

THESIS

FRAMING THE MASS SHOOTER JAMES EAGAN HOLMES:

SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS AND GUN VIOLENCE

Submitted by

Nikki Lee Martinez

Department of Journalism and Media Communications

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Michael Humphrey

Cindy Christen  
Lee Rosen

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## ABSTRACT

### FRAMING THE MASS SHOOTER JAMES EAGAN HOLMES: SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS AND GUN VIOLENCE

This study examined the framing of serious mental illness (SMI) and gun violence focused on the single case of the 2012 Aurora Theater Shooting perpetrated by James Eagan Holmes. At the time, it was the most devastating mass shooting in U.S. history with 58 injured and 12 killed. The overarching question guiding the study asked how online news stories about the Aurora Theater Shooting frame serious mental illness and mass shootings. A content analysis was conducted on four news websites, two local publications and two national publications. This was designed to detect geographical trends in reporting. Key findings were a lack of causal attribution to SMI or any other cause, which disagreed with former research that found SMI as a commonly-attributed cause to gun violence after mass shootings in news media coverage. Gun restriction policy was found to be more prevalent in national news than in local news suggesting differences in coverage by geographic location. SMI and gun restriction policy proposals did not appear together in stories often pointing to a split in individual- or societal-level responsibility. A final finding was a singular mental health professional source utilized in the 187-story sample suggesting a lack of mental health experts in crime reporting after a mass shooting. Further research could explore the crime beat reporters' source-gathering habits particularly when dealing with crime purveyed by people with SMI as well as a study assessing mental health professionals' views on being used as a source in crime news reporting.

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## INTRODUCTION

On July 20, 2012, 24-year old student James Eagan Holmes set off several canisters of an unknown gas at a sold-out movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and then opened fire on the theater audience. Holmes, who was clad in SWAT gear, killed 12 people and wounded 58, making a total of 70 victims. After the shooting, police arrested Holmes next to his car behind the theater (Stanford University Libraries, 2014). In terms of overall victims, this account, at the time, was the most devastating mass shooting in thirty years.

Recent years have brought a series of mass shootings carried out by shooters seemingly afflicted by a mental illness. The events have shaped national debates regarding mental health policy and proactive treatment measures in efforts to prevent gun violence among the mentally ill. As the topics have become national conversation, the news media has heavily covered the events focusing on shooters by framing stories around their lives, deaths, and breaking points—where it all ‘went wrong’—through the lens of the shooters’ purported mental illness as the main contributing factor. In the wake of devastating mass shootings, people turn to the media for answers. Beyond the chilling details, audiences desire to understand the impending social implications and the deeper meaning of such events (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). Following the Holmes shooting, media coverage was abundant with photos, videos, and dramatic details of the assailants’ ‘warning signs’. Throughout it all, a central frame remained his state of mental health during and preceding the event. In times of public crises such as mass shootings, normative expectations can be set, changed, or re-affirmed (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). Given the public’s mesmerization with such high-profile stories, it is important to understand how such news stories discuss and frame the supposed mental illness of the assailant. Framing theory explores how the news media delivers stories of this nature and how it shapes the viewers’ expectations, understandings, and rationalizations of mass shootings and mass shooters by utilizing, creating, and/or reinforcing stigmas and stereotypes. Goffman (1974) describes framing theory as a primary framework as a “neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates and rules” (p. 21). The way the media frames mass shootings represent the importance placed on certain characteristics like the assailant’s mental state. Moreover, these frames can shape how the public might perceive the act of mass shooter based on those characteristics.

News stories focused on the cause of a shooter's rampage are known as 'causal attribution frames.' They seek to "diagnose"—quite literally in the case of mass shootings—what caused the mass shooter's rampage. They regularly act as central frames in coverage of mass shooters, and while the story may focus on a single human being, the assigned cause may travel beyond an affiliation with the individual to a group he/she belongs to, casting a blanket of social condemnation across the entire group.

Through the lens of framing theory, this single case study investigated online news coverage of the 2012 Aurora theater shooter, James Eagan Holmes, in a content analysis of news stories in the two weeks immediately following the tragedy. This study, guided by the former research of McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski, and Barry (2014), sought to determine how news stories frame Holmes's purported mental illness in relation to his act of gun violence. The representative sample was taken from two local and two national online news publications. The reason for interest in the immediate coverage of the incident is that it is shown to have rapid media speculation and reporting.

A growing body of research has sought to identify trends in the news media's dealing with SMI in mass shooting incidents seeing as news media framing after a mass shooting tragedy can intensify negative views of people with serious mental illness by the extent to which they include SMI as a cause of gun violence and by the policy proposals suggested that, regardless of intent, ultimately inextricably tie SMI to mass shooting gun violence. Finding in this specific study of coverage of James Eagan Holmes can add to the previous literature of framing of gun violence and discussion of serious mental illness in that Holmes was receiving mental health care before the incident and had also been dismissed from his graduate program before the mass shooting at Aurora Theater. These preceding factors uniquely provided the news media with opportunities to use his history of treatment of mental illness as a predictor of his violence or alternatively assess how other life stressors could have set him off and, in turn, provided researchers in this study the opportunity to observe how those factors affected framing. Moreover, unlike other shooters, Holmes was not killed by the police and was arrested and facing trial during the time period of this study, allowing researchers to assess frames around an individual who had experienced issues with mental health before his rampage and who was being tried in the immediate two weeks after the shooting tragedy.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Mass Shootings and Mass Shooters**

The term ‘mass shooting’ evokes imprinted cultural images of American schools, community centers, and workplaces in horrific disarray while the reason for the tragedy lingers unknown—only to unfold slowly in its wake via the news media.

Known in criminological research as a mass murder or rampage shootings, a mass shooting has varied definitions in terms of scope/number of people injured varying from a minimum of two victims to a minimum of five and of having anywhere from one to several locations with little or no ‘cooling off period’ in between shots (Messing & Heeren, 2004; Holmes & Holmes, 1992, 2001; Petee, Padgett, and York, 1997; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). In 2012, in honor of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings, the University of Stanford Library created a national database for information about U.S. mass shootings and defines the event as follows: “A mass shooting incident involves an active shooter who shot three or more people in a single event” (Stanford University Libraries, 2014). Given that the database covers the mass shooting phenomena dating back to 1966 and that the proposed study refers to its data throughout, this study will adopt its definition of a mass shooting.

What is known about the motives and causes of mass shootings has been closely studied by homicide and criminological researchers who aim to categorize and organize the events. These categories help to show patterns in behaviors leading to these crimes. Unlike the varied opinion about the victim count that constitutes a mass shooting, homicide studies researchers have organized the motives for such mass shootings around five primary themes that may occur singly or in combination (Fox & Levin, 1998):

1. Revenge (e.g., a deeply disgruntled individual seeks payback for a host of failures in career, school, or personal life);
2. Power (e.g., a “pseudo-commando” style massacre perpetrated by some marginalized individual attempting to wage a personal war against society);
3. Loyalty (e.g., a devoted husband/father kills his entire family and then himself to spare them all from a miserable existence on Earth and to reunite them in the hereafter);
4. Terror (e.g., a political dissident destroys government property, with several victims killed as “collateral damage,” to send a strong message to those in power); and
5. Profit (e.g., a gunman executes the customers and employees at a retail store to eliminate all witnesses to a robbery) (Fox & DeLateur, 2013 p. 3).

Outside of the five main motives are two types of very rare shootings. The first is hate crime mass shootings in which an entire group is targeted for some individual or group of characteristics; the second is random mass shootings where the shootings are indiscriminate. Random shootings are those most often associated with psychosis or other forms of mental illness. Researchers Petee, Padgett, and York found that the perpetrator often feels the world is against them (1997). Sometimes, the assailant feels that a higher power is instructing him/her to carry out a mission. Fox and DeLateur observed cases where the individual misconstrue elements of social behavior to be malicious or threatening (2013).

In studying mass shooters' behaviors, homicide researchers found that the killings are often efforts to communicate a message on the part of the shooters. Criminologists frequently differentiate these types of shootings into two categories of violence. *Instrumental violence* is intended to achieve one or more goals. *Expressive violence* is intended to convey a message. In mass shootings, these types of violence can be used in tandem or alone (Larkin 2007, 2009).

More broadly, both types of violence are regarded as forms of behavioral communication and have been even further categorized. For instance, a 'performative script' carried out by a mass shooter usually deals with a reclaiming of a social status (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2011). In this script, assailants typically target those they feel have impeded their social status or place within a hierarchy—a school, a group of students, or a gender. An example is the 1989 case of the Montréal Massacre at École Polytechnique Université de Montréal, in which a male shooter targeted female engineering students. The shooter felt the women were transgressing gender boundaries by studying in a traditionally male-dominated field (Tonso, 2009). Thus, this and other cases can fall in a male dominance theme, as well (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Kellner 2008). A recent similar account was in Isla Vista, California, in 2014 where 22-year-old Elliot O. Rodger killed six and wounded 13 people after posting a 7-minute YouTube video expressing his hatred for women because of previous rejections (Ellis & Sidner, 2014). Similarly, a performative script for reclaiming one's dignity or social status can be seen in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. The two shooters were said to be mercilessly bullied at school and allegedly enacted revenge on both their tormentors and the institution itself—likely perceived as an authority structure that allowed the bullying to persist (Larkin, 2009). In an online journal entry shortly

before the shooting, Eric Harris, one of the teen shooters, wrote a message aimed at his peers, “I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things” (Shepard, 1999).

In this script, by calling attention to the tormentors, a ‘degradation ceremony’ begins. The assailant raises his/her own social status by shedding light on the deviance of those who have degraded him/her in the past (Garfinkel, 1956). Essentially, within this script the performance of the crime is the message—sent to the institution or individuals who are victimized. A final characteristic of the performative script is the excitement for and anticipation of violence. Part of the public fear associated with this script is that it entails moral aimlessness and a lack of regard for human life. A characteristic of this script is also a fascination with and attraction to violence for the perpetrator (Katz, 1988).

An even more direct form of communication on the part of the mass shooter involves a twisted relationship with the media. This is a communicative behavior that develops a relationship among three parties: the shooter (the message creator), the media (the message conduit), and the public audience (the message observer) (Muschert & Ragnedda 2011). Despite the frenzy caused by the perceived “randomness” of mass shootings, the assailants’ plans and schemes are often well thought out and then effectively communicated to their intended publics. Contrary to popular belief, assailants typically do not act suddenly on a bout of rage (Levin & Fox, 1985). They often have meticulous plans over long periods of time—weeks, months, even years. They strategize the time of day, location, and weapons to be used (see Fox & Levin, 2012; Walkup & Rubin, 2013). The news media is often integrated into these detailed plans. Media-savvy mass shooters find avenues to get their manifestos, writings, photos, and videos to media outlets and media platforms. In 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High shooters, posted incriminating videos and letters to their webpages. In the videos, the pair mention enemies that abused them and friends who didn’t do enough to defend them and discussed their hatred for their fellow students, taking a vow to kill them (Santiago, 2019). Despite family objection, the footage and writings were later shared by the media. The aforementioned shooter in Isla Vista, California, made an easily accessible YouTube video communicating his contempt for women. This was played repeatedly throughout the news media’s reporting of the crime. In an even more direct handing-off of information, Seung-Hui Cho, the shooter in the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre,

sent a packet of information including 27 videos, 43 pictures, and an 1,800-word manifesto to NBC corporate headquarters in New York on the day of his plotted attack (Windrem, 2007).

Presenting content to the media or releasing content for the media to access is one way the shooters can claim fame or guarantee remembrance. Moreover, by using the media to speak to a mass audience, the reasoning behind an attack can be well known, which may feed into the performative script (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2011). Because of the often shocking and rare nature of a mass shooting in comparison to routine crime, the news media has a close relationship with these types of crimes. When that is compounded by the communicative desires of mass shooters—a desire to reach out to the media or to express one’s self in the very act of the shooting—there is a recipe for a seemingly intrinsic relationship wherein the shooter, the media, and the public play a role in making meaning of mass shootings in the U.S.

### **News Media’s Role in Mass Shootings**

News media accounts stand as “the principal vehicle by which the average person comes to know crime and justice” (Barak, 1994, pp. 3-4). Warr (2000) found that most American’s knowledge and opinions of crime and justice are based on what they read in the newspaper and see on TV. However, crime in America is not always reported equally. A map of crime drawn in the media may differ significantly from one drawn from true crime statistics. The well-known axiom “If it bleeds, it leads,” has become an indication of media’s tendency to focus on crimes of violence, especially extreme cases (Doyle, 2006; Jenkins, 1994; Sacco, 2005). Similarly, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1991) found that news organizations have a tendency to focus on what is wrong in society, placing heavy emphasis on deviance and law violations. Mass shootings, among other violent crime make for interesting news given their highly deviant status. Surette (1998) noted the paradox that the “relative infrequency of violent crime in the real world heightens its newsworthiness and leads to its frequent appearance in the crime news. Crime news thus takes the rare crime event and turns it into the common crime image” (p. 68).

Mass shootings may receive especially favorable attention given their rarity when compared with other forms of gun violence—65,000 people are shot in criminal attacks each year (National Center for Injury Control and Prevention, 2012). Conversely, since 1966, there have been only 164 mass shootings (Stanford

University Libraries, 2014). Many among the 164 shootings have gained media attention and public notoriety such as the 1966 shooting that prompted Stanford University Library's (2014) database starting point. It was then that U.S. Marine Charles Joseph Whitman killed 16 and wounded 30 while shooting from a University of Texas tower. Another notable media-covered mass shooting took place in San Ysidro, California, in 1984. Forty-one-year-old James Huberty, armed with a long-barreled Uzi, a pump-action shotgun, and a handgun, shot and killed 21 adults and children at a local McDonalds (Stanford University Library, 2014). The media dubbed the shooting the "San Ysidro McDonald's massacre" (Bosh, 2014). Despite these various shootings' high death counts and unique situations, leading up to 1999, no mass shooting garnered the news media attention of the Columbine High School massacre.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, two seniors at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, opened fire at their school killing 12 students and a teacher. Shortly after, they turned the guns on themselves (Lamb, 2008). Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1999) determined that the Columbine killings had become one of the biggest news stories of its time. In terms of broadcast hours dedicated to a given news topic, the hard-hitting news stories of that year—to include the impeachment trial of former President Bill Clinton and U.S.-Iraq tensions—did not compare to the news coverage of the Columbine shootings, nor did the coverage of other high-profile crimes of the entire decade to include the 1992 Rodney King verdict and 1996 Trans World Airline crash (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). The shooters even graced the May 3, 1999, cover of Time Magazine accompanied by the headline, "The monsters next door: What made them do it?" (Maas, 1999).

Thirteen years later, on July 20, 2012, 24-year old student James Eagan Holmes set off several canisters of unknown gas at a sold-out movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and then opened fire on the theater audience. Holmes, who was clad in SWAT gear, killed 12 people and wounded 58, making a total of 70 victims. After the shooting, police arrested Holmes next to his car behind the theater (Stanford University Libraries, 2014). Only five months later, on the December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut, 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed his mother in their home then travelled to Sandy Hook Elementary School where he killed 20 children, six adult staff members, and injured two others before killing himself (Stanford University

Libraries, 2014). Following these two shootings, the Associated Press's year-end poll of news editors placed 'mass shootings' as the leading news story of 2012 (Associated Press, 2012).

