

# Not Another School Shooting: Media, Race, and Gun Violence in K-12 Schools

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## Abstract

This study examines the characteristics of school shootings and investigates the relationship between perpetrators' race and how shootings are reported by the media. Findings, utilizing data from the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, demonstrate differences by race in the characteristics of school shootings and media reporting of school shootings. Inaccurate and incomplete portrayals of school gun violence in data repositories and the media may lead to public perceptions and policy responses that do not adequately address root causes of violence. In addition, these inaccurate depictions shroud the reality of gun violence in K-12 schools. Accurate information regarding the circumstances of gun violence in schools is a necessary component of preventing future violence.

## Keywords

schools, students, urban education, change

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Since 2013, there have been 582 incidents of gunfire on school property (Everytown Research for Gun Safety, 2019) and the number continues to grow. School gun violence consists of indiscriminate killings, but also includes gang violence, suicides, and escalated disputes. Indiscriminate school killings have been highly televised and sensationalized by media outlets (Knoll & Annas, 2018). Discrepancies exist between sources (e.g., media, local, and federal) indicating if school shootings have increased or decreased over the past 10 years (Levine & McKnight, 2020). Despite the disagreement, media coverage of school shootings has increased insurmountably. Popular media (e.g., radio, television, and internet) sources have covered a surge of school shootings since the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, and more reports come out weekly. Prior to full and partial school shutdowns, due to Covid 19, media coverage of school shootings have incited outrage and panic throughout the country (Hong & Espelage, 2020). Moreover, this media coverage places school shootings as one of the biggest problems Americans face (Elsass et al., 2014). The stories from media sources paint school shooters as white, mentally ill, and loners. This invariably leads those in the Black community to believe school gun violence is only a problem in White communities.

### *Blacks in the Media*

The media's depiction of individuals, groups, or events can influence society's perceptions of those groups and events (Elsass et al., 2014). Media coverage of crime often negatively depicts marginalized groups, especially Black males (Oliver, 2003). Disproportionate media coverage leads to a flawed perception of who commits crime (Opportunity Agenda, 2011). For example, Duxbury et al. (2018) indicated that the coverage of crime often illustrates Blacks and Latino men to be responsible for social problems and label them as "thugs." The Opportunity Agenda (2011) reported the exaggerated, threatening ways Blacks are represented in the media reinforces negative stereotypes. These negative representations do not encompass the full lived experience of Blacks. Contrary to the negative view of Blacks in the media, school gun violence does not characterize Blacks as perpetrators.

Although there is research surrounding mass violence and school shooters, few studies address the role of race in regard to the perpetrators (Duxbury et al., 2018). For instance, the media portrayal of perpetrators of school shootings and mass shootings have largely indicated the perpetrators race as being White. Proposed factors contributing to the reasons for school and mass shootings acts are attributed to: (a) mental illness, (b) SES status, (c) family structure, and (d) interpersonal relationships that include bullying

(Cox & Rich, 2018; Nicodemo & Petronio, 2018). Duxbury et al. (2018) found that White shooters are 19 times more likely to be classified as mentally ill than Black shooters. Even when Blacks are found to be shooters, they are criminalized rather than seen as needing support. Additionally, the media portrays Whites as victims of society (78%) while only 17% of the media coverage described Blacks in the same way. These statistics are concerning and are the impetus for the following study. Motivated by this disproportionate coverage regarding race, the overarching objective of this article is to acknowledge the role that popular media and online news sources play in the characterization of gun violence and understand how race impacts school gun violence.

