

## Introduction

School and mass shootings have become a major news focus as the number of incidents in the United States has risen dramatically in recent years (Kowalski et al., 2021). The current study examined the American public's perceptions of school and mass shootings/shooters, including how these perceptions compare to actual data (see, e.g., Kowalski et al., 2021; Peterson & Densley, 2021). In the present study, a **school shooting** refers to a shooting that occurred at a K-12 school, college, or university where at least one person was killed. A **mass shooting** refers to a shooting in a public place (e.g., concert, movie theater, bar) resulting in the deaths of four or more people.

## Method

- 256 Mechanical Turk respondents participated (80.7% white; 54.8% male).
- Respondents completed a Qualtrics survey analyzing various aspects of school and mass shootings, including motivations behind the shootings, and characteristics of the shootings themselves.
- The same questions were asked about both mass and school shootings, respectively, to identify how perceptions of mass shooters/shootings differ from those in schools.
- Perceptions of mass and school shooters were then compared to actual data on K-12 and mass shootings, as reported by Kowalski et al. (2021).

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## Table 1: Perceptions vs. Actual

Variable	Actual K-12 Shootings ( <i>n</i> = 57)	Perceptions of School Shootings	Actual Mass Shootings ( <i>n</i> = 77)	Perceptions of Mass Shootings
Gender of shooter	95% male	99.6% male	97% male	99.2% male
Race of shooter	61% white	95.6% white	46% white	91.6% white
Age range	12 - 21 (median = 15)	80.3% 16 - 25	15 - 64 (median = 34)	63.9% 40 - 65
Fate of shooter	26% suicide	66.4% suicide	43% suicide	70.9% suicide

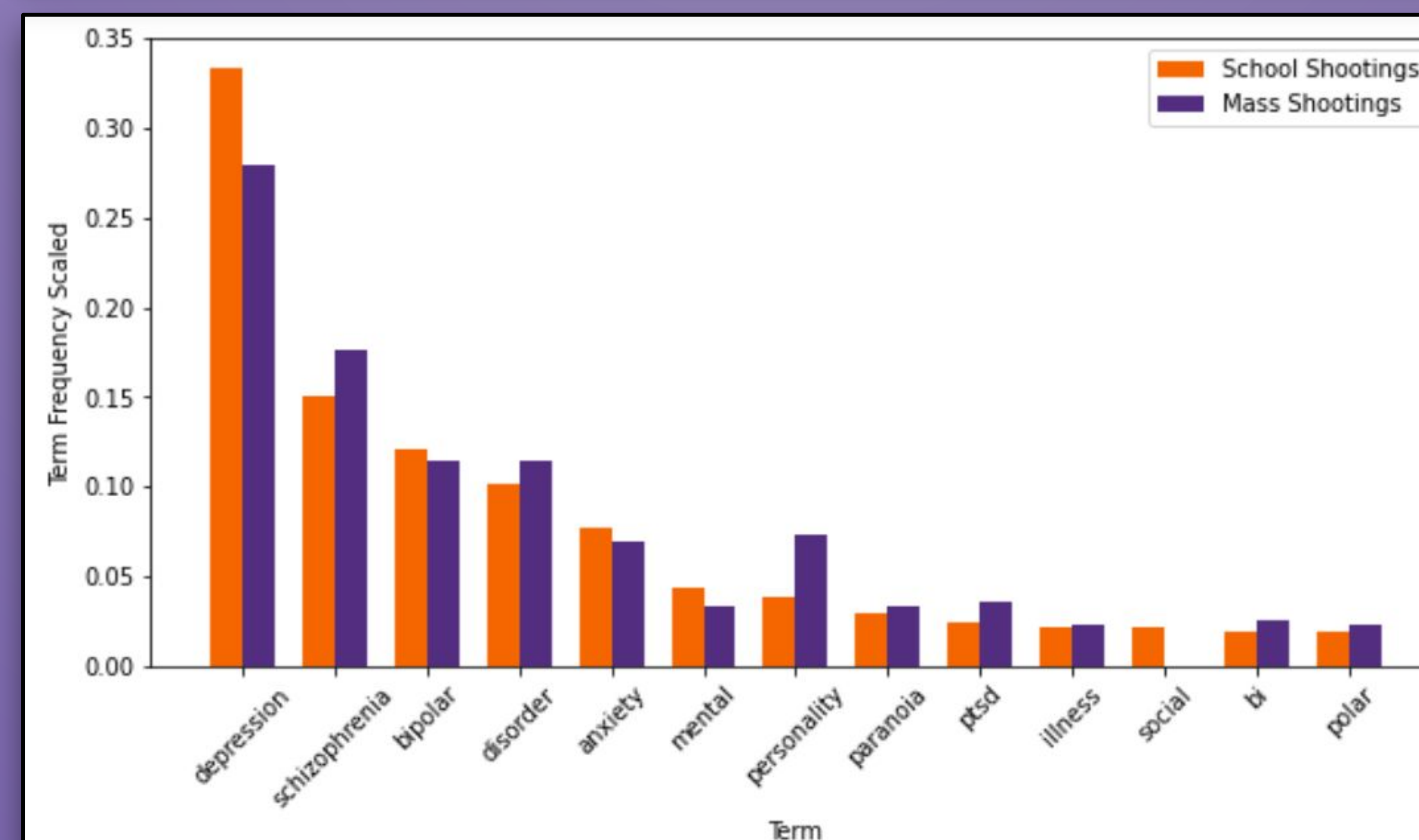
Note. Actual shootings data from Kowalski et al. (2021).

