

Mass Shootings in the Media: Framing of Perpetrators

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## Abstract

Mass shootings in the United States have been perpetrated at a higher frequency with more casualties in recent years, with six of the ten deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history occurring since 2012. The media's coverage of these incidents and perpetrators has evolved over the last two decades, shifting from framing them as incidents of domestic terrorism to conflating them with mental illness or severe mental health issues. This research took place during a time of heightened awareness and conversation about the push for racial justice following the death of George Floyd during the spring and summer of 2020. In light of these circumstances, this research seeks to ascertain how the media frame incidents of mass shootings and how the media's portrayal of the perpetrator of violence varies based on their race, mental health, the number of casualties in an incident, their criminal history, and other factors. During this process, a mass shooting was defined as an incident perpetrated within a short timeframe where three or more people, excluding the perpetrator, are killed. Results indicated that White individuals were more likely to receive coverage that focused on their mental health, while Black or Latino perpetrators were portrayed through frames that perpetuated stereotypes about their propensity for violence. Even when a mental illness frame was used in conjunction with a perpetrator of color, frames such as gang violence and criminal history were utilized alongside that of mental illness, creating a linkage between these racial groups and criminality. Research also indicated that in instances where mental illness played a role in a mass shooting, domestic violence and/or drug use were also involved, demonstrating that media should utilize these frames while referencing the mental health of a mass shooter in order to accurately portray the cause of these violent incidents.

## Keywords

Mass Shooting, Mass Casualties, Gun Violence, Media, Media Frames, Media Framing, Perpetrator, Victim, Gun Violence Victim, Race, Gender, Mental Illness, Criminal History, Domestic Abuse, Domestic Violence, Drug Activity, Drug Use, Gang Activity, Military, Law Enforcement, Religion, Terrorism, Video Games, Murder/Suicide, Homicide

## Introduction

Mass shootings in the United States have been perpetrated at a higher frequency with more casualties in recent years, with six of the ten deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history occurring since 2012. The news media's coverage of these incidents and those who perpetrate them has evolved over the last two decades, shifting from framing them as incidents of domestic terrorism to conflating them with mental illness or severe mental health issues. Current bodies of research suggest that how the media frames these mass shootings is heavily influenced by the race of the perpetrator of the incident, with White individuals being more likely to receive coverage that focuses on mental illness and identifies them as a "loner," while Black or Latino perpetrators are portrayed as criminals with a propensity for violence. The conversation of how different races are covered by the media has been elevated since the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2015 but has become more relevant over time. This research, which was conducted in Fall 2020, took place during a time of heightened awareness and conversation following the push for racial justice across the United States during the spring and summer of that same year. In light of these circumstances, this research seeks to ascertain how the media frames incidents of mass shootings and how the media's portrayal of the perpetrator of violence varies based on their race, mental health, the number of casualties in an incident, their criminal history, and other factors. While existing research tends to focus primarily on incidents that have high numbers of mass casualties or have a high degree of shock value, this body of research will evaluate all mass shooting incidents — defined as an incident perpetrated within a short timeframe where three or more people, excluding the perpetrator are killed — in order to analyze how the media frames mass shootings and those who carry them out.

## Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, key terms are defined as follows:

- Mass Shooting: three or more people, excluding the perpetrator, killed by gunfire
- Frames: common or reoccurring themes that the media utilize in connection with coverage of mass shootings and their perpetrator(s). The frames included in this research are as follows: inclusion of race, mental illness, criminal history, domestic abuse/violence/disturbance, drug use/activity, gang activity, affiliation with the military and/or law enforcement, religion, terrorism, and video games.

## “The Media’s Portrayal of Perpetrators of Mass Shootings”

### Topic 1: Framing and Linkages

Existing research suggests that the inclusion of pieces of information in connection with one another can create a linkage in an individual’s mind, regardless of whether these items are actually statistically connected. This research seeks to determine if any such linkages exist between perpetrators of mass shootings and the way in which they are framed in media coverage.

### Topic 2: Race and Notions of Criminality

Particularly in light of the recent push for racial justice in America, there is a heightened awareness of the disparities in media coverage among racial groups. Additionally, current research suggests that members of racial minority groups are more likely to be perceived in ways that emphasize their criminality. This research project will evaluate how the media covers mass shootings and how this coverage varies, if at all, among perpetrators of different races.

