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Parents' Perceptions of the Traits, Characteristics, and Circumstances of Modern-Day Mass Shooters

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Abstract

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MSW, Simmons University, 2006

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

There is little research on parents' perceptions about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances ascribed to mass shooters and the sources of information shaping these perceptions. Understanding parents' beliefs about mass shooters and mass shootings can serve to inform approaches to training and education and recommendations for media reporting on such events. Evidence-based knowledge helps parents become more equipped to serve as early interventionists for those who may be moving along a pathway of violence. Application of Gerbner's cultivation theory frames the process by which media sources shape perceptions. In this phenomenological qualitative study, semi structured interviews were conducted with 19 parents with at least one child in a K–12 school to gather data to explore participants' beliefs about mass shootings and the role of the media in constructing their realities about the phenomenon. Two main themes emerged about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters: (a) appearance or demographic profile, and (b) changes in usual or baseline presentation or behavior. Five subthemes emerged under the second theme: (a) negative mood or affect, (b) adverse childhood experience, (c) motivation, (d) social connectedness, and (e) pre-attack warning indicators. The findings of this study have potential implications for positive social change by debunking false narratives about causes of mass shootings; falsely profiling individuals could lead to missed opportunities to help those who view violence as a strategy for avenging a grievance. Accurately identifying pre-attack warning signs before an act of targeted violence is critical to a community-integrated model of identification, assessment, and violence mitigating management.

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Dedication

For Nana, who gave me the world and who made me feel every day that I was hers. Making you proud is my enduring motivation for everything.

For Kristy, the partner I never knew I truly needed but cannot imagine being without, for your patience, your love, your support, your belief in me, your sacrifice, and for being the mom that any dad would dream of having for their child.

For Nikki, for giving your mom and me new purpose every day. I hope you learn from me that ceilings to success do not exist and that goals are never time limited.

For Mom, for being proud of me no matter how large or small the achievement and being the one I have always been able to turn to celebrate wins or navigate hardships.

For Dad, who struggled to say it but unquestionably always felt it, thanks for taking so much pride in your son's accomplishments. This would be a big one to save in your memory box.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Despite their rarity, a pervasive narrative persists in the United States that mass shootings are an epidemic (Schildkraut et al., 2021; Silva & Capellan, 2019a). While the United States is exceptional in the frequency and volume of these incidents compared to other countries (Silva & Capellan, 2019a), the data on mass shootings reinforces the rarity of these attacks (Anisin, 2021; Fernandez et al., 2020). While mass shootings account for less than 1% of all firearm homicides (Peterson & Densley, 2021), research on perceptions of mass violence suggest that nearly half of Americans fear being killed in a mass shooting incident (Fox & Levin, 2022; Fox et al., 2021; Bergan & Lee, 2018) and believe they occur far more frequently than they do (Schildkraut et al., 2019; Silva & Capellan, 2019a). The perceived randomness of targeted violence generates fear, anxiety, and a general sense of peril when leaving home (Amman et al., 2019). This disproportionate moral panic, reflects the residual impact of media reporting on mass shootings and how the dissemination and receipt of related information cultivates widespread and distorted perceptions (Silva & Capellan, 2019b.; Duxbury et al., 2018).

At a rate nearly 20 times greater than other comparable countries, gun violence and mass shootings in the United States reflect a uniquely American public health crisis (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021; Croitoru et al., 2020; DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Thirty-one percent of mass shootings occur in the United States, a country of only 5% of the overall global population (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). In the aftermath of most mass shootings, the prevailing narrative suggests mass shootings are

the outcome of poorly regulated gun control laws and an underserved population of

persons with serious mental illness (SMI; Perrin, 2016). SMI is explained as a mental,

behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment that may

considerably interfere with major life activities (National Institutes of Health [NIH],

2022). Among Americans, 46% believe people with an SMI are more dangerous than the

general population (Mercier et al., 2018) and 63% attribute mental health problems as the

primary force motivating mass shootings (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Existing and

emerging research consistently supports the reality that these factors do hold a degree of

significance in relation to mass violence but the risk enhancing and perhaps causal factors

are far more dynamic than this binary explanation. As the narrative persists, the risk of

stigmatization toward those with mental illness maintains, discourse about gun control

and related legislation polarizes the political landscape, and those bystanders with the

potential to be upstanders are hindered in activating a potentially life-saving role due to

inaccurate perceptions of who is at greatest risk of carrying out the next mass shooting.

Mass media are influential in shaping perceptions and realities of viewers

(Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; Schildkraut et al., 2018),

particularly online media sources and social networks that serve as the primary source of

information over television, radio, and print (Croitoru et al., 2020), and serve as the main

source of information for nearly 95% of the general population (Schildkraut et al., 2018).

The media influences how audiences understand and make meaning of security, safety,

and threat-related matters (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022), and people spend more time

reflecting on ideas and topics prominently featured in the news (Wilson et al., 2016).

Such publicity not only serves to shape opinions and beliefs of the public audience but risks spawning a contagion or copycat effect by serving as an actionable template for future mass shooters (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021; Mullen 2004, cited in Croitoru et al., 2020). One who relates to, or identifies with, a publicized mass shooter is apt to view the shooter positively and may then attach themself to the similarities they share with the perpetrator, thus being of greater propensity to imitate the behavior (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Whether to avenge a grievance or solely to seek fame and notoriety, a direct association appears to exist between sensational mass media coverage and subsequent mass shootings by those seeking attention and infamy (Dahmen et al., 2019; Lankford, 2016).

One popular narrative suggests that targeted acts of mass violence are senseless and randomly executed by an individual who snaps (Fernandez et al., 2020). From early publications on factors specifically related to an enhanced risk for targeted violence (O'Toole, 1999; Vossekuil et al., 2004) to more contemporary findings on the subject (Amman et al., 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2021a, 2021b; National Threat Assessment Center [NTAC], 2020; Silver et al., 2018), the research delineates specific risk enhancing factors in the histories of mass shooters. Such information helps makes sense of the violence from the perspective of the assailant and reflects a methodical, sequential, and tactical pathway (Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Meloy et al., 2012) from grievance to attack, far deviant from the perception of mass shooters as snapping.

As mass shootings impact public gathering spaces, retail establishments, corporations, healthcare facilities, universities, and houses of worship, the high emotional valence of mass shootings in K–12 schools generates the greatest attention and mass media coverage (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Parents in particular turn their attention to news coverage of school shootings as it holds personal relevance. Articulation of the observable and empirical pre-attack behaviors precipitating mass shootings may help parents function as more effective participants in assessing and managing potential threats if their focus is shifted away from distorted narratives and centered on visible and identifiable warning signs (Silver et al., 2018).

In Chapter 1, I discuss the issues around mass shootings and mass shooters as they relate to public perception resulting from media influence. The research gap is an absence of research exploring the content and specificities of how the public, and more specifically, parents of K–12 students, perceive mass shooters based on the traits, characteristics, and circumstances they believe to be associated with an increased likelihood for mass violence perpetration. Three research questions guide this qualitative exploratory study to understand what attributes parents ascribe to past and future mass shooters and the mechanisms by which information is gathered and perceptions are cultivated. In this chapter, I also present a list of operational definitions, an outline of assumptions, and an outline of the sample selection process.

Problem Statement

Most Americans perceive mass shootings as the greatest threat to national security (Fox et al., 2021), often blaming lack of mental health services and gun control as

primary, contributing, or causal factors (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021; McGinty et al., 2014; Vargas et al., 2020). Despite the growing body of research on correlates of mass violence perpetration that contradict popular opinion about mental illness and firearms, the perception of why these events occur and who are the likely perpetrators remains a static, fixed, and distorted perception of reality. Inaccurate framing of mass shootings and individual traits and characteristics of mass shooters perpetuate stigmatization of the mentally ill, yield a detrimental health consequence for many viewers, and hinder informed violence mitigation strategies.

Research exploring what perceptions are held about mass shooters, mass shootings, and empirical risk enhancers in the general population is limited to one identifiable study specific to adolescent mass attackers (Girard & Aguilar, 2019). To understand the broad resistance to effective prevention models such as behavioral threat assessment and management, a baseline understanding of perceptions and the sources of perceptual influence is needed to effectively strategize how to combat false beliefs in the interest of securing a collective approach to addressing this public health concern.

Mass violence is caused by multiple social, situational, and psychological factors that interact in complex ways that are poorly understood and difficult to predict in advance (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020), yet common explanations for mass shootings include discussions about faulty mental health systems, poorly controlled access to firearms, and an urgent need for legislative reform (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; McGinty et al., 2013). People who commit mass murder are unquestionably not psychologically healthy

(Langman et al., 2020), but mental health symptoms or mental unwellness, as found in more than 60% of mass shooters (Silver et al., 2018), are not analogous.

Despite the statistical reality of mass shootings as highly rare sentinel events, there is a natural tendency to assume mental illness as an explanation for mass shootings, mass murder, and other horrific and rare types of violence (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). This reaction likely reflects an attempt to reconcile confusion, fear, and curiosity about these events and the perceptually enigmatic figures who perpetrate them (Vargas et al., 2020). There is a tendency for people to develop causal stories about the world and rationalize and explain events, behaviors, and conditions (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2011; Kambam et al., 2020). In reality, 96% of general violence would continue even if the elevated risk of violence among people with mental illness was eliminated (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Still, public perception holds that mental illness contributes to mass violence far more significantly than access to firearms (McGinty et al., 2013). This perception is often reinforced in entertainment media as people with mental illness are portrayed as homicidal maniacs (Corrigan & Watson, 2002, cited in Skeem & Mulvey, 2020) and such media portrayals can shape negative attitudes (Vargas et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2016). Public response may include social distancing from this group and further marginalization and isolation of the mentally ill (Vargas et al., 2020). People who have more exposure to persons with an SMI are more apt to recognize the weak relationship between mental illness and violence and are less likely to perpetuate stigma, supporting the need to understand what people believe, why they hold such beliefs, and how to edify their beliefs to be more accurately informed (Wilson et al., 2016).

Exposure to mass violence or media coverage about mass violence, particularly information that stimulates fear and anxiety by defining such events as senseless and unpredictable, may yield negative health consequences for viewers. Gerbner's (1986) cultivation theory frames the impact of media exposure on public perceptions: what is observed in the media often has a direct and profound influence on individual beliefs and opinions. Understanding the media impact on viewers specific to perceptions of mass shootings may serve as evidence to guide changes for how the media reports these events.

The adverse effects of exposure to violent media include physiological and psychological consequences such as elevated blood pressure and trauma-based symptoms (Wormwood et al., 2019), inflated fear (Callanan, 2012), a view of the world as mean and unsafe (Appel, 2008; Ben-Ezra et al.; Bilandzic et al., 2019), amplified anxiety (O'Brien & Taku, 2022), hostile appraisals (Bushman, 2016), and a heightened sense of victimization (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Therefore, modifying how news outlets report on mass shootings may benefit viewer wellness. Traumatic events, whether directly experienced or witnessed vicariously, undermine one's core values and views of the world (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017) and continual coverage of mass attacks promotes a disaster narrative, a misguided conceptualization of this social problem and disproportionate fear (Silva & Capellan, 2019a).

Parents, immediate family, close friends, colleagues, educators, and others who fall within intimate circles of a person of concern have valuable optics on the individual's underlying conflicts driving concerning changes in behavior, particularly for youth and others who cohabitate (Amman et al., 2019). Educated and informed parents and other

potential interventionists may be more apt to assume the role of upstander rather than

bystander in the absence of awareness and knowledge about what behaviors and

circumstances heighten the risk of a person to pursue and engage in a mass shooting.

Bystanders include anyone able to observe concerning behaviors, force multipliers of

threat management, to serve as the eyes and ears supporting behavioral threat assessment

and management (BTAM) teams (Amman et al., 2019).

In the 2019 publication, "Making Prevention a Reality," Amman et al.,

emphasized the criticality of turning bystanders into upstanders. The authors asserted that

missed opportunities for intervention by at least one bystander were observed in more

than 80% of mass attacks studied and by at least two bystanders in nearly 60% of cases.

Amman et al. advocated that to operationalize and optimize the see-something-say-

something mantra, individuals, organizations, and communities must foster a culture of

shared responsibility when it comes to helping people in crisis choose problem-solving

strategies that do not include violence. The bystander effect risks minimizing concerning

behaviors, behaviors that are heavily researched and observable in anticipation of a mass

attack (Amman et al., 2019; Meloy et al., 2012; Silver et al., 2018).

Parents or other influential figures significantly impact whether someone reports

concerning behavior when seen (Amman et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding what

parents believe to be true about mass shooters and mass shootings as relative to that

which is known to be empirically supported is vital for developing and shaping strategies

to transform bystanders into upstanders. This study aims to fill an existing research gap

through a qualitative phenomenological exploration of the perceptions of potential mass

shooters held by parents of school-age children (K–12) and the sources of information cultivating such perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to develop a greater understanding of the perceptions parents of current K–12 students hold about people most likely to perpetrate a mass shooting. Additionally, I explored how the media, as a primary source of information about local, national, and global social problems, shapes these perceptions. Through understanding prevailing perceptions and beliefs, subsequent training, outreach, and education can be more accurately tailored to help parents reframe distorted perceptions cultivated through the media. Such education or training could serve to facilitate and empower more effective upstander participation in identifying and managing preventable acts of targeted violence.

In the study, I explored and described the beliefs parents maintain about attributable traits, characteristics, and circumstances likely to be found in the histories of mass shooters. The intent of the study is to establish a more robust understanding of mass violence perceptions and identify areas where distorted perceptions and lack of knowledge and awareness contribute to elevated degrees of anxiety (O'Brien & Taku, 2022), inflated fear of a rare form of violence (Callanan, 2012), negative attitudes about the world as unsafe and mean (Appel, 2008; Ben-Ezra et al.; Bilandzic et al., 2019), and a heightened sense of victimization (Silva & Capellan, 2019a) that hinders bystanders from transitioning into potential upstanders.

Research Questions

The following research questions helped to address the identified research gap, which is that little is known about parents' perceptions of mass shooters and mass shootings. The research questions also guided a more in-depth exploration of how the media shapes or cultivates perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings among parents of K–12 students.

Research Question 1: What are parents' perceptions of the individual traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters?

Research Question 2: What sources of information do parents state shaped and influenced their perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings?

Research Question 3: What do parents believe are the best ways to identify and manage a potential mass shooter?

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory

Drawing on Gerbner's (1969) cultivation theory, numerous studies contend that media consumption influences public attitudes on crime (Adriaenssen et al., 2020). Gerbner's theory is perhaps the most referenced framework for understanding how exposure to television content influences public perception of crime seriousness. Cultivation theory indicates that the more a person is exposed to television media, the more likely their perceptions and beliefs are adaptations of the viewed content (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Lett et al., 2004) and assume the symbolic reality constructed by the

media differs from experienced reality (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Appel, 2008; Hetsroni, 2008).

Shi et al. (2019) reported that sensationalized reporting overemphasizes the frequency and prevalence of violence that leads to an exaggerated fear about crime. Cultivation theory likewise asserts that the frequency of sensational media consumption has adverse effects on audiences (Shah et al., 2020). Mass shootings are a type of crime that consistently receive disproportionate media coverage compared to the rarity of their occurrences yielding a distorted estimation of their presence (Hetsroni, 2008). Thus, the more one is exposed to media reporting of mass shootings, the more distorted their perceptions are likely to be as compared to lighter media viewers or those who do not consume media-sourced information (Riddle et al., 2011). Watching television news, reading newspapers (Callanan, 2012), and viewing social media or the internet (Roche et al., 2016) generate a heightened sense of the world as a place riddled with danger and a place to be feared (Lett et al., 2004; Shah, 2020; Shi et al., 2019).

Whereas nearly half of Americans fear being killed in a mass shooting (Fox et al., 2021), consumers are also more apt to support punitive-focused policies and host higher levels of worry about being victimized (Roche et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2020). Despite evidence of consistent, downward trends in crime prevalence, most Americans maintain a rigid baseline belief that crime rates are always on the rise, likely resulting from this disproportionate coverage of rare but emotionally valent events (Shi et al., 2019). Such information is easily accessible and readily available through television, internet, and social media. The availability heuristic posits that people use easily accessible

information to form assumptions about the frequency of events such as mass violence, so

exposure to media messages and images shape social realities (Hetsroni, 2008; Riddle et

al., 2011). The more television or media consumption, the more easily accessible these

messages are in memory (García-Castro & Pérez-Sánchez, 2018) and the more likely the

world will be perceived as a dangerous place (Appel, 2008; Bergan & Lee, 2018;

Saefudin & Venus, 2007).

      In their 2018 paper on cultivation theory as an explanation for fear of crime,

García-Castro and Pérez-Sánchez articulated the concept of narrative transportation to

explain how media shapes a reality rooted in fear. The authors defined this concept as the

individual immersion in content that involves the psychological processes of attention,

emotional implication, and cognitive ability (García-Castro & Pérez-Sánchez, 2018).

When viewing a news story on a criminal event, emotional implication suggests viewers

make emotional connections with the narrative and recruit their imagination to construct

ideas about the event, the offender, and others involved. When explanations of social

reality are unclear, people construct realities to make sense of that which is often

discussed as senseless, and this also tends to result in an overestimation of victimization

(Schildkraut et al., 2018). What cannot be overestimated is how the media, particularly

the contemporary internet, constructs and shares narratives (Raitanen et al., 2019).

      Gerbner et al. (1979) posed that construction of media-informed realities is less

about individual programming but more so the outcome of exposure to repeating ideas

and postulations across media sources. Because of such recurrent exposure to a crime-

saturated media (Callanan, 2012), a mean world view may emerge; people develop a

general skepticism about trusting others and expect that norms, rules, and laws are more likely to be violated than followed (Appel, 2008; Bilandzic et al., 2019). According to the anchoring hypothesis, those frequently exposed to media reports on violent crimes are inclined to view all crimes, even those with minimally harmful consequences, as serious and congruent to the perception of the world as mean (Adriaenssen et al., 2020).

Schutz and Berger's social constructionist model opines that social realities are the offspring of personal experiences, intimate relationships (family and friends), other social groups, and the media (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018). In turn, these sources collectively serve to shape experienced, symbolic, and socially constructed realities. Alitavoli and Kaveh (2018) described each reality construct in their research exploring the impact of media on public perceptions of crime: Experienced reality is the reality garnered from direct interactions with the social world. Symbolic reality is the product of information gained from peers, institutions, and the media—unwitnessed facts believed to be true. Socially constructed reality is the collective byproduct of experienced and symbolic realities. The social constructionist theory aligns with Gerbner's cultivation theory to explain how people make meaning of mass shooters and mass shootings because a worldview is mostly influenced by peers, institutions, and media, and media shapes the ideas of those influential peers and institutions.

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, data were collected through semistructured questionnaire-guided interviews with parents of students enrolled in K–12 schools. The use of open-ended questions and direct participant interviews are

commonly used in phenomenological qualitative research (Buckley, 2022; Wilson, 2015).

Questions and subsequent probes were used to elicit information about participants'

ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about individuals most likely to perpetrate a

mass shooting attack. Additionally, participant questions inquired about the sources of

information participants garner their information about and understanding of mass

shooting events. Qualitative coding analysis of the data was performed to improve the

understanding of commonly held perceptions about the modern-day mass shooter, the

sources of these perceptions, and how popularly held perceptions become barriers to

effective threat assessment and management (Buckley, 2022).