### *K-12 Gun Violence*

Conflicting definitions and delineating criteria for school shootings, mass shootings, and gun violence vary. *Everytown for Gun Violence*, *Mother Jones*, The Gun Violence Archive, The FBI, Secret Service, and Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) are several of the organizations that track school and mass shooting violence. Each database has its own definition of gun violence and few school shooting incidents overlap in all of them (Booty et al., 2019). For the purpose of this manuscript, gun violence incidents refer to any gun violence that results in one person being shot (excluding the shooter) in which the location of the shooting is on school grounds during school hours or school related events. The definition aligns with the CHDS methodology where the data examined in this study was collected. School campuses are inclusive of school grounds, school buses, or after school hours at school-related events such as football or basketball games. Many school shooting databases exclude after-school activities such as football games and social events (Cipriano, 2019). The key determinant to be classified as a school shooting relates to the location of the shooting not the number of murdered victims or injured parties; School shootings have been a focus in the media and by some news outlets are said to be increasing (CNN, 2019).

Expanding the media's definition of school shootings to encompass more than solely indiscriminate shootings may offer audiences a more complete picture of the issue in their respective communities. Choosing to include or exclude an act of gun violence illustrates differing views. Some conflicting events that tend to not be reported may include suicides by lethal means that occur before the school day such as at a bus stop (Elsass et al., 2016). The array of definitions can lead to misinformation surrounding gun violence.

Gun violence on school grounds has been the impetus of policy changes and legislation, beginning in the early 1990s, with the *Gun-Free Schools Act*. The *Gun-Free Schools Act* required zero-tolerance policies for students who

brought a weapon to campus. Following Columbine, the U.S. Department of Education and Secret Service collaborated on the *Safe Schools Initiative*, leading to the promotion of threat assessment approaches to preventing school gun violence (Vossekuil et al., 2004). After the Sandy Hook massacre, the Obama administration established the Now is the Time (The Whitehouse, 2013) initiative, which included a broad array of comprehensive approaches to reducing school violence. Most recently, the Parkland shooting prompted the formation of *The Federal Commission on School Safety*. The final report serves as an update to the 2004 Safe Schools Initiative and offers guidance on a number of steps schools and districts can take to prevent school violence, including the continued focus on threat assessment (DeVos et al., 2018). In Florida, the *Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act* (Florida K-20 Education Code [FDOE], 2019) was intended to comprehensively address gun violence on campuses by increasing collaboration between schools and law enforcement. Other portions of the measure aimed at the preparation and prevention of school shooting incidents include the Guardian program. Through the Guardian program, teachers in Florida can be trained to carry guns on school grounds after completing 144 hours of training and passing psychological and drug screening tests (FDOE, 2019). Around the country, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on measures to “harden” (to make impenetrable) school campuses with gates, metal detectors, and bullet-proof barriers. However, Semprevivo et al. (2020) indicated that despite the increase in funding and new policies to combat gun violence at K-12 schools, gun violence in schools continues to be a problem.

## Characterization of School Shooters

### *Research Characterizations*

Like the popular media, the research community has analyzed school shooting perpetrators from the following perspectives in an effort to explain, predict, and stop gun violence. Research indicates that White men who have been victimized (e.g., through bullying, threatened by a gun) are more likely to carry a gun to school (Semprevivo et al., 2020). Whereas Khubchandani and Price (2018) reported Black men and women who struggle with depression or suicidal ideation are more likely to carry a weapon. Similarly, Riedman and O'Neill's (2018) research addressed the disproportionate effects of gun violence in minority communities, particularly those disadvantaged by poverty. Conversely, data from the *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* survey suggested Black men and women showed lower rates of carrying a gun and carrying a weapon to school than their White counterparts (Semprevivo et al., 2020).

Regarding mass shooters, mental health concerns are continuously cited as an explanation for mass shooter violence. Lankford and Madfis (2018) reported a connection between mass shooters who have mental health diagnoses and/or suicidal ideation. Although this has been a connection in popular media, perpetrators with mental health issues only account for less than 3% of shooting incidents (Knoll & Annas, 2018; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). In fact, some researchers noted that those with mental illness are more likely to commit suicide than mass murder (Knoll & Annas, 2018).