### Topic 3: Mental Illness and Mass Shootings

Common narratives surrounding mass shootings suggest that mental illness is the most common causal factor in these incidents and that White perpetrators are more likely to receive this frame than other racial groups. This research seeks to determine whether these perceptions are grounded in the reality of how the media covers these incidents.

## Research Questions

This research paper aims to ascertain the way in which the framing of the perpetrator(s) of a mass shooting in the media is influenced by the race of the perpetrator(s), their mental health status, their criminal history, and other characteristics of both the individual and the gun violence incident. This paper considers the following:

- What frames are dominantly used in media coverage about mass shootings?
- How do these frames vary based upon the race of the perpetrator(s) of the mass shooting?
- How does media coverage impact how individuals view mass shootings and those who perpetrate them?

## Literature Review

In order to analyze the way in which the media covers the perpetrators of mass shootings, it is necessary to first understand how frames operate in the media. Entman 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” (1993). Frames “*define problems*—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes*—identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects” (Entman, 1993). Within a body of text, sentences can fulfill multiple of these framing functions or may not fulfill any of them at all. However, it is important to note that frames function by bringing attention to some aspects of what is being described, therefore diverting attention from other portions of the text. Through this process, frames make some pieces of information that the media is communicating more salient — defined as “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” — which enhances the “probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory” (Entman, 2007). When a frame is used to connect two components of a story or piece of media coverage, this can create a linkage, which is the “process through which the media convey a connection between two events/phenomena by linking them in a narrative” (Umamaheswar, 2020). These linkages can influence an audience’s thoughts and opinions — positively or negatively — about two topics, conflating them even if evidence does not support the idea that they are connected in order to perpetuate a narrative. In fact, “the media’s ideological power lies partly in their ability to filter out narratives that compete with the one(s) they wish to disseminate. A result of the filtering process in the media is that certain perspectives are given more credibility, attention, and legitimacy than others” (Umamaheswar, 2020). Additionally, these frames and linkages both create and perpetuate stereotypes in the minds of readers through associative priming, which, in essence, “refers to the idea that when thoughts or beliefs are brought to mind (or primed), these thoughts play a role in individuals’ understanding of and interpretation of subsequent information that is encountered” (Oliver, 2003). It is also critical to understand that one media outlet’s framing of an incident does not exist in isolation: researchers have demonstrated that “some news outlets set the agendas for other ones in a process known as intermedia agenda

setting. ... This process likely extends to the framing and interpretation of news events, since news organizations may look to each other to determine not only what to cover, but also which elements of an event or issue are worth covering and in what way” (Guggenheim et al., 2015). How one media outlet frames an incident can influence another to utilize similar frames, creating universal linkages that can perpetuate racialized or otherwise-biased stereotypes. Evidence in this body of research suggests that frames of mental illness, race, and criminality can create linkages in the minds of readers about mass shootings, the perpetrators of such, and the motivations of the perpetrators.

### ***Race and Criminality: Violence in the Media***

Multiple studies suggest that media and framing heavily influence “the social construction of society. As many people will never be directly affected by crime, their individual beliefs and perceptions of crime are typically shaped by the media” (Wheeler, 2017). One dominant linkage that has been put into place through years of coverage is the difference in the way in which the media frames crimes and violence that take place in suburban versus inner-city locales, desensitizing the general population to gun violence in urban centers such as Chicago while sensationalizing shooting incidents that take place in predominantly White neighborhoods. This framing simultaneously encourages readers to care significantly about gun violence in “their” community while othering the violence that occurs in inner-city and urban areas — where perpetrators and victims are more likely to be racial minorities — creating a more apathetic attitude toward these casualties and incidents. Research suggests that this may, in fact, “be the most substantial contributing factor to the indifferent response. For years, the media has depicted racial and ethnic minorities in a negative manner, perpetuating stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities as morally compromised, and hence, innately criminal” (Parham-Payne, 2014).

