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**Analyzing Mass Shootings in the USA between 1982 and 2023.**

**An Exploratory Data Analysis.**

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B.Sc. Data Science

Course: DLBDSEDAV01 – Exploratory Data Analysis and Visualization

Task 1: Visually Exploring a Data Set

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Date: 10.8.2024

Study Code:

<https://github.com/MaxIG1/var_auto_for_synth_data>

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Abbreviations Meaning

FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation

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# Introduction: Public Health and Mass Shootings

Mass shootings in the USA are one of the central interfaces between public health and safety and pose a major threat to citizens' sense of security, but more importantly are a threat to their lifes. According to the FBI, a mass shooting is defined as the use of weapons in public with at least four victims without an organizational background and not for economical gain. This excludes for example gang related violence or terroristic attacks (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005, p. 8). As a result, the concept of mass shooting, as it is established in research, has a certain bias and only represents part of the gun violence in the USA. Furthermore, it is important to mention that this form of violence is primarily a US-American phenomenon. Compared to the rest of the developed world, the USA has the highest number of mass shootings per capita. Only the civil war in Yemen recorded more mass shootings than the USA between 1966 and 2012 (Fisher & Keller, 2017; Lankford, 2016).

This study is based on Mother Jones mass shooting data compiled in the wake of the July 2012 massacre at an Aurora movie theater (Follmann et al., 2012, 2024). This database attempts to record all such crimes committed in the United States, consistent with the FBI's definition of mass shootings.

In total, the database records 149 mass shootings in a period from 1982 to the end of 2023. Data would also be available for 2024, but as this year has not yet been completed, this data is not included in this study. In total, over 1149 people died and 1628 people were injured in these events. This demonstrates that, given the large number of deaths in the US due to gun violence, the mass shooting only represents a portion of gun violence in the US (Follmann et al., 2015).

In fact, many mass shooters exhibit a wide range of behaviors and psychiatric illnesses, such as depression, anxiety or personality disorders in general, in the years or months before they become perpetrators. At the same time, it is important to note that only a small proportion of people with mental disorders commit mass (Follmann et al., 2012).

It is important to mention that the data set available here obviously only contains information about crimes that have already been committed. This leads to a retrospective view of events, which provides valuable insights, but does not allow any predictions or preventive measures to be directly derived.

Political and cultural aspects are as important to comprehending the problem as psychological and social ones. When compared to other countries the United States has a remarkably high rate of firearm ownership which raises the possibility of gun violence. Different groups have differing positions on different aspects of the contentious gun control debate. These strategies include restricting the availability of certain types of firearms and conducting more extensive background checks.

The structure of the study is as follows. In the first step, some general aspects of the existing data set are described, like correlations, mode and descriptive aspects. In the second part, the data is visualized more deeply and finally from that analysis out, some qualitative analysis about white shooters between 20 and 25 years are presented. The reason for that choice will be explained further in the study.

# 2. Investigation of Mass Shootings in the USA. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.

The data set analyzed contains 25 columns, of which only 5 are numerical. These numerical columns include the number of deaths, the number of injuries, the total number of victims, the age of the shooter and the year of the crime. It should be noted that the year of the crime was extracted from the date of the crime (Follmann et al., 2024).

The results of the correlation analysis are unsurprising. Only the number of injured, dead and the total number of victims correlate significantly with each other, which can be seen in Figure 1. This is as expected, since a higher total number of victims implies a higher number of fatal or non-fatal injuries, which is in a way tautological.

Interestingly, the analysis show that the year of the mass shooting has no effect on the number of injuries, nor does the age of the perpetrator. This is surprising as one might assume that with the increase in gun control measures or legislation, mass shootings would be less fatal. There is also no linear influence of the age of the perpetrator on the number of victims, which suggests that aspects such as physical fitness or similar do not play a role in the effectiveness of the crimes.

However, it should be noted that correlations only depict linear relationships. Other relationships, such as an initially increasing and then decreasing relationship, cannot be captured in the correlation matrix. There is also the question of the average age of the perpetrators and the average lethality of a mass shooting.

The average perpetrator is 34 years old, with 96 percent being male, and only four percent identified as non-male. Their crimes claimed on average a total of 18 victims, of whom just 8 were fatally and 10 were not fatally injured. However, it should be noted here that the data set is based on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) definition of mass shootings, which states that a mass shooting is only classified as such if there are more than 4 victims (Follmann et al., 2012) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005, p. 8). This means that mass shootings that are stopped not included in the dataset. For example, shooters can be prevented by armed citizens, police officers or, under certain circumstances, by malfunctioning weapons. The present data set therefore exhibits a sampling bias.