### *Media Characterization*

Gun violence in schools covered by the media includes: (a) school shooter characteristics, (b) reasons and motives for school shootings, and (c) community response. CNN (2019) posits school shootings are increasing and cites mental health issues and poor coping strategies to be the main concerns. Since Parkland, students and parents have been more concerned about gun violence (Graf, 2018), although the research demonstrates that school shootings have been declining (Nicodemo & Petronio, 2018). Research conducted by The Pew Research Center shows that the growing fear of school shootings is higher among minority students than Whites (Graf, 2018). A study by the Washington Post yields similar findings, showing increased media attention surrounding gun violence on White schools, although minority students are more likely to face gun violence while at school (Cox & Rich, 2018). The Washington Post analysis also noted the rarity of media reports of gun violence that occur due to gangs or accidents.

Not knowing exactly what a school shooter looks like makes it difficult to identify future attackers. However, there are commonalities among school shooting perpetrators. For instance, the likelihood of committing a school shooting increases with the likelihood of gun-carrying or gun ownership (Semprevivo et al., 2020). Reports of bullying and poor mental health are cited by news outlets as motivators for the perpetration of gun violence (Long, 2019; Shapiro, 2018). A report by the Washington Post in 2018 uncovered that more than half of children exposed to gun violence at schools since Columbine were children of color (Cox & Rich, 2018). Despite this fact most of the school shootings were deemed targeted or accidental while the majority of media reports focused on indiscriminate shooting.

### *Who is Missing?*

The national media coverage typically does not discuss shootings that have few victims or that are in connection with gang violence (Cox & Rich, 2018).

These incidents are often excluded from the growing body of research of school shootings. Many researchers and the media commonly exclude gang shootings from school shootings data even when they occur on school grounds (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). Indiscriminate shootings are said to be more violent and may garner more media coverage (Knoll & Annas, 2018). As an example, the demographics of the community or the number of people who are injured or killed may affect how school shooting incidents are publicized (Levine & McKnight, 2020). ABC News (2019) found that 57.6% of school shootings occurred at sporting events and large school functions. The characterizations and definitions of gun violence, mass violence, and active shooters on school grounds can lead to disproportionate media coverage (Knoll & Annas, 2018). If school gun violence of any kind (e.g., gang violence, single shooter) is excluded from the media's coverage, the public may internalize a skewed view of what constitutes such acts. When data is missing, policies and standards will not reflect what is actually needed for communities that are involved.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Data related to school shootings provides information for school districts and policymakers to consider in the quest to diminish the risk factors associated with school shootings. In this study, the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) database was analyzed since it provided data related to media coverage, and it has represented K-12 schools. The media coverage of school shootings by race has not been evaluated to date. According to media reports and research by the FBI, more White men perpetrate mass shooting violence (Taylor, 2019). The coverage of school violence by race may be different than media portrayal and may have short and long-term repercussions. For these reasons, the following study was conducted to analyze the media coverage of K-12 gun violence with connection to race. The research questions investigated were:

1. How do characteristics of school shootings vary in cases where race is reported?
2. What is the relationship between the CHDS media rating and the perpetrator's race?

### **Methods**

A study of secondary data from CHDS was conducted of school shootings to characterize and explore the relationships between media coverage, types of

school shootings, and perpetrator's race. In this study, K-12 school shooting data was obtained from the CHDS which is the most comprehensive database for school shootings (Levine & McKnight, 2020). Although it is more complete than other databases, the CHDS lacks full demographic data regarding the characteristics of the perpetrator committing the school shootings.