Research conducted on news media and reality television programming demonstrates that “not only are African Americans more likely to be shown as criminal suspects than actual crime statistics suggest, the ways in which African American criminal suspects are depicted imply that they are likely to be particularly violent or threatening” (Oliver, 2003). Despite this stereotype, it is important to note that “the media depict a large proportion of offenders are racial and ethnic minorities, even though a much smaller percentage are involved in the criminal justice system” (Pollak & Kubrian, 2007). This creates a linkage in consumers’ minds between Black individuals and criminality while contributing to the idea of White innocence, leading to the perpetuation of racial biases. Studies have demonstrated that “exposure to a newspaper story about a violent crime resulted in subsequently greater dispositional evaluations for black criminal suspects (i.e., violent personality), but not for white criminal suspects,” suggesting that “many viewers already have stereotypes of the ‘violent black male’ as part of their cognitive structure, and that ... exposure to violent crime alone is sufficient to call this stereotype to mind and to influence subsequent judgments” (Oliver, 2003). Building upon this idea, “as Blacks are more likely than Whites to be portrayed as lawbreakers on news, their association with crimes such as mass shootings is normalized. Thus, White perpetrators are perceived as more of an anomaly and less abhorrent” (Zhang et al., 2019).

### ***Mental Illness and Mass Shootings***

Although mass shootings in the media today are often linked with a narrative of mental illness functioning as a root cause of the tragedy, this has not always been the case. Rather, the framing of these incidents has shifted over time. Research shows that after the 1999 Columbine school shooting, media “discussed the events as domestic terrorism. ... After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, outlets replaced this narrative with the rhetoric of bullying scares and adolescent heartbreak. ... More recently, the horrific Sandy Hook shooting shifted the explanatory narrative once again, such that the dominant media explanation for mass shootings is now shooters’ questionable mental health” (Duxbury et al., 2018). While media framing has created a linkage between mental illness and mass shootings, “surprisingly little population-level evidence supports the notion that individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses are more likely than anyone else to commit gun crimes. ... [L]ess than 3% to 5% of US crimes involve people with mental illness, and the percentage of crimes that involve guns are lower than the national average for persons not diagnosed with mental illness” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). This creates a harmful and biased linkage in two different-but-related ways, simultaneously unfairly criminalizing individuals with mental illness while falsely attributing mass shootings to causes that are not grounded in evidence. The nature of mass shootings, which are often unexpected and shocking, contribute to feelings of “Fear, anxiety, and the need to find quick and clear-cut solutions [which] lead to common but mistaken beliefs that reinforce stigmatization of individuals with mental illness,” contributing to the narrative that “people with mental illness ... are more dangerous than people without mental illness, are personally to blame for their illness, and have no ‘self-control’” (Knoll & Annas, 2016).

Here, it is important to note that it is not inaccurate for the media to recognize that mental illness can play a role in mass shootings. Rather, it is problematic for the media to reference mental illness without acknowledging the factors that coincide with mental illness that increase an individual’s propensity for perpetrating mass shootings.

Although domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and male gender are all predictive risk factors for serious violence, these factors are frequently left out of dominant frames. In fact, associating domestic violence with mass shootings might well make a positive difference in policy and conversation surrounding the regulation of firearms and the prevention of mass shootings. One study found that “between 2009 and 2018, at least 54 percent of mass shootings, defined as shootings in which more than three people are killed in one event, were related to domestic or family violence” (Gold, 2020). Although this statistic would likely be reduced if the more common definition of a mass shooting, which involves four people dying in an incident who are not the perpetrator, this is a statistically significant link that the media should address while framing coverage of mass shootings. Research argues that if an association between violence against others and serious mental illness is to be made, “the focus must be narrowed to the population of individuals with serious mental illness associated with less than 3% of all violence. . . . Furthermore, current research suggests that in general there is a minimal relationship between psychiatric disorders and violence in the absence of substance abuse” (Knoll & Annas, 2016). Although mental illness may play a role in mass shootings, media’s framing of mental health as the prime factor in such crimes must be accompanied by references to the previously mentioned factors in order to be considered accurate. This is particularly important as “Experimental studies have shown that negative attitudes toward individuals with serious mental illness increase following coverage of mass shootings where mental health is cited as a probable cause. Importantly, this was not the case with mass shootings that covered gun restriction policy without mentioning mental illness” (Vargas et al., 2020). One study found that a “news story describing a mass shooting event heightened desired social distance from and perceived dangerousness of persons with serious mental illness,” confirming that media portrayals of mass shootings in conjunction with mental illness may very well lead to stigmatization (McGinty et al., 2013). In fact, “Present study results suggest that to a certain degree, widespread media coverage of mass shooting events could be occurring alongside increased salience in public perception of relations between violence, politics/government and mental health. This . . . could result in shifts in policy support at the societal level, and barriers to treatment seeking on an individual level” (Vargas et al., 2020).

