

**RESEARCH IN BRIEF**

# Mass Shooting in the United States: Victim and Offender Profiles

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## Introduction

Mass shootings are not an everyday occurrence, but they have the potential to leave entire nations in hysteria. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, over 100 mass shootings have occurred in the United States leaving nearly 850 people killed (Peterson & Densley, 2023). Not only have a large number of people been killed in mass shootings, hundreds of thousands of people have suffered direct and indirect injuries as a result of the actions of a few. Each individual killed had family, friends, and loved ones who mourned them, first responders who witnessed the aftermath of the carnage, individuals who survived the experience yet witnessed it all, community members who no longer feel safe, and the lingering feelings of hopelessness amongst all.

While the consequences of mass shootings are widespread and extensive, research on this topic is still in an early exploratory phase. The current *Research in Brief* examines the existing state of mass shootings in the United States and profiles of its victim and offender. These profiles include information on the demographic characteristics of both victims and offenders, as well as factors associated with offenders of mass shootings. Prevention strategies will also be discussed.

## Definition of Mass Shootings

There are several definitions of mass shootings utilized in the research literature on these incidents. The current study uses the following definition of mass shooting provided by the

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 850 people have been killed in U.S. mass shootings since 2000 (Peterson & Densley, 2023).
- Based on a limited definition focused on at least four victim fatalities that occurred in a public location and not related to any underlying criminal activity, there have been 112 mass shootings across numerous states from 2000 to 2022 (Peterson & Densley, 2023).
- Since 2000, Nevada has experienced two mass shootings with one being the “1 October” attack, the largest mass shooting in modern American history that left 60 people dead and over 850 people injured in the process.
- Primary victim and shooter profiles were developed to highlight who tends to be the victim and offender of mass shooting incidents.
- Early detection methods, such as VOID are being utilized to identify potential individuals who are likely to become involved in future gun violence.

Congressional Research Service and the Violence Project:

“multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms—

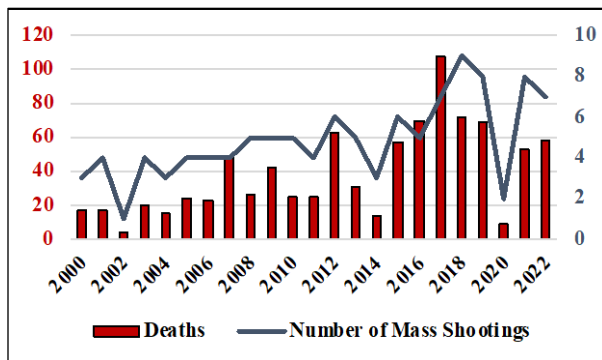
not including the offender(s)—within one event, and at least some of the murders occurred in a public location or locations in close geographical proximity (e.g., a workplace, school, restaurant, or other public settings), and the murders are not attributable to any other underlying criminal activity or commonplace circumstance (armed robbery, criminal competition, insurance fraud, argument, or romantic triangle)” (Krouse & Richardson, 2015).

**Scope of the Problem**

*National Overview*

By all accounts, mass shootings in the United States (U.S.) are a national problem. From 2000 to 2022, there have been 112 mass shootings across numerous states. The exact number of these incidents varies depending on the definition and data source used. For example, Associated Press and USA TODAY (2023) has identified 451 mass shootings just from 2006 to 2022 (Fox, 2023). They used a looser definition and counted any mass shootings that resulted in at least four victim fatalities. As shown in Figure 1, the number of fatalities and injuries in these attacks has generally increased over time.

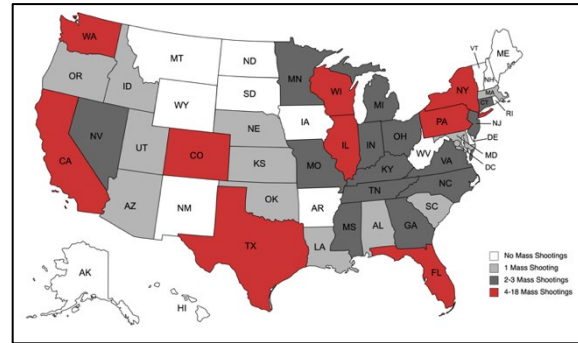
**Figure 1. Number of Mass Shootings and Deaths in the United States (2000-2022)**



Mass shootings are not limited to a particular state and their prevalence varies across states. For example, 15 states had no mass shootings from 2000 to 2022 (see Figure 2).

