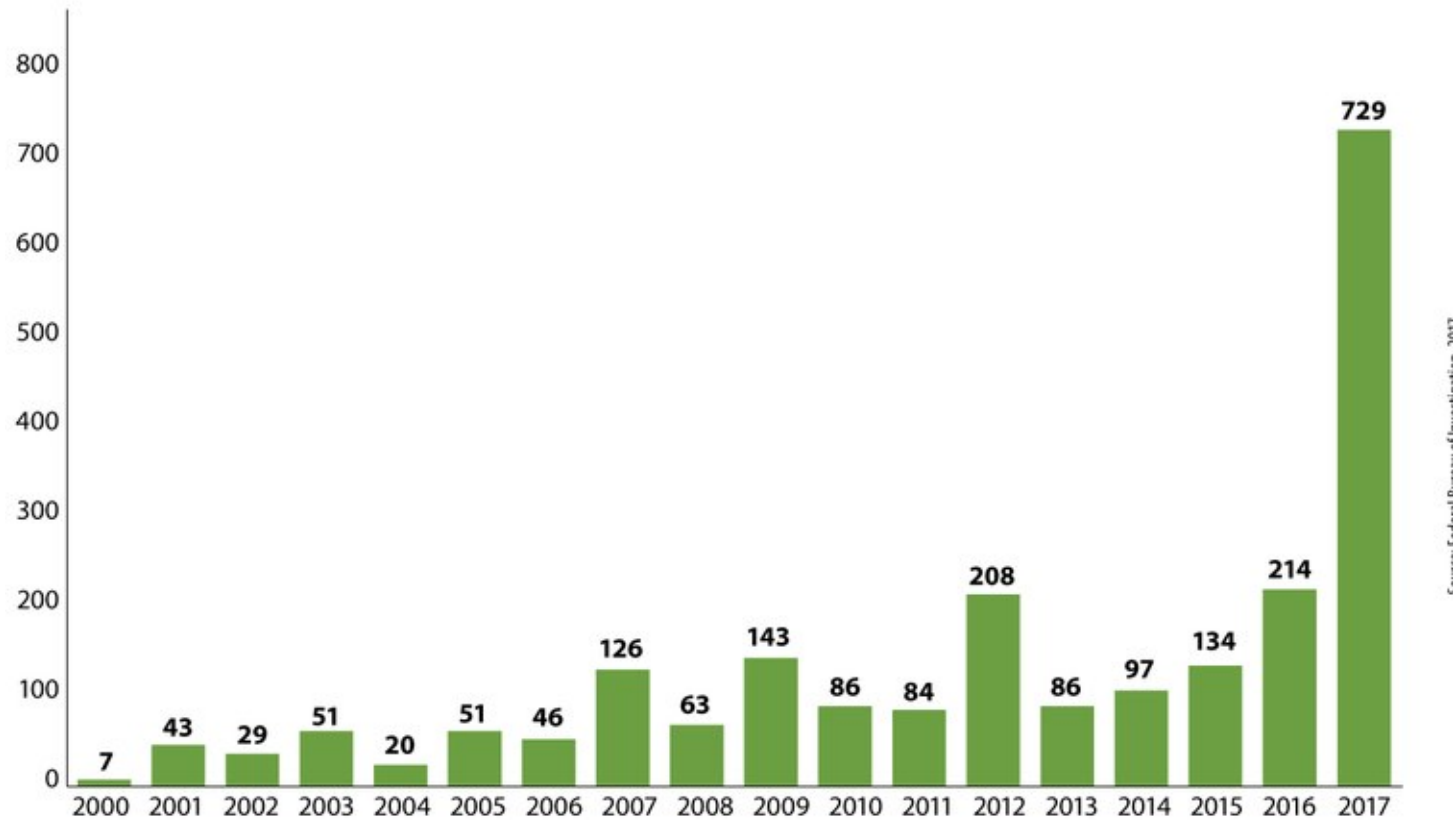


Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017

Source: FBI

FBI Stats on Casualties 2000-2017

Quick Look: 250 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States From 2000 - 2017
Casualties Per Year



Source: FBI

Research on Mass Shootings

- ❖ There is no federal database of mass shootings
- ❖ Therefore, most research has relied on data compiled by private organizations.
- ❖ There has been a lack of federal funding to determine the causes of the increase in mass shootings and how to reverse that trend.