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the way in which this stigmatization occurs varies across racial groups. According to Duxbury et al., “These recent studies suggest that mental illness narratives may only divert blame from privileged racial groups, particularly Whites. Here, mental illness narratives may amplify the apparent threat racial minorities pose to social or moral order by reinforcing criminalization narratives” (2018). Contrary to commonly held beliefs about media linkages between White perpetrators and mental illness, associating a mass shooting carried out by a White individual does not function as an excuse for their actions. However, these actions “are often rationalized as being a result of the shooters’ mental illness and are described as uncharacteristic or unexpected events. This type of portrayal rarely applies to non-white shooters, whose own mental illnesses or motivations are overshadowed by their more obvious physical differences” (Wheeler, 2017). Instead, “As shown through case comparison, when Black and Latino shooters are framed as mentally ill, attention is also drawn to their criminality. Thus, for Blacks and Latinos, the assignment of mental illness does less to divert blame but instead perpetuates criminalization narratives” (Duxbury et al., 2020). Ongoing “Social psychology research suggests that news stories that describe mass shooting events by race or mental illness could lead the public wrongly to either as a primary causal factor in tragic shootings” (Frisby, 2017).

### ***Terrorism and Video Games: The Racialization of Individual and Collective Guilt***

The racialization of the frame of mental illness extends beyond White and Black perpetrators and into different ethnic and religious groups. One study, which analyzed how newspapers covered 11 terrorist attacks based in the United States that took place between 2001 and 2010, found that “Non-Muslim perpetrators were framed as mentally ill persons who committed isolated acts of violence, whereas Muslim perpetrators were framed as radical, fanatic, infuriated, and belonging to international terrorist organizations. These disparities in coverage contribute to framing Muslims in America as the ‘evil other’” (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2020). The authors went on to acknowledge that “The media’s tendency to project collective guilt by generalizing an individual act of terror is not usually observed when a violent act is committed by a white perpetrator. In this study, Paddock [who carried out the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting] was framed mostly as a lone gunman and there was no suggestion that he was representing the entire white race” (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2020). In the United States, both citizens and the media are more likely to associate a White individual’s violence with an internal failing while attributing the actions of a Black person to their entire racial group. As previously stated in this literature review, stereotypes of African Americans as criminals normalize violence that is perpetrated by these individuals in the eyes of White Americans, causing them to associate a violent act with an inherent flaw in the member of a minority racial group. In an analysis of media linkages between video games and violent crime, the authors found that White perpetrators were more likely to receive coverage that mentioned video games rather than those of a racial minority group. The authors stated that “One possible reason for such a linkage is that there is a stereotypical association between racial

minorities and violent crime,” going on to explain that “This may cause individuals to seek an external explanation (like violent video games) when attempting to understand why an act of violence was carried out by a White perpetrator. However, when such an act of violence is carried out by a racial minority, individuals may not feel compelled to seek an external explanation because the race of the perpetrator fits their stereotype of what a violent criminal looks like” (Markey et al., 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Existing literature demonstrates that there are key differences in how the media frames mass shooting events based on the race of the individual perpetrating these violent incidents. Black and Latino individuals are more likely to be portrayed as violent criminals, while White perpetrators are often linked with external explanations for their actions, such as mental health problems or violent video games. Although the mental health frame is used most commonly to attempt to explain mass shootings, frames that involve more statistically significant triggers of violence — such as domestic violence and substance abuse — should be utilized in conjunction with discussions of mental health in order to more accurately denote what is leading to these acts of violence without stigmatizing all individuals with diagnoses of mental illness (less than five percent of whom will ever commit a violent crime). While sources differed regarding the definition of a mass shooting — some stated that three individuals needed to be killed in order to meet the definition, while others required four fatalities — conversations surrounding the links between gun violence and domestic violence suggest that universally broadening the definition to three fatalities (which would include more cases of domestic violence) could create the possibility for more productive conversations surrounding gun control policy and the prevention of mass shootings.