To understand the special attention paid to mass shootings in the news media, it is important to understand the concept of news values. As Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and

Roberts (1978) point out, "'News' is the end product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories' (p. 53). Journalists tend to agree that newsworthy stories contain certain elements: have dramatic and sensational elements, focus on notable individuals, and feature conflict or wrongdoing (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991). Moreover, journalists tend to follow these rules that lead their stories to newsworthy status, which signifies the salience or prominence of a topic or event and implies greater audience attention. News values extend beyond these simplified characteristics and have been categorized by researchers and journalists alike. While competing thoughts are held about which values are most important, there are some common criteria among them such as interest, consequence, human interest, proximity, timeliness, conflict, and novelty/oddity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Ostgaard, 1965; Rosengren, 1970; Hester, 1973; Chang, Shoemaker, & Brendlinger, 1987; Chang, 1998; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006).

Each criterion can be explained simply: *consequence*, "If it had an impact in a significant way"; *human interest*, "If it involves the battle, struggle, or triumph of an individual"; *prominence*, "If it happened to someone famous"; *proximity*, "If it's close enough to affect the audience"; *timeliness*, "If it happened very recently"; *conflict*, "If it caused struggle or if it was the struggle"; *novelty/oddity* "If it's rare, weird, or unfamiliar" ("News Values"). The latter two is where much of the newsworthiness of a mass shooting falls. For further perspective on the concept of novelty and oddity, an old journalism adage asserts, "When a dog bites a man it's not news. But when a man bites a dog, it is news." At the crosshairs of novelty, oddity, and conflict lies *deviance*—a rather newly-coined news value that encompasses a trifecta of news elements to draw interest from audiences (Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006).

An earlier term for deviance is what Hall et. al (1978) identified as 'extra-ordinariness,' regarding it also as the cardinal news value. This extra-ordinariness means that rare, novel crimes make better storylines and headlines, drawing in a larger audience. Hall et al. (1978) also cites that the factors of drama and

vulnerability are significant players in the extra-ordinariness of a crime. Essentially, the more the injury and drama in a crime story, the greater the likelihood that it will become a primary news story among the regular pool of crime news in the media (Hall et al., 1978; Surette, 1998). So because common crime, which is pervasive by nature, typically has less injury or victimization, it has less news value. Contrarily, a mass shooting such as the Aurora Theater shooting, which left 70 people injured and was carried out by a former Ph.D. candidate dressed in military gear, meets the standard of a high victimization, high drama factor, as well as the novelty factor of a mass shooting event alone.

While the aforementioned deviance refers to basic news values, it also represents a news event that threatens the status quo, breaks social norms, and has social significance within a culture. Shoemaker and colleagues (1991; 2006) suggest that the more deviant an event is, the more likely it is to be featured in news media, but unlike what Hall et. al (1978) deemed as extraordinariness, deviance goes beyond what audiences might enjoy seeing to an actual evolutionary need. In their research of newsworthiness, Shoemaker and colleagues (1991; 2006) liken an audience's entrancement with deviant news to an evolutionary requirement to look out for events that deviate from the norm in one's own environment. The researchers related the public's inherent need for reporting of deviance to what Charles Darwin (1936), in his study of evolution, explained as survival of the fittest—those who pay best attention, adapt to new situations, and avoid danger will outlive others who do not. Thus, reports of deviant news are a matter of individual and group safety. Because man no longer lives in isolated regions and can no longer monitor his environment firsthand, he relies on the news media to present deviants in the environment for his protection.

Polls taken after mass shooting have shown that the public begins to see deviant acts as a possibility in their own lives and environments. For instance, one year after the Columbine High shooting, a Gallup poll found that 63% of kindergarten through 12th-grade parents believed that a similar tragedy was very or somewhat likely to occur in their community. Moreover, 70% of these parents agreed that the Columbine shooting made them more concerned about their own child's safety at school (Gillespie, 2000). Thirteen years later following the Sandy Hook massacre, a USA Today/Gallup poll of more than 1,000 adults found that 50% of respondents watched the news reporting "very closely," while 90% reported watching at least "somewhat closely". One quarter of those surveyed believed that a shooting spree such as Sandy Hook was "very likely"

to occur in their own community and more than half thought that it was at least “somewhat likely” (Saad, 2012).

The newsworthiness of post-Columbine mass shootings has been tied to mass shootings’ ability to sustain long-term coverage and to promote social agendas and public perceptions (Duwe, 2000). In contrast to routine crime stories, which are often more factual given their smaller scale, mass murders leave more questions unanswered allotting for an unfolding plot via the news media (Chermak, 1995). In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, there is both panic and confusion. For the modern 24-hours news cycle, this allows for days’ worth of contradictory reporting about various details. An oft-used storyline involves the weapons used—a source for much speculation and debate. For example, one month after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, NBC reported that, contrary to early reports, there was no assault rifle inside the school, but there were four handguns (Becker, 2013). Over two months later, the New York Times identified that the guns used were a semiautomatic rifle in the school, and two semiautomatic handguns and a shotgun were in the assailant’s car (Kleinfeld, Rivera, & Kovaleski, 2013). Nearly four months after the high-profile incident, the shooting had remained a sensationalized media story with details being contradictorily confirmed by rival news channels.

The use of “theming” is another way that mass shootings remain newsworthy. The news media can create the impression of an event as a rampant or growing issue by tying it back to previous crimes. Mass shootings are often treated as a trend and reported on as a theme. Fishman (1978) states, “[E]very crime item that can be seen as part of a theme will be seen and reported as such” (p. 537). News media often refer to past shootings during the discourse of a current shooting. One example is the comparison of death counts—an act that places importance on the record-setting capacity of a mass shooting. As Sandy Hook school shooting coverage was unfolding, reporters were eager to speculate whether it was the worst school shooting in history (Best, 2013). On the day of the 2012 shooting, an NBC online news article headline read, “Connecticut school shooting is second worst in US history.” Its lead paragraph elaborates that the massacre is, “behind only the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007” (McLoughlin, 2012).

These themes help tie together a story stretching back to a desired date in which this problem began or was last seen. The terms ‘wrapping,’ ‘theme-ing,’ ‘consonance,’ ‘convergence,’ or ‘the consistency rule’



(Cohen & Young, 1973; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Fishman, 1978, 1980; Hall et. al, 1978) refer to the reporter's process of tying events to prior news themes, accepted public stigmas, and general reasons behind crime. They imply that the easier it is to connect an isolated crime to an extensive criminal typology, the more likely it will be reported. These crimes in turn are more newsworthy given that they are perceived as a growing or ever-present issue.

### **Serious Mental Illness in Society**

In the socially-malleable periods after mass shooting tragedies, a moral discourse can begin about the acts, their causes, and their solutions. Given that the discourse following such tragedies often falls on the issue of mental illness, which is often cited as both the cause and is central in the discussion of a solution, it can be seen that there is a long-standing issue of mental illness that includes its effect on and place within society.

The technical definition of mental illness includes any condition that appears in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. The DSM describes the spectrum of disorders and illnesses that fall within what is often blanketed as "mental illness" or "mental disorder." It is important to note that the DSM is not without fault; it has changed with society. For instance, homosexuality was deemed a mental illness until the 1980s according to the DSM, and in the latest edition, Asperger's syndrome will no longer be included as a result of the restructuring of the Autism Spectrum (Greenberg, 2013). After its inception in 1952, four more manuals have come out and its most current is the DSM 5, which debuted in May 2013.

Today, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, approximately 61.5 million—or one in four—Americans experience mental illness in a given year. Moreover, about 13.6 million—or one in 17—lives with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder (Mental Illness: Facts and Numbers, 2013). Furthermore, a longitudinal study of anti-depressant use from 1996-2005 found that it was the fastest growing and most commonly prescribed class of medications in the United States. The study, which followed more than 18,000 participants, also found that subjects on anti-depressants became more likely to take anti-psychotics (Olfson & Marcus, 2009). A 2010 study found that approximately 50% of the national representative sample reported symptoms that met DSM-related diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder during

their lifetime; moreover, 20% reported symptoms that were so severe, they impeded their daily lives, denoting a case of SMI (Merikangas et al., 2010).

While SMI is not recognized at length in the DSM, a definition of serious mental illness is made by the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), which is federally-recognized. The CMHS definition draws differences between mentally ill and seriously mentally ill (SMI)—a difference typically lost on society and of importance when discussing violence and violent crime. Adults (18 and over) who are deemed seriously mentally ill fall within the CMHS-assigned criteria of having a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (excluding developmental and substance-use disorders resulting in serious functional impairment), which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Those illnesses included are typically schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. Characteristics of these SMIs include episodic, recurrent, or persistent features; however, they vary in terms of severity and disabling effects (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Moreover, another distinction in the DSM 5 is of the renowned but little understood term “psychosis,” which is not a diagnosis; rather, it is a symptom of a serious mental illness in the psychotic disorder family to include schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder, and catatonia. It can also extend to the serious mental illnesses of bipolar disorder and major depressive disorder. Psychosis is associated with a detachment from reality. This term, coined in the mid-1800s, came to encompass what was known as ‘insanity’ or ‘mania’ (Burgoyne, 2008; Beer, 1995). Classic symptoms associated with psychosis are hallucinations, paranoia, delusions, and disorganized speech (Grohol, 2014; Heckers et al., 2013). Psychosis is also closely related to alcohol and drug abuse—especially when combined with a pre-existing mental illness (“First Episodes of Psychosis”).

### *Violence among the Mentally Ill and Seriously Mental Ill*

Despite a pervasive presence of mental illness in society, a perceived association between mental illness and violence has been highly documented over the years. This perspective was documented in an early 1950s representative survey where researchers asked the general public an open-ended question: “When you hear someone say that a person is ‘mentally ill,’ what does that mean to you?” The results exhibited

Americans' generally narrow viewpoint of mental illness, with the majority associating mental illness with psychosis. For instance, those surveyed indicated that mental illness means that "persons are not in touch with reality" or "live in their own world." Colloquial terms such as "nuts," "deranged," or "out of one's mind" were also often used by respondents to describe mental illness (Starr, 1955)." It can be argued that this was a dark time in psychiatry when involuntary commitment to psychiatric wards was standard for social defects. There were an estimated 563,000 beds available in the U.S. state and county psychiatric facility, which equates to about 314 beds per 100,000 people living in the country (National Institute of Mental Health, 1990).

Since the 1950s there have been advancements in the view of the mentally ill. When the same question was posed in a 1996 nationally representative survey, fewer respondents gave answers reflecting psychosis (35%) and more gave responses reflecting a broader understanding of the range of disorders such as anxiety/depression (34%), personality disorders, substance abuse, or cognitive impairment. This gave room to the notion that mental illness and psychotic disorders were viewed as something less alien, extreme, or threatening (Phelan, Link, Steuve, & Pescosolido, 2000). But while the general public has come a long way from casting stereotypical blankets over the mentally ill, some prejudice persists. A nearly 50-year-long longitudinal study conducted between 1950 and 1996 proved the view of mental illness in relation to violence still remained. The study, which focused of Americans' attitudes on mental health, found that, "the proportion of Americans who describe mental illness in terms consistent with violent or dangerous behavior nearly doubled" (Pescosolido, et al., 1996) A separate 1999 study found that the vast majority of Americans believed that persons with mental illnesses posed a threat for violence towards others and themselves (Pescosolido et al., 1999). That same year, in the surgeon general's assessment of mental illness stigma, it was found that, "Stigma in some ways intensified over the past 40 years even though understanding improved" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999) The aforementioned study asking, "When you hear someone say that a person is 'mentally ill,' what does that mean to you?" was similarly repeated in 2006. The researchers found that "significantly more respondents in the 2006 survey than the 1996 survey reported an unwillingness to have someone with schizophrenia as a neighbor" (Pescosolido et al., 2010, p. 3). Moreover, in the researchers' discussion, they noted, "Our most striking finding is that stigma among the American public appears to be surprisingly fixed, even in the face of anticipated advances in public knowledge" (p. 5).

Within these studies, it has also been found that there is a disparity in the society's overall understanding of mental illness versus its understanding of serious mental illness (Pescosolido, et al., 1996; Pescosolido et al., 1999; Phelan, Link, Steuve, & Pescosolido, 2000). As mentioned, serious mental illness encompasses the illnesses of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression, all of which can have psychotic characteristics. Furthermore, in some cases, the negative attitudes toward the seriously mentally ill actually increased. In a 2008 Harris poll, it was reported that a majority of the public believes that violent behavior is a symptom of schizophrenia, and "roughly one in four Americans say they would feel uncomfortable around adults who have been treated for schizophrenia" ("Schizophrenics battle myths in addition to disease," 2008).

Given these viewpoints, the mentally ill and seriously mentally ill alike have suffered a stigma in the United States for some time. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines stigma as "a mark of disgrace or infamy associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person." People suffering from mental illness undergo the process of stigmatization in the following ways: they are officially tagged and labeled, cast apart from a central group, connected to undesirable characteristics, and broadly discriminated against as a result of the process (Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989; Corrigan & Penn, 1999; Link & Phelan, 1999). These stigmatizations stem from negative attitudes, which are influenced by labeling behaviors, attributions, misinformation, particularly regarding a correlation between mental illness and violence, and a lack of contact (Link & Phelan, 1999; Corrigan & Penn, 1999; Corrigan, 2000). Much of these viewpoints have been gleaned from news media and mass media, according to various studies. The media may play a role in this stigmatization process through portrayals and frames of the mentally ill (Angermeyer & Schulze, 2001; Granello & Pauley, 2000; Link & Cullen, 1986; Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale, & Panapa, 2000). Research has proven that mental illness is often discussed in news in terms of the risk that a mentally ill individual poses to society through unpredictable violence (Dietrich, Heider, Matschinger, & Angermeyer, 2006).

In contrast to these representations, the mentally ill community has not been found to be characteristically violent or "more violent." Moreover, the very argument that they are "more violent" begs the question, "than whom?" More violent than the general population? Than another specific segment of the population? Than themselves at a given point in time (i.e. before or after psychiatric treatment)? It is typically

the general population that is most often compared to the mentally ill in relation to violence. Based on that comparison, studies have varied—some showing the mentally ill as more likely to be violent (Rice & Harris, 1997; Fazel, Gulati, Linsell, Geddes, & Grann, 2009; Swanson, Holzer, Ganju, & Jono, 1990) while others showed them to be similarly or less violent, with some studies even citing that the mentally ill are more likely to be victims of crime rather than purveyors of criminal acts (Appleby, Mortensen, Dunn, & Hiroeh, 2001; Hiday, Swartz, Swanson, Borum, & Wagner, 1999).