In contrast, states like Texas (n=18 mass shootings) and California (n=12 incidents) have multiple incidents (Peterson & Densley, 2023).

**Figure 2. Number of Mass Shootings and Deaths in the United States (2000-2022)**



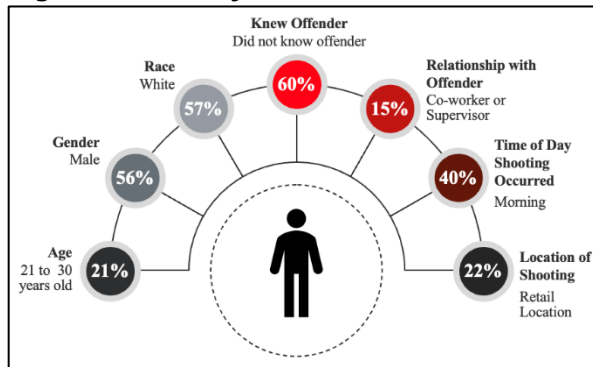
*Nevada State Overview*

From 2000 to 2022, Nevada has experienced two mass shootings. One of these was the “1 October” attack, the largest mass shooting in modern American history. In this mass shooting, the offender open fired from several stories up into a large crowd at the Route 91 festival in 2017 in Las Vegas, Nevada. His actions left 60 people dead and over 850 people injured in the process.

**Victim Profile**

Over 850 people have been killed in U.S. mass shootings since 2000 (Peterson & Densley, 2023). As summarized in Figure 3, just over half of the victims were male and white. The most common age group for victims was 21 to 30 year olds and over half of victims did not know the offender. For the victims who did have a relationship with the offender, over one-third of victims were co-workers or a supervisor of the offender in a work setting. Under half of the lethal mass shootings occurred in the morning hours and less than a quarter of shootings occurred at a retail location (Peterson & Densley, 2023).

**Figure 3. Primary Victim Profile**



**Shooter Profile**

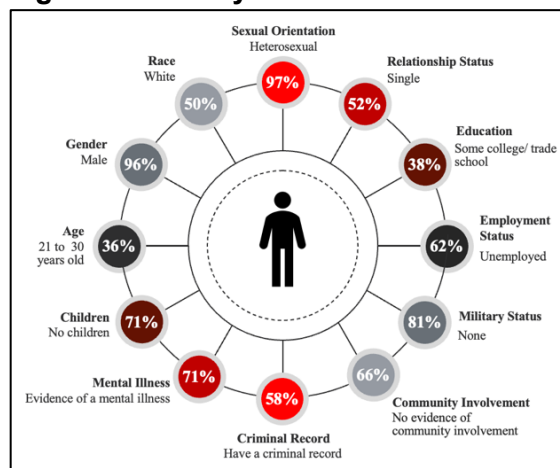
Previous research indicates that the vast majority of mass shooters are males (Chang, 2018). As summarized in Figure 4, the most common shooter in the Violence Project database are 21 to 30 years old, male, and White. Further, the vast majority of offenders are heterosexual and over half of them are single and not in a relationship at the time of the shooting. Over a quarter of offenders had attended some college or trade school, over half were not employed at the time of the shooting incident, and the majority had not served in the United States Military. Of the offenders who did serve in the military, the most common branch was the Army. For the most part, offenders were not involved in their community or played an active role in local clubs or organizations and over two-thirds of the offenders did not have any children (Peterson & Densley, 2023). Most commonly, the mass shooting events ended in the offender committing suicide while still on scene.

*Background of Crime and Violence*

A criminal or violent background is often considered a risk factor for committing mass casualty events (Wheeler, Worden & Silver, 2019). Within the current database, over half of the offenders did have a criminal record prior to the mass shooting incident. If they had a prior criminal history, it usually

involved less serious types of offenses (e.g., simple assaults, fraud/forgery/embezzlement, vandalism, weapons offenses, prostitution, drugs, driving under the influence). When it comes to histories of getting into physical or violent altercations (e.g., committing animal abuse, domestic abuse, and sexual acts), a record of prior sexual offenses was the most common risk factor (Peterson & Densley, 2023).