The literature also supports the idea that media frames of mass shootings create linkages in the minds of consumers, leading to connections between concepts that may or not be accurate. This is particularly true when discussions of mental illness and White individuals take place (leading to an idea that there is an excuse for the violence that is carried out) and when criminal history or prior records are mentioned in conjunction with Black or Latino perpetrators (further perpetuating the stereotype of racial minorities as a whole being more prone to violence). The research presented within this review suggests that, moving forward, the media has the potential to significantly alter the conversations taking place surrounding mass shootings and those who perpetrate them. Linking the frames of domestic violence and substance abuse with mental illness may very well decrease the stigmatization that innocent individuals with mental health challenges currently face due to the way in which mental illness is currently associated with mass shootings. Additionally, focusing on counter stereotyping within reporting by standardizing media coverage of incidents regardless of race — i.e., always/never mentioning a perpetrator’s criminal history, mental health, or religious background — could slowly reshape society’s perception of the ‘violent minority.’ Finally, by asking the media to analyze the frames it uses to cover mass shootings and to challenge dominant frames that lead to stereotypes, news as a whole might become more salient and accessible to broader audiences while serving as a more accurate, balanced source of information as the conversations surrounding mass shootings, gun control, and policy move forward.

### **Methodology**

This research project utilized records from the National Gun Violence Archive to compile a list of all mass shooting incidents from 2013 to 2019, which are the first and last years that a complete data set was available from this source at the time of this research. From this list, incidents where three or more individuals were killed — excluding the perpetrator(s) — were selected, based in part upon the Congressional definition of a mass shooting. Although this definition states that these incidents must take place in a public place, all incidents that met the casualty criteria were analyzed for this project to include instances of domestic violence, which occurs in a private location such as a home or apartment. These instances were compiled into a spreadsheet that included the following pieces of information: the date and location of the shooting; the number of people killed and/or injured in the shooting; the number of perpetrators; the gender and age of the perpetrator(s); and the race of the perpetrator(s). News articles covering these incidents were then analyzed to determine if they included the following frames regarding the perpetrator(s): inclusion of race; mental illness; criminal history; domestic abuse, violence, or disputes; drug use or activity; gang activity; affiliation with the military and/or law enforcement; religion; terrorism; and video games.

Online news sources were used to conduct the research in this project. For each shooting, the incident coverage was found using the month, date, year, city, and state of the incident according to the Gun Violence Archive in conjunction with the word “shooting” (ex: “January 7, 2013 Tulsa, Oklahoma shooting”). This search was conducted through the Google search engine, which accounts for the most traffic from both desktop and mobile sources in the United States. This search criterion remained consistent throughout the analysis of each of the 141 incidents that were examined over the course of this project. Search results from news outlets that appeared on the

