

WHAT DO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS KNOW ABOUT CRIME: INCONSISTENCIES IN DATA, REPORTING, AND DEFINITIONS IN MASS/SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND HATE CRIMES

INTRODUCTION

According to the Gun Violence Archive (2023) since New Year's Day there have been 63 mass shootings in the United States. In 2021, President Biden signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act into law, but as of 2023, some of the promises in the bill have yet to be fulfilled, like inconsistencies in data reporting, in addition to an increase in hate crimes last year- as reviewed by USA Today's Erin and Rebecca M. (2023).

THE ISSUE

For many, social media is the prime source of news and current events. This fact is known by all news agencies and the social media giants so much so that they proctor their algorithms and biases to reflect various political opinions and mindsets like the portrayal of mass shooters or amplification of certain hate crimes. Although violent crime in general has widely been on the decline since the 1990's with the exception of the COVID years, many still believe violent crime in the physical world is more prevalent than ever due to how it is presented in the media. However, not all crimes are reported, especially in an effective manner, like hate crimes, nor are the definitions for said crimes clear and black and white- they're grey and vague.

From eye-catching titles to emotion-inducing diction, media outlets compose news to fit the billet of the most interesting violent crimes to report on while governing agencies like the FBI struggle to fully encompass annual violent crime trends or purposefully avoid reporting certain crimes (or the local/state agencies) to comply with quotas, such as the supposed decrease in hate crimes.

MASS AND SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

As mentioned before, there have already been 63 mass shootings (currently) in 2023 in the U.S.. Of course, while most are locally reported on, very few make it to national headlines- but when they do, the portrayal of the offender and the crime is very dramatic. Russel Frank, a professor in Journalism Ethics (2018), poses this question: “Can stroking this fascination (of the criminal mind) cause harm?”

Frank also goes on to list several factors that are focused on when the media reports on national-headlining mass shooters: 1.) Obsession with deviance: the True Crime genre is a staple of American culture and evidence that we’re fascinated by the criminal mind and are eager and ravenous for each and every new story of the next mass shooter- that many on TikTok love to make edits of and glamorize, even go to the extent of creating hashtags “#JusticeFor_”. 2.) Incentives to kill: as portrayed in many True Crime shows and movies, the killer is typically one with mental disturbance and a social outcast- and the media portrays mass shooters to be of the same breed. Many of those who are against gun control will argue that the incentive to kill is one driven by mental issues but will ignore the issue of wide-spread gun availability. 3.) Killer profiles: in addition to ‘mental health being the cause’ profiles on mass shooters tend to be the bulk of the article, some including warning signs to watch out for or a copycat effect. Frank closes with the pressing urge to focus more on the victims of school shootings and not the prepretrators- perhaps the glorifying and rise of mass shootings really makes these profiles into *killer* profiles.

While the media glorifies mass shootings, the data is inconsistent, according to Penn State criminal justice professor Lacey Wallace (2018). Regarding school shootings in the 2015-2016 school year, the Department of Education (DOE) reported 240 shootings while other sources like the American

Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) were only able to confirm some of those- they found that 138 of 240 shootings were *errors* after contacting each school listed. What caused this error?

The criteria used by the DOE was based off this question: “*For the regular (...) school year, not including intersession or summer, was there at least one incident at the school that involved a shooting (regardless of whether anyone was hurt)?*”. This implies a shooting could count as a student having a firearm in their bag and it accidentally firing at some point, say, into the floor and not injuring anyone. Likely, those 138 errors were situations of this nature- the definition of ‘shooting’ is vague. Not only that, but errors in reporting by school administrators, be it a mistype, or confusion on what to report to comply with local and state laws, but not always federal, which leads to non-uniform reporting of shootings across the country. Inconsistencies on reporting mass shootings like school ones have many consequences that go beyond the numbers: it diminishes the feeling of safety kids should have in school, in addition to the stress parents face sending their children off every day.