Definitions

Active shooter: An individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill

people in a populated area with a firearm (FBI, 2022).

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM): A multifaceted and

iterative process stemming from a holistic analysis of behavioral patterns that involves

the identification, assessment, and management of a person of concern who may pose a

risk for targeted violence (Amman et al., 2019; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021).

Contagion effect: Reflects the spread of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors between

individual people and groups as facilitated through mass media (Kambam et al., 2020)

that increases the likelihood of their occurrence either in the short term or long term

(Lankford, 2016a).

Copycat effect: The idea that people who are exposed to a given behavior may become more likely to act similarly as a way of imitating the actor's behavior (Lankford, 2016a).

Leakage: When a subject shares information with a third party that reveals clues related to their thinking, planning, or execution of targeted violence (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Legacy token: A communication prepared by an offender to claim credit for an attack and articulate the underlying motives, often in the form of manifestos, videos, social media postings, or other communications deliberately created by a shooter and delivered or staged for discovery by others, usually near in time to the shooting (Silver et al., 2018).

Mass shooting: The intentional killing of four or more people in one or multiple related public or semipublic locations within a 24-hour period using a firearm (Anisin, 2021; Silva & Capellan, 2018a). Such incidents do not include self-defense, gang violence, drug violence, domestic or contained residential disputes, controlled hostage situations, crossfire as a byproduct of a criminal act, or any others that appear not to have endangered others (FBI, 2021b).

Pathway warning behavior or pathway to violence: A series of sequential behaviors that include research, planning, preparation, or implementation of a targeted attack in response to a grievance (Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Fein & Vossekuil, 1995; Meloy et al., 2012).

Pre-attack behaviors: Taxonomy of behaviors indicative of increasing or accelerating risk of targeted violence, which includes fixation, identification, direct threats, novel aggression, pathway warning behavior, leakage, energy burst, or last resort warning behavior (Meloy et al., 2012).

Targeted violence: Violent incidents involving a detectable offender resulting from a series of identifiable of sequential behaviors including ideation, planning, preparation, and probing or breaching (Amman et al., 2019).

Assumptions

The main assumption in this research was that mass shooters have empirically based traits, characteristics, and engage in behaviors that can help identify an individual at increased risk for targeted violence. Another assumption was that parents of children enrolled in K–12 schools lack awareness of such empirical factors and maintain distorted and inaccurate perceptions of who is most vulnerable to commit a mass attack. Additionally, I assumed that parents' perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings are cultivated from information gleaned through media sources, notably television and social media platforms. The ease of access to media sources reporting on a mass shooting in actual or near real time heightens the likelihood of the public to form opinions, theories, and conclusions based on preliminary and unverified information. The outcome is apt to be a skewed perspective of what transpired, why it happened, and a resolve to target gun control and mental illness as principal etiologies or contributing factors. Making such assumption is necessary because it cannot be ruled out that other sources play a role in shaping the perceptions as self-reported by participants. I also assumed that

participants would be truthful in their responses that deem them eligible for study participation.

The emergence of assumptions and conjectures in the wake of hasty and speculative information has been evident after most mass shootings such as the 1999 Columbine massacre that immediately offered heavy metal music, violent video games, and bullying as invalidated contributing factors (Mears et al., 2017). Because of the influence of media and its power to nurture perceptions of mass shooters and mass shootings, I assumed, therefore, that the influence of the media extends beyond the public audience trying to make sense of the violence to future mass shooters who are inspired and influenced by this effectual contagion.

Scope and Delimitations

I am conducting this study to address a knowledge gap in understanding what parents believe are the factors that drive someone to methodically plan, prepare, and engage a mass shooting rampage. Exploration of parental perceptions, and of public perceptions in general, about mass shooters and mass shootings has been relatively untouched. Girard and Aguilar (2019) delved into this area of investigation and studied parents' perceived perceptions of adolescent mass murderers. The purpose of their qualitative study was to establish what behaviors, social characteristics, and personality traits parents of teenagers perceive to indicate a juvenile is at risk for becoming a mass murderer and the sources they acquiesce such information from (Girard & Aguilar, 2019).

Girard and Aguilar (2019) identified four themes that emerged from their research: parents believe juvenile mass murderers tend to be loners, bullied, angry and frustrated, and have issues with their mental health. Importantly, the authors uncovered that the popular myth about mass attackers being loners or outcasts lacks supporting empirical evidence, thus appreciating the potential of all juveniles to enact mass violence regardless of social status. This is not to say that bullying or social isolation cannot or do not have any role in influencing a decision to engage in violence, but rather they are unsupported by empirical evidence refuting causation. Most people who experience bullying never go on to engage in violence (Dutton et al., 2013), and the bullied youth archetype contributes to the stigmatization of already marginalized youth (Silva & Capellan, 2019a, 2019b). Still, the relevance of such circumstances remains worthy of attention for assessing risk for violence as a substantial number of mass shooters who survived endorsed feelings of persecution, bullying, being threatened, or attacked by others (Vossekuil et al., 2002), which Girard and Aguilar (2019) identified in 54% of shooters' personal histories while the Secret Service (2002) discerned that 41% of attackers socialized as mainstream students.

Transferability refers to the potential for data extrapolation whereby findings can be generalized to other settings or groups (Elo et al., 2014). The goal of a qualitative study is to provide more insight about a specific population sample or phenomenon but due to generally small sample sizes, such as in the present study, qualitative results are difficult to generalize broadly (Creswell, 2014). Nonetheless, the results offer a glimpse

into parents' perceptions and may serve as the impetus for even more robust qualitative or more transferable quantitative analyses.

Limitations

The results of this study lack generalizability to broader populations, largely due to the small sample size. Purposeful sampling of parents who have children in K–12 schools but lack formal education and training in areas related to mass shootings or mass violence (i.e., behavioral threat assessment, criminal law, forensic mental health) helps sanitize the response content to optimize responses as reflective of the average community member but excludes those who may have a more empirically aligned perception of underlying drivers of mass shootings and are a part of the broader population.

The objective of phenomenology is consciousness, and the target of study is meaning finding (Song, 2017). Qualitative studies using a phenomenological approach are highly susceptible to researcher-induced bias. Presenting the findings is also a limitation, and qualitative results may be challenging for practitioners to deem as useful. Phenomenological research is also time consuming for both participant and researcher. Any efforts to encourage or persuade patience and continued expansive engagement may influence responses by those who may be reluctant, ambivalent, or hurried due to other obligations or competing interests (Wilson, 2015). Ensuring participants allow for ample time and can be interviewed in a quiet location with minimal to no distractions was likely to help buffer the challenge of time and patience posed by qualitative studies.

Significance

In this study, I explored the traits, characteristics, and individual and collective circumstances that parents of K–12 students attribute to mass shooters. Furthermore, I sought to enlighten what influential and contributing factors cause or influence mass shootings and the main sources of information that shape these perspectives. As a minimally explored topic (Girard & Aguilar, 2019), this study aims to provide greater understanding about what parents believe contribute to or cause mass shootings and detail the nature of such distorted perceptions relative to prevailing research (Amman et al., 2019; Meloy et al., 2012; Silver at el., 2018) that might hinder effective community-integrated prevention. The ability to accurately recognize behaviors that may be a warning to impending violence is critical to effective intervention and subsequent violence prevention.

Exploring what characteristics, traits, and circumstances parents attribute to mass shooters allows for a more precise understanding of exactly how their perspectives are aligned with, or contrary to, existing empirical evidence. Enhanced knowledge of what they believe about mass shootings allows for training and education efforts more targeted and tailored than generalized. Parents and others who readily interact with and observe a person of concern represent high-potential early interventionists long before any research, planning, or preparation for an attack of violence commences. In their 2018 study on the pre-attack behaviors of mass shooters, Silver et al. (2018) found that those most likely to have noticed concerning behaviors before an attack were classmates (92%), spouse/domestic partner (87%), teacher/school staff (75%), family member (68%), or

friend (51%). Therefore, the more aware and informed those with the greatest opportunity for intervention and prevention are, the more likely they are to activate response efforts and thwart a potential attack. Potential mass shooters are subsequently offered greater support during their personal crises and likewise granted opportunities for more prosocial approaches to resolving their underlying conflicts.

Summary and Transition

Despite the rarity with which mass shootings occur, research on the topic has flourished in recent years, much like media coverage of such events has increased exponentially since the Columbine massacre in 1999. The outcome is a popular narrative that mass shootings are a significant threat to national security (Fox et al., 2021) and are generally the result of poorly managed mental illness and gun control (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Researchers and practitioners alike have advocated for modified approaches to reporting on mass shootings and mass shooters so that media reporting limits its use of perpetrator names, images, sensationalized shooter titles and headlines, and tendency to emphasize body count (Lankford, 2016a). Because many mass attackers are motivated by the desire for fame and notoriety to overcome feelings of inadequacy, insignificance, and identity disturbances (Langman, 2020), exaggerated coverage of mass shooters and their attacks provides a relatable antihero to vulnerable and fragile individuals who may be on the fringe of violence to avenge a grievance or perceived injustice (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Additionally, the excessive media coverage dedicated to mass shootings risks shaping viewer perceptions that are empirically distorted and subsequently perpetuate stigmatization of already marginalized populations such as people diagnosed with a

mental illness and people of color (Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019; Haner et al., 2020; McCombs, 2022; Meaux et al., 2020; Schildkraut et al., 2021; Silva & Capellan, 2019a, 2019b).

In Chapter 2, I present contemporary and seminal research in the field with emphasis on research related to mass shootings and targeted violence, circumstances and pre-attack warning behaviors often found in the histories of mass shooters, and the influence of media on shaping perceptions and attitudes about mass shooters and mass attacks. Chapter 2 offers an exhaustive literature review highlighting the empirical risk factors and circumstances commonly found in mass shooters' backgrounds and the methodical trajectory nearly all mass shooters follow from grievance to attack (Amman et al., 2019; Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Meloy et al., 2012; NTAC, 2019, 2020; Silver & Silva, 2022; Silver et al., 2018). Additionally, I explore the role of the media in contributing to perception formation, health consequences for viewers, and its contribution to copycat events and a contagion effect. I offer an extensive review of existing research on the relationship between identity, masculinity (Langman, 2020), mental illness, and various adverse life experiences and mass shootings.

In Chapter 3, I detail the rationale for using a phenomenological, qualitative approach as well as the methodology for sample selection and recruitment, data collection and analysis, issues pertaining to transferability and saturation, limitations, the role of the researcher, biases, ethical considerations, and the significance of the study as it relates to filling a gap in the existing research and potential contribution to social change.

Chapter 4 details the phenomenological, qualitative findings highlighting the perceptions parents hold about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances attributable to mass shooters and an analysis of the data as it compares to existing research on such factors. Two primary themes and five subthemes emerge that capture participants' perceptions of the modern-day mass shooter.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study with emphasis on the purpose and nature of the study. The research is summarized as it relates to contemporary literature on mass shooters and mass shootings and how the study's findings contribute to what is known about the subject matter. Lastly, I discuss research limitations, significance, recommendations for future research, and the study's effect on social change efforts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Research on mass shootings, domestic terrorism, and other forms of targeted violence has blossomed in the last 20 years. Most research has emerged in the aftermath of the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School and the broad perception of mass shootings as an epidemic or public health crisis. Columbine as a watershed event symbolizes the emergence of modern media coverage of mass shootings involving hours, weeks, and months of coverage disproportionate to attack rarity. While the existing research often points to pervasive and distorted beliefs about mass shooting causality by public audiences, mental illness and gun control often emerging as cyclical discourse in the aftermath of nearly all mass attacks, there is an absence of research that explores what people believe about those who commit mass shootings. Whereas the greatest degree of fear of mass attacks centers around school shootings, little is known about what parents believe to be true about mass shooters and mass shootings in and outside of school settings. Girard and Aguilar (2019) explored parental perceptions of adolescent mass shooters in their exploratory analysis, yet a gap remains in understanding the perceptions of all mass shooters including non-adolescent perpetrators of mass shootings.

Existing research points to the significant impact of media exposure on individual or collective perceptions. Gerbner's (1986) cultivation theory frames the profound influence of media exposure on beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. In recent years, research suggests that most people adopt or form perspectives and views of the world and other social issues largely from the information garnered as media consumers. However,

little is known about what types of media have the most significant impact on shaping perceptions. Such understanding may assist in prioritizing platforms (i.e., television, social media apps, internet) for potential outreach efforts to inform and educate about warning signs to look for, strategies for effective response, and debunking of myths that risk further stigmatizing already marginalized or disenfranchised populations.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review search strategy involved accessing multiple scholarly databases, internet search engines, websites, and published texts. The most recurrently used databases were PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, ProQuest Central, Taylor & Francis Online, Homeland Security Digital Library, World Health Organization, and Sage Journals. The most frequently accessed search engine was Thoreau via the Walden University library and Google Scholar, which tended to produce paralleling search results as searches using individual databases. Keyword and key terms searches include various forms of the root terms and some variations of *mass shooter or mass shooting, mass murder, mass murderer, school shooting, school shooter, rampage shooting or shooter, mass homicide, violence risk factors, threat assessment, behavioral threat assessment, threat assessment and management, behavioral threat assessment and management, copycat effect, contagion effect, bullying and violence or mass violence, active shooter, Columbine effect, firearms or guns and mass violence or mass shooting, perception and violence, perception and mass shooting or mass violence, mass violence and perceptions or beliefs or opinions or attitudes, mass shooting and media, mass shooter and traits or characteristics, mass shooting and warning signs or risk factors or red flags, mass*

violence and mental health or mental illness, mass shootings and mental health or mental illness, and *mass shootings or mass violence and parents*.

This exhaustive search consisted of initially targeting data from studies published between 2018 and 2023, a 5-year period from the initiation of literature research. Thereafter, the range was extended back to 1995 to capture foundational and seminal works on the topics of mass shootings, mass violence, and targeted violence prevention. The literature search persisted throughout the duration of this study to ensure the most contemporary research was considered and included where applicable.

Literature Review

Pathway to Targeted Violence

Mass violence is the outcome of multiple social, situational, and psychological factors that interact in multifarious ways that are difficult to predict in advance (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). A key construct proven to effectively identify individuals who may be moving toward an act of targeted violence is the pathway to violence model (Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Fein et al., 1995; Meloy et al., 2012). A preventive approach to violence mitigation, BTAM, the process of identifying, assessing, and managing a potential threat actor, applies the pathway model to assess if a person poses a risk of violence to others. Originally a concept proposed by Fein et al. (1995), and perhaps most well-known for its application by Calhoun and Weston (2003), the pathway to violence suggests potential violent actors methodically plan their attacks through a series of identifiable behaviors moving from grievance to ideation, research and planning,

preparation, breach behavior, and a final act of violence (Amman et al., 2019; Silver et al., 2018).

Homicide reflects a conscious objective motivated by the dynamic intersection of grievances, a need for collecting on a perceived injustice, suicidality, and other biopsychosocial factors (Concordia, 2022). The final act of violence in a targeted attack is the product of a series of planning and preparatory behaviors juxtaposed to the prevailing narrative that mass shooters suddenly snap (Fernandez et al., 2020; Langman et al., 2018). In a study of mass shooters in the United States from 2003–2016, 42% of the offenders evidenced pre-attack warning signs such as threats of violence or violations of protective orders (Chang, 2018). A significant example of research and planning is evident in the pathway behaviors of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter in Newtown, Connecticut. The Sandy Hook shooter created a spreadsheet detailing the actions of more than 500 mass murderers and extensively researched the 1999 Columbine High School shooting (Langman, 2018a). As an individual cultivates extreme beliefs, and as they are likely to become immersed in media content that endorses toxic worldviews, they are apt to experience increasing fixation upon a personal cause and grievance (Kambam et al., 2020).

On May 14, 2022, an 18-year-old radically inspired White male executed 10 Black patrons at a Tops grocery store in Buffalo, New York, in one of the deadliest racially motivated attacks in U.S. history. This attack represented months of ideations, planning, research, preparation, reconnaissance, and leakage behaviors, an approach the counters popular belief that mass shooters suddenly snap. Amarasingam et al. (2022)

delved deep into the Buffalo shooter's pathway to violence and described the concept of

mass shooters learning from the attacks of their predecessors as a "wiki effect" (p. 4).

The concept suggests that with each consecutive attack, aspiring mass shooters use

effective strategies and shortcomings of previous mass shooters to try to perfect their

attack plan and eventual assault by building on the examples provided by others.

For the Buffalo shooter, the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shootings were a

pivotal experience that marked the shooter's transition from ideation and fixation to

identification (Meloy et al., 2012), a key moment when the risk for actualizing violence

notably heightens. The shooter wrote:

> It was then I realized that I could fight our replacement myself, finally I felt
>
> awakened. No longer will I just accept this. I will take the fight to the invaders
>
> myself. I will stand up to defend my race from the decay. From the replacers,
>
> from the Jews that take from us, from the elite that exploit us. I will dedicate my
>
> life to this cause. (Gendron, 2022, April 4 chat log) as cited in Amarasingam et
>
> al., 2022)

The Buffalo shooter sought to inspire future attackers with his written rhetoric and

livestreaming of this attack. He used a helmet-mounted camera to broadcast his

assassination of 10 Black shoppers as he believed that livestreaming would have a

"1000x greater impact" (Gendron, 2021, December 22 chat log as cited in Amarasingam

et al., 2022). The efforts of his research and planning are extensive. He scoured databases

to determine a target location that would optimize his ability to kill the greatest number

of Black people and relied on the internet to assess the ideal target location for his

mission (Amarasingam et al., 2022). His manifesto and online footprint expose how he acquired his weaponry, body armor, video camera, and other supplies for the attack (Amarasingam et al., 2022) as preparatory acts along the path to targeted violence (Amman et al., 2019; Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Meloy et al., 2012; NTAC, 2020; Silver et al., 2018).

An interesting aspect of the case is the frequency with which the shooter wrote about his hesitancy to kill others, which reflects multiple potential opportunities for intervention and redirection off the pathway to targeted violence. In a February 2022 chat log entry, the shooter wrote, "I don't want to kill them like this, but this is the only way. I can't even turn back now. I am trapped to this fate, I can't back out, I have to do this" (Gendron, 2022, February 26 chat log as cited in Amarasingam et al., 2022) and "I can't tell you how much I don't want to do this attack. My only other choice is suicide I can't go back" (Gendron, 2022, March 16 chat log as cited in Amarasingam et al., 2022). Identifying observable behaviors that one is moving from grievance to attack is an opportunity for intervention and a key to prevention.

Leakage and Pre-Attack Warning Behaviors

The NTAC's (2019) study on targeted school violence found that all 41 adolescent offenders identified from January 2008 to December 2017 exhibited concerning behaviors. Warning behaviors across all ages are evidence of psychological preoccupation and movement toward achieving resolution through impending violence (Meloy et al., 2012). Particularly among adolescent mass murderers, the concepts of leakage and directly communicated threats as warning behaviors are quite frequent

(Meloy et al., 2012). Leakage, or the communication of intent to commit violence to those other than the intended target (Amman et al., 2019; Silver et al., 2018; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011), has been determined a significant behavior in trying to identify a potential attacker before they carry out the act. In the sequence of pre-attack behaviors, leakage tends to appear closest to the attack (Silver & Silva, 2022). NTAC (2019) found that most individuals planning to commit a school shooting broadcast their intentions to others, which is consistent with earlier findings in the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education's Safe School Initiative (Vossekuil et al., 2002, 2004).