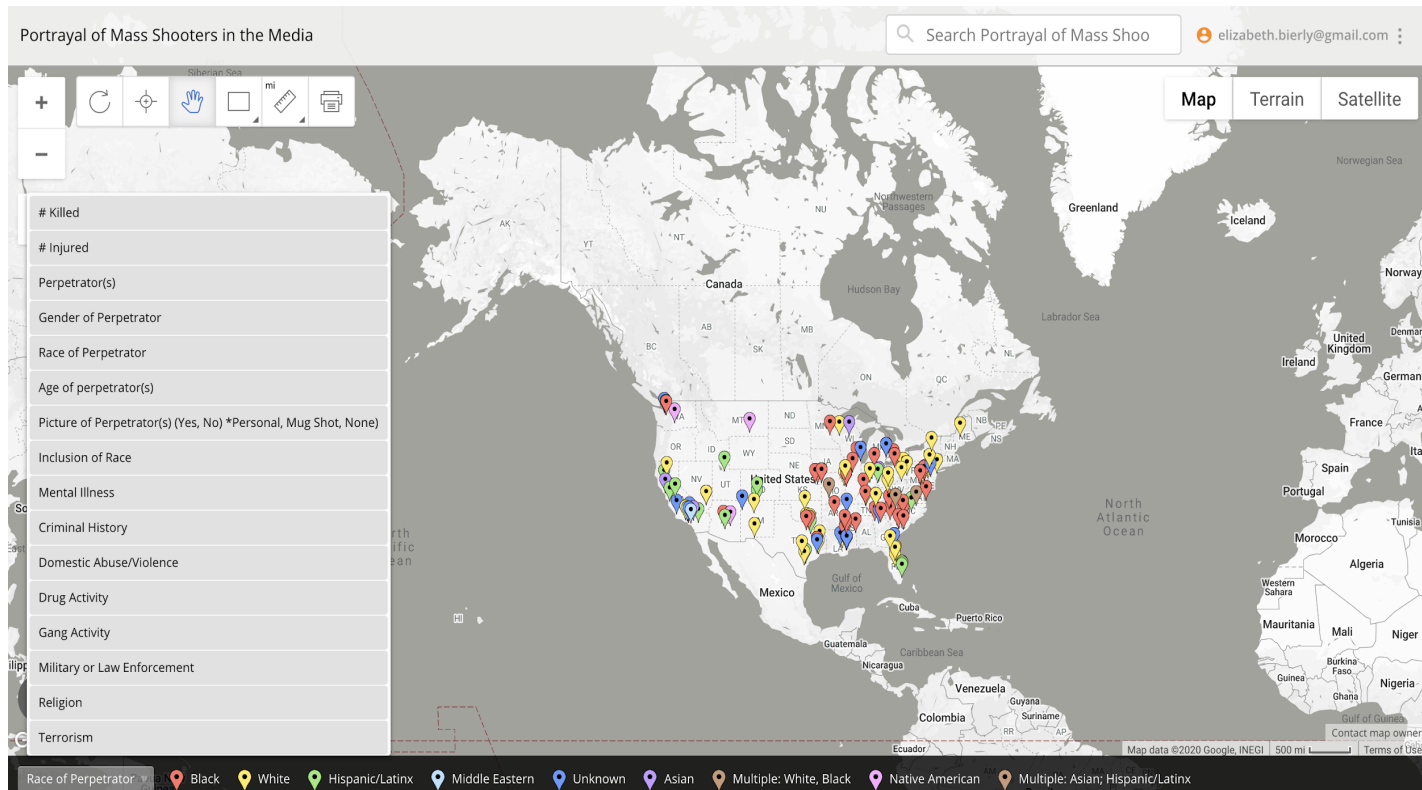
first page of Google were utilized for this research due to the likelihood that an average person looking for information about an incident is most likely to access articles that appear first in their search results. For the purposes of this project, which sought to analyze news outlets specifically, sites such as Wikipedia were excluded from the results.

Each news article about an incident that was listed on the first page of Google was analyzed for keywords or references to the frames being researched, such as references to prior criminal history, military or law enforcement affiliation, the perpetrator's mental health history, and the perpetrator's race. If the perpetrator's race was mentioned, it was marked with a "yes" in the appropriate column. If race was not mentioned, images included in the news coverage were used in conjunction with the last name listed in the article to attempt to ascertain the race of the perpetrator(s). If no images were provided in the coverage, the name of the shooter was searched with the date of the mass shooting incident to attempt to find an image or other identifying information about the individual. In instances where there was no image provided and the race of the perpetrator could not be ascertained, this was recorded as "unknown." In some cases, the perpetrator had not been caught and news outlets were, therefore, unable to provide information about the suspect or perpetrator. In these cases, information surrounding the perpetrator was also recorded as "unknown" on the spreadsheet. However, references to other frames (e.g., "this case may be narcotics related" or "investigators are looking into whether this was caused by a domestic issue) were recorded as present in coverage using a "yes" in the appropriate frame categories. For the purposes of this research, a perpetrator of a shooting is considered to be associated with a frame if the article makes reference (whether in an affirmative or negating way) to a term. For example, both "had a history of mental illness" and "did not have a history of mental illness" are considered to be within the mental illness frame because the words "mental illness" become linked to the crime, whether or not the words "did not have" are included. If no reference to a frame was included in any of the articles being analyzed, the cell on the spreadsheet was marked with "no." Information was synthesized from all articles, so if there was any reference to a frame in any article that appeared on the first page of the Google results, this was recorded in the spreadsheet.

This current research includes 141 mass shooting incidents with three or more individuals killed that took place between Jan. 1, 2013 and Dec. 31, 2019. After the spreadsheet with these incidents was finalized, the online data mapping platform "BatchGeo" was utilized to allow the data in the spreadsheet to be accessible to the public and represented visually. The map allows the viewer to search each mass shooting incident by: the date; the number of people killed; the number of people injured; the number of perpetrators; the perpetrator's race; the perpetrator's gender; the perpetrator's race; and by each frame category previously identified in this report. The map also includes a source category that lists the hyperlinks of the articles that were utilized to complete the analysis of each incident. This data map has the capability to cross-reference different frames (ex: "white male" and "mental illness" will compile a list of all incidents that include both of these terms).