When Will We Know More?

- ❖ Good research takes time: More than 10 million people died from lung cancer before it was widely accepted that cigarettes were the culprit.
- ❖ The gold standard for this type of research is **statistical significance**. But probability levels are more likely to be significant for **large numbers of events** (whether diagnoses, shootings, or anything else).

Why We Need to Know More

- ❖ 31% of the world's mass shootings occur in the United States
- ❖ 87% of all children age 0-14 worldwide killed by firearms are children living in the U.S. Less than 5% of the world's children live in the U.S.
- ❖ Mass shootings result in enormous media coverage

Impact of Media Coverage

- ❖ Media can influence what the **public thinks of** a subject
- ❖ Media more strongly influences what the public **thinks about** -
- and how often ¹
- ❖ Publicity increases the number of consumers who are interested in a product, person, or experience ²
 - Political candidates, actors, athletes, criminals, or victims
- ❖ Media coverage can create **fans and followers** ³

1. Studies since 1922 and a major study in 1972

2. McComb and Shaw (1972)

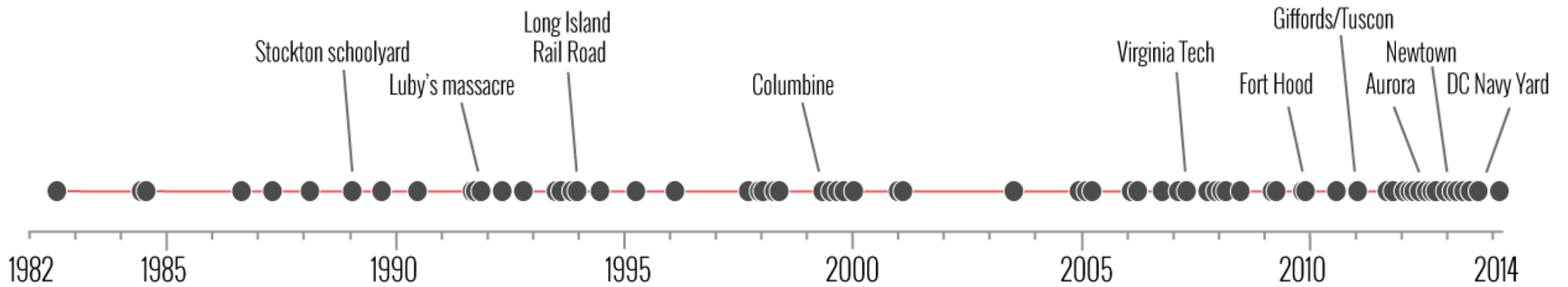
3. (Follman & Andrews, 2015; Gould & Olivares, 2017; Helfgott, 2015; Kissner, 2016; Langman, 2017; Lankford, 2016; Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Meindl & Ivy, 2017; Murray, 2017; Perrin, 2016; Sidhu, 2017; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015)

How do Media Inspire Copycats?

- ❖ Decades of research on **suicides** shows that media coverage results in an increase in suicides
- ❖ Mass shootings can also be linked to suicide:
 - 46% of the killers committed suicide/suicide by cop, compared to the estimated 5%-10% suicide rate of killers in all murderers.
- ❖ When the perpetrator committed suicide, on average 22% more people were killed in those events.