However, many studies, taking into account the complex nature of mental health, mental illness, and proclivity to violence, examine major violence-indicating factors for the population as a whole—that is to say they asked, “What makes anyone violent?” Applebaum (2013) assert “Violence is a complex, multi-causal phenomenon, and its prevention requires attention to the means used to perpetrate violence.” Furthermore, Harris and Lurigio (2007) found that although the dynamics between mental illness and violence carry particular characteristics, many of the greatest predictors of violence in the mentally ill community are the same for the general population. When Swanson, Holzer, Ganju, and Jono (1990) studied more than ten thousand individuals (both mentally ill and healthy) over the course of one year, they found that in only 4% of cases serious mental illness alone was a risk factor for violence—from minor incidents, like shoving, to armed assault. Elbogen and Johnson (2009) found that violent behaviors for both the mentally ill and general population were preceded by substance abuse or dependence; a history of violence, juvenile detention, or physical abuse; and recent stressors such as being a crime victim, getting divorced, or losing a job. In a study comparing people discharged from acute psychiatric inpatient facilities to others in the same neighborhoods, researchers found “there was no significant difference between the prevalence of violence by patients without symptoms of substance abuse and the prevalence of violence by others living in the same neighborhoods who were also without symptoms of substance abuse” (Steadman et al., 1998).

It has also been noted that while the DSM 5 lists violent behaviors as characteristics of some mental illnesses, to include bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and some severe forms of depression, those behaviors are often what dictate a diagnosis versus being evident in those already diagnosed (Krakowski, Volavka, & Brizer, 1986; Burrowes, Hales, Arrington, 1988). This creates a “chicken or egg” situation. Moreover, studies that aim to measure violence in psychiatric patients (Krakowski et al., 1986; Tardiff & Sweillam, 1982; Craig, 1982)

tend to be flawed in that violent behavior is often a reason for admitting a patient to a psychiatric ward in the first place (Petrie, Lawson, & Hollender, 1982). Even among psychiatric experts, predictions of violent behaviors by hospitalized psychiatric patients have been inconsistent (Krakowski et al., 1986; Mullen, 1984; Mills, 1988). Thus, these types of studies tend not to be representative of the population as a whole.

### *Serious Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and Public Policy*

Beyond a threat of violence alone is the association of *crime* and mental illness, specifically *violent crime*. Violent crime is defined in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program as a form of crime that includes four major offenses: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault. Additionally, violent crimes are defined in the UCR Program as those offenses which involve force or threat of force ("Crime in the United States," 2013). While it was found that only 4% of violent crime in the United States in 2014 could be attributed to those with serious mental illness including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression (Fazel & Gran, 2006; Friedman, 2012), media attention to high-profile acts of gun violence carried out by shooters seemingly afflicted by serious mental illness have brought attention to the notion that serious mental illness is a significant antecedent to gun violence. When McGinty, Webster, and Barry (2013) conducted a national survey of 1,797 Americans that studied effects of a news story about "a mass shooting by a person with a history of serious mental illness" on the attitude of the public, the researchers found that the news story significantly increased negative attitudes to and stigma against mentally ill persons.

Despite findings that most who suffer from a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are neither violent nor criminal (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009; Steadman et al., 1998; Swanson et al., 1990), research has also shown that nearly 60% of mass shooters since the 1970s have exhibited symptoms consistent with psychosis to include bouts of paranoia, delusions, and depression preceding their crimes (Lankford, 2013). Recent mass shootings have followed this trend. The 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, 2011 Tucson, Ariz., shooting, and 2012 Aurora Theater shootings each involved a killer who had been treated for a serious mental illness. Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter had been diagnosed with major depression in his youth (Friedman, 2009); Jared Lee Loughner, who attempted to kill U.S. Rep. Gabrielle and instead killed

six people and injured 13, was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and was not able to stand trial because of this diagnosis (Steller & Smith, 2011); James Eagan Holmes, the Aurora Theater shooter, plead not guilty by reason of insanity to his murder charges (Koplowitz, 2013). Preceding his mass shooting, he had seen three psychiatrists at his university (Sallinger, 2012). Links between violent crime and psychosis have been found in minority or subgroups of the severely mentally ill. These crimes typically occur during psychotic episodes of untreated mentally ill people (Choe, Teplin, & Abram, 2008; McNiel, Weaver & Hall, 2007; Large, 2014).

These crimes and their causal attributions of mental illness have raised the public's view of serious mental illness and gun violence. In a national poll of Americans conducted in January 2013, one month after the Newtown massacre, 46% of respondents believed that people with serious mental illness are far more dangerous than the general population; 67% were unwilling to have a person with a serious mental illness as a neighbor; and 71% were unwilling to have a person with a serious mental illness start working closely with them on a job (Barry, McGinty, Vernick, & Webster, 2013) This association with serious mental illness, more specifically the symptom of psychosis, pre-dates any modern-day violent crime account by thousands of years. As noted, mass shooters often enter the 'not guilty by reason of insanity' plea, which implies that a person has reached a state of psychosis where they cannot be held accountable for committing a violent crime. This plea denotes a crime by a seriously mentally ill person who is beyond responsible volition, and it has been a recognized plea throughout the history of law. Some echo of an insanity plea can be found in Code of Hammurabi, Babylonian Law that dates back to 1754 BC ("Mental State Defense," 2008). During the Roman Empire, the government found convicted people to be *non-compos mentis*, meaning without mastery of mind and not guilty for their criminal actions (Borum & Fulero, 1999). While the exact phrasing of the "not guilty by reason of insanity" plea was used throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until a case the McNaughton Case of 1843 was it paired with a test to determine true insanity. Believing that the Prime Minister was conspiring against him, Englishman Daniel McNaughton shot and killed the secretary of the British Prime Minister. When McNaughton was acquitted "by reason of insanity," public uproar ensued. It was then that Queen Victoria ordered the court to develop a stricter test for insanity. The McNaughton Rule is a standard still used in American states and in the United Kingdom. It calls for the jury to hear a testimony from the prosecution and defense experts. The rules created the presumption of sanity unless the defense could prove that "at the time of

committing the act, the accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing or, if he did know it, that he did not know what he was doing was wrong" ("The 'insanity defense' and diminished capacity").

Despite the extensive litigious history, the reality remains that simply having a serious mental illness is not criminally exculpatory, but because serious mental illness and violent crimes have had a causal relationship, especially in high-profile situations, research has been conducted to study the link more deeply. In research focused on violence serious mental illness, there was an increased risk of violence found, albeit it was not significantly greater. In the National Institute of Mental Health's Catchment Area study, one of the largest studies of mental illness and violence, researchers studied 18,000 subjects' violence risk. Among those studied, subjects who were diagnosed with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia had a lifetime prevalence of violence was 16%, compared with those who had no mental illness at 7% (Swanson et al., (1990). In other studies, more specifically looking at violent crime, violence indicators in individuals were consistent to those of the general population, mostly dealing with drug and alcohol use and a history of violence, abuse, or in relation to their illness, a lack of treatment. In a study of 8,003 individuals with schizophrenia, 13.2% committed at least one violent crime compared with 5.3% of the general population; it was found that concurrent abuse of alcohol or drugs accounted for much of the increased rate (Fazel, Langstrom, Hjern, Grann, & Lichtenstein, 2009). Research on mental disorders and violence was collected on 34,653 individuals as part of the U.S. National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. In their analysis of the data, Elbogen and Johnson (2008) assert "the incidence of violence was higher for people with severe mental illness, but only significantly so for those with co-occurring substance abuse and/or dependence." A study of 331 individuals who suffered from a serious mental illness in the United States reported that 17.8% "had engaged in serious violent acts that involved weapons or caused injury." Among those crimes, "substance abuse problems, medication noncompliance, and low insight into illness operate together to increase violence risk" (Swartz et al., 2014). Additionally, a 2001 study that specifically studied 34 adolescent male mass murderers found that substance abuse issues were found in 61.5%, but only 23% had a documented psychiatric history of any kind, which means three out of four did not (Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva, & Gray, 2001).



Because of a stigma around the general population of the seriously mentally ill and its association with violence, mental illness and legislation regarding violent crime have had a long history together reaching beyond admissible court pleas. This is especially true for mass shootings. Policies that surround mental health and mass shootings center on three interrelated concepts a) mentally ill people are prone to gun violence and b) availability to firearms is a central factor in gun violence and b) preventative measures via mental health care reform can be a roadblock to potential acts of rampage. The cause-solution approach to ending mass shooting creates a marriage between mental health professionals and federal and state legislation. One such legislative move in preventing gun violence among the mentally ill can be seen in a presidential plea for reform—an effort to mitigate and intervene *before it's too late*. In 2013, showing the pervasiveness of the view of mental illness as an antecedent to crime, specifically mass shootings, U.S. President Barack Obama (2013) addressed a crowd in Hartford, Conn. In his speech, which centered on the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, he urged congress to act: “We need to help people struggling with mental health problems get the treatment they need before it is too late. Let’s do that for our kids and our communities.” In a show of similar thinking and in an effort to shift the spotlight from guns alone as the cause of mass shootings, Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, speaking out after the Sandy Hook massacre, announced at a press conference that the problem of violence was largely due to mentally illness:

“genuine monsters. . . that are so deranged, so evil, so possessed by voices and driven by demons, that no sane person can even possibly comprehend them. They walk among us every single day, and does anybody really believe that the next Adam Lanza isn’t planning his attack on a school, he’s already identified at this very moment?” (“Transcript of remarks from the NRA press conference on Sandy Hook school shooting,” 2012).

While each side has its approach, one appearing sympathetic and the other accusatory, they each deal with the notion that serious mental illness is closely associated with violent crime, specifically mass shootings, and that the shootings can be avoided if the mentally ill are restricted and/or monitored closely. In accordance with such causal attribution, gun policy and preventative mental health reform can be seen in headlines and party platforms alike, but the argument dates further back. The modern dispute of whether or not an individual is mentally “competent” enough to carry a gun actually has a rich history. Nearly 50 years ago, a federal law called the “The Gun Control Act of 1968” prohibited any person from selling or otherwise transferring a

firearm or ammunition to any person who has been “adjudicated as a mental defective” or “committed to any mental institution” (“Federal Law on Mental Health Reporting”).

Cut to 2008 when the U.S. Supreme Court, whose justices had repeatedly stood beside the right to bear arms, conceded to exclude that right to certain Americans by endorsing prohibitions on gun ownerships to “felons and the mentally ill” because of each group’s inclination to gun violence (District of Columbia v. Heller, 2008). Current laws and policy surrounding serious mental illness and gun availability largely revolve around reducing gun violence through screening mechanisms for buying weapons. States, however, vary in their individual policies regarding mental health and gun availability. For instance, following the Newtown shooting, Maryland and New York passed gun laws restricting access to firearms from the mentally ill (Ritter & Tanner, 2013; Davis, 2013).

There has long-existed federal regulation although adherence has been inconsistent. As mentioned, the 1968 Gun Control Act laid out criteria for those who would be unable to attain a weapon based on their mental health. While this set precedence for many of the laws that followed, the criteria were not sufficiently recorded to make a real difference. A flaw of the 1968 act was that it neglected to provide a uniform way for gun dealers to identify persons prohibited from buying a gun because of their mental illness status; therefore, its measures were not widely adopted until nearly 30 years later (Simpson, 2007). Unlike the 1968 act, modern gun sales prohibition policies are accompanied by a national database. In 1993, congress passed the Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act. This act required the Federal Bureau of Investigation to create a background-check system for gun salesman to refer to when selling firearms. This system, which became fully operational in 1998, is known as the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or the NICS (Price & Norris, 2008). In 1997, it was determined whom among the seriously mentally ill would land on the list and would be restricted from buying a gun. The determination, made by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) included similar terminology to the ’68 act. According to the ATF, gun purchases are restricted to those who have been involuntarily committed to inpatient psychiatric care, those who have been found incompetent to stand trial because of a serious mental illness, as well as those who have been placed under legal conservatorship because of a serious mental illness (Simpson, 2007). However, reporting by states is completely voluntary; thus, funding was spotty and weak infrastructure ensued. A decade later in 2007, it

was found that many states lacked the resources to orchestrate data sharing between mental health agencies, law enforcement, court systems, and the federal government (“Fatal gaps: How missing records in the federal background check system put guns in the hands of killers.”, 2011). While this did prompt Congress that same year to pass the NICS Improvement Act, which allocated funding for states to develop better systems, a 2011 report showed that nearly five years later, only 17 states have submitted less than a dozen records while four states have submitted zero records (“Fatal gaps: How missing records in the federal background check system put guns in the hands of killers.”, 2011).

A potential roadblock to this system is its conflict with the confidentiality that is highly-regarded in the mental health field, as well as strictly mandated. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act dictate that health information remains private (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). While submission to the NICS list does not include a mental illness diagnosis, mental health professionals must access systems that disclose this information in order to submit. This creates a barrier that in 2013 prompted President Obama to order his administration to gather information about the issue in an effort to circumvent its obstruction to the system (“Now is the time: The president’s plan to protect our children and our communities by reducing gun violence”, 2013). Additionally, health care professionals have expressed concern that such reports would deter a person from seeking help. Furthermore, the implemented policy would force mental health professionals to acknowledge the association between mental illness and violence, which might exacerbate and reinforce preexisting stigmas about the mentally ill (Swanson, 2013; Cole, 2007).

Given healthcare providers’ hesitance to assist in determining which patients may be potential assailants based on both HIPAA restrictions, patient confidentiality and professional principle, framing around serious mental illness in the news may be less reliant on professional opinion and more reliant on stigma.

### **The Framing of News**

The media, according to Cohen (1963), “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about” (p.13). The sociological theory of framing deals with a collection and assembly of schemas or stereotypes individuals rely on to understand and respond to events. Goffman (1974) describes a primary framework as “neatly presentable as a

system of entities, postulates and rules (p. 21).” This system then allows the receiver to locate, perceive, identify, and label an infinite number of occurrences. Entman (2007) further defines framing as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation (p. 164).”

An integral attribute of framing is the construct of schema. Schema relates to preconceived notions already held by audience members that can be triggered through framing. When an audience member receives a framed message, they will evaluate the message based on schemas or information currently available to them. This can include past experience, redundancy, and relationship to currently understood “truths” (Axelrod, 1973). Frames serve to introduce or raise the salience of certain ideas by activating schemas that “encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way (Entman 2007, p. 164).” Framing relies on the activation of schema to allow audiences to quickly make connections between news events and the reporting of their details. Given the great amount of information that must be communicated to an audience, schemas help to condense the information. Gitlin (1980) emphasizes that frames and their use of schema, “enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package the information for efficient relay to their audiences” (p. 7). Additionally, within framing are individual frames, which are defined by Entman (1993) as, “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individual’s processing of information” (p. 53). Goffman (1974) considered frames to be the “schemata of interpretation” that allows individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” (p. 21). Reese (2007) proposes that media frames may surface as certain aspects of a particular news story and its “reality” is emphasized.

Framing theory is relevant to the analysis of media coverage of mass shootings in that it helps to explore how the news media delivers stories of this nature and how it shapes the viewers’ expectations, understandings, and rationalizations of mass shootings and mass shooters by utilizing, creating, and/or reinforcing stigmas and stereotypes. By using frameworks, news coverage helps the viewers, typically a national audience, to process the event—answering the who, what, when, where, and expressly in the case of a mass shooting, the why. Moreover, framing can be a way for a journalist to quickly assign an angle to a story. According to Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992), frames “give the story a ‘spin,’ ...taking into account their organizational and modality constraints, professional judgments, and certain judgments about the audience.”

Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) assert, "Frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame." While it may appear that frames are a form of light indoctrination, cognitive researchers Fiske and Taylor (1991) assert that people naturally come to rely on frames. They note that human beings are by nature "cognitive misers", meaning they prefer to do as little thinking as possible to reach conclusions and form understandings. In this way, framing is a two-way street wherein frame makers create mental shortcuts for the frame receivers. Furthermore, Kosicki and McLeod (1990) emphasize that people's information processing and interpretations are influenced by preexisting meaning structures of schemas. Neuman et al. (1992) found that audiences typically rely on "a version of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers, and interpreted selections from the mass media" (p. 120). Goffman (1974), an original researcher of framing, maintains that we all actively classify and interpret our own life experiences to make sense of them, which is the personal act of framing our own existence. Moreover, audiences are consumers who buy news content that satiates their entertainment and informational needs. As soon as a story's frame is seen as capturing consumer tastes, these tastes are reified as a market and are propagated into endless news stories (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009).

Most relevant to mass shooting is the use of framing in constructing social issues. When constructing social issues, the news media follows frame formats. Entman (1993) explicates a well-developed frame emphasizing a format that performs four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy promotion. Problem definitions serve to determine the rest of the frame; they "determine what a causal agent is doing, with what costs and benefits, usually measure in terms of common cultural values" (p. 52). Causal analysis explains which forces have created the—who or what organizations were behind the problem given. Moral judgment follows. It is where the causal agents are evaluated and judged and relies on the audience's pre-set thoughts and beliefs to prescribe a solution to the problem. Last is remedy promotion where treatments for the problem, justifications for those treatments, and the effects of the treatments are offered.

A review of the literature suggests that the elements of this format can be seen in the various news stories regarding serious mental illness and gun violence in that mass shootings are seen as a pervasive social problem, which begets a cause that is typically assigned to serious mentally ill individual's proclivity to gun

violence. This presumption is formed and processed through society's moral judgment of the SMI community, and finally, policy is often a response or remedy to the issue. While Leavey and Maloney (2009) contend that social and historical context influence what the media tend to focus on, an analysis of news media's coverage of mass shooting stories and their inclusion of SMI and gun violence is essential in understanding how the media frames mass shootings and in turn, how the public perceives and process such violent acts.

### *Causal Attribution and Policy Frames*

In Western culture, thinking in terms of cause and effect is the norm. This heightens our tendency to look for "reasons" for school shootings (Scharrer, Weidman, & Bissell, 2003). As Columbine was the first of the highly-publicized mass shootings, it set much of the criteria for news reporting in a cause-effect frame. A main frame of the 1999 shooting was the "teen super-predator" frame, which has since faded (Lindsay, 1998). A main causal attribution frame of Columbine reports was focused on guns; it was used more often than any other cause. This was largely because of political discourse set forth by congressional Democrats and Former President Bill Clinton to address the shootings through gun control policy (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). In shootings since Columbine, guns as a cause of mass shootings have remained a constant frame, and subsequently, gun policy has remained a topic, as well.

While guns have remained a topic following mass shootings, since Columbine, a new causal attribution has emerged, which is serious mental illness and its proclivity to gun violence. McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski, and Barry (2014) analyzed 364 TV, print, and magazine news stories focused on gun violence and serious mental illness in a longitudinal study from 1997-2012. The researchers aimed to measure whether news stories mentioned dangerousness of people who are seriously mentally ill and mentions of any policy proposals to reduce gun violence in relation to serious mental illness. For each medium, SMI and gun violence focused stories (n=364) were measured as follows: 36% were TV stories (n=132); 62% were print newspaper stories (n=22); and 1% were news magazine stories (n=5). The results revealed that much of the discussion regarding gun violence and SMI occurred around recent mass shooting incidents: 51% of all news media coverage about SMI and gun violence occurred around three major events: the 2007 Virginia Tech Shooting; the 2011 Tucson, Arizona shooting; and the 2012 mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut.

These results further indicated that even though the highly-reported Columbine shootings were included, discussions of SMI and gun violence begin gaining momentum in the four aforementioned shootings in recent years. This shift in framing was also noted by Schildkraut and Muschert (2013) who, in their analysis of framing between Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings, found that though the Columbine shootings were framed as memorial focused, focusing on the victims in relation to gun violence, whereas Sandy Hook frames focused on gun control and related policies in relation to the gun violence, including policy regarding serious mental illness. Moreover, McGinty et al. (2014) found that gun policy proposals were significantly more likely to be mentioned in news stories in the two weeks immediately following the shootings. Across all shootings, SMI gun restriction policy was the most commonly mentioned policy.

It was also found that news media mentions of SMI people as dangerous significantly correlated with mentions of restrictions to guns. The researchers found that dangerous people with SMI were threats to gun violence versus dangerous weapons; moreover, of the 364 news stories reviewed, only 16% clarified that most people who have a serious mental illness are not violent McGinty et al. (2014).

A secondary focus within the policy frame is one that prescribes mental health reform and outreach as a preventative measure. This frame, while still using a causal attribution of SMI, acknowledging a lack of mental health care availability as a factor in the gun violence. In McGinty et al.'s (2014) study, mental health policy was most mentioned in the two weeks following the mass shootings. However, mental health policy changes were significantly less prevalent than gun policy (12% vs. 33%). Only 7% of stories gave suggestions for both mental health policy and gun policy.

### *Story Focus Frames*

News stories depicting the tragedy of a mass shooting can have varying frames of story focus. A study of 854 local and national news articles following the Virginia Tech shootings focused on four types of news story frames: tragedy centered; victim centered; perpetrator centered; and underlying cause/issue centered. Those that focused on mental health and gun policy most often fell under the perpetrator-focused and underlying-cause/issue-focused, and the presence was pervasive (Hawdon, Agnich, & Ryan, 2014). One half of the news stories with a tragedy-focus collectively discussed gun policy and mental health as underlying

cause and descriptions of the perpetrator. In the analysis of issue-related news articles, 69.8% discussed mental health issues and gun control. Hawdon, Agnich, and Ryan (2014) the researchers behind the study, concluded the following:

“This research also contributes to our understanding of the role various media actors play in framing tragedies. As noted earlier, how the media reports on a tragedy can influence how the tragedy unfolds, the likelihood of a similar tragedy occurring again, who is blamed for the tragedy, perceptions of the tragedy’s cause, public opinion about the underlying issues related to the tragedy, policy decisions, and how quickly a community may recover from the tragedy” (p. 8).

McGinty et al. (2014) in their analysis of Sandy Hook and Columbine focused on two frames in media reporting of SMI and gun violence: thematic and event focused. The researchers identified thematic stories as those what focused on the general problem of gun policy and SMI. Event-focused were defined as stories describing the specific shooting event. In their review of 364 news stories over 16 years, 70% of news coverage discussed SMI and gun policy was event-focused.

In an analysis of Columbine and story-focus frames, it was found that two frames were at work. One was event-focused, having to do what happened at Columbine—the specifics of the single case. The other was reactions-focused, similar to thematic-focused frames, these stories purveyed the reactions elsewhere in the U.S. (Muschert, 2009) The purpose and success of the latter frame was its ability to expand the sphere of concern about Columbine and Columbine-related crimes; thus, it was included in a national conversation about crime.

#### *Community-level and Societal-level Impact Frames*

Framing of mass shootings is often focused on societal-level or community-level implications. Frames focused on community usually include an emphasis on victims and their families; they may also address community-level problems. Conversely, societal-level impact frames focused on the perpetrators, the broader meaning of their acts, and national policies to address it. These frames can impress upon an audience the perception that a problem is isolated or pervasive and in need of social change. For instance, in comparing the Sandy Hook and Columbine shootings, Schildkraut and Muschert (2013) found that overall, Columbine tended toward a nationally-focused, societal-level news frame whereas Sandy Hook tended toward a locally-focused,



community-level news frame. However, for each, nationally-focused stories discussed gun policy, showing that the issue of gun remained framed as a national concern between the two incidents.

Muschert and Carr (2006) assessed framing across nine school shootings from 1997 to 2001. The researchers found that the news media initially discussed school shootings as a community-level concern—specific to the issues within the community they occurred in. Throughout the study, as time passed between the event and the news coverage, the focus shifted to societal-level framing.

Community versus societal frames also deals with media access and community make up, as evidenced by the West Nickels Mine School shooting. On October 2, 2006, a shooting occurred at the West Nickel Mines School, an Amish one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community of Nickel Mines, a village in Bart Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, took 10 girls hostages (ages 6-13), all of whom he shot, five of whom he killed. Because of the remote location of the shooting, the closed-off society—the gunman’s widow was one of the few ‘outsiders’ allowed at the funeral (McElroy, 2006)—, and the immediacy in which they publicly forgave the gunmen (see Kraybill, Nolt & Weaver-Zercher, 2007), the media framing focused on the local community (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009).

The proximity of the news source is another factor in community- and societal-level frames. In their analysis of frames of the Virginia Tech Shootings, researchers Hawdon, Agnich, and Ryan (2014) found that a source’s location influenced how it framed the shooting tragedy. Geographically-close and socially-connected news sources tended to focus on the tragedy of the shooting at a community level whereas geographically-distant sources focused on the underlying causes of the shootings, thus framing the issue at a societal level. Additionally, closer-proximity news sources were more likely to publish stories about the impact of the shooting on the victims’ families, depicting the community in a grieving, victimized state. These differences in frames is likely due to local and socially-connected media sources’ access to victims’ families and other relevant geographically-close sources. Distant papers tended to publish stories discussing the shortcomings of the mental health community in predicting and preventing the shootings; the need for gun policy reform; and the issues of campus security. In a review of local news sources framing of the Columbine shootings, community reactions were at the forefront of coverage. While much of the Columbine shootings coverage

played out on national news sources, these community-level framed stories covered the various funeral arrangements of victims and the status of the students' return to school (Muschert, 2009).

## HYPOTHESES

The following overarching question guides this study: How do online news stories about the James Eagan Holmes Theater Shooting frame serious mental illness and mass shootings? Moreover, the study will be guided by the previous work of McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski, & Barry (2014). A review of the literature has informed the following hypotheses and research questions.

### **Causal Attribution**

- H1A There will be an inverse relationship between media citations of SMI as the cause of gun violence and citations of any other causes.

### **Previous Mental Health Signs and Symptoms**

- H2A In online news coverage following a mass shooting, there will be a positive correlation between locally covered news stories and mentions of the assailant's previous poor mental health signs or symptoms pointing toward an SMI.
- H2B In online news coverage immediately following a mass shooting, the number of mentions of previous poor mental health signs and symptoms in local news stories will decrease over a two-week period.

### **Story Tone**

- H3A In online news coverage of a mass shooting, there will be more instances of accusatory tone in local news stories than in national news stories.

### **Policy Proposals**

- H4A Mentions of gun restriction policy will be more prevalent in the national news sites' coverage of a mass shooting than in the local news sites' coverage.
-

- RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### **Policy Proposals**

- RQ1 How often do online news articles covering a mass shooting propose both mental health policy *and* gun restriction policy as solutions to gun violence?

### **Story Tone**

- RQ2 In stories that have a sympathetic tone toward people with SMI, are there also mentions or proposals of gun restriction policies for them or other high-risk groups?

### **Alternative Causal Factors**

- RQ3 In stories in which the assailant's past symptoms and signs are referenced, are alternative causal factors (substance abuse/history of abuse or trauma/bullying or harassment/ unemployment stressful life event) considered as alternative factors precipitating acts of violence?

### **Mental Health Professional Causal Attribution**

- RQ4 If there is a mental health professional source in an article what is the substance of their statements?
  - Cites the possibility of mental illness
  - Mentions a specific mental illness (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, psychosis, personality disorder)
  - Does not cite the possibility of a mental illness
  - Cites alternative causal factors (stress/life problems)
  - Cites gun control as causal factor
  - Cites no cause

## METHODS

This single case study attempts to answer the overarching question, “How do news stories about the Aurora Theater Shooting frame serious mental illness and gun violence?” Answering this question required an in-depth analysis of variables within news articles posted on four news sites in the distinct two-week period after the Aurora Theater Shooting. Given the breadth of data needed for this study as well as the individual news stories acting as units of analysis for this study, the quantitative method of content analysis was the logical method needed to conduct this study. As defined by GAO (1996), content analysis enables researchers to sift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion. Moreover, content analysis allows researchers to glean inferences, which prove or disprove hypotheses set forth and research questions posed. Content analysis has been used to study the content of many types of media messages, including the extensive analysis of newspaper coverage of mass shootings (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski, & Barry, 2014; Hawdon, Agnich, & Ryan, 2014; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013; Schildkraut, 2014).

Content analysis has also been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952; GAO, 1996; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990; Neundorf, 2002). Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as, "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14). Overall, this type of analysis is a useful technique for allowing researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Weber, 1990).

This content analysis of online news site stories posted in four newspaper online sites between July 20 through August 3, 2012, which is the two-week period following the Aurora Theater Shooting carried out by James Eagan Holmes on July 20, 2012. The basis for the near-immediate time period analysis is a social stage model of coping with disasters put forth by Pennebaker and Harber (1993). This breaks down the process of audience attention and news value after a disaster. According to the model, the first two to three weeks after a disaster, which they call the ‘emergency phase,’ is characterized by individuals openly sharing their thoughts and feelings about the tragedy. This stage allows for processing and seeking of answers. In response, the news media, which can create as well as reflect a community’s framing of an event, follow this model and report on

issues to begin making sense of the tragedy. This was also found to be the beginning of long, extended coverage that is a byproduct of mass shootings.

## **Sample**

I analyzed two national newspapers and two local newspapers accessing stories posted online that appeared in the respective publications' print version as well.

The national publications I chose were The New York Times' (NYT) via NYTimes.com and the Washington Post via washingtonpost.com. In terms of generalizability, The New York Times has won 127 Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other newspaper. Moreover, The Times is ranked 18th in the world by circulation and 3rd in the U.S., making it a well-know, far-reaching American news publication addressing national and global issues to a broad audience. The Washington Post has also been awarded nearly 50 Pulitzer Prizes for excellence in journalism, second only to the NYT. The Post has distinguished itself as a leading American-centric paper focusing on national politics and government. Also, The Post holds the position of 7th-highest circulation in the country. The prominence of the two publications and their massive reach affect their ability in agenda setting wherein mass media determines which events deserve the focus and attention of their audience. And research supports that the more a story is publicized in the media, the more it becomes prominently stored in individuals' memories when they are asked to recall it, even if it doesn't directly affect them or register as a significant issue in their minds (Bajracharya, 2018).

The two local papers I chose were geographically close to the location of the Aurora Theater Shooting, which are *The Aurora Sentinel* and *The Denver Post*. *The Aurora Sentinel* directly serves the Aurora, CO, community and serves as the only mainstream newspaper. Its online site, [arourasentinel.com](http://arourasentinel.com) was scanned for content. Denver, CO, is 10 miles west of Aurora, CO. Although it serves the Denver community, as a publication located in the state's capitol, it also serves the Colorado community; its close proximity to the affected area establishes it as local. Its online site [denverpost.com](http://denverpost.com) was used for content.