## Table 2: Perceived Motives of School and Mass Shooters

Motive	School Shooters	Mass Shooters
Mental illness	4.15 (.91)	4.22 (.89)
History of bullying	<b>3.72 (.97)</b>	<b>3.29 (1.16)</b>
Childhood trauma	3.35 (1.01)	3.33 (1.08)
Victim of domestic violence	3.20 (1.04)	3.24 (1.09)
Ease of obtaining firearms	3.52 (1.30)	3.60 (1.31)
Engagement with violent media	2.38 (1.22)	2.41 (1.26)
Fascination with previous shootings	<b>3.33 (1.06)</b>	<b>3.49 (1.15)</b>
Fascination with death	<b>3.06 (1.13)</b>	<b>3.37 (1.15)</b>
Desire for revenge	3.71 (1.01)	3.82 (1.05)

Note. Means in a single row in bold differ significantly,  $p < .05$ .

Figure 1: Frequency of Perceived Mental Illness Terms



## Results

- As shown in **Table 1**, a higher percentage of respondents perceived school shooters to be male, white, older, and to have committed suicide than is found amongst actual K-12 shooters (Kowalski et al., 2021). The same discrepancies are found amongst perceptions of actual mass shooters. Specific types of problems ascribed to shooters are shown in **Figure 1**.
- Most respondents believed that both school ( $M = 4.15$ ) and mass ( $M = 4.22$ ) shooters were primarily motivated by a mental illness/psychological problem (**Table 2**).
- Respondents believed that school shooters ( $M = 3.72$ ) were more likely to be motivated by a history of bullying/cyberbullying victimization than mass shooters ( $M = 3.29$ ).
- Many respondents (40.9%) believed that extensive news coverage of both mass/school shootings increases their frequency in the U.S.
- Regardless of the perceived younger age of school shooters (80.3% of respondents believed school shooters to be within the 16-25 age range) and greater bullying victimization, respondents demonstrated an equal amount of remorse for both school and mass shooters (with 16.1% saying they did feel remorse).
- School shooters were largely believed to have no political affiliation (64.7%) whereas mass shooters were perceived as affiliated with the Republican party (44.6%).

## Discussion

Participants perceived school and mass shootings to be more similar to than different from one another. Both school and mass shootings were seen as motivated by mental illness, bullying, fascination with death, and a fascination with violence (e.g., previous shootings), all of which have been identified as correlates of actual school and mass shootings (Kowalski et al., 2021). Additionally, consistent with this previous research, most shooters were perceived to be white males. Interestingly, respondents perceived that far more school and mass shooters took their own lives than is actually the case. This could stem from media accounts that either cover those shootings or sensationalize them. Indeed, respondents noted that media coverage may have contributed to the increase in shootings in recent years.