

Mass shootings in the United States have been perpetrated at a higher frequency with more casualties in recent years, with six of the ten deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history occurring since 2012. The media's coverage of these incidents and perpetrators has evolved over the last two decades, shifting from framing them as incidents of domestic terrorism to conflating them with mental illness or severe mental health issues. This research took place during a time of heightened awareness and conversation about the push for racial justice following the death of George Floyd during the spring and summer of 2020. In light of these circumstances, this research seeks to ascertain how the media frame incidents of mass shootings and how the media's portrayal of the perpetrator of violence varies based on their race, mental health, the number of casualties in an incident, their criminal history, and other factors.

This research builds upon existing data surrounding theories of media framing and linkages; race and notions of criminality; and mental illness and mass shootings. For this project, records from the National Gun Violence Archive were used to compile a list of all mass shooting incidents from 2013 to 2019. From this list, incidents where three or more individuals were killed — excluding the perpetrator(s) — were selected. These incidents were compiled into a spreadsheet that included the following pieces of information: the date and location of the shooting; the number of people killed and/or injured in the shooting; the number of perpetrators; the gender and age of the perpetrator(s); and the race of the perpetrator(s). News articles covering these incidents were then analyzed to determine if they included the following frames regarding the perpetrator(s): inclusion of race; mental illness; criminal history; domestic abuse, violence, or disputes; drug use or activity; gang activity; affiliation with the military and/or law enforcement; religion; terrorism; and video games. These analyses were visually mapped using the BatchGeo software, which allows users to cross-reference incidents by all of the characteristics listed above.

Research indicates that the portrayal of mass shooters in the media is most likely to be framed by criminal history, followed in descending order by domestic abuse/violence/disputes, drug use/activity, the race of the perpetrator, mental illness, gang activity, affiliation with military and/or law enforcement, terrorism, religion, and video games. Of these frames, White individuals are more or equally likely than other racial groups to receive coverage that links their behavior to their criminal history, domestic abuse/violence/disputes, an affiliation with law enforcement or the military, and their religion. Although common perceptions about the coverage of mass shootings hold that White individuals are more likely to be treated sympathetically in the media while racial minorities are more likely to be criminalized, results in this study indicate that this is not universal in all frames. Hispanic/Latinx perpetrators were more likely to have their gun violence framed in light of drug use and Black perpetrators were more likely to have their actions connected to gang activity than White perpetrators, supporting existing research that demonstrates that some notions of criminality, such as those associated with minorities, are more likely to be perpetuated through media framing and coverage. Contrary to dominant narratives surrounding the media's coverage of mass shooting incidents, White perpetrators were more likely than other racial groups to receive coverage that linked their actions to terrorism. This study supports the broad findings of other reports, which indicate that White perpetrators are more likely to have their mental health referenced while perpetrators of color are connected to criminality. It also identifies that both drug use and domestic abuse are

more likely to be connected to mass shootings through coverage than mental illness is, despite the fact that mental illness has been more commonly perceived as a causal factor in these types of shootings. This finding is also significant in supporting the request of domestic violence advocacy groups that hope to establish the standard definition of a mass shooting as what was utilized in this research: an incident where three or more people, excluding the perpetrator, are killed.

Data Map:

<https://batchgeo.com/map/575565942dec4ed4164088b41bb45e4b>

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