Warning behaviors leading up to violence have been referred to as signaling the attack (Silver et al., 2018; Vossekuil et al., 2000). In 81% of cases ($n = 37$) that made up the sample of the seminal Safe School Initiative (2004), at least one person had knowledge of the shooter's contemplation or planning of violence; more than one person had awareness in nearly 60% of the 37 cases (Vossekuil et al., 2004). In hindsight for 93% of their cases, attackers' behaviors were described as disturbing by those the attacker had social interactions with. On average, shooters display four to five concerning behaviors over time observable to others (Silver et al., 2018).

Bullying and Mass Shootings

The pathway to violence identifies the presence of a grievance as the impetus for considering and strategizing a targeted attack. What might serve as an attack-triggering grievance for one person may not serve similarly for others. Bullying is one example of an interpersonal stressor often thought to prompt violence as a means of resolution or retribution. While some shooters are socially sidelined, not all are (Lee et al., 2022), and

most people who experience bullying never go on to engage in violence (Dutton et al., 2013). Silva and Capellan (2019a, 2019b) stated that the bullied youth archetype is largely inaccurate and contributes to the stigmatization of already marginalized youth.

Still, a substantial number of mass shooters who survived endorsed feelings of persecution, bullying, being threatened, or attacked by others (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Girard and Aguilar (2019) identified bullying in 54% of shooters' personal histories, but the Secret Service (2002) discerned that 41% of attackers socialized as mainstream students. The perceived relevance of bullying related to mass shootings became an immediate headline and point of discussion following the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Contrarily, Cullen (2009) found that the shooters were not subjected to bullying despite the assumption made by the media (Cullen, 2009, as cited in Dutton et al., 2013; Langman et al., 2018). The narrative that a mass shooter being motivated by bullying runs the risk of inspiring future shooters who may identify and sympathize with a shared experience and serve as the justification to act (Langman et al., 2018).

Even if bullying is unlikely to drive one to commit a mass shooting, it remains a significant concern for the more than 160,000 children who miss school daily due to being bullied (Newman, 2004, as cited in Girard & Aguilar, 2019). In situations where bullying may be the grievance for an eventual mass shooter, homicide serves as a shooter's acquisition and demonstration of power and unwillingness to accept maltreatment by peers (Girard & Aguilar, 2019). Countless youths experience degrees of social ostracization without engaging in violence, so unaccompanied social problems do

not sufficiently explain school shootings (Raitanen et al., 2019). Ultimately, violence in all contexts reflects a dire need to experience a sense of control in a world where one otherwise feels powerless.

Media Coverage and Perception

News media is the primary source of information about crime for the public (Silva & Capellan, 2019b). Researchers propose that the 1966 tower shooting at the University of Texas at Austin marks the introduction of mass public shootings into the cultural lexicon (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Existing literature suggests extensive media attention to mass shootings contributes to public perception of these events (Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019; Haner et al., 2020; Schildkraut et al., 2021). Media outlets are often the first source of information regarding mass violence and the way information is presented may leave enduring impressions on the public (Meaux et al., 2020; Silva & Capellan, 2019a; Silva & Capellan, 2019b.). Beyond mass violence, the media provides people with much information that informs their perceptions of the world in which they live (McCombs, 2022).

Mass murder receives more media coverage than any other type of crime (Croitoru et al., 2020; Silva & Capellan, 2019b). The most common predictor of news worthiness is the number of those wounded and killed (Anisin, 2021; Peterson et al., 2022; Schildkraut et al., 2021; Silva & Capellan, 2019b). This finding aligns with the prevailing media maxim of if it bleeds, it leads (Girard & Aguilar, 2019; Lawrence & Muller, 2003 in Silva & Green-Colozzi, 2019) so some topics, particularly sensational stories (Dahmen et al., 2019) like mass violence, are amplified in their amount of

coverage (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022). Beard et al. (2019) found that nearly 60% of media headlines included body count statistics. Additionally, predictors of media coverage include younger offender age (Silva & Capellan, 2019b), ideological motivation (Anisin, 2021), and the location of the shooting (Beard et al., 2019).

Hidden agendas such as financial interest (Anisin, 2021; Croitoru et al., 2020) and biases influence what information is reported to the public and what information is withheld (Girard & Aguilar, 2019). A monetary incentive to report on marketable issues in extraordinary ways might deter media outlets from reporting on fact if the facts are less sensational (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Subsequently, the media is highly influential in shaping public perceptions, conscious knowledge, and subconscious stereotypes about mass shooters and mass shootings (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019).

The way the media reports information shapes perceptions of issues ranging from mental health, national security, safety, and threats (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022). Media sourced information is chiefly impactful for viewers who do not have personal experience with a particular subject (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; Schildkraut et al., 2018). An application of framing theory suggests that how the media frame central issues shapes perceptions and key assumptions about society and influences both what consumers think about and how they make meaning of social phenomena (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018, Schildkraut et al., 2021). The extent of the event coverage directly impacts public understanding of mass shootings to include the risk of victimization (Silva & Capellan, 2019a).

The media and the public have reciprocal interest in reporting on sensational topics such as violence and crime for people maintain a general interest in matters pertaining to public safety (Anisin, 2021; Croitoru et al., 2020). Nearly 70% of consumers also believe that media coverage contributes to an increase in mass shootings (Schildkraut & McHale, 2018 in Croitoru et al., 2020). The public's interest in mass shootings peaks in the first 24 to 48 hours and gradually declines over a 10-day period (Croitoru et al., 2020). Despite this timeline of interest, media coverage of such incidents tends to last upwards of 31 days, inundating audiences with information and images that shapes understanding of the mass violence phenomenon (Croitoru et al., 2020). With this extended coverage, shooters' legacies are solidified as their names and faces, accompanied by captivating and dramatized headlines, continuously stream across televisions, computers, and cell phones (Amman et al., 2019).

Focusing on extreme social issues has become a recipe for garnering audience attention (Schildkraut et al., 2018). While mass shootings are most likely to be covered by the media if occurring in a school setting and as body count rises (Schildkraut et al., 2018, 2021), the use of firearms influences a greater degree of media coverage, a facet of mass violence that is almost exclusively American (Gruenewald et al., 2009 in Silva & Capellan, 2019b). Mass public shootings have become engrained in America's collective psyche from the vast attention devoted to the issue (Elsass et al., 2016).

An application of agenda setting reveals a significant relationship between the importance the media places on a particular issue and the importance given to that issue by the public audience (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Numerous researchers have discovered

the impact of the media on constructing cultural narratives which not only influence individual perceptions and beliefs, but has influence over political discourse and policymaking (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). The collective impact is what Garland (2008 in Silva & Capellan, 2019a) calls a cultural trauma and accentuates awareness of mass shootings.

School Shootings, the Media, and Perception

The mass murder of students generates a great deal of media attention and publicity and is a significant prognosticator of newsworthiness (Croitoru et al., 2020; Girard & Aguilar, 2019; Silva & Capellan, 2019a, 2019b). The earliest account of a school shooting dates to 1764, though most school shooting events were recorded beginning in 1840 (Croitoru et al., 2020). The exponential attention to school shootings and their high degree of emotional valence contributes to the misleading perception that school shootings are more frequent than the statistical rarity with which they occur (Girard & Aguilar, 2019).

Silva and Capellan (2019a) found that school shootings were 255% likelier to be newsworthy than shootings which occurred in other settings as corroborated by Peterson et al. (2022). Even though school shootings and lone wolf incidents comprise only 32% of all mass shooting events, they found these types of cases yield upwards of 80% of all mass attack coverage. The likelihood of media coverage rises if the school is positioned in a wealthy community since public perception holds that crime only happens in poorer locations (Schildkraut et al., 2018).

A notable and widespread misconception assumes that the mass public shooting phenomenon is a school-based problem and that mass shooters are predominantly alienated youth (Elsass et al., 2016). Such an assumption is dangerous as it risks contributing to false conceptualizations of a shooter profile and overlooks those truly at risk for targeted violence (Silva & Capellan, 2019a).

Impact of Violent Media on Viewer Health and Wellness

The adverse effects of exposure to violent media are dynamic and concerning. In a study by Wormwood et al. (2019), respondents endorsed heightened distress and an increased hyperstartle response when exposed to coverage of mass violence reported in a negative tone. They learned the more one is exposed to media reports on terrorism and mass violence, the greater the risk of poorer mental health, an onset of trauma-based symptoms, and inferior cardiovascular health. The more people were exposed to such negative information the more likely they were to perceive the world as threatening.

The recurrent accounts of random violence in the media have been contended to increase the salience of crime in people's lives, heighten their assessment of risk, and inflate fear (Callanan, 2012). Traditional crime news often depicts a spectrum of reactions from grieving family members which heightens the emotional response of viewers. Callanan (2012) proposes that the elderly, the wealthy, whites, and other low risk populations are likely to experience a greater degree of escalating fear than people from higher risk demographics. Modern crime news compromises nearly one third of all television news and is intended to entertain through intentional emphasis on outlying and unusual crimes (Surette, 2007).

A study by O'Brien and Taku (2022) supports Wormwood et al.'s findings suggesting amplified anxiety levels result from cognitive recalibrations after exposure to information on mass shootings. Additionally, exposure to violent-themed media risks influencing hostile appraisals (Bushman, 2016) and influences a heightened sense of victimization (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). The implications are significant as they endorse consideration of modifying how news outlets report on mass shootings may benefit viewer wellness.

Mass shootings may challenge the idea of a benevolent world (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017) and stimulate a mean world view that others are not to be trusted and likely to be law, rule, and norm defying (Appel, 2008; Bilandzic et al., 2019). After the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting during which a 29-year-old man murdered 49 and wounded more than 50 club goers in Orlando, Florida, Ben Ezra et al. (2017) found elevated levels of psychological distress in 13% of their sample population. In the same study, 7% of respondents endorsed a negative perception of the world and their outlook on the future. Traumatic events, whether directly experienced or witnessed vicariously, undermine one's core values and views of the world (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017) and continual coverage of mass attacks promotes a disaster narrative, a misguided conceptualization of this social problem and disproportionate fear (Silva & Capellan, 2019a).

Imitators, Copycats, and the Contagion Effect

Mass shootings are prominent epidemiological issues in the United States with questions regarding their contagiousness (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021). Much of the work surrounding mass shootings and the potential for a copycat offense, contagion effect, or

imitation is rooted in research on the impact of media reporting about suicides and a

subsequent contagion effect. Contagion and copycat concepts both refer to how people

may become more prone to behaving similarly to those on display before them, most

often through media exposure (Lankford, 2016a). Vulnerable youth may be more

susceptible to suicidal ideation when exposed to reports of suicide in mass media, a

similar finding regarding homicide and mass violence (Thompson, 2011). Media reports

of suicide have consistently been shown to increase rates of suicide in viewers (Perrin,

2016).

Applicable to mass shootings, a contagion effect would exist if a single incident

increased the likelihood of other mass shootings soon thereafter (Langman, 2018a;

Meindl & Ivy, 2017). The concept of contagion in mass violence is concerned with the

tendency for behavioral imitation and conferring of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors

through the media (Kambam et al., 2020).

Mass killings involving firearms are often inspired by similar events, particularly

other mass attacks that occur within a period of 13 days following an attack (Schildkraut,

2019; Thompson, 2011; Towers et al., 2015). After 13 days, this heightened period for

contagion risk declines (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021; Schildkraut, 2019). The prospect of a

school shooting increases with the number of tweets talking about school shootings

whereas the probability of a shooting in the following week doubles when the tweets

increase from 10 to 50 tweets per million (Garcia-Bernardo et al., 2020). Stressed

individuals may be more vulnerable to kill based on media-facilitated inspiration (Towers

et al., 2015). Due to the rarity of mass shootings, truly understanding the effect of media coverage on future incidents is complicated (Fox et al., 2021).

The concept of a copycat effect refers to peoples' imitation of modeled behavior (Lankford, 2016a; Meindl & Ivy, 2017) whereas a contagion effect suggests that behaviors can spread like a virus and increase the likelihood of another occurrence (Lankford, 2016a; Towers et al., 2015). Excessive media attention on mass shooters risks turning violent criminals into role models and de facto celebrities for those who may be vulnerable and considering targeted violence (Lankford, 2016a).

School shooters and mass shooters alike have fans around the world. The advent of the internet and social media have made it easier to research, study, emulate, and immortalize previous mass attackers. School shooters frequently use social media to leak clues about their grievances, violent ideations, plans, and preparations that serve to inform and inspire future imitators (Raitanen et al., 2019).

Peter Langman has done extensive research and writing on mass shootings, school shootings, and the concepts of contagion, copycats, and imitation. He found at least 32 attackers who endorsed the Columbine shooters as role models, and at least eight others who felt similarly about a shooter who fatally gunned down 32 and wounded 17 others (Langman, 2017b). Some perpetrators identify similarities between a prior mass shooter and themselves aiding the transition from interest and fixation to identification. Identification may be communicated through appearance, clothing, references, behaviors, and pop culture symbols and is often shared on social media. This notion of contagions, copycats, and imitation are not exclusively contemporary. Within three weeks after the

1966 shooting at the University of Texas at Austin and a mass murder of nurses in

Chicago, Illinois, a Texas teenager shot and killed someone. At the time of his arrest, he

stated, "I've been thinking about why I did it. I wanted to have fun like the guys in

Chicago and Austin who had fun killing people" (Lavergne, 1997, p. 259 in Langman,

2017b).

Inspiration from prior attackers is also garnered through pilgrimages to the

locations of the mass shootings. Langman (2017b) describes an 18-year-old who

convinced his mother to drive him cross country to Littleton, Colorado where he visited

Columbine High School, drove to the home of one of the shooters, bought a black trench

coat akin to those the pair wore, and stopped by the pizza shop where both shooters

worked. Many impressionable persons, especially the vulnerable young, sympathize with

perpetrators whom they view as taking justified revenge on those who had wronged them

in some way (Fox et al., 2021; Langman, 2018a). Often, these pliable admirers see

reflections of themselves in previous mass shooters and may attempt to replicate or

surpass their violence and body count (Lankford, 2016a).

Fame and Notoriety

Fame and notoriety are common motives for mass shooters. Mass shootings

receive extensive media attention due to their extreme violence (Vasturia et al., 2018).

Infamy gained through news reports confers a new degree of significance and social

status to the shooter (Meindl & Ivy, 2017) and many shooters contact the media directly

to aid in the acquisition of fame (Lankford, 2016a). Some mass attackers regard mass

homicide as a vehicle to move from insignificance or inadequacy to a position of

importance or power, even if posthumously (Fox & Levin, 2022). Gaining notoriety is a way of reclaiming social capital or feeding one's narcissism (Kambam et al., 2020).

Such media coverage is consequential by gratifying the shooter's goals and serving as a template for future violent actors (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Silva and Greene-Colozzi (2019) learned that fame seekers were more likely to be covered in the *New York Times* (95.6%) than shooters whose motivation was not primarily fame-seeking (74.1%), with an average of 50 and 9 articles about the shootings respectively. In 2015, 2017, and 2018, articles about mass shootings were among the 100 most read stories in the *New York Times* (Croitoru et al., 2020). Mass shooters receive more coverage during the month after their attack than celebrities, Super Bowl champions, and Academy Award winners (Lankford, 2018a).

When fame is the primary motivation to commit mass murder, body and injury counts rise to an average of 7.6 victims per incident rather than an average of 3.45 victims per incident when the motivation is otherwise (Lankford, 2016a; Silva & Greene-Colozzi, 2019). The relationship between fame-seeking and fatality count is evident in numerous mass shootings such as Virginia Tech (2007), Pulse Nightclub (2016), and Marjory Stoneman Douglas (2018). The Columbine shooters fantasized about posthumous glory and were accurate in their prediction that their lives would be immortalized in television and movies (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Even where fame is not a primary motivation, notoriety comes with media coverage of mass shootings and exponentially increases as body count tallies rise (Peterson et al., 2022). The public's infatuation with these rare tragedies is a reminder to angry and dispirited individuals that

picking up a gun and opening fire on those perceived to be responsible will foster desired notoriety (Fox et al., 2021).

Lankford (2016b) offered that those mass shooters who do carry a diagnosis of a SMI such as schizophrenia or posttraumatic stress disorder may seek fame via mass violence to compensate for their high rates of suicidality in the wake of social marginalization. In such cases, fame may be less about infamy and legacy but more about a desperate need to feel connected to society, experience a sense of personal significance, and overcome the increased rates of suicidality (Lankford, 2018b). Subsequent fame from media coverage is an instantaneous reward for the shooter, an incentive for future offenders to act, and suggests a need to address media coverage of mass shootings to deter future fame-seeking offenders (Anisin, 2021; Lankford, 2016a; Lankford & Madfis, 2018). As the April 2014 FedEx shooter stated, "a life lived in infamy is better than just another nobody" (Visser, 2014 in Langman et al., 2018).

Protected Class Considerations: Race, Ethnicity, Religion, and Gender

Perpetrators of mass shootings span different races, ethnicities, ages, and while a predominantly male phenomenon (Schildkraut et al., 2021), mass shootings and other forms of targeted violence have been perpetrated by women as well (Anisin, 2021). That said, mass shootings by female offenders were considered far less newsworthy (Anisin, 2021) but if ignored, the consequences could be catastrophic (Girard & Aguilar, 2019). However, the media tends to focus on shootings carried out by younger attackers, those of Middle Eastern descent, and those whose motivation is ideologically based (Croitoru

et al., 2020). Race, ethnicity, victim counts, and school settings have been linked to the likelihood of news coverage (Schildkraut et al., 2018).

Duxbury et al. (2018) found that race strongly predicts the likelihood of enhanced media coverage. News framing greatly shapes viewers' perceptions of race and crime (DeFoster & Swalve, 2022). Mass shootings carried out by whites tend to yield mental illness as a causation (Anisin, 2021) and the shooter is more likely portrayed with redeeming personality traits and as a victim of his illness or circumstances (Duxbury et al., 2018; Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019). White shooters tend to be described as more sympathetic compared to Blacks or Latinos who are stereotyped as unendingly and expectedly violent (Anisin, 2021). Latino shooters are less apt to be framed through a mental health lens than whites, yet such framing is far more likely than if the shooter is Black (Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019).

When racial stereotypes are applied to mass shootings, the risk of moral panic rises. Meloy (2014) defines moral panic as the way in which the public reacts to a real or perceived threat in response to a superfluity of information from the media. When a particular group is deemed responsible for a social problem, moral panic influences the perception of that racial, ethnic, or cultural group as a folk devil (Duxbury et al., 2018). The folk devil label equates to having less worth and victim worthiness is one of the most salient predictors of media coverage (Schildkraut et al., 2018).

Research points to disproportionate media coverage of mass violence perpetrated by people of Middle Eastern descent or Muslim faith (Anisin, 2021) which produces more international headlines than attacks by non-Muslims (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022;

Silva & Capellan, 2019a). A shooter of Middle Eastern descent is 28 times more likely to receive news coverage than shooters from other ethnic backgrounds (Anisin, 2021). Anti-Muslim sentiment enhances perceived blameworthiness to conform with the viewer's negative narratives about Muslims and terroristic activities (Mercier et al., 2018). Anisin (2021) reports that a shooter's background is a leading influence for newsworthiness.