For all four news sites, when selecting stories, I first removed any editorials, letters to the editor, blog posts, and story previews. I analyzed only news and news feature stories. I also searched for all wire or

syndicated stories, which I counted as duplicate stories and removed from the sample. For the remaining stories, I examined and coded the entire news story excluding only the headlines.

For each publication, I gathered stories from LexisNexis Media Production and Journalism archive published within the to-week time frame. I used the following search terms: “James Eagan Holmes” or “Holmes shooting” “Aurora mass shooter” “Aurora Theater Shooting” “Aurora shooting” “Aurora Colorado shooting” “Colorado theater shooting” “Colorado mass shooting”.

To archive the articles, I printed them and stored them in designated folders. This was so that if the newspaper site for any reason chooses to take down or edit a story I have coded, I have a record of its existence and/or its original form used for coding.

## **Codes**

In this study, there are specific variables I will measure within each online news article. These variables are based on the hypotheses I have stated and the research questions I have posed. The variables chose are online news site, causal attribution, policy proposals, story tone, alternative causal factors, previous mental health sign/symptoms, and mental health professional causal attribution.

### *Online Newspaper Site*

The newspaper refers to the online publication in which the news story is published. Each story will be coded into one of four online news outlet categories, based on where it was published.

### *Causal attribution*

Causal Attribution relates to linking a behavior or act to a cause. In a news story, the causal attribution acts like an explanation for the audience, answering the why in the “who? what? when? where? why?” news story construction. The causes to be coded are serious mental illness, gun availability and lax gun policy (See Appendix A).

### *Policy proposals*

Policy proposals in news stories are suggestions or mentions of public policy to mitigate future mass shootings or to reduce gun violence. They fall in two camps: mental health policy, which proposes improving the mental health care system, and gun restriction policies (See Appendix A).

### *Story tone*

The portrayal of the seriously mentally ill in Aurora Theater Shooting coverage deals with how people of SMI are depicted as the guilty party. Two types of portrayals are accusatory and sympathetic.

An accusatory tone refers to the tone of a story that condemns the population of people with SMI for the rare acts of gun violence. A sympathetic tone may pose solutions, such as policy change for mental health or it may challenge the use of mental illness as a scapegoat for heinous crimes suggesting that singling out the population as a whole can lead to a fear of seeking help (See Appendix A).

### *Alternative causal factors*

Although the dynamics between mental illness and violence carry particular characteristics, many of the greatest predictors of violence in the mentally ill community are the same for the general population. Violent behaviors for both the mentally ill and general population can be preceded by substance abuse or dependence; a history of violence, juvenile detention, or physical abuse; and recent stressors such as being a crime victim, getting divorced, or losing a job (See Appendix A).

### *Previous Mental health symptoms and signs*

Sources who knew or knew of Holmes may take it upon themselves to divulge behaviors that they may see as a symptom or sign of the impending crime. These behaviors can be comments the assailant made; actions of the assailant such as texts or phone calls; other acts of violence like threats or physical abuse; they can be vague or unprovable statements such as saying he was “odd/ a loner/ weird/ creepy/ to himself/ unsociable/ strange/ didn’t fit in,” etc. (See Appendix A).



### *Mental health professional causal attribution*

This variable, while similar to the causal attribution variable focuses on the specific comments of a single type of source--those quoted or referenced in the story who are described as a mental health professional (See Appendix A).

## **Coding**

### *Coding Scheme Development*

A copy of the coding scheme used is included in the appendices. Prior to the start of coder training, I refined my coding scheme by trying it out on a sample of online articles on the topic of the Aurora Theater Shooting that were published on CNN.com, which were articles outside of my sample. I coded approximately 10 stories and I made revisions based on the problems I encountered. Then I coded another set of stories and made more revisions.

### *Coder Training.*

I took the following steps to train a second coder:

1. I arranged for a complete overview of the code book and code sheet with my second coder where I went over the codebook and code sheet page by page.
2. After the overview, I addressed all questions the coder had.
3. The coder and I then separately practiced coding 10 online news stories on the topic of the Aurora Theatre Shooting from CNN.com, which were articles outside of my sample.
4. I met with the second coder afterward to discuss results, answer questions and clarify details.
5. I revised my coding scheme based on the feedback given in that meeting.
6. We once again separately coded another 10 stories from CNN.com.
7. We reached complete agreement upon a Krippendorff's Alpha test on that second try.

## **Intercoder Reliability**

In a quantitative content analysis, the reliability of the coding scheme must be established (Neuendorf, 2002). To assess intercoder reliability, after a training session, my coder and I worked independently to code 20% of the stories. Once the stories were coded, I used appropriate chance-adjusted reliability statistics i.e. Krippendorff's Alpha to test the categorical variables for intercoder reliability. My goal was met to achieve intercoder reliability levels of .80 and above on the majority of variables. Neuendorf (2002) states "reliability coefficients of .90 or greater would be acceptable to all, .80 or greater would be acceptable in most situations" (p. 143), similarly, Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998) state that the acceptable level of agreement is .80 and is usually the standard.

### *Intercoder Reliability Test Results.*

Twenty percent (N=38) of the sample stories were coded by me and another coder then subjected to an intercoder reliability test with the desired result of .80 coefficient or above to show reliability. The following are the result of the intercoder reliability test, which determined that several variables were lacked reliability and in turn precluded several hypotheses and research questions from remaining in this study (see next page).

Table 1: *Intercoder Reliability Test Results*

Variable Name	Percent Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Publication	100	1
Day	100	1
Causal Attribution SMI	94.7	.84
Causal Attribution "Gun Availability"	100	1
Causal Attribution "Lax Gun Policy"	97.4	.88
Causal Attribution "No Cause"	97.4	.94
Causal Attribution "Other"	100	undefined *
Tone Accusatory	86.8	.54
Tone Sympathetic	94.7	-.0135
Previous Poor Mental Health Signs/Symptoms	89.5	.45
Mental Health Policy	100	1
Alternative Causal Factors	94.7	.72
Gun restriction Policy	97.4	.84
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "Possibility of SMI"	100	undefined *
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "Specific Illness"	100	undefined *
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "Alt. Causal Factors"	100	undefined *
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "Gun Control"	100	undefined *
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "No Cause"	100	undefined *
Mental Health Pro Causal Att. "Other"	100	undefined *

\* Krippendorff's Alpha are undefined for this variable because all coders have attained 100% agreement and have selected the same variable value for every unit of analysis

## Excluded Hypotheses and Research Questions

Weak Krippendorff's Alpha scores determined by the intercoder reliability test indicated that the following variables lacked reliability among coders: accusatory tone (.54); sympathetic tone (-.0135); previous poor mental health signs and symptoms (.45), and alternative causal factors (.72). The variables were found in the following in the following hypotheses and research question that will now be excluded from the study:

### *Previous Mental Health Signs or Symptoms*

- H2A In online news coverage following a mass shooting, there will be a positive correlation between locally covered news stories and mentions of the assailant's previous poor mental health signs or symptoms pointing toward an SMI.
- H2B In online news coverage immediately following a mass shooting, the number of mentions of previous mental health signs and symptoms in local news stories will decrease over a two-week period.

### *Story Tone*

- H3A In online news coverage of a mass shooting, there will be more instances of accusatory tone in local news stories than in national news stories.
- RQ2 In stories that have a sympathetic tone toward people with SMI, are there also mentions or proposals of gun restriction policies for them or other high-risk groups?

### *Alternative Causal Factors*

- RQ3 In stories in which the assailant's previous poor mental health signs and symptoms are referenced, are alternative causal factors (substance abuse/history of abuse or trauma/bullying or harassment/ unemployment stressful life event) considered as alternative factors precipitating acts of violence?

- NOTE: The variable *alternative causal factors*' Krippendorff's Alpha score was .74 coefficient, which arguably could have been included in this study with the understanding that it had marginally less-than-ideal reliability; however, its only appearance in Research Question 3 detailed above where its dismissal was decided based on its pairing with the variable previous poor mental health signs and symptoms, which reached only a .45 coefficient.

## Data Analysis

All data were entered into SPSS prior to analyzing. All items analyzed met conventional standards for adequate reliability, with Krippendorff's Alpha values of 0.8 or above. Those variables coded that did not meet the desired value are explained in this section. Descriptive statistics were run for each variable. The total for all recording units are as follows N=187: AS (Aurora Sentinel) = 42, DP (Denver Post) = 81; WP (Washington Post) = 43; NYT (New York Times) = 21. The following are descriptions of the data analysis I performed for each hypotheses and research question.

### *Hypotheses*

- H1A There will be an inverse relationship between media citations of SMI as the cause of gun violence and citations of any other causes.

To test this hypothesis, I ran descriptive statistics of my data set in SPSS then I ran a Pearson's R Correlation to determine the relationship of the variables.

- H4A Mentions of gun restriction policy will be more prevalent in the national news sites' coverage of a mass shooting than in the local news sites' coverage.

To test this hypothesis, I ran descriptive statistics of my data set in SPSS then I ran a Crosstabulation of the national and local news sites and their mentions of gun restriction.

### *Research Questions*

- RQ1 How often do online news articles covering a mass shooting propose both mental health policy *and* gun restriction policy as solutions to gun violence?

To answer Research Question 1, after running descriptive statistics of my data set, I counted the co-occurrence of the two types of policy proposals.

- RQ4 If there is a mental health professional source in an article what is the substance of their statements?
  - Cites the possibility of mental illness
  - Mentions a specific mental illness (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, psychosis, personality disorder)
  - Does not cite the possibility of a mental illness
  - Cites alternative causal factors (stress/life problems)
  - Cites gun control as causal factor
  - Cites no cause

To answer Research Question 2, after running descriptive statistics of my data set, I counted the total number of mental health causal attributions.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis H1A: Causal Attributions

The first hypothesis proposed in this study was partially confirmed. It posited, “There will be an inverse relationship between media citations of SMI as the cause of gun violence and citations of any other causes.” Aside from SMI as causal attribution, there were the causes of “lax gun policy”, “gun availability”, as well as “no cause” and “other cause”. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between SMI causal attribution and non-SMI causal attribution. There was an inverse relationship between the two variables [ $r = -.177$ ,  $n = 187$ ,  $p = .015$ ]. Overall, non-SMI causes were more prevalent than SMI across all publications as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: *Correlations: SMI and Non-SMI Causes*

		SMI	Non-SMI
SMI	Pearson Correlation	1	-.177*
	Sig (2-tailed)		.015
	N	187	187
Non-SMI Causes	Pearson Correlation	-.177	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.015	
	N	187	187

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

However, Table 3, which shows the frequency of SMI and each cause separately, shows that the correlation is driven by the “no cause” variable (next page).

Table 3: *Correlations SMI and Each Non-SMI Cause*

		SMI	Non-SMI	Lax Gun Policy	No Cause	Other
<u>SMI</u>	Pearson Correlation	1	.024	.138	-.667**	. <sup>b</sup>
	Sig (2-tailed)		.748	.060	.000	.
	N	187	187	187	187	187
<u>Gun Availability</u>	Pearson Correlation	.024	1	.803**	-.489**	. <sup>b</sup>
	Sig (2-tailed)		.748	.000	.000	.
	N	187	187	187	187	187
<u>Lax Gun Policy</u>	Pearson Correlation	.138	.803**	1	-.516**	. <sup>b</sup>
	Sig (2-tailed)	.060	.000		.000	.
	N	187	187	187	187	187
<u>No Cause</u>	Pearson Correlation	-.667**	-.489**	-.516**	1	. <sup>b</sup>
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.
	N	187	187	187.	187.	187
<u>Other</u>	Pearson Correlation	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>
	Sig (2-tailed)	.	.	.	.	.
	N	187	187	187	187	187

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

b. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

The data suggests a weak but significant inverse relationship between Non-SMI and SMI as causal attribution.

### **Hypothesis H2A: Previous Mental Health Signs or Symptoms: Reliability Not Met**

The intercoder reliability test determined that the variable of previous mental health signs and symptoms lacked reliability among coders. Most often when a variable fails to meet intercoder reliability, they are not included in results; however, after discussion among coders, interesting differences in coding that caused the disagreements were discovered and will now be discussed as they may be helpful to future research.

Because of the low reliability, the following two related hypotheses were left unanswered: “In online news coverage following a mass shooting, there will be a positive correlation between locally-covered news stories and mentions of the assailant’s previous mental health signs or symptoms pointing toward an SMI” and



“In online news coverage immediately following a mass shooting, the number of mentions of previous mental health signs and symptoms in local news stories will decrease over a two-week period”.

Later coder discussion determined that one disagreement lay in a detail covered in many stories about Holmes’ booby-trapped apartment. According to news reports, the night of the shooting, prior to leaving his apartment building, Holmes rigged a system to blast loud music at midnight to coincide with his attack on the theater. The blaring music was an attempt to lure one of his fellow tenants to open his apartment’s front door, which he had left ajar. Doing this would set off countless handmade explosives he had set around the apartment. An example of this disagreement among coders was found in a Denver Post story titled, “Booby-trapped apartment where alleged Aurora theater shooter lived vexes cops” (Whaley & McGhee, 2012). The story included an interview with his fellow tenant, Kaitlyn Fonzi, who went to knock on his door upon hearing the loud music. The article discussed her actions as follows:

“She went up to the apartment to ask him to turn the music down. The door was ajar, and she placed her hand on the doorknob but didn’t push it open. Something made her think she shouldn’t go in, she said. She thought Holmes might have wanted to lure someone inside. “There has never been music like that playing in that apartment until last night,” she said.” (Whaley & McGhee, 2012).

One coder felt the act was a sign or symptom consistent with the coding protocol’s definition, specifically where the protocol outlines coding certain behavioral instances, citing the following example:

“Coding this variable involves searching for instances where the story and/or sources within it cite behaviors indicating the assailant's poor mental health preceding the event that might help understand what happened or why. These behaviors can be: Actions of the assailant such as texts or phone calls; other acts of violence like threats or physical abuse that can be vague or unprovable statements such as saying he was “odd/a loner/ weird/ creepy/ to himself/ unsociable/ strange/ didn’t fit in,” etc.”

However, though this was undeniably bizarre behavior denoting impending danger, this did not count as a previous mental health sign or symptom because, though it failed to detonate, the intended explosion was part of the overall crime meant to happen exactly at the same time as the attack at the midnight showing at the Aurora Theater thus it was not a *previous* sign or symptom.

### **Hypothesis H3A: Story Tone (Reliability Not Met)**

The intercoder reliability test determined that the variable of story tone lacked reliability among coders. Most often when a variable fails to meet intercoder reliability, they are not included in results;

however, after discussion among coders, interesting differences in coding that caused the disagreements were discovered and will now be discussed as they may be helpful to future research. Hypothesis 3A dealt with story tone and posited “In online news coverage of a mass shooting, there will be more instances of accusatory tone in local news stories than in national news stories”. Using these kinds of concepts proved to be unreliable in this single-case study. Disagreements revealed an oversight in examples in the coding protocol, specifically with description of an accusatory tone (see Appendix A). When coding for story tone, the protocol states an accusatory tone “refers to the tone of a story that condemns the population of people with SMI for the rare acts of gun violence. They tend to suggest that having SMI implies violence in several ways. These stories will assert that Holmes’ mental illness and its symptoms are what lead him to kill and injure the 70 victims”.

