

An Examination of Mass Shootings

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INTRODUCTION

Mass shootings have become extremely common events that happen in the United States more often than they should. According to a The Washington Post story, “Mass shootings took place roughly every six months. Between Columbine and Charleston, the pace was roughly one every two and a half months. After Charleston? One almost every six weeks” (Berkowitz 2019: n.p.). The term “mass shooting” is often thought of as an event where at least four people are murdered, with no cooling-off periods between the murders (Berkowitz 2019: n.p.) Mass shootings can happen anywhere, including at a concert, at a church, at a school, or at a grocery store. Technically there is no universally accepted definition of a mass shooting, which makes it hard to collect accurate data across the years on how many mass shootings occur around the world. Despite the lack of reliable data, the United States is still the leading country for mass shootings, as the number of shootings in this country have gradually increased throughout the years. In fact, in 2019, the total number of reported mass shootings in the United States was the highest it had been since 2006. This has caused people in society to live in fear because no one knows when or if they are going to be the next victim of a mass shooting. The reason for the sudden increase in mass shootings is unknown, but some suggest that the

explicit media coverage of mass shootings, the lack of mental health care, and/or the lack of gun control are the leading causes. Mass shootings are often covered in news articles where the author addresses them as a social problem and tries to figure out when they started and why they are becoming more common. News agencies are looking at mass shootings through an analytical lens to tackle them as a problem, which will be explored throughout this paper.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to explore this social problem, a content analysis was performed on ten articles taken from The Washington Post from the time of January 2018 to December 2019. The articles were evaluated and their content was categorized into the following categories: grounds, warrants, and conclusions. According to Joel Best, a ground asserts the facts of a problem using statistics, names, and typifying examples. A warrant convinces people to take action and get something done regarding the social problem. Lastly, a conclusion states what action should be taken to address the social problem (2017: p. 32). Using these definitions, two classmates paired up to check for intercoder reliability where they double coded sections of the same two articles as grounds, warrants, or conclusions and compared their work. It was found that there was a lot of disagreement over whether certain sections should

be considered a warrant or a ground, considering several sections could potentially be argued as both, but an agreement was always reached. In addition, all conclusions that were coded were relatively the same.

FOUNDATIONS

All of the ten articles analyzed consisted of mostly grounds, where they stated the facts of several mass shootings that happened around the country. When establishing grounds, most authors used statistics, numerical data, to discuss the shootings. In seven out of the 10 articles, the first couple of paragraphs included the author listing out the number of injuries and the number of deaths caused by the specific shooting they were writing about. For example, one article stated, “A gunman wielding an assault-style rifle killed 20 people and wounded 26 more Saturday at a busy Walmart and shopping center not far from the Mexican border, authorities said” (Rosenwald 2019: n.p.). Two separate articles used statistics in a different way to assert the facts of mass shootings. One article, discussing how the U.S leads the world in mass shootings, used the statistic, “[...] The United States had significantly more mass shootings, with 90 between 1966 and 2012, compared with 202 in the rest of the world,” to establish this fact (Kessler 2018: n.p.). Another article discussed why mental health was a major cause of mass shootings, so they used a statistic to point how many of the shooters had a mental illness. This article stated, “[i]n a 2018 report on 63 active shooter assailants, the FBI found that 25 percent had been diagnosed with a mental illness” (Wan 2019: n.p.). In fact, out of the 10 articles analyzed, 23 statistics were used in total to establish grounds.

When establishing grounds, the authors also often gave a name to the social problem. They would briefly say that these large killings from gun violence are called

mass shootings, and some gave a brief description of what usually qualifies as a mass shooting. For example, one article stated, “[...] Shootings since 1966 in which at least four people were killed [...]” (Berkowitz 2019: n.p.). This article is offering a definition of what is widely considered a mass shooting in the United States, despite there being some argument over what is and what isn’t a mass shooting. They were very vague because the term isn’t described in the same way around the world; because of this, all ten articles did name the problem, but only three of them gave a description of what a mass shooting is.