Stereotype amplification theory offers that out group stereotypes (non-white) are susceptible to an exaggerated perception of risk (Quillan & Pager, 2010, as cited in Haner et al., 2020). Perceptions of culpability are inextricably linked to extant social hierarchies (Hier, 2008). After a mass shooting, people are likely to defer to the stereotypes they hold for explanation in lieu of any further investigation (Haner et al., 2020). Beard et al. (2019) emphasize the concern with racially, ethnically, or culturally disparate reporting as risking misrepresentation of mass violence epidemiology and hindering evidence-based approaches to prevention and intervention.

Approaches to Reporting

Since the turn of the century, threat assessment professionals, practitioners, researchers, and others invested in the prevention of targeted violence have proposed a call to action to alter the ways the media reports on mass shootings. In his book *Trigger Points* (2021), journalist Mark Follman submits to his journalist peers to consider how they disseminate information about mass shootings across all settings.

The World Health Organization (WHO) published several media guidelines for reporting suicide deaths that apply to reporting practices for mass violence. The WHO recommends avoiding sensationalizing language and imagery; presenting actual solutions

to problems; avoiding repetition of stories; avoiding explicit narratives of the method;

and providing information about where to seek help (Perrin, 2016). A similar campaign

to media coverage of underage mass shooters, Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them,

But Report Everything Else, has proven successful in Canada. Thus, Lankford (2016a)

suggests that if such an approach targeting anonymity works for minor-aged offenders,

the same approach could be efficacious for offenders of all ages across all locations.

A 2017 study by Meindl and Ivy proposed that the media avoid sensationalizing

topics such as suicide, mass shootings, and school shootings. They offer a paralleling

strategy for reporting that entails avoiding prominent headlines, refraining from repeating

the story frequently, avoiding details about self-harming methods that might serve as a

template for future offenders, and limiting use of the perpetrators image or images of

violent scenes. They conceptualize this approach for reporting on suicides and apply it as

a shared approach to reporting on mass violence. Other suggestions include disseminating

information through written updates to minimize overall interest in the carnage and

diffuse the potential for notoriety, fame, and imitation. Lankford (2016a) offered

comparable guidance that recommends not naming the perpetrator, avoiding use of

offender photographs, refraining from comparatives to past mass shooters, and focusing

on details of the crime that serve to promote greater understanding and prevention of

targeted mass violence. Another benefit may be the inclusion of media commentary by

psychiatrists and threat assessment experts in the aftermath of mass shootings to

encourage public education and stigma reduction (Kambam et al., 2020).

The likelihood of such adjustments to media reporting may unappealing to media outlets who have financial interest in sensational storytelling. Meindl and Ivy (2017) suggest that enhancing public awareness of the relationship between media and the imitation of violence may stimulate an outpouring of public pressure on the media.

Mental Illness or Mental Unwellness

Mass violence is caused by multiple social, situational, and psychological factors that interact with one another in complex ways that are poorly understood and difficult to predict in advance (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). In the aftermath of nearly all mass shootings, there is a rekindled discourse about faulty mental health systems, poorly controlled access to firearms, and an urgent need for legislative reform (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; McGinty et al., 2013).

The mental health frame largely emerged as the central topic of discussion regarding perceived causes of mass violence after the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut (Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019; McGinty et al. 2014) though the relationship between violence and mental illness is tenuous (Fernandez et al., 2020). Shootings that occur in public places have significantly higher odds of invoking the mental illness frame (Duxbury et al., 2018).

The relationship between SMI and violence is complex with violence generally being attributable to comorbid factors such as substance use (McGinty et al., 2013). People who commit mass murder are unquestionably not psychologically healthy (Langman et al., 2020) but mental health symptoms or mental unwellness, as found in

more than 60% of mass shooters (Silver et al., 2018), are not analogous to having a mental illness.

The media tend to focus on perpetrators suffering from actual or perceived mental illness and through a negative slant on reporting, they have thus contributed to growing negative attitudes about people with an SMI (Hammarlund et el., 2020; Silva & Capellan, 2019a; Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). The same is often true when political leaders speak on the matter and perpetuate the stigmatization of the mentally ill through unfounded assumptions and assertions (Kambam et al., 2020). After the 2019 mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, President Donald J. Trump decreed, "Mental illness and hatred pull the trigger. Not the gun." (Abutaleb & Wan, 2019 in Peterson et al., 2022). Despite such rhetoric, when a perpetrator is described as mentally ill, reporting tends to have less of an angry tone than if the perpetrator were Muslim, Black, or Hispanic (Hammarlund et al., 2020).

Research from the Pew Research Center (2018) reported that 86% of American teenagers believe restricting those with an SMI from having guns and improving mental health treatment will decrease school shootings (Meaux et al., 2020). Media portrayals of violent persons with SMI catalyze negative attitudes toward persons with an SMI diagnosis (McGinty et al., 2013). Biases against individuals with an SMI stem from flawed assumptions that they are inherently more violent, dangerous and unpredictable (Meaux et al., 2020) when in reality, people with an SMI commit less than 5% of violent crimes in the United States (Peterson et al., 2022). This assumption is fueled by the news media (McGinty et al., 2014), which disproportionately emphasizes a link between

mental illness and violence (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). In a survey of nearly 1,000 randomly selected Americans, 63% of respondents believed that public mass shootings in the United States are primarily a result of mental health problems, far greater than the 23% who believed they are caused by inadequate gun control (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020).

There is a natural appeal to assume mental illness as an explanation for mass shootings, mass murder, and other horrific and rare types of violence (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). There is a tendency for people to develop causal stories about the world around them that rationalize and explain events, behaviors, and conditions (Haider-Markel & Joslyn (2011; Kambam et al., 2020). Those who have more exposure to people with an SMI are more apt to recognize the weak relationship between mental illness and violence and are less likely to perpetuate stigma (Wilson et al., 2016). As stigmatization persists, the outcome is greater hesitancy for people with an SMI to seek out or continue engagement in mental health treatment (McGinty et al., 2013). Following mass shootings in Florida and Virginia, violence-related stigmatizing messaging increased 113% and 300% respectively (Budenz et al., 2019). Still, access to mental health care may help prevent mass shootings in a minority of cases but should not be considered as the solution to preventing mass shootings (Peterson et al., 2022).

Negative attitudes towards the mentally ill are abetted by a lack of understanding their circumstances (Duxbury et al., 2018) and fosters an us versus them perception of those who appear dissimilar applying a social identity theoretical framework (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022). In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, a spike in Google searches for the terms mental health and gun(s) was observed the following week (Vargas et al.,

2020). This reaction likely reflects an attempt to reconcile one's confusion, fear, and curiosity about these events and the perceptually enigmatic figures that perpetrate them (Vargas et al., 2020).

Peterson et al. (2022) conducted a systematic analysis to explore the role of psychosis in mass shootings. Psychosis describes perceptual disturbances that encompasses delusions (fixed false beliefs), hallucinations (perceiving something across all senses that is not there), and cognitive distortions (i.e., confusion or other disrupted patterns of thought). They found that psychotic symptoms bore no relevance in 69% of cases, a minor role in 11% of cases, a moderate role in 9% of cases, and a major role in 11% of cases. The authors noted that psychosis appears a poor proxy for dangerous people, yet pointedly state that dangerous weapons stay dangerous no matter who is holding them. Among people with SMI, general risk factors like substance abuse, antisocial traits, anger, and a history of maltreatment are stronger predictors of violence than psychosis or other clinical factors (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). They also found that those with and without SMI who engaged in a mass shooting used psychotropic medications proportionately. The same risk factors arouse violence for people with and without an SMI.

The sheer presence of SMI does not establish causality in mass shootings and most people with SMI living in the community are not violent (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Nearly all general violence (96%) would continue even if the elevated risk of violence among people with SMI was eliminated (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Still, public perception holds that mental illness contributes to mass violence far more significantly

than access to firearms (McGinty et al., 2013). This perception is often reinforced in entertainment media as people with mental illness are portrayed as homicidal maniacs (Corrigan & Watson, 2002 as cited in Skeem & Mulvey, 2020) and such media portrayals can shape negative attitudes (Vargas et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2016). Public response may include social distancing from this group and further marginalize and isolate the mentally ill (Vargas et al., 2020).

Profiling Mass Shooters

In the discipline of BTAM, it is widely accepted that a profile for mass shooters does not exist (Amman et al., 2019). The profiling model frequently employed by law enforcement agencies such as the FBI has reaped benefits for identifying serial killers but lacks applicability to mass shooters. Attempts to profile a mass shooter risks applying labels to persons who may never engage in targeted violence while those who are ideating, planning, and preparing go unattended. Several high-profile school shootings have led to attempts to diagnose and characterize mass shooters (Dutton et al., 2013) and while a profile cannot be determined, there are empirically based risk enhancing factors that are frequently found in the histories of mass shooters that help in assessing who may be at elevated risk for targeted violence. Still, no accurate profile of school shooters or other mass shooters exists (Girard & Aguilar, 2019).

A 2018 study of pre-attack behaviors by James Silver, Andre Simons, and Sarah Craun of the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit stands as one of the most comprehensive and current analyses of mass attackers (Silver et al., 2018). Their findings support the suggestion that a mass shooter profile cannot be established as the 63 shooters analyzed

lacked any demographic uniformity. Nonetheless, mass shooters may be identified proactively given each shooter displayed about four to five concerning behaviors as they moved along the pathway to violence that were observed or observable by others. Their pathway trajectory was not shrouded in secrecy as signs of mental health changes, confrontational interpersonal interactions, and leakage were prominent.

Age is another demographic that is not predictive of mass violence as shooters range in age from 12 to 88 years old with an average age of 37.8 years (Langman et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2018). Shooters have come from a myriad of socioeconomic circumstances, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations (Anisin, 2021). Not all risk factors have equal value (Meloy et al., 2012), but where a profile does not exist, most mass shooters appear to move toward violence sequentially from personal stressors to residual mental health concerns, to increasingly aggressive behavior, and finally to engagement in planning and preparing their assault (Silver & Silva, 2022). Active shooters typically experience an average of 3.6 stressors in the year preceding their attack while concerning behaviors are often observed more than two years earlier (Silver et al., 2018). A profile may not exist, but attention to behavioral trends and patterns appears beneficial to disrupting the pathway to targeted violence.

O'Toole's Four-Pronged Model

In 2000, FBI profiler Mary Ellen O'Toole (ret.) penned a seminal work on school threat assessment aptly titled The school shooter. In her article, she proposes a four-pronged model of factors that should be considered when assessing a student who may pose a risk for targeted violence. This four-pronged model guides the remainder of this

section to frame risk enhancing variables for both student and non-student mass shooters. More recent research should be considered cautiously whereas it points to male gender, experienced bullying, signs of mental illness, fascination with weapons, and being a loner as the most significant risk factors associated with school shootings specifically (Ioannou et al., 2018 as cited in Campbell et al., 2022). There is no single variable that predicts targeted violence, but a structured approach to risk assessment promotes objectivity and minimizes susceptibility to bias infiltration (Amman et al., 2019).

Personality Factors

A personality disorder reflects an enduring, pervasive, and inflexible pattern of internal experience and behavior with typical onset in adolescence or early adulthood that manifests as certain maladaptive attitudes, behaviors and thought patterns (Amman et al., 2019). Personality traits that are commonly identified in those who perpetrate mass shootings include low frustration tolerance, pathological narcissism, lack of empathy, externalization of blame, and difficulties tolerating and coping with criticism, rejection, humiliation, or failure (O'Toole, 2000). Such individuals may have a history of stalking, harassment, threats, and menacing behavior that exposes a wanton disregard for the well-being and safety of others (Amman et al., 2019).

Many individuals who go on to commit mass violence have previously engaged in rule breaking, lack of compliance with laws or supervision stipulations, and a generally aggressive manner of interaction with others in the social world (Amman et al., 2019). These people pose significant challenges for threat managers who depend on the person of concern to cooperate with recommended or mandated interventions.

As discussed in the context of pre-attack warning behaviors, leakage (Amman et al., 2019; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; O'Toole, 2000; Silver et al., 2018) is the intentional or unintentional revelation of clues that one is experiencing thoughts, feelings, or fantasies about being violent. Leakage may be discernible as boasting, threatening comments, innuendos, ultimatums, insignias, tattoos, classroom assignments, journals, or drawings (O'Toole, 2000). Sequentially, leakage is most likely to manifest near the time of attack (Silver & Silva, 2022) whether via social media posts, general conversations with others, or in the form of legacy tokens. The FBI defines legacy tokens as a method of communication to claim credit for an act of violence while shedding light on their motives; these surface in about 30% of mass shooting cases (Silver et al., 2018). Legacy tokens may be produced as manifestos, videos, or social media postings (Silver et al., 2018). Leakage is qualified as a personality factor since the motivation for creating such content is often driven by a pathological narcissism, sense of entitlement and superiority, ideas of grandeur, and the need for attention.

Amman et al (2019) have used the term brittle to describe individuals who struggle to tolerate criticism, rejection, or slights and often endorse feeling targeted, persecuted, or outcasted from friends, family, and the social world. Such individuals tend to brood and obsess over every injustice regardless of whether the perceived injustice is reality-based or delusional (Amman et al., 2019).

Research points to loss of a romantic relationship (Fox & Levin, 2022) and failed sex pair bonding, failure to establish intimate relationships, as risk factors for targeted violence (Goodwill & Meloy, 2019; Meloy & Gill, 2016; O'Toole, 2000). Failure to form

a relationship with a partner of the opposite sex may contribute to feelings of inadequacy or rejection and spark rage from this narcissistic injury as evident in the case of the 2014 Isla Vista killings. The grievance of rejection may lead to preoccupied ideation and fixation that one must assume the identity of an injustice collector to avenge the perceived wrongdoing (O'Toole, 2000). At the time of their attack, most adult-aged shooters had never been married (51%), were divorced or separated (22%), still had social support as they lived with someone else regardless of age (average 66%), and all either lived with someone or had an intact online social network (Silver et al., 2018). Thus, many opportunities existed to observe concerning behaviors and intervene accordingly.

Personality factors in potential mass shooters present various opportunities for identification of behavioral concerns and responsive intervention. Unlike the isolated brooding, ideating, and planning of a future attacker, behaviors such as the dehumanization of others, blame externalization (Fox & Levin, 2022), arrogance and entitlement, poor anger management, or attempts to manipulate others are far more observable (O'Toole, 2000). Such individuals are often rigid in their thinking, suffer from low self-esteem, are distrusting, and are socially withdrawn, all of which represent observable warning signs of elevated violence risk (O'Toole, 2000).

A significant, often symbiotic relationship exists between mass violence and suicidality. A history of suicidality, thoughts that reflect loss of hope, often accompany ideations of violence toward others (Amman et al., 2019). In matters of murder-suicide, suicide is most often the root cause with homicide being a virtuous byproduct in the name

of glory, mercy, justice, or duty (Joiner, 2014). Airline hijackers on September 11, 2001, took their own lives and the lives of thousands more in the name of glory, duty, justice, and a collective ideology. At the time of theirn attack, 90% of of mass shooters were suicidal (n = 30), showed signs of suicidal ideation prior to their attack, and 23% had engaged in prior suicide attempts (Silver et al., 2018).

Peterson and Densley (2021) found that 71% of mass attackers were suicidal at the time of their offense and more than 40% of mass shooters exhibited signs of personal crisis years or months before their attack. Suicide is a common contemplation amongst mass shooters prior to an attack that may influence their drive to punish those whom they perceive as contributing to their misery and plight (Amman et al., 2019).

A history of criminality may evident in people less apt to adhere to laws, rules, and norms, yet the minority of mass shooters (35%) will have a criminal conviction prior to an active shooting event (Silver et al., 2018). Of the offenders in their study (n = 55), Silver et al. determined that 14% of that 35% had a history of misdemeanor or felonious property crime and 11% of the 35% had crimes against persons (Silver et al., 2018). Antisociality appears more often as 62% had a history of abusive or harassing behaviors such as school or workplace bullying, 11% engaged in stalking or unwanted pursuit and approach behaviors, while 16% engaged in prior intimate partner violence (Silver et al., 2018). A 2020 Bloomberg analysis of 749 mass attacks from 2014-2020 identified that 60% of those attacks were either domestic violence attacks or committed by men with histories of domestic violence (Gu, 2020).

The presence of anger is also notable in most mass shootings according to a 2020 study by Fernandez et al. The authors reasoned that mass shootings reflect physical representations of anger as retaliatory (72%), externalizing (72%), punitive (81%) and are carefully planned, strategically executed, and highly controlled (80%). In their study, they found anger to be contributing factor in 70% of all mass shooting which contests the popular narrative that mass shootings are random or senseless (Fernandez et al., 2020).

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics are patterns of behavior, thinking, beliefs, traditions, roles, customs, and values that exist in a family (O'Toole, 2000). Family problems are prominent in the histories of mass attackers and may represent any area for targeted management and intervention in the context of a threat assessment (Silver & Silva, 2022). Disruption to the family unit from divorce, separation, or loss may be experienced as abandonment or rejection and represent an injustice in an unfair world (O'Toole, 2000). High-risk adolescents who offend criminally as adults are frequently raised in single-parent homes or by extended family with high rates of physical and sexual abuse (Abel et al., 2021). Such disruptions may hinder the family acting as a supportive resource and source of stability and more so if the disruption is marked by hostility, conflict, or violence.

When it comes to youth violence mitigation, parents' acceptance of pathological behavior may contribute to a struggling child's pathological behavior and acceptance of violence as a strategy for problem solving (O'Toole, 2000). Parents who do not recognize concerning behaviors or are defensive or indifferent when concerns arise may be telling

their child that they endorse or approve of their conduct. Such a response may also inform the struggling child that the parents do not recognize the behavior as an indication of a personal crisis and view the response as dismissive, uncaring, and invalidating.

An unhealthy home life can enhance violence risk. An absence of intimacy in the family or a family that moves frequently may foster an environment of instability and insecure familial attachments (O'Toole, 2000). Inattentive attachment figures risk missing opportunities to recognize warning signs of potential violence toward self or others or remain unaware of concerning content being routinely observed on television, cell phones, or the internet (O'Toole, 2000).

In recent years, more parents are being prosecuted for their failure to protect weapons access in the home (Thompson, 2011; Williams, C., 2022) as may be reflective of inattentive or chaotic parenting (Amman et al., 2019). Unattended or unsecured weapons heighten the potential for recklessness and may present a critical opportunity for the would-be shooter to move from planning to preparation. Mass shooters access firearms legally and intentionally for their attack plan in 40% of cases (Silver et al., 2018). Only 2% of firearms used in mass attacks are purchased illegally, 6% are stolen, and 11% are borrowed or taken from someone known to the shooter (Silver et al., 2018). 35% of shooters had firearms in their possession prior to planning or preparing for an attack. The data calls for prioritized attention to safeguard firearms that, while not the cognitive motivator for violence, unequivocally contributes to high body counts and exponentially greater lethality (Silver et al., 2018).

Organizational Dynamics

Organizational dynamics, as adapted from O'Toole's (2000) conceptualized school dynamics prong, are patterns of behavior, thinking, beliefs, customs, traditions, roles, and values that exist in an organizational culture.

Nearly 95% of mass shooters are men (Silver et al., 2018). Regarding employment, men more than women encapsulate a sense of identity through their professional role and are more inclined to experience greater psychological distress in the wake of unemployment (Fox & Levin, 2022). At the time of the shooting, the number of shooters who were employed or unemployed was consistent (Silver et al., 2018). Job volatility may contribute to financial and residential instability as have proven weighty when assessing factorial risk relevance. Adverse employment experience and financial strain were contributing stressors for 35% and 49% of mass shooters between 2000 and 2013 respectively, the former identified as the most common grievance amongst mass shooters (Amman et al., 2019; Silver et al, 2018).