When coders conferred later over differences, it was determined that coding articles dealing with courtroom proceedings were not explicitly covered in the protocol. Since James Holmes was arrested alive outside the theater, he was subject to a trial for his crimes, which began within the timeframe of this study’s sample. These courtroom stories began appearing late in the second week of the aftermath of the shooting. While they discussed the event, their focus shifted to hearing-related topics. News reporting on the event and on Holmes’ impending criminal case highlighted disagreements between the prosecution and defense over appropriate information to be considered as well as sentencing, i.e. whether the insanity plea or diminished capacity would be considered; thus, SMI became a prevalent topic in courtroom stories but not in the ways explained in the coding protocol or intended in this study. The news stories covering courtroom disagreements tended to be neutral in tone as they were written by courtroom reporters who relayed developing court determinations, but coders disagreed in some instances, mistaking courtroom disputes for an accusatory story tone. An example of such disagreement can be found in a story coded from the Denver Post titled “James Holmes court document revised four days after its release” (Meyer, 2012). The story covers a judge’s redacting information from a defense motion. The redacted information was Holmes’ being a patient of University of Colorado psychiatrist Dr. Lynne Fenton; it was reportedly redacted because it was considered doctor-patient confidentiality. Coders disagreed whether this would constitute an accusatory tone for people with SMI—was it implicating people with SMI simply by reporting on his seeing a psychiatrist or was the news story tone

neutral because it was reporting on a courtroom decision? However, this news story actually discusses how the redacted information had become a major part of news media’s discussion of SMI as a cause:

“That information made headlines across the globe for the media looking for clues behind Holmes’ motive for allegedly unleashing a hail of bullets on July 20 inside an Aurora movie theater, killing 12 and injuring 58. The revelation that Holmes was seeing a psychiatrist was a significant development in a case that has been put under a gag order by District Court Judge William Sylvester.” (Meyer, 2012)

Overall, there was a different dynamic to news stories discussing SMI within legal proceedings and no such instances or examples were included in the coding protocol. Since those stories began appearing in the sample toward the end of the two-week time frame, they should’ve either been taken out from the sample or included in the protocol.

#### **Hypothesis 4A: Policy Proposals**

Hypothesis 4A was confirmed; it asserted that “Mentions of gun restriction policy will be more prevalent in the national news sites’ coverage of a mass shooting than in the local news sites’ coverage”.

Table 4: *Frequency of Gun Restriction Mentions Across Sites*

	Yes	No	Total
Aurora Sentinel	5	37	42
Denver Post	4	77	81
NY Times	18	25	43
Washington Post	9	12	21
Total	36	151	187

Of the sample of local news sites, the Aurora Sentinel mentioned gun restriction policy 12% of the time while the Denver Post mentioned gun restriction policy only 5% of the time throughout its reporting in the two-week span; the two local newspapers averaged only 8.5% of stories in the time frame mentioning gun policy. Meanwhile, the national site the New York Times mentioned gun restriction policy in 42% of its coverage. The Washington Post mentioned gun restriction policy in 41% of its coverage, creating an average

of 41.5% of national coverage coded discussing gun restriction policy, resulting in nearly half of national news reporting mentioned gun restriction policy.

## Research Questions

### *Research Question 1*

Research question 1 asked, “How often do online news articles covering a mass shooting propose both mental health policy *and* gun restriction policy as solutions to gun violence?” Of the coded articles, 3.2% of articles proposed both mental health policy and gun restriction policy as solutions to gun violence.

Table 5: *Frequency of Mental Health Policy and Gun Restriction Policy Mentions*

	Yes	No	Percentage	N
Mental Health Policy and Gun Restriction Policy	6	182	3.2%	187

### *Research Question 2*

Research Question 2 asked, “In stories that have a sympathetic tone toward people with SMI, are there also mentions or proposals of gun restriction policies for them or other high-risk groups?” Reliability for story tone was not met in the intercoder reliability test, so the question is unanswered. More information about the lack of reliability can be found in the previous section discussing hypotheses.

### *Research Question 3*

RQ3 asked, “In stories in which the assailant's previous symptoms and signs are referenced, are alternative causal factors (substance abuse/history of abuse or trauma/bullying or harassment/ unemployment stressful life event) considered as alternative factors precipitating acts of violence? “Reliability for previous mental health symptoms and signs was not met in the intercoder reliability test, so the question is unanswered. More information about the lack of reliability can be found in the previous section discussing hypotheses.

### *Research Question 4*

Research Question 4 asked, “If there is a mental health professional source in an article what is the substance of their statements?” Mental health professionals were listed in the coding protocol as: a

psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, counselor, psychiatric nurse or researchers or experts in the psychology, social work, or behavioral health and science fields. Of the 187 articles, less than 1% of stories had a mental health professional as a source.

Table 6: *Frequency of Mental Health Professional Source Causal Attribution*

	Yes	No	Percentage	N
Mental Health Professional Source Causal Attribution	1	186	.5%	187

Stories were also coded for the substance of the information given by a mental health professional source. I coded for the following substantive causal attribution statements: cites the possibility of mental illness; mentions a specific mental illness; does not cite the possibility of a mental illness; cites alternative causal factors; cites gun control; and cites no cause (See Appendix A). The single story containing a mental health professional gave no causal attribution for the shooting.

## DISCUSSION

In reflection of the results of this study, there are factors at play that separate this coverage from other mass shootings and in turn affected the news media's framing of this mass shooting in the first two weeks after the tragedy. Events in the life of the Aurora Theater shooter James Eagan Holmes before his rampage were seemingly prime material for news media speculation of serious mental illness. Not only had he received mental health treatment at his university, CU Anschutz, before his rampage, he had also been flagged by the university for being at risk through their mental health response team. Moreover, he reportedly sent a letter to his former school therapist, Lynne Fenton, that was speculated to be a manifesto. And yet, the results of this study reflect that framing of this tragedy in the first two weeks after the shooting rarely attributed the crime to serious mental illness. I attribute this to CU Anschutz, Holmes' former university, influencing the news media's framing by withholding information that would provide concrete evidence of mental illness. For instance, the letter the university intercepted from Holmes sent to his therapist, was not revealed to the media as it was determined to be covered by doctor-patient confidentiality. Additionally, the university's legal team issued a gag order to its staff and faculty disallowing opportunities for the media to speak to his therapist or many other who interacted with Holmes in school. Finally, Holmes was arrested after his rampage and faced trial in the latter week of the two-week time frame in which this study observed. The court proceedings also affected news media speculation of mental illness as the insanity plea was being discussed, and the District Attorney outwardly rejected it by asserting that it was an easy way out for paying for his crimes. In a unique set of events, injured victims and victim family members attended Holmes' early court appearances. They also held these views and expressed them to the media. This created a dynamic where the news media may have stepped away from framing mental illness in avoidance of disagreeing with the prosecutor and victims. It is these factors that might inform the discussion of this study's results and might explain why the findings of this study differ from other research of this shooting and other mass shooting research.

## **Causal Attribution**

The first hypothesis, which was partially confirmed, suggested a weak but significant inverse relationship between SMI and Non-SMI causal attributions. However, the relationship was driven by “no cause” being coded among non-SMI causes. The majority of stories mentioned no cause more often than they did SMI, gun availability, lax gun policy or any other cause behind the gun violence in Aurora. These results do not align with previous research, which has found that dangerous people with SMI are often cited by media as the cause of mass shooting gun violence. The McGinty et al. (2014) study that guided this content analysis found that 33% of stories in the two weeks after the mass shootings in Virginia Tech, Tucson, Aurora and Newtown mentioned dangerous people with SMI as the cause for gun violence. Moreover, their study overall found that a higher portion of news stories mentioned dangerous people with SMI as opposed to dangerous weapons as a cause of gun violence (McGinty et al., 2014).

Causal attribution as a function of issue framing helps to shape views on blame for tragic incidents, and the public comes to hear about SMI and gun violence most often in times of tragedy. McGinty et al. (2014) found that the two weeks after a mass shooting is a window of time in which the issue of gun violence and SMI is at the forefront of the public agenda. The majority of articles coded in this study were devoid of causal attribution, seemingly leaving no one and/or nothing to blame for the gun violence at the Aurora Theater. This lack of causal attribution disrupted the framing of this tragedy in that it left no bridge or logical step to remedy or solution. Much of the research I culled in the literature review reported that the news media’s focus on mass shooters with SMI could lead the public to view SMI as a common cause of gun violence (Gostin & Record, 2011; Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010; Swanson, 2011). In this study, the absence of a cause can also be seen as the decline in media citations of SMI as a cause. My findings might suggest a move away from SMI as the most prevalent causal attribution for gun violence, and it supports the similar findings of McGinty et al. (2014) who found that the Aurora shooting coverage had the fewest mentions of SMI as a cause for gun violence than coverage of the Tucson, Virginia Tech and Newtown shootings. Frames can reinforce stigmas and stereotypes and the lack of causal attribution I found in this content analysis could mean a decrease in negative framing of people living with SMI.



However, a lack of causal attribution or analysis leaves no room for the final element in Entman's (1993) well-rounded frame, which is remedy promotion, i.e. the presentation of a solution to the cause. In their analysis of 854 news articles following gun violence, Hawdon, Agnich, and Ryan (2014), concluded that the "media reports on a tragedy can influence how the tragedy unfolds, the likelihood of a similar tragedy occurring again, who is blamed for the tragedy, perceptions of the tragedy's cause, public opinion about the underlying issues related to the tragedy, policy decisions, and how quickly a community may recover from the tragedy" (p. 8). In absence of the other causes (SMI, gun restriction, and lax gun policy or any other cause), the lack of causal attribution can affect how the public understands or views the tragedy and in turn understands or advocates for a related solution. Beyond the function of framing to aid in or influence public understanding, news coverage framing of tragic incidents can also affect related policy outcomes. Kingdon (1984) found that framing a preferred causal story following a mass shooting allowed policy makers a window to spring into action in advocacy of the preferred causal story. Moreover, framing can also aid in making an event a "focusing event, which Birkland (1997) defines as an event that brings attention to an issue and clarifies and narrows the range of possible policy responses. The Aurora Shooting was a significant event in terms of death toll, which at the time was the highest of any shooting up to that date, and the impending news media framing, specifically around causal attribution, could make or break it as a focusing event (Kingdon, 1995). Thus, relaying a legitimate cause for gun violence can aid in problem resolution through public policy. A lack of causal attribution for an event of this scope disallows it to become a focusing event wherein public policy can be suggested or presented to address social issues.

### **Policy Proposals: Mental Health and Gun Restriction**

As discussed, prior research suggests that media portrayals of mass shootings can increase negative sentiment toward persons with SMI and worsen stigma. This is at least partly driven by gun rights advocates whose strategic messaging seeks to deflect blame from dangerous weapons and place culpability on the seriously mentally ill shooter and the insufficiencies of the mental healthcare system (Schultz et al., 2014). As part of Entman's (1993) well-developed frame, after causal analysis and moral judgment, remedy promotion is

introduced to provide a solution to a given issue. In the case of mass shootings, news coverage includes policy proposals at state, congressional and national levels. The competing policies propose different strategies to combat gun violence. Mental health policy characteristically calls for the expansion of mental health services to thwart gun violence among SMI populations. Gun restriction policy proposals typically recommended restriction to dangerous weapons.

In this study, I looked for specific instances in which both policies were ascribed in a single story. Similar to findings of McGinty et al. (2014) in which only 7% of news stories covering four major mass shootings were mental health policy and gun restriction policy mentioned in the same story, I found low occurrences of dual causal attribution, with only 3.2% of stories mentioning both policies. The policy proposals differ most obviously in that they address gun violence based on perceived dangerousness. Mental health policy, while it advocates for much-needed expansion of services for people with SMI, still frames people with SMI as dangerous and in need of intervention. In contrast, gun restriction policy attempts to address dangerousness of weapons as the cause for gun violence. An example of both policies mentioned in one story can be found in the article “Aurora shooting suspect is tragic reminder of a big problem” wherein the author directly acknowledges the two sides of the gun violence debate and the policies surrounding them:

“If form continues to hold true, one side will use the massacre to argue that rifles like the AR-15 have no civilian purpose and are too easy to purchase, making mass slayings inevitable. The other side will argue that if just one other patron had been armed at the midnight movie, the tragedy might have been averted by creating a death toll of only one — suspect James Eagan Holmes. Both sides are right.”

The author then addresses mental health policy (or a lack thereof):

“In the U.S. we have scarce resources for treating mental illness and are even worse about monitoring patients who suffer from it. If we are looking for solutions to horrifying events such as Friday morning’s mass shooting, it’s a good place to start. A recent study published in the Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law noted that the number of beds available for inpatient psychiatric treatment has fallen from 339 per 100,000 Americans in 1955 to 22 per 100,000 in the year 2000. Either we have gotten a lot saner as a nation or we have chosen to ignore the real problem” (Murphy, 2012)

Iyengar (1991) distinguished between societal or individualistic attributions for socially pervasive problems such as poverty and crime and linked these attributions to TV news’ emphasis on individuals’ responsibility for these issues, which then detracted from framing the issues as a societal matter to be dealt with on a societal level. I found that the few stories that mentioned or acknowledged more than one type of

policy to address gun violence shifted causal attribution from individual blame of people living with SMI to broader issues affecting society such as poor mental healthcare services and gun and ammunition availability. Those stories I coded including both policy proposals de-emphasized SMI a predictor of gun violence by including alternate proposals and alternative sources to gun violence prevention. In the years following the Aurora shooting, mental health advocates have welcomed the opportunity to discuss mental health in the media but on the condition of decoupling the discussion with gun violence and legislators responded at the executive level with President Obama vowing in 2013 to take mental illness “out of the shadows” with a media campaign calling for expanded services and de-stigmatization. However, stories written immediately after the Aurora shooting one year earlier still unfortunately coupled SMI and gun violence, yet in proposing both policies in some articles, they managed to challenge the assumption that the issue of gun violence at an individual level purveyed by dangerous people with SMI by also including discussions of gun restriction policy, which implies societal level responsibility.

### **Policy Proposals: Gun Restriction in National News Coverage**

More so in national news than local was the mention of gun restriction policy, 8.5% and 41.5% respectively. I took interest in geographical distance and policy given that the Aurora Shooting took place in mid-2012 during an election year at state, congressional and federal levels. Thus, gun violence prevention was often discussed as a possibility for political platform consideration. My results pointed to geographically differing political climates for discussing the gun violence prevention issue. Though public and elected officials were cautious in navigating the conversation around gun violence protection, at the local, geographically-near level, politicians spoke about the victims and the strength of the community while deflecting gun violence prevention talk. And when politicians at the national level visited the Aurora victims or confer with local legislators and law enforcement, they also focused more on the community than However, when speaking on a national scale, they were more likely to discuss the prevention of gun violence. For instance, is an oft-quoted statement made by President Barack Obama when he called the Aurora shooting an “extraordinarily heartbreaking tragedy.” Obama added that talk of reforming gun laws after similar mass

shootings had too often been “defeated by politics and by lobbying and eventually by the pull of our collective attention elsewhere” (O’Keefe. 2012).