### *Demographics of the Sample*

The CHDS compiles a list of school shooting incidents by combining events from other databases, online media sources that report on school shooters, and newspaper archives (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018). Shooting incidents involved anyone who threatened a school campus with a firearm. The following sample was derived from the CHDS dataset. The sample was delimited to incidents that occurred from 2012 until March 2020 and by the following criteria: (a) incidents that occurred before the Sandy Hook school shooting ( $n=1,060$ ), (b) shooter suicides ( $n=122$ ), and (c) cases where there were no victims ( $n=246$ ). There were a total of  $N=160$  cases remaining. Of these, 63 (37.5%) cases did not list the shooter's race. Perpetrators included adults and minors: affiliated with the school (students  $n=51$ , former students  $n=10$ , other staff  $n=3$ ), adjacent to someone at the school (parents  $n=5$ , relative  $n=3$ , students from a rival school  $n=4$ , relationship with victim  $n=2$ ), multiple shooters ( $n=4$ ) non students using the athletic facilities ( $n=13$ ), no affiliation ( $n=26$ ), or no known affiliation ( $n=39$ ). Shooters' race included: (a) Black (35.7%), (b) White (20.8%), (c) other but identified as Hispanic/Latino in the ethnicity column (3%), (d) Asian (1.2%), (e) American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.6%), and race unknown (37.5%).

Data for the sample includes grade levels served by the school, victim(s) count, and shooter demographics, as well as variables such as shooter gender, race, type of school, reliability ratings (media rating), category of shooting, and narrative and summary of the shooting. Age range for the perpetrators were: 12 to 17 years of age ( $n=61$ ), shooters 18 or older, ( $n=48$ ), and shooters of unknown or not specified ages ( $n=51$ ).

### *Data Cleaning and Analysis*

The CHDS dataset included school shootings from 1970 to the present. However, school shootings that took place after the Sandy Hook school shooting and resulting policy changes were considered for this study. The resulting delimited dataset was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 25) software. Descriptive statistics were considered to inform research question one. To answer the second research question, an

ordinal regression was conducted. Ordinal regression was chosen to overcome unequal variances and non-normal distribution between groups of Likert scale type data (Liddell & Kruschke, 2018). A comparison of means was determined through ANOVAs and *t*-test. A two-way analysis of variance examined the relationship between race and media ratings. Independent *t*-test compared means by: (a) race and location in the school and (b) race and type of shooting.

## Variables

*Type of school shooting.* The CHDS categories of shootings were utilized to classify reasons for school shootings including (a) bullying, (b) domestic or targeted victim, (c) escalation of dispute, (d) gang-related, (e) illegal or drug-related activity, (f) indiscriminate shooting, (g) murder or suicide, (h) robbery, or (i) self-defense.

*Media coverage.* The CHDS database included ratings that indicated the reliability of the recorded incident across five levels of media criteria: (a) non-cited sources (e.g., blog or anonymous author), (b) single newspaper article or online news report, (c) multiple news sources, (d) hundreds of news sources, inclusive of interviews from Law Enforcement and/or court rulings, and (e) official police records. Each category is assigned a rating (1–5) based on these criteria. For this study, only the first four ratings were included in the analysis since these sources were the most related to outside media coverage. The higher the number of the media rating the more media sources and coverage. Likewise, higher ratings included the media sources of the lower rating numbers (e.g., a rating of three would include media from criteria one and two). Reliability scores correspond with the overall media rating determined by media coverage for a single case. Riedman and O'Neill's (2018) discussed the goal for each shooting incident to have a reliability rating of 5 indicating law enforcement verified the data connected to the shooting.

*Race.* The demographics of the sample by race include (a) Black, (b) White, (c) other but identified as Hispanic/Latino in the ethnicity column, (d) Asian, and (e) American Indian or Alaskan Native. Where race was reported by the media, it may have not been confirmed by additional sources. Several shooting incidents reported by the media did not include the perpetrator's race. This study explores the relationship between Black and White shooters and did not include other race classifications due to the small involvement of those races.



## Data Analysis

To describe the data set, descriptive statistics were run. Descriptives were used to see how characteristics of school shootings varied by race, with chi-square conducted to test for statistical significance. In addition to descriptives, inferential statistics were computed including an ordinal regression PLUM (polytomous universal model) procedure (Decarlo, 2003), which was employed to analyze the dependent variable (Reliability Media Rating) and the independent variable of race. A two-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of media ratings on shooter race. The dependent variable was the media rating which refers to the reliability score given by the CHDS database. The independent variable is the shooter's race: Black or White.

