Chapter 3

Mother Knows Best: A Brief Examination of the 1982–2019 US Mass Shootings Data From Mother Jones’s Investigation

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the movie theater mass shooting in July of 2012 in Aurora, Colorado, Mother Jones magazine created one of the first open-source databases documenting mass shootings in the United States. They focused on documenting rampage shootings in public places which resulted in four or more victims killed by the attacker(s). Their initial database consisted of incidents between 1982 and 2012, then an additional 54 cases were added to this data base of incidents which occurred between 2013 and August 2019. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the incidents gathered in this complete database from 1982 to 2019. Special attention is given to overall trends and characteristics of types of offenders, events, and weapons used in such violent events.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the movie theater mass shooting in July of 2012 in Aurora, Colorado, Mother Jones magazine created one of the first open-source databases documenting mass shootings in the United States (Follman, Aronsen, and Pan, 2019). They focused on documenting rampage shootings in public places which resulted in four or more victims killed by the attacker(s). Their initial database consisted of incidents between 1982 and 2012, then an additional 54 cases were added to this data base of incidents.
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As of late 2019, there is still no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a *mass shooting*. But, generally, it is considered an incident involving multiple victims of firearm-related violence. Most definitions *exclude* mass killings as a result of terrorist, authorized law enforcement or authorized military actions. The *United States’ Congressional Research Service* (Walker, 2015) (the public policy research arm of the United States Congress) acknowledges that there is no broadly accepted definition but defines a “public mass shooting” as an event where someone selects four or more people indiscriminately and kills them. This definition is very similar to the Federal Bureau of Investigations’ definition (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019) of the term “mass murder”. According to the FBI, the term “mass murder” has been defined generally as a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered, within one event, and in one or more locations in close geographical proximity.

The *Mother Jones’* database is an attempt to help in the understanding of the complexities of mass shootings in the United States.

**OVERVIEW OF CASES AND EVENTS**

The first part of the *Mother Jones’* database focuses on the characteristics of each mass shooting event they documented between 1982 and 2019. This includes an examination of the year, month, and day of an event. An examination of the type of location, state of occurrence, and whether an event was a “mass” or “spree” shooting is included. The following is an overview of those findings.

**Number of Incidents each Year**

In examining the number of incidents which have occurred each year, there is an obvious trend towards increasing numbers. While there have *only* (for lack of a better word) been seven (7) incidents listed in 2019, there is still approximately four months left in the year. Moreover, educational institutions at all levels are about to open their doors for another year of school. Sadly, these are locations where many mass shootings occur.

A significant increase in the number of mass shootings can be seen beginning generally in 2012 to 2019. 2012 was the first year in this timeline to experience seven (7) events. That number, or more, is becoming common place it appears in American society.

A list of the mass shootings occurring in 2019 is shown in Table 1.

**Month of Occurrence**

While February (12) and June (12) are slightly ahead in the number of mass shootings, it appears that these types of events are almost evenly distributed throughout the months of any given year. No month of the year during this time frame had less than seven (7) documented events.
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