

Mass Murder: School Shootings by Adolescents in America

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Synopsis

“Mass murder” is defined as a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with a firearm, within one event, and in one or more locations in close geographical proximity, according to the FBI. Furthermore, a “school shooting” is defined as an event in which a student at an educational institution shoots and injures or kills at least one other student or faculty member on the grounds of that institution with a firearm. As per Duzor (2021), between 1966 – February 2020, there were 168 mass shootings that fit the description provided by the FBI. Of those 168, 11 of those were in the locations of a school. For mass murder, the average age for a mass shooter was 34 years old with the youngest being only 11 and the oldest being 70. Of the 172 mass shooters studied, four of them were women and acted in partnership with a man. Each year, 80% to 90% of mass shooters were men. According to TVP (The Violence Project), of the 172 mass shooters studied, 53.3% were White, 20.9% Black, 8.1% Latino, 6.4% Asian, 4.2% Middle Eastern, and 1.8% Native American. These are some general statistics of mass murder as one but to narrow down the topic, we will dig deeper into school shootings that occurred on K-12 grounds.

School & Mass Shooting Statistics

Included in the statistics are incidents labeled as “active shooter.” An “active shooter” is when the shooter has killed and/or wounded victims, either targeted or random, within the school campus during a continuous episode of violence. The use of this definition/criteria for an “active shooter” blends the FBI’s definition with the homicide literature’s differentiation between a rampage killing versus a traditional homicide. It is important to note that there are widely differing definitions for a mass killer, serial killer, rampage killer, active shooter, and school shooter (FBI; USSS; DOJ). According to SSDB, from 1970 to 2022, there have been 194 active shooter situations at K-12 schools. The deaths and injuries cannot accurately be listed as many sources have different standards for what is considered a school shooting. California, Texas, and Florida are the states with the most incidents with the most common time being in the early morning and during the fall season. 76 of the 194 active shooter situations occurred during early morning classes with the follow-ups being lunch and afternoon classes. When it comes to shooter statistics, in 43.1% of the incidents, the shooter was a student at the school. The shooter was male in 98% of the incidents and a firearm was used in 100% of the incidents. Of these incidents, the most common shooter age was 17 years old, followed by 16 and 15. Most school shootings (18.4%) occurred in the

morning, followed by at a sporting event (10.2%) or during afternoon classes (10.1%). 57 incidents occurred in classrooms with 29 in the hallways (other areas of the school account for the rest.) With these statistics, we can take away that the broader category to put mass murders in would be murder and the subcategory would be narrowed down to school shootings specifically. With the narrowing down of categories, we can see from the statistics that school shootings are quite rare but are becoming more frequent with every year that passes. When it comes to mass murders and school shootings, there are many causes, some being, childhood trauma, mental illness, and signs of crisis. 42% of mass shooters experienced childhood trauma as well as exposure to violence at an early age according to The Violence Project. Childhood trauma can be the result of one or more of the following things, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence in the household, having a parent who committed suicide, or being the victim of bullying. According to the American Medical Association, those who have experienced trauma as children were more likely to face a host of difficulties as adults, including having violent relationships, becoming dependent on drugs or alcohol, having a psychiatric disorder, and becoming depressed or suicidal. As a result, this can and has led to crimes like mass shootings. Next up is mental illness, two-thirds of mass shooters had a history of mental health concerns, 25% of them had a mood disorder, 27% of them had a thought disorder, and 23% of them were on psychiatric medication. For this reason, mental illness has been targeted by many researchers and scientists as the main cause of mass shootings. Per The Violence Project, signs of crisis were another cause of mass and school shootings. More than 80% of mass shooters were in crisis before they committed their crimes, sign of crisis is described by The Violence Project as a marked change in behavior that is noticeable to others. Such behavior includes exaggerated emotional responses, an increased interest in violence, and signs of hopelessness. With these numbers, studies also show that 72% of the shooters were suicidal either before or during the time of the shooting. With the causes of mass and school shootings being known, the motives must now be reviewed. According to the DOJ, 24% of school shooters were motivated by a desire for attention or recognition, 27% were motivated by suicide or desperation, 34% were motivated by an attempt to solve a problem, 54% had multiple motives, 61% were motivated by revenge, and 75% felt bullied/threatened by others. There are many more motives, but these were the ones that appeared the most in studies and research. Some important things to remember when discussing school shootings are that there is no "profile" to school shooters as they all differed from each other in numerous ways and shootings are rarely impulsive acts because they are often thought out and planned.

Review of Academic Literature

Crime Theory

Mass and school shootings have been on the rise with every year that has passed since 1760. For one to prevent such things from happening or do everything possible to reduce the chances, studies must be taken to understand and find out why they happen. Something cannot be fixed until we know how and why it is happening. According to the NCJRS, fatal shooters were statistically a lot more likely to be from the low-income stratum and significantly less likely to be from the middle-income stratum. This statement from the NCJRS is consistent with the arguments of the strain theory. For example, more deprived people commit more severe fatal acts than say less deprived people.