This trend supports the research by Hawdon, Agnich, and Ryan (2014) who found that the proximity of the news source played a factor in framing at a community- and societal-level. In their analysis of frames of the Virginia Tech Shootings, researchers discovered that a news source’s location influenced how it framed the shooting tragedy. Geographically close news sources tended to focus on the tragedy of the shooting at a community level whereas geographically distant sources focused on the underlying causes of the shootings, thus framing the issue at a societal level. Overall, Hawdon, Agnich and Ryan (2014) found that half of all tragedy-related stories (N=257) published by the geographically distant papers focused on issues such as the treatment of the mentally ill, gun-control laws, or the university’s response to the tragedy while only 19.7% of the stories published in the proximate papers discussed these broad issues.

Despite the tendencies for national media sources to focus on broad issues and local media sources to focus on local issues, I observed an almost avoidance to talk about the perpetrator or his violence at the local level. The focus instead was placed on victims and community; however, it would seem that discussions about gun violence prevention on a policy level would be of most concern in the communities in which the tragedy has stricken, where the gun violence took lives of local people and where the state and local laws would apply to the perpetrator the most; instead, the conversation was happening from farther away in an almost fishbowl conversation about Aurora, Colo., from outside Aurora, Colo. In an Aurora Sentinel article, Floyd Ciruli, a political analyst weighed in on why politicians might be staying quiet by saying, “There will be short-term discussion, but the issue will fade fairly quickly. National polls show that support for gun rights has increased over the years, and support for gun control has decreased. In general, at least up until this point, there has not been an outpouring for support on gun control” (The Sentinel, 2012). Often in articles in the sample, the sources used were entirely political and that was reflected in headlines like “Gun issues may become a hot topic on campaign trails,” which was tagged with “Aurora Shooting” and therefore part of my sample. This was most likely because of the time frame of the sample within an election year. These stories tied to the Aurora shooting were dominated by talking points and election speculation; thus, the framing was highly subject to political agenda. Framing can have an effect on public policy by elevating the salience of an issue or

event and influencing opinion. This study found that local news journalists in Aurora and Denver tended to focus on community-level reporting focused on the strength and resilience of the community, but in doing so, they lost opportunity to report on policy solutions to remedy and prevent future mass shooting incidents.

### **Mental Health Sources and Causal Attribution**

A study by McGinty et al. (2013) suggest that news coverage linking violence to SMI has been shown to exacerbate already-high levels of social stigma towards those with mental illnesses. Framing can aid in the building of these stereotypes, and that framing is reliant on journalist perspective, which is often thought to be the “if it bleeds, it leads” mentality. The phrase denotes a news content hierarchy that promotes violent, fear-based depictions of society leaving viewers with fatalistic thinking (Serani, 2011). However, Allen & Nairn (1997) challenged the idea that negative depictions of mental illness are the result of sensationalist news practices; rather, they discovered news journalists are not always well informed regarding mental health issues.

Regardless of intent or reason, the outcome can be damaging to people suffering from serious mental illnesses. For instance, on a broader social scale, news coverage that emphasizes violence may contribute to a societal focus on enacting public safety-oriented policies aiming to protect society from people with SMI (Glied & Frank, 2014; Schneider, 1993; McGinty et al., 2014). These policies can include mandatory treatment and firearm restrictions and may be enacted at the expense of public-health-oriented policies designed to foster recovery and improve the lives of people with SMI. In this case study of 187 news articles, only one story utilized a mental health professional source. That story, titled “Colorado shooting: It’s hard to spot threats, experts say,” included an interview with Bill Woodward, a director of training at the University of Colorado at Boulder’s Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence who teaches violence-indicating behaviors. The source’s causal attribution was determined as “no cause”. The single article was a news story filed under the Health and Science section of the Washington Post online edition. It was co-written by a Science and Politics Reporter and a National Political Correspondent. Overall, this finding gave insight into the news media’s use of sources to determine the legitimacy of SMI claims as the cause of gun violence as well as news media’s use of relevant sources by beat.

Several stories mentioned that HIPAA restrictions disallowed Holmes' direct caretakers from sharing mental health information under the rule of doctor-patient confidentiality, and yet there were still near-inexistent findings of outside mental health professionals providing insight into James Holmes' purported SMI. This is similar to findings by Conrad (1999) in which researchers analyzed how genetics and behavior are reported in the news by analyzing quotes in stories in the time frame of 1970-1995. Of 117 news articles discussing mental illness, only 2.6% of stories quoted an expert on mental illness. Meagher et al. (1995) examined 380 articles containing references to psychiatric issues. While articles featured on the front page of tabloid newspapers more often than others detailed forensic psychiatric issues (69.5%), articles on the front page of broadsheet newspapers contained more informative reports. However, in both types of newspapers, it was discovered that very few mental health professionals contributed to the writing of these articles and it was concluded that their involvement would help in constructing more positive portrayals of people who experience mental health problems (Meagher et al., 1995).

Through the results of this study and related research on serious mental illness in the news, I feel that particularly in news reporting of mass shootings, a journalists' sources as well as their familiarity with the subject can influence broader social action toward groups affected by a purported cause. Journalists rely on their sources to provide them with the information they need to construct news stories, and Conrad (1999) found that the greater the social power of a source, the more likely the news media was in successfully defining an event or the importance of an issue. The importance of using experts in a given field, particularly psychology and psychiatry, is that research shows that quotes and contributions from mental health professionals can challenge perceptions and improve the quality of information about mental illness relayed to the general public (White, 2013). Benefits of these insights from professionals include creating a more accessible face for mental healthcare and dispelling outdated, inaccurate stereotypes and stigmas often held by the public.

Moreover, as discussed, the single story including a mental health professional source was filed under the "Health and Science" section of the Washington Post online edition and was co-written by a Science and Politics Reporter and a National Political Correspondent. I found in my coding that most other stories were filed under "Crime News" and were written by crime news beat reporter on local sites and by national crime

reporters in the national publications. The joint effort made in the single story using a mental health professional between a science beat reporter and politics beat reporter affected the sources used. This finding suggests a disconnect between crime reporting and the use of sources outside of the pure crime perspective. I found that when SMI was reported as the cause, sources cited were often those directly affected by the tragedy from a crime perspective such as policeman and victims' families. This alone can reinforce stigma that people with SMI victimize the public. Crime reporters reporting on the Aurora Theater Shooting had an opportunity to access the sources of health or science beats to create a well-rounded story that allows for a mental health perspective. Like the single instance in this analysis, reporters also have opportunity in times of complex public issues to co-write stories about SMI with members of the news staff who have connections to sources willing to give expert testimony.

### **Suggestions**

Suggestions for future research include a qualitative study using interviews to analyze the source-gathering habits of crime beat reporters whose news stories cover mental health topics. Aside from the rare mass shooting and the news media's speculation of SMI as a cause, for the past 50 years, inpatient treatment of the mentally ill has moved from hospitals to jails according to a study performed by the Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (Lamb & Weinberger, 2005). This shift places the news framing of crime perpetrated by the mentally ill, violent or not, in the hands of crime beat reporters versus health or science reporters. Viswanth et al. (2008) found that among health and medical science reporters, more than 80% of those surveyed reported that they often contact health care providers when working on their stories. An overarching research question to drive such a study could be, "How do crime beat reporters frame mental health issues and events through the use of sources?"

Potential future research could also consider mental health professionals' opinions about speaking to media as a source for mental health information, specifically in relation to articles on crime committed by people living with SMI. This could build upon research by Morris (2006) who found that mental health professionals have stated their reluctance to speak to the media because by doing so they might create an

indirect link to the crime being discussed and mental illness—even when they are attempting to clarify information or dispel myths. This could be a qualitative study using interviews with mental health professionals that could also explore their views of the news coverage of serious mental illness in times of mass shootings.

The Aurora shooting took place during an election year; this was reflected in the repetitive use of sources like politicians and political analysts, which also affected the discussion on gun restriction and mental health policy. The politically-driven climate at times stifled conversation—for politicians strategically avoiding taking a stance, while at other times was divisive in nature—to reinforce the individual’s political platform stance. Overall, it dictated the conversation around policy in a significant way. Another potential follow-up to this study would be a longitudinal examination of news media coverage of gun prevention policy proposals in election years coinciding with mass shootings. Since the Aurora Theater shooting in 2012, there have been record numbers of mass shootings in the U.S., many that have fallen within election periods. This type of analysis could detect trends in sources used to discuss policy as well as trends in causal attribution and related policy for gun violence prevention.

## **Limitations**

The results of this study should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, because of the sampling approach, which included only print news and excluded blogs, feature stories and editorials, differences in coverage using different story types related to SMI remain unexplored. Additionally, assessing how news media coverage of mass shootings and serious mental illness was associated with public attitudes was outside the scope of this study. Also, this study only looked at the immediate two weeks after the tragedy based on a stage model of coping with disaster and tragedy wherein the media tends to rapidly speculate causes and proposes solution (Pennebaker and Harber, 1993). This does not reflect trends in later coverage that would develop from information revealed after the two-week period, and specifically in this case the details that emerged from the criminal trial of James Eagan Holmes. A study that would observe a 6-month period after the shooting may have findings more consistent with the former literature.



As this study is focused on a mass shooting that occurred nearly 8 years ago, the casual attribution frames applied to mass shootings at that time did not reflect up-to-date alternative causal frames for mass shootings that have been seen in the media since, which includes hate crime and domestic terror frames. These frames did not appear in the literature review for this study but have since been studied as causal frames for current mass shootings (Taylor, 2019). Finally, my print and online sample, aggregated from local and national news publications, attempted to gauge the agenda-setting and framing habits of prominent national publications as well as geographically-near publications; in choosing this distinct sample, I did not include other news mediums to include television broadcast news, podcasts, YouTube, or social media, which are sources through which many Americans now access to get at least some of their news.

## **Conclusion**

Findings in this study do not support those of researchers McGinty et al. (2014), which guided this case study, as well as other previous research on SMI and gun violence, most of which found SMI to be a prominent causal attribution for gun violence after a mass shooting incident. Instead, there was often no cause given for the gun violence perpetrated by James Holmes in the two-week time period after the shooting. This was the time period that McGinty et al. (2014) found to be the narrow window in which causes are rapidly assigned to a mass shooting. This could point to a move away from SMI as a cause of gun violence, which would be consistent with research that has concluded that people living with SMI are less violent than the general public and are more likely to be victims of violent crime (Applebaum, 2013; Swanson, 2013), but could also suggest a causally-ambiguous period in news reporting of a mass shooting. Media's framing of gun violence helps to inform the public of the causes and remedies for the incidents. Other causes outlined in the study had similarly low occurrences; they included lax gun policy and gun availability as well as any other cause. Along with SMI, these are causes that are inextricably tied to public policy, and the year of the shooting having coincided with an election year seemed to have an effect on the coverage of causal attribution as well as policy proposals. Mental health policy and gun restriction policy made few appearances together in new stories. This finding suggests that the policies are not often given equal attention in news stories and more

often used to support a singular cause given in the story, following a cause-solution format. This prevents a two-sided discussion about the cause and related solution for gun violence. At the national level, gun restriction policy was a featured policy in news stories but was not a focus of local news stories.

Geographically-near news coverage rarely covered gun restriction policy while national news coverage spent nearly half of its coverage discussing gun violence prevention through gun restriction policy. Moreover, geographically-near coverage tended to focus on the grieving community; however, it is an opportunity for local news journalists to cover gun violence prevention in the communities that are actually affected by them seeing as media coverage influences opinion and public policy. Finally, in one of the more astounding findings. Only one mental health professional was sourced in the 187-story sample to speak on the crimes by James Holmes, and even in the one instance, no cause was given. This suggests a disconnect between crime reporting and public health reporting wherein medical professionals like psychologists and psychiatrists are called upon to discuss health issues. This is an opportunity for crime news reporters to expand their use of sources to include professionals who can dispel myths and clarify information about health topics as they relate to crime.

Findings of this study build upon former research in that, though they disagree with much of the research that points to news media's tendencies to use SMI as a primary casual attribution, it provides an example of an early time period that can be stifled by outside influences such as involvement of legal teams and court proceedings. If a study were to look beyond the two-week period, for instance a study conducted observing the 6-month period after the rampage of this particular shooting, overall coverage may be consistent with other research, but the particulars at play in early reporting of this act of gun violence in these four newspapers provide a different snapshot than what is usually observed. Moreover, insights into the coding issues that I have outlined can provide guidance to future content analysis researchers in coder training and agreement.

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## APPENDIX A

### Coding Protocol

The study “Framing the Mass Shooter: Serious Mental Illness and Gun Policy” is a content analysis of news stories from two local newspapers, The Denver Post and the Aurora Sentinel, and two national online newspapers, The New York Times and Washington Post, covering the Aurora Theater shooting and its perpetrator, James Eagan Holmes. The shooting took place on July 20, 2012, when then 24-year-old Holmes set off several canisters of an unknown gas at a sold-out movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and then opened fire on the theater audience. Holmes, who was clad in SWAT gear, killed 12 people and wounded 58, making a total of 70 victims. (Stanford University Libraries, 2014).

This study is guided by framing theory, which deals with a collection and assembly of schemas or stereotypes individuals rely on to understand and respond to events. This analysis seeks to find how James Eagan Holmes’ purported mental illness is framed in relation to his act of gun violence. This protocol will act as a guide to standardize the findings, create consistency and mitigate confusion among the coders involved in this study. As the unit of analysis is the entire story, meaning line-by-line content, it is important to understand how the coding process will handle instances of variables listed in the codebook, as well as what those variables might look like.

The quotes and facts used throughout this protocol as examples of the variables at work are an assemblage of facts and quotes from multiple sources that are not the newspapers used in the study. They include the Stanford University Library Mass Shooting Index (2014), The Huffington Post and The L.A. Times. Quotes are used both as a whole and as edited portions of a quote to more clearly evidence the variable. The facts used in this protocol may very well appear in the coded news stories because they are, in fact, true representations of the event as seen in national newspapers.

This protocol separates the coded variables in to two distinct categories: *whole-story attributes* and *in-story attributes*. It includes the variables coded within these specific capacities, their definitions, and examples of how they might be displayed in the story.

*Whole-story attributes* are characteristics of the story as a whole. They are the overall focus, tone, or “feel” of the story. These variables are *causal attribution* and *story tone*. These elements are part of the overarching storyline. In accordance with framing theory, these elements help to frame serious mental illness in much the same way that researchers Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992), found that story frames “give the story a ‘spin.’” This is what the study aims to capture when coding these variables.

*In-story attributes* capture individual variables within the story. These variables act as small parts of the overall story. These include *previous poor mental health signs/symptoms*, *mental health policy*, *gun restriction policies*, *tone*, *alternative factors associated with gun violence*, and *mental health professional causal attribution*.



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## *Whole-Story Attributes*

### *Variable: Causal Attribution*

Coding for *causal attribution* requires you to code for every instance of the variable you find, add up the total instances and report them on the code sheet in the area provided.