Lastly, the other main way that grounds were established was by using typifying examples, which are very extreme specific examples that don’t usually represent the problem as a whole. In these articles, authors would use graphic stories experienced by mass shooting victims as a typifying example, but these stories were often unique and didn’t apply to most victims. For example, one article states, “Joseph Griffith, 40, was shot and killed while waiting at a traffic light with his wife and two children” (Guarino 2019, n.p.). This is a typifying example because usually mass shootings don’t occur like this. They usually happen out at a restaurant or concert, etc., where the victims have a chance of running away, while this one in particular gave the victim no chance of escape or survival. Only two articles in the sample used typifying examples; however, most of the articles listed the victims and described what they experienced first-hand but, given the nature of the problem, these would not be considered typifying examples.

WARRANTS

When establishing warrants in the articles about mass shootings, all ten sought to appeal to the reader’s emotions to convince them to get something done and take action

to stop these killings. There were a total of 17 warrants present in the 10 articles. The warrants often were specifically written to make the reader feel saddened or scared so that they would want to fight against mass shootings. When trying to make the reader sad, the authors would talk about the victims that were children or the survivors who had been severely affected. For example, one article said, “That’s when he saw a young girl, just 17 months old, who had been struck in the face by a bullet” (Lowery 2019: n.p.). Another article said, “David Anderson immediately knew he was in the middle of a mass shooting. He had lived through one last year” (Zezima 2018: n.p.). These two quotes make the reader feel extreme emotions, due to the fact that the victims are going to be affected for the rest of their lives, experiencing both mental and physical scars.

Warrants were also expressed by trying to scare people into fighting for change. For example, most articles talked about how mass shootings were occurring more frequently than ever, taking more and more lives in all places of the world. Others discussed how mass shootings had become so common that people are not even shocked by them anymore. One article specifically said, “It is hard to name a type of place where a mass shooting hasn’t occurred. Playground? Yes. Nursing home? Yes. Theater. Campground. House party. Yacht. And of course many schools, churches, and military sites” (Berkowitz 2019: n.p.). By pointing out the commonness of mass shootings, the authors scare people into thinking “I could be next”. All of the articles that had warrants in them either tried to promote fear or sadness to inspire change.

CONCLUSIONS

Out of the ten articles examined, all of them had conclusions presented towards the end

of the article. Four of these articles didn’t call for a specific action to be taken, but they all said something along the lines that something needs to be done. The remaining six articles had specific actions they wanted people to take. More specifically, some articles called on public officials for gun control or mental health awareness. One article called for gun control by saying, “I don’t want prayers; I don’t want thoughts; I want gun control, and I hope to God nobody else sends me any more prayers” (Zezima 2018: n.p.). A separate article called for mental health care when they said, “The sad truth is that in America, it’s easy to get a gun. It’s very difficult to get mental health care” (Wan 2019: n.p.). Still, another conclusion argued that mass shootings appeared to be a social contagion, a behavioral epidemic, that spikes every time other mass shooting receives a lot of media coverage. Therefore, their conclusion was to ban the extensive media coverage of mass shootings. No matter who wrote the article, they all agreed that some sort of action needed to be taken to prevent the increase of mass shootings (McArdle 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ten articles that were examined offered a wide variety of grounds, warrants, and conclusions. The common way to write grounds in these articles was to use statistics to address the facts of the mass shootings. They also often named the social problem a mass shooting, but they very rarely used typifying examples to assert grounds. When warrants were found in these articles, they often sought to bring out sadness or fear in the reader to provoke change. Although warrants were not used as often as grounds, they were convincing enough to appeal to the reader’s emotions and inspire change. When it came to conclusions, all of the articles agreed that something needs to be done to prevent mass

shootings, and several of them also blamed gun control, media coverage, and mental health for the increase of mass shootings. Overall, the ten articles were very consistent with establishing grounds, warrants,

and conclusions; however, it would have been interesting to get a larger sample size, including other news agencies, to really look at how mass shootings are constructed over a variety of news sources.

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