Though consistent with the strain theory, it is also in line with the social control theory. Approximately 8% of the fatal and 16% of the non-fatal shooters were from high socioeconomic backgrounds. Approximately 30% of the mass shooters were in the low or high socioeconomic stratum, and 43% were in the middle stratum (Freilich, Chermak, Connell, Klein, Greene-Colozzi, 2021.) Also consistent with social control theory, NCJRS states that evidence shows that youths with psychological issues would not do well in school, have more difficulty forming bonds/attachment with classmates and teachers, and be less likely to be involved in collective activities, i.e., have more time on their hands. Thus, youth with lower attachment/commitment/involvement- social control- could be more likely to commit more severe school shootings. In relation to that, 75% of the mass shooters had psychological problems (Freilich, Chermak, Connell, Klein, Greene-Colozzi, 2021.) This number is exceedingly small, and I feel as if it is due to the selection issue with how adolescent school shootings receive a lot more media coverage. In other words, if the media coverage were equal, the number would be a lot higher.

As we can see there is a trend towards the social control theory, to support this even more, 57% percent of the fatal shooters, compared to 50% of the non-fatal shooters had parents that were divorced or separated, so, surprisingly, 43% of the mass shooters' parents were separated or divorced (Freilich, Chermak, Connell, Klein, Greene-Colozzi, 2021.) In addition, 33% of all adolescent school shooters had some other significant family issue (Freilich, Chermak, Connell, Klein, Greene-Colozzi, 2021.) Social control theory and mass shootings are just related due to the sheer effect that one's social factors can have on them and cause them to commit such crimes.

On the other side of theories, aside from the social control theory, when talking about school shootings the strain theory also comes up a good bit. In partnership with the strain theory, there is also a five-stage sequential model. Levin and Madfis (2009) proposed a five-stage sequential model involving several criminological theories like strain theory, control theory, and routine activity theory but in a way to collectively

demonstrate their cumulative effect. The main one that is seen a lot though, is strain theory. In the five-stage sequential model, the stages are chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, planning stage, and then the massacre. It begins with chronic strains which are defined as long-term frustrations experienced early in life or in adolescence leading to social isolation. As result, there is a lack of prosocial support systems (uncontrolled strain) and this in turn allows for a short-term negative effect which is known as acute strain (Levin & Madfis, 2009). This acute strain stage is significantly important as the event that one goes through, whether it be real or imagined, is usually devastating and initiates the planning stage. During this planning stage, mass killing is fantasized about as it is seen as a way to regain lost feelings of control, and actions are then taken to ensure that this fantasy becomes reality. The planning stage is then concluded with a massacre. Levin and Madfis emphasized the term cumulative strain, they defined this term as the crucial point that these factors intersect and build on one another in a cumulative fashion. This is emphasized because no one stage can be viewed by itself as causing a school massacre. Agnew's general strain theory broadened the concept of strain to include a range of negative experiences in social relationships (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

In Agnew's theory, he regarded strain as a range of difficulties that lead to anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, fear, and ultimately, crime. Chronic strain is often a trigger for many to do absurd things due to these strains occurring for so long. Merton's analysis of the disparity between cultural goals and structural means was like Agnew's theory but a little broader. In relation, things like not achieving your goals in school or simply being bullied constantly, turn into a chronic strain. So, in terms of school shootings, these troubling peer relationships or family issues often constituted serious and chronic strains for school shooters. Though serious, it is hardly enough to push any one person to commit such a crime. After chronic strain, there's uncontrolled strain. Hirschi argued that the commitment that people have to conventional institutions and bonding relationships with conventional people immunize individuals from committing criminal acts.

Levin and Madfis explain that people that are well-connected are reluctant to jeopardize what they have by engaging in criminal behavior. This then leaves the people who are not and in relation to school shooters, they are usually at the age where they believe heavily in independence and rebelliousness as well as having very little attachment to things like their parents, success, and more into their friends as they become everything to them. But what happens when there are no friends and there's little attachment to anything else? This often leads to isolation, and this becomes an everyday battle that eventually leads to acute strain. The acute strain stage could be considered as "thin ice", in other words, the person is one catastrophic event away from their breaking point. For adults, this event can be anything from losing a job to losing your spouse. In this case, with school shooters, the events tend to be things like a humiliating loss of face, a rejection by a girlfriend, a loss of academic standing, losing

friends, or even a major illness like cancer (Madfis & Arford, 2008). Madfis also suggested that acute strains precipitate a planning stage but not necessarily the massacre itself. Acute losses prove catastrophic in part because of the lack of a positive and supportive environment and have a cumulative effect because of long-term frustration and chronic strain (Levin & Madfis, 2009). Following the acute strain stage, is the planning stage. The shooter has their mind made up now that they are going to commit this crime and they often plan for weeks to months before executing the plan. They commit to the plan because they feel as if they have nothing else to lose and that this will be their way to go out with a bang. With the information provided, Levin and Madfis have explained just how important the strain theory is when it comes to school shootings.