## Graphics

[Map](#) of Mass Shooting Incidents with Cross-Referenced Media Frames:



## Analysis of Findings

### Perpetrator Demographics

Of the 113 incidents analyzed in this report, 39 (34.5%) were perpetrated by a Black individual; 33 (29.2%) were perpetrated by a white individual; 13 (11.5%) were perpetrated by Hispanic/Latinx individuals; 7 (6.2%) were perpetrated by an Asian individual; 3 (2.7%) were perpetrated by Native American individuals. The race of the perpetrator was unknown in 23 (20.4%) of cases. Three of the incidents involved multiple perpetrators that were of different races and, for the purposes of this research, were included in the previous incident totals. Males perpetrated 97 (85.8%) of the mass shooting incidents, while females perpetrated 3 (2.7%) of the mass shootings. The gender of the perpetrator was unknown in 13 (11.5%) of the incidents. Due to the small number of incidents perpetrated by Native American individuals, the results are not statistically significant enough to accurately analyze media frames in regard to incidents that involve perpetrators from this racial category and will not be included in percentage categories in the following examination of frame categories.

### Frame Categories

The race of the perpetrator was included in media coverage in 27 (23.9%) of the mass shooting incidents. Of the perpetrators whose race was referenced, 10 were White, 9 were Black, 3 were Hispanic/Latinx, 3 were Native American, 1 was Asian, and 1 incident mentioned race in conjunction with an incident where the race of the perpetrator was unknown (ex: naming the race of the victims). Native American and White perpetrators were more likely to have their race mentioned in articles than other racial groups, while Black and Hispanic/Latinx individuals were equally likely to have their race referenced. Whether or not a perpetrator had a mental illness was referenced in 24 of the mass shooting incidents. Of the perpetrators whose mental health was referenced, 14 were White, 5 were Black, 4 were Hispanic/Latinx, and 1 was a perpetrator whose race was unknown. This means that 42.4% of White shooters were likely to receive a mental illness frame in media coverage, while only 30.8% of Hispanic/Latinx and 12.8% of Black perpetrators received this same frame.

A perpetrator's criminal history was referenced in 49 of the incidents: 19 were White, 17 were Black, 6 were Hispanic/Latinx, 2 were Native American, 2 were Asian, and the races of 4 of the perpetrators were unknown. White perpetrators were 11.4% and 14% more likely than Hispanic/Latinx and Black perpetrators, respectively, to have their criminal history mentioned. Of the perpetrators of the 33 mass shooting incidents that received a domestic abuse/violence/dispute frame in the media, 12 were White, 7 were Black, 6 were Hispanic/Latinx, 5 were Asian, and



the races of 4 were unknown. Hispanic/Latinx and Asian perpetrators were the most likely of the racial groups to receive these frames.

Drug use or activity was referenced in 31 mass shooting incidents. Of the perpetrators connected with this frame through media coverage, 11 were Black, 9 were White, 4 were Hispanic/Latinx, 3 were Native American, 1 was Asian, and the race of 3 was unknown. Hispanic/Latinx and Black perpetrators were respectively 2.6% and 1% more likely to receive this media frame than White perpetrators. The frame of affiliation with gang activity was utilized in 15 of the mass shooting incidents: 9 of the perpetrators who received this frame were Black, 2 were Native American, 1 was White, and the race of 6 was unknown. Native American and Black perpetrators were the racial groups most likely to receive this frame.

Thirteen of the mass shooting incidents affiliated a perpetrator with military or law enforcement. Of these perpetrators, 7 were White, 3 were Black, 2 were Hispanic/Latinx, and 1 was Asian. Hispanic/Latinx and White perpetrators were the racial groups most likely to receive this frame. The religion of the perpetrator of a mass shooting was referenced in 9 of the incidents. Six White perpetrators and 3 Black perpetrators received this frame. Ten mass shooting incidents received a media frame that referenced terrorism. Of the perpetrators of these incidents, 8 were White, 1 was Black, and 1 was Hispanic/Latinx. Again, white perpetrators were the most likely to receive this frame. Finally, 2 mass shooting incidents received a frame that referenced video games, with 1 White and 1 Black perpetrator being framed in this manner.