**Figure 1:** Correlation Matrix for Numerical Features of Mass Shootings Incidents

A graph of a number of patients

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# 3. Deeper Analysis of Mass Shootings

## 3.1. Increasing Prevalence of Mass Shootings

In general, the number of mass shootings is escalating, as can be seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Mass Shootings in the USA per Year with Trend Analysis

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This figure shows the number of shootings per year in the period between 1982 and 2023. What is clear visually can also be understood statistically.

A Poisson regression was calculated to illustrate the relationship between time and mass shooting events. A Poisson regression is equipped with the logarithmic link as standard, so that it is well able to depict exponential growth. Furthermore, Poisson regression is particularly suitable for count data, as there can be no negative numbers of shootings. There is a highly statistically significant relationship between the year and the number of shootings. To interpret this relationship in terms of ratios, the coefficient can be exponentiated: exp(0.0606) ≈ 1.0625. This means that the expected number of shootings increases by a factor of approximately 1.0625 for each additional year, which corresponds to an increase of approximately 6.25%. In other words, the number of shootings increases by just around 6% per year. The p-value is p<0.001 which indicates high significance.

## 3.2. Social Demographics of Mass Shooters: Analysis of Race, Age and Gender

Even though the average age of the shooters has already been briefly discussed, it is important to show the distribution of the shooters. A meaningful interpretation is only possible with symmetrical and unimodal distributions. However, age is not usually distributed symmetrically, which is also shown by the age distribution of the shooters in Figure 3.

Here it can be seen that the age distribution of the shooters is bimodal, i.e. there are two modes. The first mode is between 20 and 25, and the second is between 40 and 45 years. This finding demonstrates that different age groups are represented differently and may require different prevention approaches. The bimodal distribution may indicate different psychosocial factors or life circumstances that are particularly pronounced in these age groups. A further analysis of these factors could provide further insights into preventing and combating mass shootings.

**Figure 3:** Age Distribution of Mass Shooters in the USA

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In general, a bimodal distribution often indicates that several underlying processes overlap, i.e. that different populations are present. This leads to the next question, namely the ethnicity of the shooters. It is important to note that ethnicity alone does not provide information about specific character traits. However, ethnicity and being a perpetrator can be confounded through other factors such as poverty, discrimination or place of residence. Since such confounding aspects are not included in the present data set, it is only possible to investigate whether there are differences in mass shootings by ethnicity.

In the USA, there are major differences between Afro-American and White citizens in a number of socio-demographic factors which has a deep effect on their lives (Correll et al., 2002; Demny, 2004, pp. 18–22). It can therefore be assumed that, at least on average, these divergent experiences can also influence the incidence and form of mass shootings.

**Figure 4:** Age Distribution of Mass Shooters per Ethnicity Group

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Figure 4 compares the age distribution of White, Afro-American and Asian mass shooters. All three groups have a peak between 40 and 45, yet the White mass shooters age distribution depicts an anomaly.

White mass shooters have a bimodal age distribution. Offenders between the ages of 20 and 25 are particularly common. Interestingly, this age cohort is completely absent among African American and Asian mass shooters. This suggests that white mass shooters between the ages of 20 and 25 are a special case that should be investigated further. To answer this question more precisely, a random sample of white mass shooters between the ages of 20 and 25 will be drawn and qualitatively analyzed to identify commonalities in chapter 4.

However, white, African American and Asian mass shooters have a mode between the ages of 40 and 45. This suggests that a risk factor for mass shootings is particularly pronounced at this age. One possible explanation could be that people aged 40 to 45 believe that their lives will not change fundamentally as they are in later adulthood. This is also an age at which mental illness often becomes entrenched. For example, on average, white shooters exhibit mental health issues 46 percent of the time before they become mass shooters, while in the 40-45 age group, that rate rises to 75 percent.

Finally, the question arises regarding the data on racial disparities in mental health, specifically whether there are differences in the prevalence of previous psychological issues among shooters of different racial backgrounds. The data indeed shows a significant disparity. White shooters exhibit more prior signs of mental health issues compared to African American shooters.