Frequency of Mass Shootings 1982-2014

Time Between Mass Shootings, 1982-2014



Data analysis by Harvard School of Public Health

Mother Jones

Media and Mass Killers: Celebrity Effect

- ❖ Professor Adam Lankford (U Alabama) compared perpetrators of 7 mass killings to media for more than 600 celebrities between 2013-2017
- ❖ During the same month as the attacks, some shooters received more media coverage than some of the most famous American celebrities
 - Kim Kardashian, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, and Jennifer Aniston



How Much Media Coverage is There of Mass Shootings?

- ❖ Months following attack: more coverage than professional athletes and slightly less than television and film stars
- ❖ Overall: \$75 million in media coverage value

How Much News Coverage is There?

- ❖ In many cases, winning a Super Bowl or Academy Award garnered less media attention than committing a high-profile mass killing
- ❖ The 1999 Columbine school shooting was one the highest media covered events of the decade. It received larger CNN audiences than both the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections and the death of Princess Diana

More Victims, More Coverage

- ❖ Mass murderers from 1976 to 1999 who killed and wounded more victims were significantly more likely to be featured in *The New York Times* ¹
- ❖ Mass shooters from 2000 to 2012 resulted in more articles and longer articles if they **killed more victims** ²
- ❖ **More victims** resulted in **more front page photos** and **stayed on front pages** significantly longer ³

1. Duwe (2004)

2. Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith (2017)

3. Dahmen (2018)

How does Media Affect Mass Shootings?

- ❖ Towers et al (2015) has shown a temporary increase in the probability of another mass shooting event within the next 13 days
 - Mathematical contagion model that had previously applied to financial markets, civilian deaths in Iraq, terrorist attacks.
- ❖ Other researchers found long-term copycat effects: 20 - 30 % of mass shootings are the result of imitating recent high-profile incidents

Media Coverage of Shooters and Victims

- ❖ Newspaper front pages contained slightly more **total photos** of deceased victims than of shooters
- ❖ On a **photos-per-individual** basis, newspapers gave 16x as much attention to shooters than deceased victims
- ❖ Front page photos of perpetrators were much more likely to be **large or medium sized** than photos of victims, which were small 91% of the time

Is Extensive Media Coverage Inevitable?

- ❖ From 2013 to 2017, many mass killers got **disproportionate coverage** from newspapers and TV compared to the public interest these killers generated through online searches and Twitter.
- ❖ When the media put mass killers on the front pages TV news channels, the public may pay attention—but that does not necessarily mean this is what they really want.

Social Media

- ❖ Rise of **global online communities** who express a deep interest in mass shooters
 - Some members of these communities are nonviolent, but some (such as the Sandy Hook shooter) become violent over time
- ❖ **Obsessions are fed by media coverage** of past perpetrators, providing names, photos, and life stories that can be crafted into objects for future worship and shared online

Who Became Fans of Mass Shooters?

- ❖ Fans are fascinated by previous attackers for many reasons
 - Sexual attraction
 - Deep sympathy
 - Intense curiosity
 - Desire to commit own copycat attacks

- ❖ Online communities are fascinated by the **individuals** who commit mass killings, not just their actions

Copycat Offenders

- ❖ Most copycats are **NOT copying attack tactics** ¹
- ❖ Copycat killers often imitate the **language and appearance** of previous mass killers ²
 - Similar to fans of celebrities who repeat famous lines or wear similar clothes

1. Langman (2018)

2. Langman 156 American Behavioral Scientist 62(2) (2018)

Copycat Offenders

- ❖ Mass killers become **celebrity role models**, who are then **worshiped** as gods, heroes, or kindred spirits by future mass killers
- ❖ This will affect a **small number of people**, especially those who are very troubled or angry

1. Langman (2018)

2. Langman 156 American Behavioral Scientist 62(2) (2018)

Fame-Seeking Perpetrators

- ❖ In the first study of the role of fame-seeking perpetrators, Professor Lankford analyzed 24 shooters who openly admitted seeking fame or who directly contacted the media to get it
- ❖ Desire for fame was a big incentive, especially in U.S.
- ❖ Some attackers competed with each other to become the most famous mass shooter in history