An individual's relationship to their institution of learning appears to have significance as it relates to mass violence. O'Toole (2000) offers that a student's detachment from their school, peers, teachers, or activities increases the risk of a threat. Meloy and White's (2016) Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk (WAVR-21 v3), a 21-item coded instrument for the structured assessment of workplace and campus targeted violence risk, lists extreme attachment to one's school or job as a risk factor for targeted violence. The more one feels connected to their place of learning or work, the

greater the loss they are likely to experience in the wake of a suspension, expulsion, or termination.

Concerning student behavior shares applicability to employee concerning behavior. Risk enhancers for both students and employees may include inequitable discipline, tolerance for misconduct, codes of silence, and a social structure of inequity (O'Toole, 2000). Where shootings occur on college campuses, the shooters are most likely to be a graduate student responding to academic pressure (Campbell et al., 2022). Of the 55 mass shooters analyzed in the FBI study on pre-attack behaviors, Silver et al. (2018) discerned that the educational level for 36% of shooters was unknown but where education level could be identified, 76% had completed high school or attended a community or four-year college.

Social Dynamics

Social dynamics are patterns of behavior, thinking, beliefs, customs, traditions, and roles that exist in the larger community where one lives. This domain covers a range of stressors such as rejections, consequences for misconduct, interpersonal conflicts, and the desire to achieve fame (Langman, 2020).

Concerning social dynamics may include an intense or preoccupying interest in violent media, violent themes, violent imagery, hate or extremist ideologies, other mass shootings, and prior mass shooters perceived as role models (Amman et al., 2019; O'Toole, 2000; Silver et al., 2018). Much of this information can be readily accessed on internet and social media sites, so poor monitoring of youths' use of television, social media, and cell phones fosters more opportunities for a potential attacker to discretely

research, plan, prepare, and spiral into a state of fixation and identification (Meloy et al.,

2012; O'Toole, 2000). Video games are often pegged as contributors to violence,

particularly role-playing games where the success of a mission depends on tactical,

militaristic strategy to kill enemies with a selection of high-powered firearms. However,

there is no existing evidence that supports a significant relationship, let alone one of

causation, between playing video games and perpetrating a mass shooting (Salam &

Stack, 2018).

Langman's Typologies of Mass Shooters

While threat assessors and violence preventionists concur that a profile for mass

shooters cannot be established, clinical psychologist and school shooter expert Peter

Langman offers a classification system of three school shooter categories that can be

logically extended to mass shooters regardless of target location (Langman, 2020;

Langman et al., 2018). The authors emphasize that people who commit mass shootings

are unwell, but they do not all experience psychological distress uniformly.

The first typology, psychopathic shooters, are perhaps the most akin to the

sadistic antagonists in television and cinema. These individuals tend to have high degrees

of pathological narcissism, are devoid of empathy, experience a sense of entitlement, and

are quick to anger when their wants or needs are not met. Psychotic shooters also

experience at least one symptom of a psychotic disorder (e.g., hallucinations, delusions)

and tend to struggle with their social–emotional functioning. Subsequently, they are

vulnerable to becoming depressed and looking at others with envy. Lastly, traumatized

shooters have dysfunctional family histories that may include early exposure to violence

in the home and/or adult criminality and substance use. These typologies do not equate to a mass shooter profile but offer a constellation of factors that help distinguish the influencing circumstances and motivations across school shooters.

Considerations of Masculinity and Identity

Peter Langman (2020) offers a comprehensive analysis of multiple mass shooters and the influence of identity and masculinity on their decision to commit mass violence. There is no evidence to support issues pertaining to image or identity as causal factors, but there is compelling evidence to support these constructs as enhancing risk for targeted violence and warranting attention.

There is a theme of using violence to experience a degree of power and control across many mass shootings. Some offenders assume a hypermasculine warrior mentality or pseudo-commando persona personified by various symbols of dominance such as assault weapons or militaristic costuming (Fox & Levin, 2022).

Langman (2020) offers a comprehensive analysis of the role of body-related issues, sexuality, masculinity, and identity in which he speaks of body-related issues as factors that might negatively affect positive male identity, bring about teasing, and hinder success with dating and heterosexual courtships. To highlight the impact of body-related factors such as physical defects, illnesses, or lack of athletic prowess, Langman analyzed several high-profile mass shooters and the influence of body-related issues on their psyche (Langman, 2020). He found that some mass shooters are motivated by an identity insecurity considering their failure to establish sexual encounters with women. While body-related factors do not cause violence, residual inferiority, inadequacy, shame,

humiliation, envy, and other negative affective experiences conceivably serve as the motivation and impetus to punish those who embody that which the shooter longs to be.

Langman also spoke about the prevalence and relevance of being raised in, or infatuated with, hypermasculinized military culture. In 2018, Silver et al. found that 24% (n = 13) of mass shooters in the FBI's study of pre-attack behaviors had at least some military experience but the number of military service persons and veterans who do not commit mass shootings is indisputable evidence that military experience does not cause mass shootings. A recurring theme is shooters' endorsement of heightened confidence after purchasing a gun, and that they felt more confident, stronger, and more God-like (Langman, 2020).

Zero Tolerance

Regardless of the type of organization, the risk for violence is heightened by rigid and inflexible policies and practices. In the 1990's, zero tolerance policies were the response to a series of school shootings and have been implemented across all school settings and workplaces alike. Zero tolerance uses automatic exclusionary discipline practices to address a code of conduct violation without considering the severity or context of the behavior (Maeng et al., 2020). BTAM as a preventative practice has proven a highly effective alternative to zero tolerance policies as it focuses on the context of the situation and the individual circumstances and needs of the subject and potential target(s).

As a result of widespread implementation of zero tolerance policies, students are routinely suspended for minor infractions. Non-threatening gestures such as forming

one's hand into the shape of a gun or bringing a bubble blowing gun to school frequently results in punitive action (Morgan et al., 2014 as cited in Maeng et al., 2020). An added concern is the disproportionate impact these policies have on students of color. Losen & Martinez (2013) estimated that 11% of middle school students were suspended between 2009-2010 while 33% of Black middle school students were dealt the same consequence (Maeng et al. 2020).

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

In their 2019 publication Making Prevention a Reality, the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit and National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) articulated BTAM teams as the most valuable approach to prevention. BTAM are two interrelated processes intended to respond to allegations or concerns that a particular individual is at risk for perpetrating targeted violence (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; NTAC, 2019). Assessment in BTAM is a multidisciplinary approach to evaluating risk, mitigation, and contextual factors to determine if an individual poses a risk for violence (Peterson et al., 2022). Management is an ongoing and iterative process that includes frequent reassessment and operationalizing early interventions to resolve underlying conflicts motivating movement toward violence (Concordia, 2022).

Preventing targeted violence mandates commandeering every opportunity for early assessment and management strategies whereas missed opportunities create a cascading effect that could result in a targeted act of lethality to self or to others (Concordia, 2022). BTAM is a multifaceted, holistic process (Amman et al., 2019) that seeks to understand the why behind a person's intent to be violent (Concordia, 2022).

Understanding why mass shootings occur may inform public perceptions of these events and their leading actors (Campbell et al., 2022).

Summary and Conclusions

Research on mass shootings has expanded exponentially in recent years, particularly as the frequency of these statistically rare events increase. Most recent research focuses on best strategies for assessing and understanding mass shooters and the events they perpetrate. What is known is that mass shooters do not act impulsively (Amman et al., 2019; Meloy et al., 2012; Silver & Silva, 2022; Silver et al., 2018; Vossekuil et al., 2002) but follow a methodical and observable trajectory from the point of having an unresolved internal conflict or grievance to the point of final attack (Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2015; Meloy et al., 2012; Meloy & Hoffman, 2014; NTAC, 2019, 2020, 2023; Silver & Silva, 2022; Silver et al., 2018)

Researchers have found common traits, characteristics, and individual circumstances in the histories of mass shooters such as a high prevalence of suicidal thinking before and during a mass shooting (Peterson & Densley, 2021), immersion and preoccupation with violent media content (Meloy et al., 2012), conflicts around masculinity and identity (Langman, 2020), concerning mental health symptoms (Lankford, 2018b; Silver et al., 2018), early exposure to violence and family discord (Langman, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Skeem & Mulvey, 2020), and acute or recent losses or stressors (Amman et al., 2019; Fox & Levin, 2022; Silver et al., 2018). What remains relatively unknown is the public's perceptions of mass shooters and mass shootings and how they might contribute to the continuation of a false narrative suggesting that SMI

and poor gun control laws cause mass shootings. This study seeks to understand the

beliefs and perceptions of parents about mass shooters to help inform education, training,

and outreach efforts and foster a narrative supported by preponderant evidence.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore what parents of K–12 students hold to be true about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters and the influential factors driving mass shootings. O'Toole's (2000) study on school shooters, Silver et al.'s (2018) study on mass shooter pre-attack behaviors, Amman et al.'s (2019) study on preventing targeted violence through behavioral threat assessment, and the NTAC's (2023) study on mass attacks in public spaces between 2016 and 2020 served as the framework for establishing empirical risk enhancers and other contributing factors specific to mass shootings. Interviews with parents of K–12 students were conducted to capture their perceptions of mass shooters and mass shootings, the factors they believe contribute to mass shootings, the sources that shape their perceptions, and how their responses align or conflict with the empirical data offered by prevailing research.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my role as a researcher and approaches for minimizing researcher bias, as researcher-induced bias can affect the outcome of a study. The rationale and strategy for participant sample determination and selection are also discussed. I collected data through virtual participant interviews as guided by a researcher-developed semistructured questionnaire and analyzed data by hand using spreadsheets to systematically organize and code the data. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved, as is discussed in this chapter along with concepts of transferability, generalizability, and significance of the study.

Research Design and Rationale

This study was a phenomenological qualitative study designed to understand the

individual experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about mass shooters and mass shootings

among parents with students in K–12 schools. The study was designed to answer three

research questions:

Research Question 1: What are parents' perceptions of the individual traits,

characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters?

Research Question 2: What sources of information do parents state shaped and

influenced their perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings?

Research Question 3: What do parents believe are the best ways to identify and

manage a potential mass shooter?

Generally, a phenomenological approach is used to explore common human

experiences to gain greater insight into how people understand their experiences. In

essence, qualitative research can help unearth the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of

research participants to better understand the meaning that people ascribe to their

experiences (Buckley 2022; Sutton & Austin, 2015). This research is conducted to seek

to communicate why people have thoughts and feelings that might affect the way they

behave (Sutton & Austin, 2022) and is focused on thematic interrelationships across

individual perceptions (Buckley, 2022). During qualitative analysis, individual responses

are examined and grouped into codes to discern interrelationships of repeated themes in

individual perceptions that emerge through communication between researcher and

participant (Buckley, 2022). In a qualitative study, a sufficient sample is the key to

research validity while saturation helps to assess the adequacy of research data (Yang & Zhang, 2022).

A phenomenological approach was selected for this study as it aligned with the research objectives. The aim of phenomenology is to understand human experience and involves exploring the way participants experience or make sense of their world as meaningful (Wilson, 2015). Diekelman (2005) stated that people are naturally disposed to experience their world as meaningful (Wilson 2015). Using a phenomenological approach served to broaden understanding and knowledge about the mass shooting phenomenon, promote greater awareness of how mass shootings affect parents of K–12 students, and clarify popular theories that explain why mass shootings occur while debunking prevalent myths (Creswell & Creswell, 2009).

The goal of this study was to understand what people believe to be true about mass shooters and mass shootings and a qualitative phenomenological approach granted an opportunity to understand participants' subjective experiences of this phenomenon (Sutton & Austin, 2022). Direct virtual interviews with participants served as the singular method for data collection. A semistructured, researcher-developed questionnaire guided the elicitation of cognitive data through the process of one-on-one interviewing, an effective and broadly applied approach for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2009; Wilson, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

In this study, my role as the researcher involved data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. My role as researcher also involved direct interviews of participants

using a semistructured line of questioning. As researcher, I sat in a participant-only role whereas observation was inapplicable because oral response content was the sole data of interest. I used a semistructured interview approach to limit risk of researcher bias so that questions solely prompted participants' perceptions, perspectives, and beliefs. Akin to structured risk assessment, a structured assessment or interview approach ensures questions target elicitation of data that can be supported or refuted by empirical evidence rather than subjective opinion. I used follow-up questions or probes for response clarification or encouragement to expound on a response where necessary and where applicable.

The topic of mass shootings can be psychologically unnerving for some people, eliciting a spectrum of emotive responses. The detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria were intentionally considerate of this potential and sought to minimize any likelihood of distress for participants. There was minimal likelihood of relationship duality between researcher and participants. Anyone with whom I had familiarity or a relationship, whether directly or indirectly, as determined by my own awareness or participant disclosure, was not included in the study sample. While I have consulted for the regional school system some of the sample population could have been drawn from, I am not employed by the local school system and only have familiarity with school district personnel. Parents who were also local school personnel were not included to minimize risk of familiarity with me or if they have attended one of my trainings on preventing school violence or behavioral threat assessment in schools. The latter is particularly salient as those who have attended such training would have prior education that is

precluding criteria and may be inclined to produce intentional rather than organic

responses to please someone they perceive as an expert or authority on the subject matter.

This was ultimately not an issue as none of the participants were employed by any

schools in the local region. I also do not have any children enrolled in the school system

that might enhance the likelihood of parent-to-parent familiarity. This served to optimize

anonymity and confidentiality, which is critical to ethical research and avoiding harm to

participants.

Methodology

Sample Population and Selection Rationale

The study sample population targeted was 15–20 parents in various locations

across the United States who currently have at least one child enrolled in a K–12 public,

private, or charter school. Of all recruited potential participants, 19 parents were

interviewed to facilitate data saturation, which is critical to reliability of qualitative

research (see Buckley, 2022). Researchers have suggested various samples sizes to

achieve saturation such as between one and three (Finlay, 2009, as cited in Wilson, 2015)

or six and 20 (Wilson, 20). Based on competing ideas about ideal sample size, 15–20

appeared as a commonly overlapping number in the moderate-to-high range, and 19 was

the number needed for this study to achieve saturation.

As per inclusion criteria denoted in the social media recruitment post and

informed consent form, all 19 participants were 18 years of age or older to ensure only

adult participants were included in the study, and all spoke fluent English. This was not

to discriminate but considered how such language restriction may help reduce the risk of

bias because I am only fluent in the English language (see Buckley, 2022). Limiting participants to English-speaking parents did minimize generalizability, as is inherent in qualitative research but preserved saturation as conceivably more critical to a qualitative study. Parents were also excluded from the study if they had any formal training in behavioral threat assessment, violence risk assessment, forensic mental health disciplines, general mental health, or legal studies. Parents with educational backgrounds in journalism or broadcasting or currently employed by a media entity were excluded from the study as well given the interest in exploring the role of the media in shaping perceptions. Using participants who work in media or journalism may have presented an insurmountable bias. Additionally, parents were excluded if they had a direct or indirect experience with mass shootings such as being a victim of a mass shooting, being in a location where a mass attack occurred; being from a community where a mass attack had previously occurred (e.g., Sutherland Springs, Ft. Hood, and Uvalde, Texas); or being intimately connected to someone (e.g., spouse, child, relative, friend, peer, work colleague) who had directly or indirectly experienced a mass attack (e.g., friend's partner worked at a school during a school shooting event).

Parents were asked to review inclusion criteria prior to participation and inclusion was exclusively based on self-report. If I determined during an interview that a participant did not meet the outlined criteria, the interview would be terminated, and the data would not be included in the analysis. As such, one participant was excluded upon disclosing a former classmate affiliation with the perpetrator of a highly publicized mass shooting prior to the onset of the interview.

The rationale for the sampling criterion was to minimize the risk of biased perceptions and beliefs based on proximity to a mass shooting incident. A skewed or biased perspective risked detracting from exploring and understanding how the public perceives mass shooters and mass shootings. As bias can be introduced through nonrandom sources of rejection, such as being in a hurry or language barriers for example, parents were asked to ensure they allotted at least 60 minutes of time in a private location so they could participate with minimal risk for distraction (see Buckley, 2022; Wilson, 2015). This was upheld without disruption for all interviews.

All participants were asked to participate in the study via the Zoom virtual platform. While Zoom offers both audio and video capabilities, participants could decide if cameras remained on or off during the interview. The intent was to foster a greater degree of comfort with me and the interview experience to provide flexibility in consideration of each interview being recorded for later content review. This approach also considered that participants may not have access to a camera and prevented the lack of such equipment from precluding participation. The more comfortable the participant was with me, the more likely their responses would be transparent and organic. All but one participant, who lacked camera access, elected to keep their cameras on for the duration of the interviews.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited based on established inclusion criteria. This was initially done through a local Facebook parent group upon approval from the group administrator to actively recruit on the site. Participants were informed in a social media

post about the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and expectations for participation. Upon indicated interest in participation via email, each potential participant was sent an approved informed consent form as per the Walden University IRB approval 01-31-23-1040077. The consent form explained the scope of the study, role and expectations of participants, any potential risks of harm and how any emerging concerns can be addressed and supported. Informed consent was critical to delineating a qualified sample population and ensuring the study was conducted in accordance with APA ethical guidelines.

The initial posting via a local parent Facebook group yielded only one direct response after 1 week of posting. A personal contact working for the local school system offered to share the recruitment posting through her social network as we do not share any mutual contacts. This yielded greater success as her contacts likewise reposted and resulted in a snowball effect for participant recruitment. Interested participants adhered to the recommendation to express interest via email and not directly on the social media post. Eligibility remained based on participant attestation that they did not meet criteria for any excluding factors such as having prior training in a related discipline or a personal connection to a prior mass shooting threat or attack. One-hour interviews were scheduled as participants consented to partake after reviewing the informed consent form across a period of 2 consecutive weeks. Most interviews took 25–35 minutes, and this allowed for ample time to review all questions and helped limit the risk of rushing, which might have compromised the quality and integrity of the data.

Following the interview, each participant was sent a link to review the recording of the interview to ensure their narratives accurately reflected their intended responses. The recordings were set to be non-downloadable to limit the risk of confidentiality being compromised with the link expiring 3 days after receipt by the participant. The recordings were maintained in a password-protected file folder for me to review as needed while transcribing and coding data.

Sources of Data

In this research study, the primary source of data was interview responses from participants based on a semi-structured questionnaire. This provided me with direct insight into parents' perceptions of the traits, characteristics, and circumstances attributed to mass shooters and mass shootings, the meaning they make of these events, and the sources of information influencing the cultivation of such perceptions. Their responses also shed light on their perceptions of school safety, efforts that might improve school safety, and existing safety measures perceived as fostering a culture of safety in the schools attended by their children and schools in general.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire used in this study was researcher developed (see Appendix A). The instrument included five questions about participant demographics (age, gender, race, children's ages and grade, and area of employment) and 13 total questions comprised of three focused questions (#6, #11, #13) and 10 open-ended questions. These questions focused on the participants' perceptions and beliefs about mass shooters, mass shootings, the primary sources of information from which their perceptions are formed

(e.g., television, internet, social media), and their opinions and attitudes about strategies for prevention based on their fund of knowledge. Where needed and beneficial to data collection, I used probes to help participants expound on their responses while being careful not to influence or lead a particular response where response clarification was needed.