## Results

An analysis of the CHDS database of school shootings from December 2012 until 2020 related to race, media coverage, and types of school shootings was conducted to analyze the level of media coverage related to race. Descriptive analysis provides the answer to the first research question. The frequency of types of school shootings reported were analyzed, and escalation of dispute ( $n=40$ ), is the largest category. Gang-related shootings ( $n=17$ ) and indiscriminate shootings ( $n=13$ ) follow as second and third reasons why students engage in gun violence. In addition, White shooters are more likely to commit gun violence through indiscriminate shooting ( $n=13$ ) while Black shooters are more likely to commit gun violence due to an escalation of dispute ( $n=37$ ). Differences in reasons for school shooting by race were statistically significant according to the results of a chi square test of independence  $X^2(1, N=53)=39.83, p=.000. \Phi=0.867$ . White shooters are also more likely to engage in gun violence inside school buildings (63.3%,  $n=19$ ), while Black shooters are more likely to engage in violence outside on school property (84.2%,  $n=48$ ). Despite race  $r$  and the location of the shooting, differences were statistically significant,  $X^2(1, N=82)=30.63, p=.000. \Phi=0.589$ .

In support of prior research, gun violence on school campuses occurred in high schools at a higher rate (67.1%,  $n=49$ ) overall.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of media ratings on shooter race, which revealed there is a significant difference between shooter race,  $F(2, 94)=17.083, \eta^2=0.267, p<.001$ . Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean scores of Black shooters ( $M=2.77, SD=0.945$ ) tend to be lower than that of White shooters ( $M=4.10, SD=1.155$ ),  $p<.001$ .

An ordinal regression was conducted on the sample data from the CHDS K-12 shooting database to answer the second research question. The regression analysis predicted media rating based on the known shooter race. An ordinal regression analysis was conducted to predict the ordinal variable of media ratings. An ordinal regression analysis of shooter's race and media scores (Black and White) indicated that media coverage is more widespread when White shooters are involved. The odds ratio indicated a 46.48% greater chance of school shootings by White perpetrators reporting (hundreds of media stories) than for an incident when Black shooters are involved. The proportional odds model indicated a statistically significant effect,  $B=3.865$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1)=9.366$   $p<.001$  (CI: 1.39, 6.34). Conversely, Black school shooters are almost two times more likely to garner limited media coverage. Meaning that the shooting may only be mentioned in a single source and most likely written by an anonymous author.

## **Discussion**

A study was conducted to determine the media coverage of school shootings by type and by race. The findings support calls for more research that have argued for the need for more complete reporting of gun violence in schools (Levine & McKnight, 2020; Lopez et al., 2020). It is imperative to have an accurate view of school gun violence in order to assess threats and identify risk factors leading to these school shootings. The evidence demonstrates differences between White and Black shooters regarding type of school shooting, location of school shooting, and the media coverage of those events.

The results of this study suggest White school shooters are more likely to engage in indiscriminate shootings which corresponds with research from Livingston et al. (2019). These types of indiscriminate school shootings are more likely to receive greater media coverage than others as was demonstrated by the higher levels of media coverage recorded in the CHDS database. Black shooters are more likely to engage in shootings resulting from an escalation of a dispute or gang activity. These types of gun violence often take place outside of school buildings but are still on school property. The results of this investigation support that escalation of dispute shootings, more often committed by Black perpetrators, garner less media coverage (Knoll & Annas, 2018). The lack of media coverage is of concern as it does not provide the attention and urgency to address all gun violence occurring in K-12 education in all communities.

