



Another Perspective

Is There Really an Epidemic of Mass Shootings?

After Isla Vista, some unconsoling perspective.

By Josh Blackman – 6.9.14

The recent tragedy at the University of California, Santa Barbara has reignited debate over the fraught issues of gun control, mental health, and school safety. The loss of any life is of course tragic. Parents, community members, and policy makers are right to ask questions about how each attack might have been prevented.

But some perspective is in order. Type “mass shootings” and “common” into a search engine and you’ll get all sorts of breathless commentary that might lead one to believe there Americans face a genuine epidemic of shooting rampages. A few headlines:

Vox: “Mass shootings on campus are getting more common and more deadly.”

ThinkProgress: “Mass Shootings Are Becoming More Frequent.”

NPR: “Study: Mass Shootings Are On The Rise Across U.S.”

Washington Post: “Why are mass shootings becoming more common?”

The truth, simply put, is that mass shootings — as horrible and nightmarish as they are — are very rare, constitute a tiny sliver of homicides, and are *not* becoming more frequent. The debate over how to respond to gun violence is controversial and unlikely to yield solutions that will satisfy everyone. That said, any efforts that intend to strike a balance between safety, self-defense, and civil liberties must take account of these inconvenient truths.

Homicide in America is far more common than it ought to be. But mass shootings — defined as four or more murders in the same incident — constitute a minuscule share of the total, as I discuss in “[The Shooting Cycle](#)” in the most recent edition of the *Connecticut Law Review*

The [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) reported that from 2002-2011, 95 percent of total homicide incidents involved a single fatality, 4 percent involved two victims, 0.6 percent involved 3 victims, and *only .02 percent* involved four or more victims. Another study performed between 1976 and 2005 yields similar results — that less than one-fifth of 1 percent all murders in the United States involved four or more victims. In other words, the bottom line is that out of every 10,000 incidents of homicide, roughly two are mass killings.

Further, contrary to what the [zeitgeist may suggest](#), mass shootings are not on the rise. Prominent criminologist [James Alan Fox](#) has found “no upward trend in mass killings” since the ’70s. Take campus statistics as an example: “Overall in this country, there is an average of 10 to 20 murders across campuses in any given year,” Fox told CNN (and roughly 99 percent of these reported homicides were not mass shootings). “Compare that to over 1,000 suicides and about 1,500 deaths from binge drinking and drug

overdoses.” Mass shootings on college campuses lag far, far behind many much more prevalent social and mental health problems.

The rare nature of these incidents also holds true for safety in K-12 schools, which garnered a significant amount of attention in the wake of the tragedies in Columbine and Newtown. According to two reports by the Centers for Disease Control, the probability of a child “dying in school in any given year from homicide or suicide was less than one in 1 million between 1992 and 1994 and slightly greater than one in 2 million between 1994 and 1999.”

If mass shootings are rare, constitute a tiny percentage of gun homicides, and have not been occurring more frequently, why are they so salient today?

Behavioral economists have identified several important heuristics that explain how our minds work. First, the *availability heuristic* leads people to overweigh the prominence of events that are easily retrievable from our memories. Mass shootings that receive widespread media attention dominate our collective consciousness and therefore we perceive them as occurring more frequently than they actually do.

Second, people tend to weigh the risks of unfamiliar, unknown events more heavily than those with which they are familiar. This is referred to as the *unfamiliar-event heuristic*. For example, a person may perceive that the risk of being killed in a (thankfully) unfamiliar tragedy like a mass shooting at a college campus is greater than the risk of, say, accidentally drowning in a pool (which is surprisingly common and claims 3,500 lives per year).

Third, people with preexisting views, or *cultural predispositions*, on issues such as gun control are more likely to see tragic events through a lens that gratifies their own beliefs. Yale Law Professor Dan Kahan explains that those who already feel “revulsion and disgust” toward guns are likely to fixate on shootings, rather than other types of deaths (such as accidental drownings), and see these losses as a reason to strengthen gun regulations. Conversely, a person who is predisposed to favor gun rights is likely to minimize shootings and focus on the role firearms play in preventing crime. This confirmation bias explains the visceral reactions that many on the Left and Right display following mass shootings.

Fourth, because of *in-group bias*, people tend to focus on victims who are like them. Think about the locales of shootings that gain wall-to-wall TV coverage: schools, college campuses, movie theaters, supermarkets. Incidents on the proverbial wrong side of town, in contrast, do not warrant as much notice. For example, forty-six people were shot in Chicago during a seventy-two-hour period around the six-month anniversary of Sandy Hook. Yet this garnered very little attention. According to the *Los Angeles Times* Homicide Report, in the first five months of 2014, there have already been 193 homicides in the City of Angels.

No number of mass shootings can ever be deemed “acceptable,” and the public may legitimately ask whether stronger rules — on background checks, on involuntary mental health commitment — might avert future tragedy. But mass shootings occupy a disproportionately large share of discussion surrounding gun control, and the debate should turn on facts, not misconceptions.

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