Mental Illness vs. Narcissism

- ❖ Do you have to be crazy to kill people you don't know?
- ❖ Many mass shooters have narcissistic tendencies 1
 - Evidence from prior studies, government reports, psychiatrists, and offenders' statements that correspond to items on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory
- ❖ Narcissists often want to be the center of attention and are willing to be aggressive
- ❖ The media provides the stage for the attention they crave

Media Recommendations To Reduce Harm

- ❑ I'm not suggesting government-mandated rules or censorship
 - Attackers' identities will still be a matter of legal record and known by many people

- ❑ Voluntary restraints already exist:
 - Major media usually do not publish the names and photos of victims of sexual harassment or sexual assault

 - Media already refrains from releasing information that would jeopardize national security or put lives in danger

Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics

- ❖ “Balance the public’s need for information against potential harms” and “avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.”

Laws have not been needed to prevent media from

- ❖ Using profanity, slurs, epithets, and other offensive language, even when it was used during a newsworthy event
- ❖ Publishing images that contain nudity, sexually explicit material, graphic violence, or corpses

What can the Media Do to Reduce Copycats?

- ❖ **Avoid making the shooter a celebrity**
 - Don't reward the shooter with fame or attention
 - Don't portray the shooter as competent (e.g., at accomplishing a mission or sending a message)
- ❖ **Warning: Coverage that identifies shooters as dangerous or menacing may be taken as a compliment**

What Can the Media Do? (cont'd)

- ❖ Stop publishing names and photos of mass killers
 - Replace names with year, attack location, and word like “shooter” or “suspect”

- ❖ Continue reporting other details of those crimes as needed

- ❖ Deny mass killers celebrity status, fame, and free advertising that can be dangerous
 - Reduce chances of killers becoming role models
 - Disrupt future perpetrators from connecting on personal and emotional levels to past perpetrators

Other Problems with Media Coverage

- ❖ Inaccurate stereotypes that most mass shooters are psychopaths or psychotic loners (Madfis, 2014)
- ❖ Research shows coverage results in the public becoming excessively fearful (Altheide, 2009; Madfis, 2016, 2017).
 - At what point is it no longer excessive?
- ❖ Safer media coverage could potentially **reduce** both **copycats** and **public fear**

Caveats

- ❖ Not all mass killers are fame seekers or copycats
- ❖ Changing media coverage would not stop all mass killings

Media Successes

- ❖ Portrayal of smoking and alcohol use has successfully changed public perceptions
- ❖ Changes in how suicides are reported has reduced copycats

FBI and others' "Don't Name Them" Campaign

Based on the success with fewer reporting on suicides

- Portray actions as shameful
- Avoid in-depth descriptions of rationale or manifesto
- Reduce overall news coverage
- Avoid sensationalism
- Avoid detailed accounts of the actions – only provide information necessary to describe the event

The Role of Social Media

- ❖ With the rise of the internet and social media violent behavior can spread faster and is more permanent. Perpetrators can use the internet to obsessively study details of previous events
- ❖ In fact, Twitter is the most used form of social media after mass shootings

What Can be Done?

- ❖ There is not one cause and not one solution. Media coverage is just one issue but can have an exponential impact.
- ❖ Regulations that reduce availability of firearms (permits, licensing) reduce **suicide** rates
- ❖ Regulations that make it harder to copy mass shootings could reduce mass shootings. (Even if $p > .05$)

Bottom Line

Media coverage of mass killers:

- Rewards past and current perpetrators with fame
- Provides an incentive for future fame-seekers to attack
- Provides an incentive for perpetrators to choose options that enable them to kill as many victims as possible in order to gain more attention

What is Needed

- ✓ More research (federal funding or foundations)
- ✓ A federal database on all mass killings and school shootings, including details such as what weapons were used, where and how the weapons were obtained, if the guns were obtained legally or not
- ✓ A national understanding why “Don’t Name Them” matters
- ✓ Reduce Access to weapons by copycats



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