**Figure 4. Primary Shooter Profile**



*Cognitive and Mental State*

Previous research indicates that various stressors are experienced by mass shooters before their acts (Slemaker, 2022). Within the Violence Project database, employment issues (34%) were the most common stressor among mass shooters. The majority of offenders displayed particular signs of crisis (e.g., rapid mood swings, abusive behavior, paranoia, losing touch with reality, isolation) prior to the shooting event. Increased agitation, followed by abusive behaviors and then isolating were the most common signs of crisis which typically occurred most commonly years before the shooting.

An overwhelming majority of offenders in the current sample showed some signs of being in crisis prior to the mass shooting event.

Examples of these include a rapid increase in depression, mood swings, increased agitation or abusive behaviors, unusual feelings of calmness or happiness, the inability to complete daily tasks, paranoia, increased isolation, and signs of losing touch with reality (Peterson & Densley, 2023). Unfortunately, some of these examples are common occurrences within the general population so it can be difficult to truly see the signs of crisis until it is too late.

Among various types of mental illness, thought disorders has been widely associated with increased violence and aggressive behavior (Song, Corcoran & Gillespie, 2022). Some history of mental illness was suggested in about 70% of 111 cases of U.S. mass shootings since 2000. There was no official diagnosis of mental illness in some of these cases, however these offenders often exhibited clear indications of psychiatric disorders. As indicative of other types of cognitive and mental impairment, about 40% of mass shooters indicated they intended to die in the shooting and relied on some sort of substance (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, other drugs).

Finally, nearly 40% of mass shooters in the Violence Project database took their own lives following the mass casualty incident. Offenders rarely attempted to flee and if they were able to be criminally charged, they most commonly received life in prison without parole as a punishment (over 16%).

**Motives**

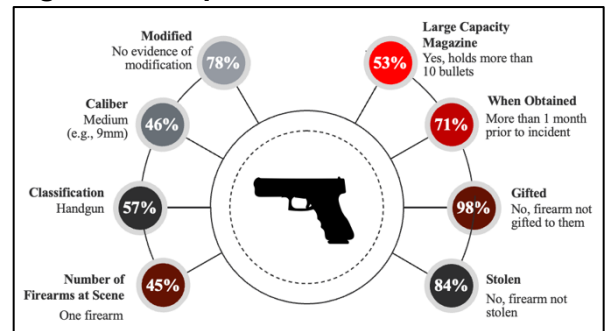
Mass shooters have a variety of reasons why they commit the acts that they do. Motives can range from religious hate, homophobia, misogyny, racism, or any other pre-existing prejudices (Ahmed & Okoroafor, 2023). Within the Violence Project database, however, nearly 60% of offenders did not

have any known prejudices that could have served as a motive. Among known motives, interpersonal conflict with a family member, co-worker, or friend was the most commonly experienced (roughly 21%).

**Weapons**

For a mass shooting event to occur, there must be the presence of guns at the scene where the incident occurred. According to the Violence Project database, nearly half of the shooters only had one firearm at the scene of the crime. Over half of the time the firearm was a handgun and about half of the firearms were a medium caliber (e.g., 9mm). Over three-fourths of the firearms were not modified and more than half the time they had large capacity magazines that held more than 10 bullets. Further, usually the firearms were obtained more than one month prior to the incident and the firearms were not typically gifted or stolen.

**Figure 5. Weapons Utilized**



**Prevention Strategies**

Numerous prevention strategies have been implemented over the years such as early detection methods. The Violent Offender Identification Directive (VOID) tool is used in some police departments to identify potential individuals who are likely to become involved in future gun violence. VOID utilizes records from the police department to explore prior criminal history to identify high risk individuals. According to Wheeler and

colleagues (2019), the VOID tool was effective enough to utilize in identifying individuals who will be involved in gun violence. Further, a number of machine learning (ML) models and tools have been utilized to scour social media sites to predict and classify mass shooting topics to detect individuals who may offend in the future (Ahmed & Okoroafor, 2023). In addition, situational crime prevention techniques such as target-hardening, removing excuses, decreasing provocations, and increasing mental health expenditures offer prevention strategies.

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