Indiscriminate shootings perpetrated by White shooters garner more national media coverage than school gun violence which has an intended victim or is perpetrated by a Black shooter (Cox & Rich, 2018). Reasons for

the greater attention may be related to (a) the shock of the incident taking place in a “safe setting,” (b) the number of victims and their demographics, and (c) the senselessness of the act (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Popular media can influence public perceptions which can inform policy; therefore, it is important to recognize all gun violence incidents to develop public awareness of all types of school-based shootings for all communities. Prior research has noted that indiscriminate shootings completed by White shooters often take place at schools with a majority White population. However, shootings perpetrated by Black shooters, tend to take place in schools with a majority black population (Cox & Rich, 2018). By not providing media attention to all types of shootings, an inequity may be perpetrated in predominantly Black schools. Without attention to the problem of school gun violence of all types, support to remedy causes related to gun violence on these school campuses may not be funded. Perceptions of school safety and the appropriateness of specific policy proposals has been found to vary by race (Graf, 2018). Moreover, due to the media’s influence on public perception, to inform the policy setting agenda, such that policies to prevent school shootings focus rarer, indiscriminate shootings without addressing mediation measures that may prevent the shootings that stem from gang activity or escalation of disputes.

## Limitations and Implications

Implications for the media could include evaluating coverage of school-related shootings. Media reports could include different types of gun violence rather than solely focusing on indiscriminate shootings. Oversight from media organizations could ensure that the perspectives and concerns of diverse communities are represented in reporting. Awareness of such variations in media reporting may help media to ensure that their reporting more accurately portrays the concerns of communities whose voices are less likely to be heard. Media reporting of shootings should consider how portrayals of crime by race may contribute to harmful stereotypes (Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Instead of focusing on the perpetrator reporting, the community perspectives of crime and violence may be one way to balance the need for accurate reporting with the responsibility to avoid encouraging bias in perceptions of safety.

One major limitation of the study is the accuracy and accessibility of the database. The accuracy of the CHDS database cannot be verified because the data is curated from secondhand sources (Riedman & O’Neill, 2018). While there are many databases that collect mass shooter incidents, the CHDS has strengths (Levine & McKnight, 2020). However, in many cases as noted in this analysis ( $n=84$ ), there are gaps in the information found in the CHDS

regarding the perpetrators' gender, age, race, and affiliation with the school. The unknown cases could demonstrate a different representation of school shootings had the complete information been reported. Moreover, there needs to be increased research on commonalities and characteristics of perpetrators to inform proactive interventions and preventative measures (Levine & McKnight, 2020). For example, prior disciplinary actions, incidents with violence, social media presence, behavioral characteristics, and familial structure are areas in need of analysis.

Schools and communities could be educated to diffuse disputes that lead to gun violence, and training could be developed to inform stakeholders and the public about potential warning signs. Due to the nature of school shootings, there has been a call to increase the number of mental health resources on school campuses, yet little attention has been given to the mental health wellbeing of teachers (Reddy et al., 2013). There is a scant amount of research exploring school shootings and its overall impact on students, teachers, administrators, and the general public. Future research should be conducted to explore the relationship between trauma and school shootings for these populations (Cox & Rich, 2018). The stress of anticipating or, worse, experiencing a school shooting may be traumatic for students, teachers, and administration. In addition, future research might include implications of gun violence on school campuses as it relates to learning. Student enrollment has decreased in schools where a school shooting has occurred and standardized testing scores have declined (Beland & Kim, 2016). To identify potential perpetrators there needs to be a comprehensive and systematic way of tracking data that provides insight to gun violence, therefore law enforcement, government agencies, and organizations can streamline their data collection efforts (Lopez et al., 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Often school shootings are random and unforeseen which can prompt panic leading to a frenzy. Since Columbine, there has been increased attention by the media and the public surrounding certain types of school shootings. Parents and teachers question if their students are as safe at school as they once believed. Politicians are feeling pressure to enact laws to ease the public's mind and provide a safe space for students to learn and grow. Society is longing for the chance to understand the characteristics of a school shooter and how to prevent these acts from occurring in the future. There are databases that document instances of school shooters but lack pertinent information that could inform preventative factors. There is a skewed view of what gun violence looks like on school campuses due to focused media reports on

indiscriminate shootings and lack of inclusive media coverage. Attention to more inclusive media representation could possibly lead to the prevention of school gun violence while fostering safer school environments for all K-12 students.

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