Data Collection

Individual participants who met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study were asked a series of questions to elicit information about how they perceive mass shooters, mass shootings, school safety, and the primary sources of information from which these perceptions are cultivated. Upon conclusion of the interviews, and prior to the formal process of analysis and coding, I sent all participants transcripts of their interviews to review for accuracy and enhance study validity, ensuring the information they provided reflected their opinions, beliefs, or perceptions of mass shootings (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis Plan

The data for this study comes from the responses provided by parents of K-12 students during their interviews. I hand-coded responses as a stable method of analysis across all participants' data. Overlapping concepts and emerging themes shed light on the specific traits, characteristics, and circumstances parents believe to be associated with mass shooters that were then compared to current empirical data (NTAC, 2023; Silver et al., 2018) framing the interview questions. The responses also revealed popular sources

of information from which participants largely gather the information that shapes their perceptions.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the subjective views of respondents may shape the research frame and the whole process of an inquiry (Creswell, 2015). Researchers often use credibility, reliability, transferability, and confirmability as the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Chowdhury, 2015). Choosing appropriate methods for data collection and data analysis may also be significant aspects of judging quality in qualitative research (Richardson, 2008 as cited in Chowdhury, 2015).

Credibility is considered the most important aspect in establishing trustworthiness as it demands linking the study's findings with reality to demonstrate the truth of the research study's findings (Chowdhury, 2015). In qualitative research, dependability is analogous to reliability whereas researchers need to facilitate a future investigation to get the consistency of their study (Shenton 2004). Thus, subsequent research on the issue of parental perceptions of mass shooters will be necessary to validate consistency. Transferability refers to the potential for data extrapolation whereby findings can be generalized to other settings or groups (Elo et al., 2014). Dependability is central to trustworthiness because it establishes the study's findings as consistent and repeatable. Triangulation also helps to ensure research findings are robust, rich, comprehensive, and well-developed (Creswell, 2014). In this study, comparative analysis of participants with shared and dissimilar perspectives constitutes source triangulation. Application of

Gerbner's (1986) cultivation theory along with consideration of copycat and contagion frameworks promoted theoretical triangulation.

Lastly, confirmability refers to the degree of confidence that the findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases (Chowdhury, 2015). Confirmability is nurtured by the steps taken to mitigate bias from both me and the data provided by participants as detailed in Chapter 1 (Anney, 2014). Simply stated, confirmability is attained by explaining the decisions that are being made in the research process (Anney, 2014). Describing the steps taken for data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the data help establish an audit trail. Taking a reflexive approach helps foster confirmability as I was conscientious in proactively considering my background and position to remain mindful of how this might influence the research process.

Achieving data saturation indicates further data collection will not contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Yang & Zhang, 2022). Buckley (2022) stated that techniques to maximize the range of views from the sample population should include description of the steps taken to amplify diversity that can be achieved by ensuring participants encompass a range of ages, genders, and ethnicities and other diversified demographic characteristics (Buckley, 2022). For example, if the target class is nationwide, but the study is carried out within a single geographic location, then interviewees may be largely homogenous and not socioeconomically, demographically, or psychologically representative of broader geographical regions to contribute to both saturation and generalizability or transferability (Buckley, 2022).

Achieving saturation also hinges on sample size. Mason's (2010) meta-study of 500,000 PhD theses offered that 20–30 interviews is ideal for reaching saturation in qualitative studies and supports a sample size of 20–30 parents to facilitate data saturation (Iuliana, 2022; Yang & Zhang, 2022). Other researchers have suggested varying samples sizes as necessary to achieve saturation such as ranges between one and three (Finlay, 2009 in Wilson, 2015) or six and 20 (Wilson et al., 2016). Based on competing ideas about ideal sample size, 15–20 appeared as a commonly overlapping number in the high range of what is likely needed to achieve data saturation. I proactively scheduled interviews with additional participants to compensate for any potential loss of participants due to self-termination from the study or if determined they did not meet the criteria for inclusion. Data analysis and coding in a qualitative study helps delineate saturation. Full code saturation is achieved when additional interviews no longer identify and further codes while effective code saturation is reached once further case interviews do not have an impact on the coding tree (Buckley, 2022).

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore what parents of K–12 students hold to be true about the traits, characteristics, the circumstances of mass shooters and the influential factors driving mass shootings, the role of the media in cultivating their perceptions, and their general perceptions of school safety. Direct interviews of parent participants who met the criteria for participant eligibility helped shed light on the meaning parents make of mass shootings based on the information they

garner from exposure to media sources, and how media-generated information cultivates

or shapes their perceptions of mass shooters and mass shootings.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the results of the interviews and apply a qualitative-based

analysis using thematic coding that reveals what parents believe to be true about the

factors and circumstances that drive the phenomenon of mass shootings. Chapter 5 offers

a discussion of the findings and the potentiation for such findings to impact social

change. Specifically, the results stimulate ideas for approaching widespread education

about the underlying drivers of mass shootings to help bystanders become participants in

the collective process of preventing targeted violence.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Despite the statistical rarity of occurrences, mass shootings are perceived by many Americans as an epidemic (Anisin, 2021; Fernandez et al., 2020; Schildkraut et al., 2021; Silva & Capellan, 2019a), with nearly half of Americans fearing being killed in a mass shooting (Bergan & Lee, 2018; Fox & Levin, 2022; Fox et al., 2021) while believing mass shootings occur far more frequently than they do (Schildkraut et al., 2019; Silva & Capellan, 2019a). In the aftermath of most mass shootings, the prevailing narrative suggests mass shootings are the outcome of poorly regulated gun control laws and an underserved population of persons with SMI (Perrin, 2016). In the United States, 46% of Americans believe people with an SMI are more dangerous than the general population (Mercier et al., 2018) and 63% attribute mental health problems as the primary force motivating mass shootings (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). Contemporary findings on mass attackers (Amman et al., 2019; FBI, 2021a, 2021b; NTAC, 2020, 2023; Silver et al., 2018) delineate specific risk-enhancing factors and pre-attack warning behaviors frequently present or otherwise absent in the histories of mass shooters.

Mass media are influential in shaping perceptions and the realities among viewers (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018; Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; Schildkraut et al., 2018). Online media sources and social networks serve as the primary source of information over television, radio, and print (Croitoru et al., 2020) and serve as the main source of information for nearly 95% of the general population (Schildkraut et al., 2018). Such publicity not only serves to shape opinions and beliefs of the public audience but

concerningly risks spawning a contagion or copycat effect by serving as an actionable template for future mass shooters (Boyd & Molyneux, 2021; Mullen 2004, as cited in Croitoru et al., 2020). One who relates to or identifies with a publicized mass shooter is apt to view the shooter positively, may then attach themselves to the similarities they share with the perpetrator, and thus be of greater propensity to imitate the behavior (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022; Meindl & Ivy, 2017).

As mass shootings impact public gathering spaces, retail establishments, corporations, healthcare facilities, universities, and houses of worship, the high emotional valence of mass shootings in K–12 schools generates the greatest attention and mass media coverage (Silva & Capellan, 2019a). Parents in particular turn their attention to news coverage of school shootings as it holds personal relevance.

In this study, I interviewed 19 parents with at least one child currently enrolled in a K–12 program to understand their perceptions of mass shooters, mass shootings, and the sources where they tend to gather the information cultivating such perceptions. Additionally, the research revealed their perceptions of the world as safe, unsafe, or somewhere nestled in between and what efforts they believe are necessary to promote safer environment, particularly in the schools attended by their children. Through an analysis of the behaviors, traits, and circumstances participants associate with mass shootings and their perpetrators, I was able to identify frequently and consistently emerging concepts and themes about how parents perceive this public health phenomenon and the actors who carry them out across various settings. The research questions corresponding with these findings are:

Research Question 1: What are parents' perceptions of the individual traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters?

Research Question 2: What sources of information do parents state shaped and influenced their perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings?

Research Question 3: What do parents believe are the best ways to identify and manage a potential mass shooter?

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the setting in which the research was conducted, a summary of participant demographics, and an explanation of the data collection and methodology used, as well as the data recording processes. I then detail the steps used in data recording and the approach to data analysis and coding. This discussion includes issues of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Setting

The entirety of the research was conducted through direct interviews of voluntary participants over Zoom. The use of a virtual platform permitted greater ease of scheduling and less disruption to parents' days. This approach also offered participants the choice to have their video camera on or off to promote a comfortable environment more so than in an in-person, face-to-face setting. The virtual platform also eliminated the need to locate and coordinate a neutral interview space and permitted scheduling across weekdays, weekends, and nontraditional business hours as preferred by the participants. This was an additional benefit to providing a comfortable and safe interview

experience to promote engagement and further minimize any possible distress or harm to participants, which was carefully considered when crafting the interview questions.

Demographics

Nineteen participants were interviewed across a period of 11 days. Of the 19 participants, 17 identified as female, and 2 identified as male. In this study, the concepts of *mother* or *father* denote anyone who identified as a mother, father, parent, stepparent, or primary guardian or caregiver. Interviews with each participant lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to 50 minutes within an allocated 60-minute interview block.

Most participants, including both men, identified as White or Caucasian ($n = 16$). Two participants identified as Hispanic, and one participant identified as African American. The average age of the participants was 40.3 years, with the youngest participant identifying as 34 and the oldest as 47. Each participant reported having anywhere from one to five biological or stepchildren currently enrolled in a K–12 school, with the average number of children per participant being 2.47 children. The participants were employed in a spectrum of vocational fields, including education, construction, design, visual arts, insurance, social services, marketing, administration, health services, and sales. All participants met established criteria for inclusion in the study and resided across multiple states, ranging from the Pacific Northwest to the Northeast, as well as states in the Southwest, Southeast, and South Central parts of the United States.

Data Collection

I collected data through virtual one-on-one interviews with each of the 19 participants. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview to capture key terms,

phrases, and descriptions respective to the individual question. Each interview was recorded so transcriptions were also used to analyze word content and themes. Each participant was sent a link to review the recording after the interview and advised to verify that their responses accurately reflected what they intended to say. None of the participants identified any erroneous comments or indicated that their narrative did not reflect what they intended to share during the interview.

Data coding was executed in a manner that captured the participants' perceived traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters. Coding initially involved quantification of specific terms. Thereafter, similar words that expressed related ideas were grouped and categorized for simplicity. As an example, words such as *sad*, *unhappy*, or *depressed* were grouped under the collective category of *negative disturbance of mood* and then percentages based on participant responses were calculated to assess for prevalence among the sample population.

Data Analysis

After numerous reviews of all collected data, word/key term quantification, and subsequent categorization, I was able to identify two primary themes and five subthemes that represented the traits, characteristics, and circumstances the participants attribute to mass shooters and mass shootings. Data saturation was achieved relatively quickly as similarities in responses across participants emerged with notable consistency. The relationship of media consumption to participant perception was supported by Gerbner's cultivation theory as presented earlier. The results section details the applicability of this theoretical framework as well as the seven biopsychosocial themes associated with mass

shooters by the research participants. The responses to questions about sources of mass shooting information participants' perceptions evolve from helped to provide a definitive understanding as to primary sources of influence. Additional questions included in the study related to the perception of school safety as were included given that the criteria for inclusion in the study necessitated having at least one child in a K-12 program at the time of the interview, offered insight into what parents assess as constituting a safe learning environment, what contributes to their perception of schools as safe, and what directions may be considered for future social change specific to school safety and mitigating the distorted perception of mass shootings as an epidemic in the United States. While not directly related to the three research questions being explored in this study, these topics hold relevance to the study topic and provide insight into future areas where additional research may be needed.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the subjective views of respondents may shape the research frame and the process of an inquiry (Creswell, 2015). Researchers often use credibility, reliability, transferability, and confirmability as the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Chowdhury, 2015). For credibility, considered the most important aspect in establishing trustworthiness, I used two primary evidence-based sources, the 2018 FBI publication on pre-attack behaviors by Silver et al., and the 2023 NTAC publication on mass attacks in public spaces as reliable data sources the study's findings could be linked to. Comparative analysis of participants with shared and dissimilar responses constituted source triangulation, ensuring the findings were robust, rich,

comprehensive, and well developed (Creswell, 2014). I frequently self-reflected while analyzing and coding data to be mindful of my own biases when coding, categorizing, and identifying emerging themes given my experience in this area professionally and my informed knowledge about the subject matter.

I provided a detailed account of the study, the data collection process, and my role as researcher. The results from the data as compared to the two primary empirical sources highlighted how the data aligned with or deviated from prior research findings about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters. This helps with the possibility of transferability.

As noted in Chapter 3, confirmability refers to the degree of confidence that the findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases (Chowdhury, 2015). To ensure confirmability as well as dependability, I presented my findings as accurately as possible, reviewing noted taken during interviews multiple times and reviewing interview recordings to ensure accuracy of data transcription and narrative interpretation. Participants were also sent transcripts of their recordings to further ensure their responses reflected what they intended to share and to be reflected in the study findings.

Results

In this study, two overarching themes emerged regarding identification of future mass shooters in the interest of prevention. The first theme that emerged was the perceived importance of appearance or demographics (e.g., race, age, gender) when trying to identify a future shooter. The second theme that emerged was the importance of

recognizing significant changes in one's usual or baseline presentation or behavior as indicators someone may be on the pathway to committing a mass shooting. Subthemes regarding changes in behavior emerged that delineated specific categories of behavioral changes that participants believe critical in identifying a future mass shooter. Table 1 provides the themes and subthemes with examples of codes and quotes.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Examples of Codes and Quotes

Theme/subtheme	Code examples	Quote examples
Appearance or demographic profile	Male White Young Columbine	"Usually a White male, somewhere between 18 and 25" "I tend to think of the shooters from Columbine with dark trench coats, a large rifle, kind of goth."
Changes in usual or baseline behavior		
S1: Negative mood or affect	Anger or angry Disgruntled Depressed Unhappy or sad Mental health struggles Suicidal thoughts	"No longer interest in the things they normally enjoy" "Someone who always looks angry" "Changes in their mood and they may not have access to the resources they need" "Feeling suicidal"
S2: Adverse childhood experiences	Broken home Abuse Absent parents Coping skills Bullied	"Probably had a negative home life" "Unable to build resilience or coping skills" "Lacking at least one supportive parent" "Some form of childhood trauma, maybe they were abused" "Bullied at school and want to get even"
S3: Motivation	Notoriety or fame Attention Hate Body count Grievance	"Wipe out people who have what they desire" "May select their location due to a personal grievance" "Choose the most accessible places for maximum damage" "May want what other shooters before them had" "Looking for attention or they need to be seen"
S4: Social connectedness	Withdrawn Isolative Lonely Lack of friendships	"If they become more withdrawn from the family or their friends" "Becoming more distant" "More sneaky or secretive" "Isolating at home or spending more time in their room"
S5: Pre-attack warning indicators	Obsessed with weapons Concerning online behavior Talk about guns Major stressor or trauma	"I would want to know what they are posting online, what they are looking up, who they are talking to" "Making references to firearms" "Traumatic experience at school" "Recent life changes – losses or feeling unaccepted or disconnected"

Theme 1: Appearance or Demographic Profile

Most of the participants in the study divulged a shared demographic profile of mass shooters. Each of the participants stated that when they think of a mass shooter, they envision a male perpetrator. Participant 19 stated, "gender is male, I think that's pretty much the first thing that pops into my mind when describing a mass shooter." Some stated they have never heard of a female mass shooter and believe this to be an entirely male perpetrated phenomenon. Participant 5 stated:

> Firstly, I think of a male. I think mostly White. Other characteristics, I would
> think of is someone who probably has a difficult home life, maybe anger issues,
> doesn't get support, doesn't get attention, possibly bullied or probably honestly.
> Probably someone who feels like they don't fit in and has reached out for help but
> doesn't receive help and are probably angry about it. I would think probably
> between 16 and 40, more tend to the younger side, but definitely a White male.

Most participants (68%) also suggested that the modern-day mass shooter is likely to be a young male ranging from 12-35 years of age while the remainder suggested mass shooting perpetration is not age specific. Participant 16 stated, "It seems like most of the school-specific mass shootings tend to be younger, White males," and Participant 1 said, "I would say a male, White, younger than 25, maybe 18 to 25." The remaining 16%, and 16% of those who indicated their initial conceptualization of a mass shooter is likely to be White, believe that race is nonspecific when it comes to mass shooter demographics. Participant 4 stated, "I do tend to be a bit global thinking, so I don't necessarily say that it's pinned on one particular ethnicity or race."

Three of the participants referenced the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School and the notable media coverage that followed as imprinted in their memory from their early 20's as the visual representation of what comes to mind when they think of a mass shooter. A total of 21% of the participants used the term "dark" to describe what they perceive as a mass shooter's manner of dress, humor, or "vibe." As Participant 9 stated, "I don't mean dark necessarily physically, but you know how you can just get a vibe from someone." An additional 11% also indicated that a mass shooter could be identified by having a disheveled appearance or otherwise poor hygiene practices. Participant 3 stated, "So when I think of this, I think of a long black trench coat, kind of disheveled looking, um, big black boots." In all, 33% of the participants suggest a mass shooter may be identified by their outward facing appearance not including protected categories such as race or gender.

Theme 2: Changes in Usual or Baseline Presentation or Behavior

Subtheme 1: Negative Mood or Affect

Throughout the study, 95% ($n = 18$) of participants used terms suggesting mental unwellness or concerning mood symptoms or affect presentation are red flag warning behaviors for someone possibly contemplating a mass shooting. Every participant also specified that such mood and affect concerns would reflect an observable change in their usual baseline demeanor or presentation. None of the participants suggested that a diagnosed, SMI is likely to be present while Participants 8 and 19 stated that a mass shooter may be suffering from an undiagnosed mental health condition.

The term most offered during the study was depressed as the probable mood state of someone who commits a mass shooting. Participant 7 described a likely mass shooter as, "just sort of is depressed," and Participant 3 as, "unhappy, depressed, angry, resentful." 58% of the participants believe that a budding mass shooter will appear outwardly angry. Participant 9 stated:

> So, there's always this, like, kind of scary look to them or distressed or almost sad, almost a sad character. It's almost like they wear the sadness and the anger outwardly. Not all the time, but I definitely would say the majority of the time. And I don't know if that's just a media perception that they want us to buy, but I would say most commonly, even in growing up and you always have that, that kid would probably be the one that comes and shoot up the school.

Other key terms that suggest a depressed or similar negative mood state included appearing sad (21%), unhappy (16%), experiencing or endorsing suicidal ideations (16%), or anxious or distressed (16%). A lack of needed mental health or otherwise supportive resources was identified by 21% of participants, noting that socioeconomic circumstances or extensive appointment wait times may leave the interruptible mass shooter able to move along their pathway to violence.

Subtheme 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences

The third theme to emerge, adverse childhood experiences, reflect negative experiences in the home or at school that might otherwise impact developmental milestones or one's ability to effectively cope with conflict and stressors. Participant 1 stated:

I think that there's sort of a culture of upbringing among the last generation or so

of Americans where I think parents try to avoid their kids facing failure or

disappointment. Kind of like kids are spoiled or parents kind of smooth over their

children's problems for them when they're younger so that when kids get older

and face more significant problems skills are really lacking. And they can't, their

parents can't make their problems go away for them anymore at that age. And I

think that they have a lot of anger.