## Discussion

Research indicates that the portrayal of mass shooters in the media is most likely to be framed by criminal history, followed in descending order by domestic abuse/violence/disputes, drug use/activity, the race of the perpetrator, mental illness, gang activity, affiliation with military and/or law enforcement, terrorism, religion, and video games. Of these frames, White individuals are more or equally likely than other racial groups to receive coverage that links their behavior to their criminal history, domestic abuse/violence/disputes, an affiliation with law enforcement or the military, and their religion. Although common perceptions about the coverage of mass shootings hold that White individuals are more likely to be treated sympathetically in the media while racial minorities are more likely to be criminalized, results in this study indicate that this is not universal in all frames. White perpetrators are objectively more likely to receive coverage that frames their gun violence in the light of their mental health status. Additionally, Black perpetrators are 7.2% more likely than White perpetrators to have a frame that is associated with criminality (criminal history, domestic abuse, drug activity, gang activity, or terrorism) utilized in conjunction with the mental health frame when their mental health status is referenced in coverage. Hispanic/Latinx perpetrators were less likely to receive a criminality frame in conjunction with a mental illness frame when compared to White perpetrators. However, Hispanic/Latinx perpetrators were more likely to have their gun violence framed in light of drug use and Black perpetrators were more likely to have their actions connected to gang activity than White perpetrators, supporting existing research that demonstrates that some notions of criminality, such as those associated with minorities, are more likely to be perpetuated through media framing and coverage. Contrary to dominant narratives surrounding the media's coverage of mass shooting incidents, White perpetrators were more likely than other racial groups to receive coverage that linked their actions to terrorism. This study supports the broad findings of other reports, which indicate that White perpetrators are more likely to have their mental health referenced while perpetrators of color are connected to criminality. It also identifies that both drug use and domestic abuse are more likely to be connected to mass shootings through coverage than mental illness is, despite the fact that mental illness has been more commonly perceived as a causal factor in these types of shootings. This finding is also significant in supporting the request of domestic violence advocacy groups that hope to establish the standard definition of a mass shooting as what was utilized in this research: an incident where three or more people, excluding the perpetrator, are killed.

## Limitations and Further Research

One of the largest limitations faced during this research was the ability to ascertain an individual's race. While race was only included in the research if it could be reasonably determined through contextual clues in coverage and images, it was nearly impossible to go beyond broad racial categories to determine whether perpetrators identified as mixed race.

Additionally, the definition utilized for this project, where three or more people or killed excluding the perpetrator, was also a limitation for this research. While it was necessary due to the time constraints of the semester-long study, some incidents had double-digit injuries but fewer than three fatalities and were thus excluded from the project, despite the fact that an average person would perceive that incident as a mass shooting. Along these same lines, time was a large limitation for the project, which also meant that the data pool did not include a

statistically significant amount of perpetrators within some racial categories to determine how the media framed mass shooting incidents that they carried out.

Future research has a breadth of areas that should be explored in order to better understand how the media frames the perpetrators of mass shootings. Although this study will go on to analyze all incidents between 2013 and 2019 in which three or more people are killed, broadening the definition of a mass shooting to include injuries as well as deaths would provide more statistically significant results. Textual analysis of the headlines and bodies of articles could be reviewed for words that might suggest a link to a frame without outright using the words; for example, an article that describes an individual as “troubled” or “a loner” could prompt a linkage to mental illness, despite the fact that no official diagnosis was mentioned. Additionally, future research should evaluate whether articles use the term “mass shooting” to describe an incident that took place and whether or not this is influenced by a perpetrator’s race. As there is evidence of a growing link between mental illness and substance abuse, future research should analyze articles for references to other substances, such as alcohol, in addition to the drug use frame that was included in this research. Additionally, it would be interesting to evaluate whether the perpetrator of a mass shooting survived the incident or whether they died during it — either through self-inflicted injuries or from police/bystander intervention — and whether this correlates to specific racial groups. Finally, future research should include a category to determine whether the gun that was utilized in the mass shooting incident was acquired legally, as this could have ramifications for policy development.

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