



Reducing Gun Violence Requires Accurate Definitions and Specific Strategies

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Current media portrayal of and public debate about gun violence are big on shock values but short on solutions. The term ‘mass shooting’ is often used to describe events that involve various types of mass gun violence, even though the natures of these events themselves differ widely. Reports and discussions about shootings rarely differentiate types of gun crimes, victims, or circumstances, as gang violence, home invasions, armed robberies, familicides, and personal vengeance are all lumped together with random public mass killings.

This aspect of gun violence—how it is defined and referenced by reporters, politicians, advocates and community members—may not appear urgent, but it is actually critical to how people understand, respond to, and work to address gun violence. The most broad or flexible term of ‘mass shootings’ is not conducive to effective interventions, and greater efforts should be made to understand and offer solutions to the different types of gun violence.

Types of Gun Violence

Events of all kinds involving gun violence with three or more victims are often called mass shootings in public conversations. While there is a lack of consensus on a formal definition, some define mass shootings more accurately as incidents involving four or more shot and killed randomly during a singular event in a public place.

With this definition, there are usually a handful of mass shootings a year in the US. Between 2017 and 2021, there were about six mass shootings per year, and there have been four so far in 2022: the events in Buffalo, New York; Uvalde, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Highland Park, Illinois. During this period, there were typically less than 80 victims per year out of more than 15,000 total gun violence deaths. If the definition was expanded to include shootings in private spaces, any number of shooters, and regardless of motives, there would have been 206 incidents between 2012 to 2022, an average of about 20 per year.

These incidents, and the overwhelming fear and grief of the affected communities, are broadcast widely and capture attention nationwide. Yet they represent only a fraction of all gun deaths that occur each year—less than 1%, even under expansive definitions that include about 550 to 650 events as mass shootings. Further, because of this extensive coverage, ‘mass shooting’ has also become a catch-all term for all kinds of gun violence that involve three or more victims.

If the narrower definition of mass shootings was adopted widely, it would be possible to differentiate them from other more common types of gun violence and allow the police and society to develop relevant and

effective strategies tailored to the specific types of incidents.

Recommendations on Addressing Mass Shootings

With random public mass shootings being extremely rare and over 99% of gun homicides involving more routinely occurring incidents, our police and society should differentiate different types of gun violence and implement strategies that capture their nuances and contexts. Due to mass shootings' rarity and lack of patterns, they are extremely difficult for police to prevent by themselves. While gun legislation might be important at the national level, there are more immediate and realistic ways to address mass shootings.

- State-level risk assessment centers should be established, which would identify, assess, and analyze the risks of certain persons and disseminate risk information to local establishments. This would help identify potential offenders and neutralize threats.
- At-risk entities, such as schools and businesses, should fortify their facilities with security features and protocols, increasing the effort and risks of offenders, and thus disrupt opportunities for mass shootings.

Recommendations on Addressing More Common Forms of Gun Violence

For the overwhelming majority of gun homicides that occur routinely, the police and the public should be able to discern their patterns and apply appropriate strategies. Several strategies have been proven effective as follows:

- Problem-oriented policing, which involves directed patrols and focused deterrence, may have a significant effect in reducing gun homicides due to street fighting and gang rivalries.
- Comprehensive policing, which combines immediate tactical responses and community-oriented policing, may achieve a sustainable impact on gun violence rooted in underlying social, economic, and cultural conditions such as home invasions and armed robberies.
- Situational/routine activities, which involve deploying resources in areas and contexts prone to gun violence by using a variety of situational measures such as risk analysis, traffic/pedestrian stops, firearm removal, differential licensing, and sting operations, can help reduce gun homicides due to drugs, personal vengeance, and family violence that tend to recur in specific locations and domestic settings.
- Tech-driven law enforcement utilizing gun tracing/ballistics analysis can improve gun homicide clearance and thus have a deterrence effect on premeditated gun murders.

In broad discussions of gun violence data, meanings and nuances tend to be lost, and the 99% of gun deaths that are not a result of mass shootings can be overlooked. However, there is an opportunity to make real progress.

By promoting accurate definitions and understandings of true mass shootings and other more common types of gun homicides, police and society can focus on specific intervention strategies and reduce gun violence deaths.