A total of 37% of participants broadly offered that a mass shooter will have a

history of trauma at some point in their life whether at home, at school, in their

workplace, or another unspecified location. Participant 2 stated, "I think there could be an

abusive home environment or even close family or family friend potentially. I don't think

that everyone who is abused does this, but I think in those kids' lives some abuse long-

term." Specific to early childhood experiences, 16% believe that trauma is likely to occur

during childhood and may be experienced most often as bullying by peers (74%), as well

as parental neglect (37%), childhood abuse (16%), or another form of childhood trauma

(16%).

The relationship of one's home life during childhood and one's ability to develop

coping skills, resilience, self-love, and self-esteem to serve as buffer to engaging in

violence was mentioned with some degree of frequency. Participant 5, like 16% of

respondents, attribute feelings of abandonment by parents or primary attachment figures

as influential in future mass violence and stated:

I think of is like a kid who maybe has a single parent or just has like a sense of

abandonment maybe, or maybe lives with grandparents or something, or just

doesn't feel like valued and doesn't feel like they've been mainly valued, but they

just don't get a lot of attention, whether that's because their parents are having to

work a lot or the parents are off, you know, doing something else by choice. So

they just don't feel like they get attention.

Participant 17 stated, "I think it's a culmination of things of being disregarded and

unloved and abandoned or questioned or bullied," and 21% of parents interviewed

envision a mass shooter coming from a broken home as defined by parental absence,

parental neglect, or lacking at least one positive attachment figure. Participant 9 offered,

"maybe they come from a broken home," as did Participant 17 who stated, "The home

life is, you know, it's usually a broken home or living with a grandparent." A lack of

feeling or experiencing love in childhood contributing to the decision to commit mass

violence was expressed by 16% of participants and 26% stated that early exposure to

violence, in the home is likely to foster maladaptive conflict resolution skills using

violence.

Subtheme 3: Motivation

Interviewees were specifically asked about their perceptions of what causes or

drives mass shootings. All the participants believe that mass shooters select their specific

target locations for different reasons when asked if they believe all shooters select their

target location for the same reasons regardless of setting or if their target location setting

differs based on motivation. Specific settings and their relative motivations were not

queried, but some specified their belief that K-12 school or university shooters may select schools as a current or former student harboring a grievance due to some negative experience while attending the schools. Participant 7 stated:

> For some reason when I think of a school shooter, and I know that this is not always the case, I immediately go to someone that went to the school, which we know obviously sometimes that's the case, but not always. So, when I say that like, you know, the straw that broke the camel's back, were they bullied? Are they targeting one specific person? Probably someone that's in the school would, but maybe just a random person obviously wouldn't.

Others offered that those without a connection to a K-12 school or university may select these settings due to the vulnerability of young children in the interest of maximizing body count or overall damage. Participant 13 stated, "I feel like the more vulnerable and the more people's guards are let down, the easier they become a target because school is known to be a safe place." Other participants shared their belief that houses of worship are likely targeted due to some hate-based ideology while workplaces in general may be targeted by a former employee with a grievance due to some adverse employment action. Participant 1 stated:

> I think sometimes the shooter incorrectly perceives a certain group to be evil, such as Jews or Blacks or Muslims. And I think sometimes people, mass shooters, who have that perception of a certain group are specifically looking to target a location where that group will be present. to target a location where that group will be present.

In all, 79% of participants believe that K-12 schools are the most likely targets and settings of mass shootings, followed by retail locations (16%), and former workplaces (5%). Most notably, 42% believe that one motivation of mass shooters is total body count, so those with such motivation are likely to choose settings that are most accessible (e.g., concert, shopping mall) or with the most vulnerable and defenseless populations (i.e., elementary schools, middle schools). Participant 14 stated:

> I'm sure they're going to be different depending on the shooter, but for the majority, I'm thinking that they're looking for the – a crowd. the crowd, the highest number of people in a small area that is unarmed. All these mass shootings that you see are in places that you know they're going to be unarmed. Schools are no-gun zones, universities, hospitals, concert venues most of the time are gun-free zones. Venues most of the time are gun-free zones. Those are inviting, those types of places are inviting someone to say, hey listen, it's easy target.

In this study, when body count or maximum damage was not perceived as the primary motivation, participants believe that a recent trauma (37%) or major life stressor (21%) such as financial hardship, relational loss, or death may serve as the grievance or impetus for planning, preparing, and carrying out a mass shooting. Participant 19 stated one should ask, "Have they experienced any recent changes in their life," and participant 4 stated:

> I feel like that would look like maybe, like I said, a bullying incident or a firing, a big life-altering-type effect. Like I said, bullying or firing from a job or a divorce

or even a death of somebody in in their immediate circle, family type thing, some

type of big life-changing event.

Of the 21% offering a major life stressor as the trigger or grievance, 75% believe that the

experienced stressor serves as a "last straw" causing them to pursue their violent act.

A prevalent perception of study participants is the influential role the media plays

in encouraging and prophetically fulfilling a mass shooter's goal of achieving desired

attention. None of the participants believe that the media *causes* mass shootings but

acknowledge this role of the media in perpetuating mass shootings by offering an

attention-getting platform. Participant 10 stated, "It glorifies the negativity part of it. It

makes them famous to a degree," and Participant 12 stated, "It's glorified in their mind.

They hear about it, and they see it and they're like, oh yeah, I want to be on the news, or I

want to be seen." Participant 14 stated:

They do exactly what these people are looking for. That moment of fame, that

moment where their name is put out there for everyone to see that attention that

they've been looking for. Also, it gives other people those ideas to be like, yeah,

see, he did it. You know, next thing you know, you'll see something on the news

where one did it. Next thing you know, somebody else is a follow up like they

are. Like they are, they even have a name for it where they're just a copycat.

A majority 68% stated that the primary motivation of mass shooters is to achieve

fame or infamy, attention, the ability to feel as if they are "seen," or to achieve notoriety.

Mass media reporting on mass shootings was described by 32% of participants in a

manner that is glorified (21%) or sensationalized (11%), and thus provides a platform for

mass shooters to fulfill their goal of feeling connected to the social world, even if in posthumous infamy.

Subtheme 4: Social Connectedness

One of the most prevalent themes emerging from the data was the relevance of the mass shooter's relationships to others. In describing the perceived traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters, 79% of study participants described perpetrators as likely being isolative, while 47% described shooters as likely being withdrawn or evidencing increased withdrawal from their usual social networks. Participant 2 stated, "So I would say isolation, whether that's self-inflicted isolation, true isolation, or perceived isolation from others," as a warning behavior that might signal an emerging mass shooter. Participant 6 described the modern-day mass shooter as, "someone who is already isolated for whatever reason," Participant 3 as, "people who don't have a lot of friends, don't socialize a lot, isolate," and Participant 18 as, "someone becoming withdrawn, socially isolating themselves from people." Collectively, 84% of participants identified mass shooters as being withdrawn or isolative. Regarding withdrawal and isolation, 52% and 63% of parents stated these would constitute warning behaviors of concern if exhibited by their own children. In total, 89% of parents perceive withdrawal or isolation as red flag warning behaviors that might indicate their child or children were experiencing a personal crisis such as contemplating violence toward others.

Relatedly, 26% of participants believe that mass shooters are likely to lack any close friends with 32% likely identifying as lonely. Participant 9 stated a mass shooter likely, "doesn't have a lot of friends, doesn't engage in the big things that are going on

around them," as did participant 11 who described a mass shooter's social situation as, "maybe no friends or not many friends. Nobody to talk to." Of the participants, 21% perceive mass shooters as lacking any form of social group or social support connections, 32% believing they likely lack the social skills to form meaningful relationships with others as shared by Participant 3 who stated mass shooters likely demonstrate, "just not a lot of normal social interactions or not a lot of healthy social interactions."

Only Participant 6 indicated that mass shooters are likely to have a history of violence toward other people as a potential risk factor for future violence stating, "domestic violence charges is the first thing that comes to mind." Participant 10 stated:

I think it goes back to just valuing life. If it's, you know, a younger kid who may be torturing animals or doing anything like that, or, you know, harming that are harming themselves and just not valuing life as a whole, I think that's a huge red flag right there.

In all, 26% suggested that violence or cruelty toward animals is likely to be found in a perpetrator's individual history.

Participant 5 stated, "Behaviors that I would be looking for would be inability to empathize with others, to you know kind of see their point of view or think about others feelings," and 16% believe mass attackers are likely devoid of empathy to compassionately appreciate the suffering they appear willing to inflict on others with two participants specifically stating that their ability to commit mass violence is linked to their dehumanization of others. Participant 1 stated:

> I think that the mass shooter feels disconnected from their victims. I think they
> don't see, like, they have no empathy or they're unable to empathize with their
> victims' families or understand the severity or connect with the severity of their
> actions and what it will cause.

Participant 11 linked dehumanization to a lack of self-love resulting from adverse childhood experiences stating, "I would assume their life is probably not the best if this is where they're going, if these are the thoughts that they're having they're not a happy person. No self-love."

Subtheme 5: Pre-Attack Warning Indicators

As one methodically moves along the pathway to violence, participants identified several additional behaviors and cognitions that might forecast the potential engagement in a mass shooting. Participant 16 indicated their belief that mass shootings are methodical and planning, stating that mass shooters, "probably talk to at least someone ahead of time, whoever they trust most ahead of time, you know, whoever they trust most."

Participants unanimously offered that the media serves as a platform to fame or notoriety given the exponential coverage dedicated to mass shootings when they occur. Exposure to violent media was suggested as offering a blueprint or inspiration for future shooters as reported by participant 14 who stated, "You'll see something on the news where one did it. Next thing you know, somebody else is a follow up like they are. Like they are, they even have a name for it where they're just a copycat."

Exposure to violent media was not only suggested as offering a blueprint or inspiration for future shooters, but spotlighting attackers by face and name with whom impressionable and struggling others might experience connection and validation through a relatable belief that violence is a justiciable approach to resolving a grievance or perceived injustice, fosters a concerning interest or engagement with violent media that might be a cause for concern and intervention. Regarding the questioned media's impact on mass violence, participant 9 stated:

> I feel like it's a comparison game. So, for the people that I feel like are making these acts out of emotion, all they're seeing are their peers or these people around the world that either have what they want, or they know that they can't get what they want. I think that that's where the psychological thing comes into play, where it's like, I'm seeing all these people happy, why can't I have that? Or, you know, look at all of these happy people in one place, let me go just, I'm done, I'm done looking at it, I don't want to see it anymore, so let me go take them out.

Many of the participants interviewed suggested that social media use should be monitored when concerns about mood, affect, or social connectedness arise. 32% believe that mass shooters likely engage in concerning online social media prior to their attack. Emphasis was placed on tending to the content of their social media posts and online dialogue content with 21% noting that concerning references to firearms would be something to which they would be most attentive.

Other online behavior was also expressed as a behavior of mass shooter's that might lead to detection and prevention. General online activity should be minded when

someone has a concern about another engaging in violence per 26% of participants. In all, 32% stated that searches specific to weapons or firearms would serve as a red flag warning behavior that someone might be planning or preparing for an attack. As stated by participant 8, "looking up lots of mass shootings or just like lots of weapon searches." New talk or interest in guns as a behavior that might warn of future violence whether searched online or discussed in general discourse at home or with peers was noted by 47% of participants as a perceived behavior of concern, one of whom being participant 6 who stated, "I also think that there is a weird, perverse obsession with guns."

Other pre-attack warning signs offered by study participants included concerning thoughts or beliefs. Ideologies of hate, delusional thinking consisting of alarming theories, or extremist values are likely to comprise the cognitions of mass shooters and subsequently influence their target population and location according to 16% of participants. Participant 6 stated:

I don't know if religion plays into it at all, but I definitely see male, white, extreme beliefs, and not left or right, but extremists probably on one end of the spectrum. Probably something like INCEL. Someone that's isolated, that feels the world deserves, the world owes them something, that they have something coming to them.

Another 16% suggested that direct or veiled threats, not specified if made to the potential target(s) or others, are made by mass shooters before they actualize their attack. Lastly, another 16% stated that they would become concerned about their own children's

potential for violence if they were playing violent-themed video games, linking such video game play to violence desensitization. As stated by participant 5:

> I think video games are a problem. I have a son who plays shoot-em-up video games and all the access to YouTube you can just pull anything up on your phone at any time. You can pull up real violent videos that are like actual, it's not like made up, it's like real stuff. So access to violent things online, to see them and to be desensitized to them, I think is a huge problem.

Sources of Information on Mass Shootings

All of the study participants stated that they gained all their information about mass shootings from at least one digital media source. In total, 37% of participants indicated that they obtain all their information about mass shootings from one media source while the remaining 63% indicated they get their information from two or more sources (see Table 2). Only two participants indicated they obtain some of their information from a non-digital source, this being by word of mouth though they both stated that that generally prompts them to access their regularly accessed media source for further information.

Table 2

Sources of Information on Mass Shootings

Stub heading	n	%
TV news[1]	7	37%
Online news[2]	12	63%
Social media[3]	9	47%
Phone news app[4]	4	21%
Radio	1	5%
Podcasts	2	11%
Word of mouth	2	11%
Multiple sources	7	37%

Note. [1]Fox News, CNN, local mainstream cable news; [2] *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or other reputable, mainstream news source; [3] Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, or Instagram; [4] Apple News or other on-phone app with news alert notifications.

Most participants, 63%, learn about mass shootings from an online news source such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or website corresponding with a mainstream television news station such as FOX News or CNN. Forty-seven percent shared that the bulk of their information comes from a social media site. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok were those social media sites specifically named when probed.

Table 3 shows how many participants gathering information from one media source or word of mouth gather information from a secondary source. The greatest overlap of accessed sources were online news sources and social media sites, so 26% of participants who get information on mass shootings from social media sources also get information from online news sites. These participants reported that upon learning about a mass shooting via social media, they are inclined to search for additional information via a reputable, online news source.

Table 3

Complementary Media Sources for Information on Mass Shootings

Stub heading	TV news	Online news	Social media	Phone news app	Radio	Podcasts	Word of mouth
TV news	–	3	3	2	0	0	0
Online news	3	–	5	2	1	2	1
Social media	3	5	–	3	0	1	2
Phone news app	2	2	3	–	0	0	0
Radio	0	1	0	0	–	0	0
Podcasts	0	2	1	0	0	–	0
Word of mouth	0	1	2	0	0	0	–

Summary

This study involved interviews of parents with at least one child in a K-12 school to better understand their perceptions of the traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters and mass shootings. I conducted 19 virtual interviews and recorded data in an excel spreadsheet. The data was subsequently analyzed, coded multiple times to delineate six emerging themes about parents' perceptions of the modern-day mass shooter. Recording interviews for researcher review and to allow participants to review for accuracy, safeguarding their responses reflected their opinions and beliefs accurately, ensured the validity, reliability, and transferability of this qualitative study. Findings in this study were satisfactory to answer all three research questions and have a more robust understanding of the meaning parents make of mass shootings and those that perpetrate such media-publicized events.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the purpose of this research and its potential impact on social change. I summarize the research findings as related to the most current literature on mass shootings and mass shooters and how these findings contribute to the body of knowledge on this phenomenon. I conclude with an examination of study limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Mass violence is the outcome of multiple social, situational, and psychological factors that interact in multifarious ways that are difficult to predict in advance (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). The discipline of BTAM widely accepts that a profile for mass shooters does not exist (Amman et al., 2019; Silver at al., 2018). Age is not predictive of mass shooters; the average age range of mass shooters being 34 (NTAC, 2023) to 37.8 years of age (Langman et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2018). Shooters have come from a myriad of socioeconomic circumstances, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations (Anisin, 2021).

How the media reports information shapes perceptions of issues ranging from mental health, national security, safety, and threats (Dolliver & Kearns, 2022), and existing literature suggests extensive media attention to mass shootings contributes to public perception of these events (Frizzell & Lindsay, 2019; Haner et al., 2020; Schildkraut et al., 2021). The exponential attention on school shootings and their high degree of emotional valence contributes to the misleading perception that school shootings are more than frequent than is statistically accurate (Girard & Aguilar, 2019).

Much has been learned about mass shooters and the traits, characteristics, and circumstances often associated with these individuals. However, only one study has been conducted to assess parents' perceptions of these factors associated with adolescent mass shooters (Girard & Aguilar, 2018) and none more generalized to perceptions of mass shooters regardless of age. At a time when mass shootings are being carried out with an

increased rate of frequency, albeit still statistically rare, there remains a gap in the research as to why the phenomenon persists and what role the perception of mass shooters and mass shootings might play in hindering more effective prevention and mitigation.

To address this gap relating to parents' perceptions of the traits, characteristics, and circumstances that might drive one to commit a mass shooting, I interviewed 19 parents with at least one child in a K–12 school program to provide a deeper understanding of what they believe to be true about, or foreshadowing of, someone who commits a mass shooting. By analyzing data related to perceived traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters, I was able to identify six common themes that emerged from their collective responses. The six themes that emerged were (a) appearance or demographic profile, (b) negative mood or affect, (c) adverse childhood experiences, (d) motivation, (e) social connectedness, and (f) pre-attack warning indicators. Other data that emerged, particularly in response to Research Question 2, were the sources of information their perceptions are cultivated from and the role the media plays relative to mass shootings. As well, perceptions of school safety and avenues for enhancing school safety materialized.

The research questions that corresponded with the findings and identified themes are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are parents' perceptions of the individual traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters?

Research Question 2: What sources of information do parents state shaped and influenced their perceptions about mass shooters and mass shootings?

Research Question 3: What do parents believe are the best ways to identify and manage a potential mass shooter?

Interpretation of the Findings

Mass violence is the outcome of multiple social, situational, and psychological factors that interact in multifarious ways that are difficult to predict in advance (Skeem & Mulvey, 2020). The responses from the 19 parents interviewed in this study also reflected a constellation of social, situational, and psychological factors believed to be associated with someone who perpetrates a mass shooting as cultivated from their exposure to various media sources. As aligned with the most current research, parents perceived mass shootings to be an entirely male-perpetrated phenomenon, some parents believing that mass shootings have never been perpetrated by women. While most mass shootings are perpetrated by men (96%), three attackers between 2016 and 2020 identified as transgender and five identified as female, so mass shootings are not an exclusively male phenomenon despite popular perception.

There remains a prevailing perception of mass shooters as likely to be White. While 57% (NTAC, 2023) and 63% (Silver et al., 2018) of mass shooters identify racially as White, 84% of parents in this study believe mass shooters are apt be White. Thirty-two percent of parents perceive mass shooters as possibly being non-White, as is more aligned with the current data indicating that mass shooters have been Black (34%), Hispanic (11%), Asian (4%), or another identifying race (5%). This reflects a broader

prevalence of racial diversity among shooters than Silver et al.'s 2018 study. References

by parents to Columbine and specific characteristics of the Columbine shooters (black

trench coats, black boots, goth) suggest the resonating impact that watershed mass

casualty event had on media viewers in 1999, notably the perpetration of the mass

shooting by two White young men. Participants also broadly believed that mass shooters

are likely to fall in the age range of 12–25, although recent studies indicate the average

age of mass shooters to be 34 years (NTAC, 2023) to 37.8 years (Silver et al., 2018).

As was expected, most parents (79%) believed most mass shootings occur in

schools when an estimated 8% of mass shootings between 2016 and 2020 occurred in

education settings (NTAC, 2023). Three of the parents (16%) suggested retail locations

are the location where mass shootings are most likely to occur; retail or business

locations are likely to experience 51% of mass shootings (NTAC, 2023).