However, it is important to consider potential confounding factors (Neal, 2020, p. 4; Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018). It is likely that white individuals have better access to healthcare and insurance, which could result in a higher rate of diagnosed mental health conditions compared to African Americans (Case & Deaton, 2021). Thus, these figures might offer limited information on the actual differences in mental health among shooters.

**Figure 5:** Distribution of Prior Signs of Mental Health Issues by Race

A graph of a bar graph

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

# 4. Qualitative Analysis of White Mass Shooters between 20 and 25 Years of Age

As mentioned before the white mass shooter between 20 and 25 is an anomaly, which demands further investigation. Therefore, a random sample of five shooters was selected and their motives were analyzed:

These shooters were: Robert "Bobby" E. Crimo III, who perpetrated the Highland Park parade shooting on July 4, 2022; Patrick Wood Crusius, who carried out the 2019 El Paso shooting; Dylann Roof who committed the Charleston Shooting and and Jonathan Sapirman of the Indiana Mall Shooting in 2022 (AP, 2019; Guarino et al., 2022; Nelson, 2022; Sanchez & Payne Ed, 2016). All of these shooters, who had information available, had racist motives. The .95 percent confidence interval for the proportion of white mass shooter having racist motives is (0.449, 1). For one of the random samples no publicly available information could be found. The age might be a confounding factor because in this life period the perpetrators radicalize themselves in online communities and combined with other troubling life situations the risk factors might escalate.

The violence of the white mass murderers analyzed here was directed against the Asian and Latino communities or exhibited general racist and anti-Semitic tendencies. This indicates that a right-wing extremist ideology often contributes significantly to the violence perpetrated by white shooters in this age group, a factor that has not been adequately addressed in the debate. Such acts of violence committed by white perpetrators against minorities could also be understood as a form of terrorism (Schmid, 2011, pp. 99–148). Thus, one reason why white mass shooters are more prevalent might be a form of racism. It must be added that three samples are relatively small, yet this research opens further research endeavors that might be tested in the near future.

# 5. Conclusion

In the United States, mass shootings pose a severe threat to public safety and health. According to the FBI's definition, a mass shooting is an event where four or more people are killed (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005, p. 8). The Mother Jones database has been tracking such incidents since 1982. The study reveals that there have been 149 mass shootings since 1982, resulting in 1,149 fatalities and 1,628 injuries (Follmann et al., 2012, 2024). Despite representing only a small fraction of all gun violence in the country, these numbers underscore the serious and escalating nature of the issue (Follmann et al., 2015).

Psychological conditions, such as personality disorders or depression, are frequently found in mass shooters. However, it is crucial to emphasize that most individuals with mental health disorders do not become mass shooters. Maintaining this distinction is essential to avoid stigmatizing mental health issues and to focus on preventive measures (Follmann et al., 2012). Additionally, the retrospective nature of the available data presents a challenge. While it offers valuable insights, it does not allow for predictions or direct preventive actions.

The United States has an exceptionally high density of firearms compared to other developed nations, which increases the potential for gun violence. Political debates on gun control are often highly polarized, with various interest groups proposing different policies. These range from stricter background checks to bans on specific types of firearms. Such discussions highlight the complexity of the issue, influenced heavily by political and cultural factors (Fisher & Keller, 2017).

Time-series analysis from 1982 to 2023 shows a startling rise in mass shootings. Poisson regression confirms an annual increase of approximately 6.25%, indicating an exponential growth in the problem. This suggests that more research and effective solutions are urgently needed. Interestingly, there is no significant correlation between the age of offenders and the number of casualties or injuries. This might imply that factors like physical fitness or specific gun control laws may have less impact on the number of victims than previously thought.

The age distribution of perpetrators is bimodal, with peaks between 20 and 25 years old and again between 40 and 45 years old. Furthermore, it became apparent that white mass shootees in the age group of 20 to 25 exhibit a high lever of racism, which might contribute to their decision to become mass murders. These demands further research and poses important questions: Why is this not considered terrorism, given that the white mass shooters have radicalized and have a political agenda. On argument might be, that the USA does not have a mass shooting crisis, but a crisis of racist mass shootings. Yet this is a political problem and not so much a mental health problem.

Overall, the statistics on mass shootings in the United States paint a disturbing picture. The increasing frequency of these incidents and the various contributing factors highlight the complexity of the issue. While social and cultural factors, gun density, and mental health conditions all play a role, it is clear that specific and nuanced preventive and support strategies are needed. The challenge lies in developing a comprehensive understanding that addresses both systemic and individual aspects to identify effective and practical solutions.

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