*Causal Attribution* relates to recognizing how a story links Holmes' mass shooting to a cause. In a news story, the causal attribution acts like an explanation for the audience. Coders should be aware of the position the story takes on what is responsible for the shooting. The obvious perpetrator is James Eagan Holmes; however, his use of guns and his violence are linked to other exterior factors and influences. Coders should be aware that there are political and social forces that choose to blame the following *SMI, Gun availability and Lax gun policy*. There can also be instances where there is no causal attribution, or another causal factor is given--explain this in the code sheet.

1. *Serious Mental Illness as cause*: SMI is cited as the cause of the violent act. Major indicators can be found when a story mentions mental health reform to stop mass shootings. The story and/or sources within it may propose mental health reform. SMI will be mentioned throughout the story and it will be connected to the act of violence. It can also be evident in the attempt to contact Holmes' former mental health care providers to learn more about his behavior before the shooting. This is a passive form of connecting his rampage to his SMI.

Examples:

1. Headline: "Delusional Holmes plans spree for months"
2. Lead: "James Eagan Holmes, the 24-year-old theater shooter had been treated at his university for a serious mental illness, which may have contributed to his massacre."

Throughout the story:

3. "Dr. Lynne Fenton could not be reached to comment on Holmes' mental state leading to the mass shooting; but her research interests according to her curriculum vitae include schizophrenia."
4. "Holmes, who displayed characteristics of schizophrenia, appeared detached as the police cuffed him and placed him in the police car."

5. “Holmes’ text message to a peer about his having a form of bipolar disorder was telling of his detached state that led to the massacre.”

6. Most mentally ill people — including Aaron Alexis, the Navy Yard shooter who apparently showed signs of psychosis — never get treatment or aren't recognized as being in crisis.

2. Gun availability as cause: This means that gun availability will be mentioned as the reason for the ability to mass murder a group of people. This can include the mention of magazine size, how and where you can buy gun and the ease of which guns were obtained:

Examples:

1. Headline: “Aurora Shooting spurs gun control debate”
2. “Holmes purchased high-powered, heavy-magazine guns, which allowed him to rapidly shoot without reloading killing the 12 victims in seconds. He was able to buy guns from a myriad of sources to remain unnoticed.”
3. “Holmes received packages to his apartment, shopped at fish and wildlife stores, and purchased guns online.”

3. Lax gun policy as cause: *This looks specifically at the laws and policies around gun ownership. It often calls for a tightening of gun laws and implementation of restrictions as measures to stop this type of crime from happening. The story may appear to lobby for stricter gun control laws. It may include quotes from lawmakers about gun control or the mentions of the status of gun control laws in Colorado. It may be evident in the headline and then carried in to the body of the story.*

1. Through his many avenues of buying guns, Holmes obtained all guns legally, and was able to use those guns, some high-powered, military-grade weapons, to plan a military-style attack on ordinary citizens.
2. “Too many people had to bury their loved ones after the massacre in Aurora, and too many Americans continue to see the tragic toll of gun violence each and every day in this country. As we remember my son and the victims of Aurora today, I hope our nation will take meaningful action to protect our

families by keeping guns out of the wrong hands – so no more fathers have to experience this anguish.”

3. James Holmes, the gunman in the Aurora, Colo., movie theater shootings in 2012, passed a background check. As did Jared Loughner, who in 2011 killed six people in Tucson and wounded 13 others, including Gabrielle Giffords, who was then a congresswoman. Adam Lanza, the Newtown, Conn., elementary school shooter, got his guns at home, but he would not have had trouble passing a check either.

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*Variable: Story Tone*

This coding portion accounts for how James Eagan Holmes’ purported serious mental illness is depicted in tone. Tone can be defined literally as the general character or attitude of a piece of writing. Given that this deals with an “attitude,” coders should recognize that the tone refers to the way of thinking or feeling about the issue; this is typically reflected in the writer’s portrayal of Holmes’ purported serious mental illness. Thus, there are two types of portrayals common in coverage of serious mental illness and gun violence: *sympathetic* and *accusatory*.

*Sympathetic Tone:* Coders will recognize these stories when there are mentions to change policy based on a lack of preventative care. This tone offers solutions to the issue of mass shootings through better care for the seriously mentally ill. It is sympathetic toward the struggles and plight of the seriously mentally ill. It can suggest policy or course of action by mental health professionals

Examples:

1. “Dr. Fenton, Holmes’ school psychiatrist, did in fact notify authorities when certain behaviors by Homes were off-putting in her professional opinion. While authorities did not act immediately on this tip, she did fulfil her professional obligation. With extended policy in place, these actions can be mitigated and those who need professional help can be reached.”
2. “In the wake of the shooting, friends, family, and acquaintances say they hope they had done more—perhaps that they had urged him to seek psychiatric care outside the school where a

- counselor's case load may be smaller. This kind of uninterrupted, focused care would have been better, they say.”
3. “An extension of the mental health availability to students and other citizens in Colorado can help to halt these types of tragedies.”
  4. “Colorado Gov. Hickenlooper announced the mental health initiatives in December, just days after the mass shooting at a Connecticut elementary school. He acknowledged at the time that there would never be "fail-safe system" to prevent violence. But he said expanding services would be a wise investment, noting, "The common element of so many of these mass homicides seems to be a level of mental illness."
  5. Arvada Democratic Rep. Tracy Kraft-Tharp, a sponsor of the bill to increase mental health services, said the mass shootings made the issue a priority after years of budget cuts since the 2002 recession. “The mental health system received some drastic cuts and we haven't been able to recover," she said. Currently, some people seeking help go to hospital emergency rooms, where they sometimes can wait for hours. Or they go to the state's mental hospitals in Pueblo and Fort Logan, where the number of beds has decreased, Kraft-Tharp said.

*Accusatory Tone:* refers to the tone of a story that condemns the population of people with SMI for the rare acts of gun violence. They tend to suggest that having SMI implies violence in several ways. These stories will assert that Holmes' mental illness and its symptoms are what lead him to kill and injure the 70 victims.

Examples:

1. “The search for an explanation [for the shooting] has been elusive, but in the months before the mass shooting in a Colorado movie theater, James Holmes withdrew from his already small social circle into a near solitary existence. His limited interactions with other neuroscience students during this phase of heightened isolation included sending a text message in which he suggested he was afflicted by a form of bipolar disorder.”

2. “Holmes’ detachment from reality coupled with his odd behaviors, to include text messages suggesting he was bipolar, are warning signs from a troubled past riddled with mental illness.”

### *In-Story Attributes*

#### *Previous Poor Mental Health Symptoms and Signs*

Coding this variable involves searching for instances where the story and/or sources within it cite behaviors indicating the assailant's poor mental health preceding the event that might help understand what happened or why. These behaviors can be:

-Strange comments the assailant made

-Actions of the assailant such as texts or phone calls; other acts of violence like threats or physical abuse that can be vague or unprovable statements such as saying he was “odd/a loner/ weird/ creepy/ to himself/ unsociable/ strange/ didn’t fit in,” etc.

-Mentions of DSM-5 diagnoses or symptoms to include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder, and psychosis (delusions, hallucinations, voices, psychosis)

Examples:

1. He was “very quiet, strangely quiet in class” and he seemed “socially off,” said a University of Colorado neuroscience faculty member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of privacy concerns and said he taught Holmes in a class at the school’s medical campus.
2. “He had begun withdrawing long before his failed oral exam, one fellow graduate student who chose to remain anonymous said. His behavior had gone from somewhat outgoing to completely quiet and eventually absent altogether once he quit the program.”

There is also the option for no instance if none of these instances arise.

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### Mental Health Policy

For this variable, coders should be looking in the story for instances when the story or sources within it call for changes to mental health policy (locally or nationally) as they relate to the act of gun violence. These instances may appear to advocate for or place blame on people with SMI, but either way they include policies for mental health as prevention measures for mass shootings and gun violence. Such instances might mention:

- Expanded mental health programs or access to mental healthcare from peoples with SMI
- The necessity or proposal of outreach through social programs and policies

Examples:

1. “Had there been programs in Holmes community or school that offered help for his mental state, there may have been early intervention, Jones said. The development of such programs are the focus of his community activist group, Concerned Parents of School Children. In a forum following the shooting, the group asked Aurora city council for funds to be allocated to mental health resources in a variety of ways.”
2. The Aurora Theater shooting drew attention to the government’s involvement in mental health efforts at local, state and national levels. The National Institute for Mental Health Monday issued a news release refuting claims of serious mental illness as the driving factor of mass shootings and urged members of congress to consider a nation-wide mental health reform to reduce stigma and improve condition for people with SMI.
3. The NIMH news release criticized news media for inflaming the stigma of SMI saying it has “repeatedly targeted people living with serious mental illness following nearly every mass shooting despite their being an already marginalized group more likely to be victims of violent crime than perpetrators.” The institution called for reform despite the inaccuracies citing that “if in fact the government believes these tragedies are extensions of mental illness, which is against the finding of many prominent researchers, then we urge our government, as we always have, to increase funding for public aid to one of our nation's most vulnerable populations.”

4. “The indication that a psychiatrist had called Holmes a danger to the public gave momentum to Democratic state lawmakers' plans to introduce legislation to further restrict mentally ill people from buying guns. State Rep. Beth McCann initially cited the information Thursday as a reason she would introduce a bill as soon as Friday, but quickly backed off and said no date has been set.”

There is also the option for no instance if none of these instances arise.

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#### *Gun Restriction Policy*

Also regarding policy mentions is the variable of gun restriction policy. Coders should recognize this variable in the story when the story or sources within it propose the following:

- Assault weapons or ammunition ban
- Improved background check system to prevent certain high-risk groups from buying guns (criminals, people with SMI)
- Assault weapons or ammunition ban

Example:

1. “Multiple states have tried for more restrictive gun laws that target limiting the sales of high-magazine guns or put a limit on ammunition availability in an effort to deter these types of mass murder crimes.”

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#### *Mental Health Professional Causal Attribution*

Coding for *mental health professional causal attribution* requires you to code for every instance you find, add up the total instances and report them on the codesheet in the area provided.

This variable deal with the comments of a specific source--those quoted or referenced in the story who are described as a mental health professional. This can include a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, counselor or psychiatric nurse or researcher or experts in the psychology or social work or behavioral health and science fields. They are used to offer insight to the mental health or behavioral health side of this story.



They may give general information about mental illness or specific predictions or speculation about the assailant and his actions or motives. Coders should look for the following to determine how the mental health professional is attributing the cause.

- Cites the possibility of mental illness
- Mentions a specific mental illness (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, psychosis, personality disorder)

Example:

1. “Clinical and forensic psychiatrist Nathan Lavid was rather more skeptical about using the journal as evidence for the insanity defense. He pointed out that after a mental illness is established in court, there's still the thorny issue of proving that the patient didn't know right from wrong. He thinks that will be fundamentally tough in this case. "He used a gun. I know that he knew what a gun does. He wasn't going around with a banana," Lavid said.”
2. Psychologists said shooters who go on rampages, targeting random people with no apparent motive, may or may not have a psychotic disorder such as schizophrenia. Rather, Holmes was likely living in a world of an alternate reality, suffering from delusions of threats and making plans to make right things that he perceived were wrong.
3. "The thing to realize is that within his own thoughts, what he was doing was completely logical. To him, he was accomplishing something worth doing," said Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, founder of the Treatment Advocacy Center in Arlington, Va.”

- Cites alternative causal factors (stress/life problems)
  - For this variable, coders should look for mentions of any additional factors cited that may have caused the incident outside of SMI. Coders should be aware that although the dynamics between mental

illness and violence carry particular characteristics, many of the greatest predictors of violence in the mentally ill community are the same for the general population. Violent behaviors for both the mentally ill and general population can be preceded by the following alternative causal factors:

- substance abuse or dependence
- a history of violence, juvenile detention, or physical abuse
- recent stressors such as being a crime victim, getting divorced, failing at a goal, or losing a job

Examples:

1. "What's going on in the defendant's life at the time is extremely relevant to this case," Chief Deputy District Attorney Karen Pearson said of their need for the documents. Holmes' defense lawyer, Daniel King, has said Holmes is mentally ill, setting up a possible insanity defense. But Pearson's arguments Thursday revealed a possible motive: Holmes' anger that he was failing at school, "at the same time he's buying an enormous amount of ammunition, body armor and explosives."
2. The dive in Holmes' academic performance could be a possible motive, one legal observer said. "That's the kind of thing that is classic motivation for a murderer and doesn't support insanity," said Craig Silverman, a criminal defense attorney and former Denver prosecutor.
3. "James Holmes was a promising neuroscience doctoral candidate, but by the end of the program's first year, he had fallen out of favor with professors and failed a key exam, prosecutors said."

- Cites gun control as causal factor

Examples:

1. "I think I speak on behalf of many experts on mental health when I say I wish politicians and other public figures would stop using mental illness as a shield against talking about the complex social issues related to gun violence—mass shootings and also the everyday gun violence to which we've become accustomed—in America, said Psychiatrist Jonathan Metzl."

2. “Gun violence is a mental health issue only to a very small extent and to a much smaller extent than most people assume,” said Paul Appelbaum, a psychiatrist and the director of the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons’ Division of Law, Ethics and Psychiatry.

There is also the option for coders for “no cause” or “other.” Coders should mark these options when mental health professionals within the story cite no cause or cite another cause not covered in the options wherein the coder should explain briefly the cause given outside of the coded examples.

APPENDIX B

Code Sheet \*See coding protocol for specific examples of each variable.

Exclusionary Factors	
These stories are exempt	1 – editorials 2 – letters to the editor 3 – story previews 4 – wire stories 5 – corrections 6 – blog entries
Manifest Codes	
Item	Coding Scheme
Coder ID	
Story Number (refer to Google Sheet)	
Month (Two #)	
Day (Two #)	
Location	1 - aurasentinel.com 2 - denverpost.com 3- NYTimes.com 4- washingtonpost.com

Coded Variables	
Item	Codeable Options
A. Causal Attribution	1. Instances of citing Serious Mental Illness # _____ 2. Instances of citing Gun availability # _____ 3. Instances of citing Lax gun policy # _____ 4. No Cause attributed 5. Other (Explain Briefly):
B. Tone: Accusatory	1. Accusatory  2. No Instance  3. Not Clear (Explain Briefly)

C. Tone: Sympathetic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sympathetic</li> <li>2. No Instance</li> <li>3. Not Clear (Explain Briefly)</li> </ol>
D. Mention of previous poor mental health signs/symptoms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes</li> <li>2. No</li> <li>3. Unclear: (Explain Briefly)</li> </ol>
E. Mental Health Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes</li> <li>2. No</li> <li>3. Unclear: (Explain Briefly):</li> </ol>
F. Gun Restriction Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes</li> <li>2. No</li> <li>3. Unclear: (Explain Briefly)</li> </ol>
G. Alternative factors associated with gun violence mentions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes</li> <li>2. No</li> <li>3. Not clear: (Explain Briefly)</li> </ol>
H. Mental health professional causal attribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instances of citing the possibility of mental illness # _____</li> <li>2. Instances of mentioning a specific mental illness (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, psychosis, personality disorder) # _____</li> <li>3. Instances of citing alternative causal factors (stress/life problems) # _____</li> <li>4. Instances of citing gun control as causal factor # _____</li> </ol>

	<p>5. Cites no cause</p> <p>6. Other (Explain Briefly):</p>
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