Regarding motivation for mass shootings, 42% of parents believed that the most

likely motivation of mass shooters is total body count. The NTAC study on mass attacks

in public spaces (2023) analyzed the pure desire to kill as motivation in 7% of attacks

compared to 51% of attacks motivated by a personal, domestic, or workplace grievance.

Personal grievances were further defined in the research as bullying, health and finances

related stress, feuds with neighbors, or feelings of victimization.

Throughout the study, 95% (n = 18) of participants used terms suggesting mental

unwellness or concerning mood symptoms or affect presentation are red flag warning

behaviors for someone possibly contemplating a mass shooting. Every participant

specified that such mood and affect concerns would reflect an observable change in their

usual baseline demeanor or presentation. This is consistent with the most recent research

offering that 58% (NTAC, 2023) and 62% (Silver et al., 2018) of mass shooters are

known to have experienced mental health symptoms prior to or at the time of their

attacks. Others close to mass attackers had expressed or demonstrated concerns about the

impending shooter's mental health 26% of the time (NTAC, 2023). Depressive symptoms

appear in approximately 34% of mass shooters ,as qualified by 100% of study

participants, whereas depressive symptoms encapsulate feelings of sadness, anger,

irritability, anxiety, or hopelessness (NTAC, 2023). Anger has been specifically

identified in 33% of mass shooters (Silver et al., 2018) and was cited by 58% of study

participants.

Most study participants (79%) described perpetrators as likely being isolative,

while 47% described shooters as likely being withdrawn or evidencing increased

withdrawal from their usual social networks. Collectively, 84% of participants identified

mass shooters as being withdrawn or isolative under the theme of social connectedness.

Twenty-nine percent of mass attackers have been identified as withdrawn, loners, being

asocial (NTAC, 2023) or having general interpersonal conflicts (57%) (Silver et al.,

2018). Such behaviors were linked to having experienced bullying, an experience in

childhood or adolescence referenced by 74% of participants. Contrarily, research points

to 36% of mass attackers being perpetrators of bullying or harassing others (NTAC,

2023). Primary grievances of mass shooters tend to be linked to an adverse interpersonal

interaction (33%), which may encompass bullying or an adverse employment action

(16%). Significant trauma or stressors leading up to the point of attack were suggested by

37% of study participants. At least one significant stressor was experienced by 93% of mass shooters within 5 years of their attack, 77% within the 1 year preceding the act (NTAC, 2023), and on average, mass shooters experience 3.6 separate stressors (Silver et al., 2018). The most common stressors were financial instability (72%), family or romantic-relational issues (51%), personal issues such as loss of a pet, crime victimization, housing instability, or identity issues (51%), non-criminal legal involvement (33%), and employment problems (31%). Financial instability appears as a prevalent and rising stressor for mass shooters as compared to being identified as present in the histories of 49% of mass shooters only a few years earlier (Silver et al., 2018). Adverse interpersonal or employment problems have been found to be the most common grievances in about 49% of mass shooters (Silver et al., 2018). Other forms of trauma in childhood were reported as relevant to mass violence by 16% of interviewed parents with 20% of mass shooting perpetrators having experienced childhood trauma (NTAC, 2023).

In this study, only one participant referenced final act behaviors such as giving away property or finalizing affairs as a red flag warning behavior, when 28% of attackers between 2016 and 2020 evidenced such behavior (NTAC, 2023). Unusual or concerning beliefs were also mentioned by 16% of study participants. In the 2023 NTAC study, 26% of attackers evidenced beliefs of conspiracy, topic specificity, or hate ideologies. Of those attackers, 19% evidenced misogynistic behaviors pre-attack, with 8% engaging in such behavior online.

Interest in guns or firearms was noted as a behavior of concern by 47% of participants, particularly when asked about warning behaviors for potential violence they

might look for in their own children. Five of the study participants recommended being attentive to a person of concern's online activity and seven specifically noted attentiveness to social media use. Social media or online posts have been used by mass shooters in many cases to disclose their innermost thoughts and ideas that may be related to violence or mass shootings in some manner. The sharing of information or clues about such ideations or preparatory behaviors preceding a mass attack may constitute leakage, a significantly valuable warning behavior as appears in 56% of cases; 88% of shooters 17 and younger leaked their intent to commit violence compared to 51% of adults (Silver at al., 2018).

None of the participants referenced criminal behavior or criminal history as a circumstance likely to be associated with mass shooters. NTAC (2023) reported that nearly 64% of mass shooters had a prior criminal history with 38% having prior charges for violent offenses. Only one participant indicated that a history of domestic violence would be a red flag warning behavior in the histories of mass shooters whereas a history of domestic violence amongst mass shooters has drastically risen from 16% (Silver et al., 2018) to 41% (NTAC, 2023) with at least one prior act of domestic violence.

Substance use was another statistically relevant risk factor not referenced by parents in the study though some mentioned that the presence of drugs on school campuses is a safety concern about which they have concerns. From 2016-2020, 34% of mass shooters were found to have a history of using illicit drugs, misusing prescription medications, or abusing any substance including marijuana or alcohol.

Ultimately, 100% of study participants identified changes in baseline or usual behavior, whether in reference to a mass shooter, or in reference to identifying concerns in their own children, as a key warning sign signaling the need for attention and intervention. Of 82 mass attackers who evidenced behavioral changes prior to their attack, 68% displayed mood or mental wellness changes, 24% showed general behavior changes (sleep disturbances, being more secretive, decreased affection), and 17% demonstrated changes in appearance or work/school performance (NTAC, 2023). In all, 76% of studied mass shooters revealed behaviors or communications that were concerning to others with at least 20% of mass shooters exhibiting three to five different types of observable behavioral changes within 3 to 5 years of their attack (NTAC, 2023). Of those who were concerned 68% (Silver et al, 2018) to 70% (NTAC, 2023) represented family members closest to the perpetrator. In 92% of cases, it is likely to be a schoolmate, and 75% of the time is apt to be a teacher or school staff likely to observe concerning behaviors when the shooter is age 18 or younger (Silver et al., 2018). There is often a dependency on law enforcement to predict and intervene with potential mass shooters, law enforcement often receiving significant criticism in the wake of a mass shooting, though law enforcement are likely to be the observers of pre-attack behaviors of concern 25% of the time making parents, classmates, and teachers or school far more critical to first line intervention (Silver et al., 2018).

The prevalence of media consumption in various forms (e.g., online news, social media, television, apps, podcasts) denotes the influence of the media on how people, namely parents per the study, gather information and shape their perceptions, as per

Gerbner's cultivation theory, about social issues such as mass shootings. Not only is the

media a primary source of information for parents in the study, parents also largely

indicate that the media has a suggestible relationship to mass violence. Parents do not

suggest the media causes mass violence, but the degree to which the media report on

mass violence and the way they communicate information about these events and the

shooters themselves provides a platform for fame, notoriety, and attention, even if

posthumously. Infamy gained through news reports confers a new degree of significance

and social status to the shooter (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Some mass attackers regard mass

homicide as vehicle to move from insignificance or inadequacy to a position of

importance or power (Fox & Levin, 2022), gaining notoriety being a way of reclaiming

social capital or feeding one's narcissism (Kambam et al., 2020). And concerningly,

when fame is the primary motivation to commit mass murder, body and injury counts rise

to an average of 7.6 victims per incident rather than an average of 3.45 victims per

incident where the motivation is otherwise (Lankford, 2016a; Silva & Greene-Colozzi,

2019).

Perceptions of school safety also vary across parents in this study. Schools were

generally described as safe by 74% of parents, with 26% offering that schools are not

safe. However, all parents agreed that schools are neither entirely safe or unsafe as

depends on various factors such as the school's investment in safety or socioeconomic

circumstances and crime statistics of the area in which the school is located. Various

responses offered ideas for what might enhance school safety such as site hardening,

active threat training, and better funding and resources to enhance teacher, student, and parent socioemotional wellness.

Only one parent shared that they worry about mass shootings in schools daily. Two parents said they think about school shootings a few times per week, 37% worry a few times per month, and 47% worry once a month or less. Every parent said they tend to worry more about school shootings in the aftermath of a highly publicized mass shooting event, when their child's school notifies them about a threat situation that was addressed and resolved, or sometimes when they are at the school for a school event. Nearly all the participants stated they worry more about other types of safety concerns such as bullying, weapons or drugs on campus, hazardous construction sites, bus accidents en route to school, kidnapping or trafficking abductions, or being unintentionally harmed in the context of nearby gunfire.

The results of the study and the emerging themes partially align with the assumptions proposed earlier. Parents appear to have some distortions about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters, but overall, their attention to concerning behavioral changes is consistent with much of the prevailing research and likely to serve them in helping their own children if experiencing a personal crisis. As previously assumed, the findings do suggest that the media serves to cultivate parental perceptions of mass shooters, and as supported by participant's responses and current research, the media likewise influences the cognitive processes of mass shooters who might find relatability to previous mass shooters, use news coverage as a blueprint for

future acts, and may identify the media as an avenue for achieving fame and a sense of importance in the social sphere.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in this study, notably the nature of qualitative study results being non-transferrable to broader populations (Creswell, 2014). Drawing conclusions from a sample population of 19 participants makes the findings not generalizable to the larger parent population. The ratio of male to female participants, or those identifying as mothers or fathers, is grossly disproportionate to gender ratios in the general population and lacks gender identity diversity in a non-binary taxonomical classification system. As well, race or ethnic representations likewise do not reflect the overall makeup of the American population.

As the sole researcher and data coder, this presents an additional limitation and a threat to confirmability, credibility, and dependability (Creswell, 2014). What started as purposeful sampling and eventually evolved into snowball sampling has some inherent limitations such as sampling bias. Those who continued to reshare the social media recruitment post with those whom they knew, though unknown to me, created a possible sampling bias and margin of error (Creswell, 2014). Another limitation to consider is that those who agreed to participate in the study may consist of those who have greater interest in the social phenomenon of mass shootings or those who feel confident in discussing the topic. Therefore, this may not represent portions of the population who lack interest or confidence in speaking about this social issue and may, in essence,

constitute those who have the greatest need for education and awareness as postulated in my first assumption.

Another limitation may be the criteria that was implemented for inclusion or exclusion from the study. The study did not exclude persons who work in school settings who may not have formal training on the subject matter but may have a different degree of interest or investment in the study topic because of their closeness to the setting where they believe mass shootings are most likely to occur. As well, those who watch a significant amount of true crime shows or documentaries may have a different degree of exposure to, and knowledge of, mass violence not learned in a formal setting. In a way, this may serve as a form of training or education on the topic depending on the credibility of the program content making them more informed than other participants or the broader general audience.

Recommendations

The findings in this study offer some insight into considerations for future research in this subject area. One consideration would be to include a sample population of greater diversity across gender, age, and race as the sample population was largely comprised of white women in their late 30s to mid 40s. Including criteria for inclusion or exclusion as noted in the study limitations, specifically eliminating those who work in educational or school settings, might help further mitigate potential bias or awareness about the social phenomenon of mass shootings and its relationship to perceptions of school safety. The study yielded relatively consistent data and ensuing themes about the traits, characteristics, and circumstances of mass shooters that might otherwise help

frame a more transferrable and generalizable quantitative study to provide greater insight into what the average person living in the United States believes to be true of these events and their actors.

It appeared throughout the study that many participants appeared to equate the concept of a mass shooter to a school shooter so clarification was provided. Future research may benefit to clarify the definition of a mass shooter at the onset of the study as includes school shooters and mass shooters committing mass violence in other settings.

As relevant to perceptions of school safety, an interesting study may involve assessing perceptions of safety comparing parents who are aware of their children's school having BTAM teams and a preventative resource to those parents who lack awareness of, or confirm negatively, schools having such multidisciplinary teams as 100% of participants in study reported being unaware of such team presence in any of their respective children's schools.

Implications

After a comprehensive review of the literature on mass shootings and mass shooters with emphasis on publications between 2016 and present and seminal works in the field, I was able to identify a research gap pertaining to parents' perceptions of the modern-day mass shooter and the traits, characteristics, and circumstances they associate with these violent actors. The study was framed by Gerbner's cultivation theory that opines that the more one is exposed to television media, the more likely their perceptions and beliefs are adaptations of the viewed content (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Lett et al., 2004) and assumes the symbolic reality constructed by the media differs from

experienced reality (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Appel, 2008; Hetsroni, 2008). Beyond just exploring the content of their perceptions, cultivation theory, as extended beyond television alone to various media sources, helped explain how the perceptions of the participants in the study evolved through media exposure of incidents of mass violence.

The findings of the study led to the emergence of six themes pertaining the traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with mass shooters and mass shootings. The six themes that emerged were appearance or demographic profile, negative mood or affect, adverse childhood experiences, motivation, social connectedness, and pre-attack warning indicators. The findings reflected some important consistencies and some concerning aberrations as they pertain to bystander awareness of warning indicators for mass violence and responsive intervention and management. The similarities and deviations were identified in reference to the most current and prevailing research on mass violence, notably the 2018 study of pre-attack behaviors by Silver et al., and the 2023 publication from the NTAC on mass attacks in public spaces between 2016–2020.

The results offer a glimpse into what parents believe to be true about mass shooters and mass shootings. Such findings suggest areas of awareness where parents may serve as effective primary interventionists when concerned about someone close to them given 70% of those who have expressed concerns about eventual mass shooters before their attacks were family members. As well, distorted perceptions of key pre-attack warning behaviors might hinder parents from recognizing critical indicators of potential violence or otherwise cause them to misassign behaviors as suggestive of future

violence and engage disproportionate and potentially stigmatizing, shaming, or antagonizing intervention responses.

Understanding what parents believe to be true about mass shooters ensures that which aligns with the data is reinforced to parents through training and education, and that which deviates is addressed and reshaped. A best approach to violence mitigation is an integrated, community-involved approach that empowers community members to be active interventionists, often referred to as upstanders. The more focused training and education is according to gaps in knowledge about mass shootings can impact social change by empowering parents to help more potential violent actors and mass shooters identify more healthy solutions to address their real or perceived grievances or general desire to commit harm unto others. Knowing that 70% of family members are likely to be the ones to observe and express concerns about a loved one's behavior, ensuring that these potential first responders have the knowledge about what to look for, and thereafter know how to manage such information effectively, is likely to yield an exponential increase in circumstances where violence is thwarted. By recognizing warning signs earlier, this may serve to help struggling individuals access the help and resources they might desperately need and put them on a path toward support and healing rather than legal entanglement, incarceration, or continuation along a pathway to violence. This helps more people in crisis maintain their liberty and dignity instead of experiencing compounded hardship, shame, or the onset of a new stressor or grievance.

The media has significant influence over what people believe to be true. The media sshapes beliefs and perceptions to align with whatever script or narrative being

broadcasted. An application of framing theory suggests that the way the media frame central issues shapes perceptions and key assumptions about society and influences both what consumers think about and how they make meaning of social phenomena (DeFoster & Swalve, 2018, Schildkraut et al., 2021). Knowing the impact of the media on people's perceptions and views of the world, as well as how it serves as a source of inspiration and platform for notoriety for aspiring mass shooters who may be considering targeted violence (Lankford, 2016a), the findings of this study reinforce the criticality of the media to provide useful education on effective prevention and avoid sensationalizing such tragic events.

It is imperative to emphasize that all the individual traits, characteristics, and circumstances identified by parents in this study, and as reported in existing research, in and of themselves do not qualify as predictors of mass violence. Individuals experiencing isolation, withdrawal, depressive symptoms, researching weapons online, dressing in dark clothing, or other identified factors are more likely to never perpetrate mass violence given the statistical rarity of such events. The presence of these factors in isolation or as a constellation of factors simply serves as a signal that inquiry about wellness and intervention may be warranted. Such a reality supports the value of BTAM teams in schools, workplaces, and beyond as they are trained specifically to support individuals in crisis who may pose a threat of targeted violence and can support parents as front line responders in a collaborative, help-oriented approach to reducing violence towards both self and others in schools, in workplaces, in houses of worship, communities, at home, and beyond.

Conclusion

Previous researchers have dedicated much time and effort to studying the traits, characteristics, and circumstances often linked to mass shooters in the interest of early identification and prevention. Until this study, only one others study by Girard and Aguilar (2018) explored perceptions of mass shooters although restricted to adolescent mass shooters. Given school shootings receive the most coverage in the media (Schildkraut et al., 2018; Schildkraut et al., 2021), the media provides people with much of the information that informs their perceptions of the world in which they live (McCombs, 2022). Considering that most Americans believe mass shootings are the greatest threat to national security (Fox et al., 2021), the research provides novel insight into what parents believe to be true about the factors that motivate a person to kill or injure at least four people during their violent attacks and why so many hols this belief about national security in the United States.

In the aftermath of mass shootings, interviews with family members and others close in proximity to the mass shooter often reveal prior and recent concerns about the perpetrator or in contrast, utter disbelief that someone known to them would be capable of such atrocity. This begs the question as to why more people in the position to see something and say something neglect to do so as a potential opportunity for threat identification and violence prevention. One consideration is that despite the national campaign to get people to see something and say something, perhaps people do not step up to report concerning behaviors as indicators for possible future violence, not out of denial or fear, but rather lacking an accurate and informed understanding about what

warning behaviors to look for that might otherwise prompt their action to mitigate. This study aimed to assess exactly that, to better understand what people, specifically parents, perceive as the traits, characteristics, and circumstances associated with someone at risk for perpetrating mass violence or even other forms of harm due to a personal crisis.

While this study offers a glimpse into what a small cohort of parents perceive about the modern-day mass shooter and the attacks they carry out, more research is needed with a broader population to know what information needs to be imparted upon parents and others who are most likely in the best position to identify and thwart a nascent mass shooter. Such understanding is critical to informing education, outreach, training, and public awareness campaigns targeting these primary and secondary interventionists given it is well established that a community-involved, integrated model of prevention is conceivably the best approach to preventing mass shootings, slowing the frequency of their escalating shootings, reshaping how information about such events is reported by the media, and seeing what will hopefully be an end to rare occurrences that yield such permeating and lingering devastation.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Demographic Information

Age:
Gender:
Race/Ethnicity:
Children Ages & Grades
Area of Employment

Questionnaire

1. When you think of a mass shooter, describe what you think of or picture. Gender? Race? Ethnicity? Religion? Other characteristics?

2. We sometimes use the term 'red flags' to describe someone's behavior who may be moving toward an act of violence like a mass shooting. What are red flags people could look for?

3. Tell me what you think life is like for a mass shooter leading up to their attack?

4. What do you think causes mass shootings?

5. Do you think the causes are the same or different depending on the target location someone selects (i.e., school, university, hospital, grocery store, concert venue)?

6. Where do mass shootings occur most often?

7. Where do you get most of your information about mass shootings?

8. Do you think the media plays a role in people committing mass shootings? If so, how or why?

9. Do you believe our schools are safe? If no, what could be done to make them safer?

10. Do you worry about your child's safety when they go to school? What do you

worry about most?

11. How much time do you spend thinking about mass shootings or school shootings?

    a. Daily
    b. A few times/week
    c. A few times / month
    d. Once a month or less
    e. Never

12. What behaviors might cause you to be concerned about your child and their

potential to commit a mass shooting?

13. Does your child's school have a behavioral threat assessment and management

team or behavioral intervention team?