HATE CRIMES

Mass shootings aren’t the only crime that is misrepresented in the numbers and media, it’s also hate crimes. Anthropology professor Sophie Bjork-James of Vanderbilt University (2019) argues that the annual FBI report that holds the statistics for that year’s crime reports from all over the country does *not* prioritize hate crimes- so much so that many don’t even make it into the database!

Bjork-James cites many reasons as to why data is underreported: lack of training for hate crimes, lack of trust between law enforcement and hate-targeted groups, differentiation in reporting criteria, and downplaying of hate crimes by police and the FBI. This was such an issue that, at the time, many agreed that there was no reliable source for hate crime statistics on a national scale, like FBI reports. Other important reasons for the underreporting of data are the definition and understanding of hate crimes and pressure to comply with bias.

Jeannine Bell, a professor of law (2021) claims the narrow legal definition of hate crimes makes it difficult to change and convict, as well as report. As mentioned in the introduction, in 2021 there was an official hate crime law passed- but despite plenty of *seemingly* racially biased hate crimes, Bell notes that authorities resist against many reports on the notion that the bias is uncertain.

Although in 1990 the Hate Crime Statistics Act was passed followed by state legislature on hate crimes, the FBI report in 2019 showed that a whopping 86.1% of states reported *no hate crime* occurrences that year. This comes from inconsistencies in reporting caused by the difficulties in understanding how hate crimes are defined and what they look like, in addition to ineffective training and lack of valuable resources for prosecuting hate crimes effectively. On top of that, there's police bias to not report hate crimes that are blatantly obvious to the public as bias-motivated, which hurts the victims further.

A SOLUTION?

In an article authored jointly by Anna Ross, Elizabeth Paton, and Michelle Blanchard (2020), the undeniable call to action has been examined: reporting on mental illness, violence, and crime needs to change (in the media and in the numbers!). They write that a whopping 96% of violent crimes are not committed by mentally ill people. Yet, the media focuses heavily on violent crime, mental illness, and many combinations of one causing the other situations that it creates a bias toward mental illnesses being the cause for violent crimes. The stigmatizing language used in many media coverages regarding mental illness, or the glorification of it and mass shootings, does more harm than good- some could say this is more of entertaining than informative. It is also important to note that those with mental illnesses are also victims of hate crimes, too!

As an effort to promote safer media reporting coverage, they have outlined the following points to keep in mind: "*Consider the impact of media reporting on people living with complex mental illness and their families. Include relevant contextual factors when reporting on a violent crime in which mental*

illness has been confirmed by authoritative sources to have played a part in the person's behaviour. Use appropriate and respectful language when talking about people with a mental illness. Say "a person with schizophrenia" rather than "a schizophrenic". These guidelines were inspired by Mindframe, a program developed by the Australian National Government for suicide prevention. Mindframe has also developed other programs to aide in proper media coverage regarding mental illness, violence, and crime, that the U.S. media could learn a thing or two from.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there are many issues regarding inconsistencies on the media and data side of crime reporting in addition to the definition of various violent crimes such as hate crimes and mass/school shootings. Tying all these factors together has revealed a dangerous threat to many, from criminologists to the victims of the crimes themselves. Over time, this has made a bad reputation for the police and reporting authorities in the eyes of the public with the help of the media. How could this happen? How can it be fixed?

From the suggested guidelines of media coverage regarding mental illness, violence, and crime, it is wise to start there. By better covering these topics and being more aware of the terminology we use to better suit those who struggle with those issues or are related to the victims/offenders, we can create a more receptive audience that may be willing to band together and conjure up change through public action in hate-targeted neighborhoods, lobbying in local, state, and federal levels for better legislation regarding violent crimes such as hate crimes and mass shootings, attending local school board meetings, being more mindful of your media consumption and output, etc. It won't change overnight, but with resilient determination on multiple fronts, it will over time.

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