Crime Policy

In the aftermath of the Columbine High School attack, numerous shortsighted policies were designed to put the public at ease, reduce fear in teachers, students, and parents, and make it seem like politicians were protecting us. Some of the policies that were proposed included the excessive use of resource officers and metal detectors, one legislator even proposed allowing faculty members to carry concealed handguns. Over time, these proposals lost their traction and soon regained it with the Virginia Tech shooting. School shootings often happen in a small frame, roughly 15 minutes. From a routine activity perspective, having armed faculty, emergency plans, and resource officers help significantly by increasing the number and effectiveness of capable guardians and engaging in target-hardening tactics to diminish their suitability and easy access does nothing to diminish the most vital of Felson's factors, the motivation of offenders (Levin & Madfis 2009). With that being said, the focus must be on long-term prevention to ensure that the desire to commit a mass shooting is not developed in the first place. In other words, the best way to prevent these types of things from happening is to be able to detect troubled students and work with them. It all begins with the guardians, teachers, and people of that nature. Being able to identify and counteract these signs of strains is the best way to prevent them. Programs like Second Step and Oliver and Ryan's (2003) *Lesson One* are great examples of ways to do help with these long-term preventions. Second Step is a program that aims at helping children solve their problems, develop empathy, manage their anger, and control their impulses. What this program does is not only neutralize some strains but also help them control their emotions with other strains than may not have been touched. Research shows that it is indeed effective at achieving its objectives. Along with Second Step is *Lesson One*, which is another educational program that helps elementary school children develop their life skills and internal discipline. *Lesson One* has been great in the student culture. This helps immensely as this prevents children from becoming antisocial and falling into the

problems associated with the social control theory. These two programs are implemented in a way that is appealing to children and this is through games and activities as well as exercises. With these two effective programs and other things like informing others when the plans of a potential shooter have been revealed and gun safety at home, school shootings can certainly be prevented.

Current Event

A few months ago in October, there was a school shooting in St. Louis. 19-year-old gunman Orlando Harris had graduated from Central Visual and Performing Arts High School just last year but returned for a sinister reason. Harris returned to his old high school with an AR-15 rifle, over 600 rounds of ammunition, and more than a dozen highcapacity magazines. The gunman killed two people and wounded several others and St. Louis are not happy with what happened but are grateful that the tragedy wasn't much worse given the gunman's extensive arsenal. Reports say that Harris, the shooter, left a note in the car that he drove to the school that day and the note included this passage: "I don't have any friends. I don't have any family. I've never had a girlfriend. I've never had a social life. I've been an isolated loner my entire life," the note said, according to Sack. "This was the perfect storm for a mass shooter." This relates to the strain theory and social control theory as he stated that he had no friends, family, or girlfriend, as well as being isolated his entire life and having no social life. The feeling of isolation is a part of the uncontrolled strain stage and him having no social life or friend and family is a part of the social control theory. The gunman killed a talented 15-year-old dancer and a soon-to-retire 61-year-old teacher, Jean Kuczka. A colleague of the teacher reported that Ms. Kuczka died protecting her student by jumping between the shooter and student. Authorities believe that the doors being shut and locked delayed the shooter and accredit that and a quick law enforcement response for preventing more deaths at school that day. This shooting presented to the public as a reminder that these things still happen and that all we can do is come together to prevent them. The public is also reminded that this can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone so we as a community must not forget and always be ready.

Overview

Mass and school shootings are on the rise and criminologists and sociologists have worked together to find out exactly why/what drives someone to do such a thing. People like Hirschi and Agnew have laid the foundation for them to evaluate and get to the root of it. The social control theory as well as the strain theory are extremely important in terms of this crime topic. The main trigger to school shootings is isolation

so with a lack of social support as well as strain, one can become isolated. School shootings are a major problem as the number one goal is to protect our youth as they are the future. It is important to make sure that every child is getting the help they need so that they can have healthy social lives and as a result, live happily. School shooting numbers have only increased, and it is important that we do what we can now to prevent the number from getting any higher. This topic is one that doesn't get as much light as it should. The only time it really gets media coverage and attention is when it happens, after a while, it slowly fades away. Because of this, there is very little research on the topic, so statistics are not whole quite yet. There are programs that specifically talk about mass and school shootings like The Violence Project and these programs were the main source of information as they aim to shine a light on the topic. There was a lack of information solely on school shootings as there is slightly more data on mass shootings as they are all thrown into one big category. I feel that school shootings aren't something that you can just completely get rid of, but I do think that as a mass we can all do our part in preventing or at least mitigating the outcome of the situation. As one we need to remember that these things still happen and that all we can do is come together to prevent them. This can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone so we as a community must not forget and always be ready.

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