Chapter 5
School Mass Shootings in America

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ABSTRACT

The killings at Columbine High School in 1999, Virginia Tech in 2007, the Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 are four dire examples of mass shootings in school settings by current or former students in the U.S. Schools—K-12 and college campuses—which have long been considered a sacred place for our children and young people receiving education. According to the data collected by the author, since 1999, school mass shootings (SMS) have increased steadily, causing higher casualty with more powerful weapons and planned schemes. School and campus security have become significant concerns. One big question to all Americans is, are our schools really safe enough to send our children to in order to learn and grow? This article presents preliminary research findings of SMS incidents based on 71 cases with the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The killings at Columbine High School in 1999 leaving 12 dead and 21 injured, and at Virginia Tech in 2007 leaving 32 dead and many more wounded, were both committed by enrolled student offenders in a relatively short time period. The Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in 2012 leaving 27 dead and three injured, as well as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting in 2018 with 12 dead victims and 17 injured individuals, were both committed by former students.

These are four dire examples of mass shootings in school settings by current or former students in the U.S. – the most extreme form of school violence. Schools—K-12 and college campuses—have long been considered a sacred place for our children and young people receiving education. According to the data collected by the author, since 1999, school mass shootings (SMS) have increased steadily, causing higher casualty with more powerful weapons and planned schemes. School and campus security have become significant concerns. One big question to all Americans is, are our schools really safe enough to send our children to in order to learn and grow?

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0113-9.ch005
This article presents preliminary research findings of SMS incidents based on 71 cases. The database was built with 71 cases, employing a content analysis method. The sources for content analysis were newspapers, media outlets, magazines, and various Internet information. The findings cover the characteristics of SMS incidents, schools, shooters, and weapon.

Definitions of SMS

This article is about “school mass shooting.” Among various types of violent acts, this article focuses on mass shooting cases which occurred within school property line, dealing with “shooting” cases with the use of various types of guns and other deadly devices (e.g., bomb, high-power bow and arrow, sword, etc.), and resulting in the form of “mass” with a minimum of three dead victims excluding the circumstance where the offender died. This is a unique form of extreme criminal action.

Mass murder (or mass homicide) is generally one of the three major forms of multiple killings. The other two include killing sprees and serial murders (Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Ressler et al., 1988). Three criteria are often used to differentiate types of multiple murders: the number of victims, the time of the killing, and the place of an incident (Holmes & Holmes, 1992; 2001; Lee & McCrie, 2012).

Little agreement has been reached regarding the “number” of victims (either three (FBI, 2013; Hickey, 2010; Holmes & DeBurger, 1985; 1988; Holmes & Holmes, 1995; 2001; Lee & McCrie, 2012; Petee et al., 1997) or four (Douglas et al., 1992; Duew, 2000; 2004; Fox & Levin, 1998) and whether injured victims should be included in the definition of “mass” homicides because the focus is the number of victims killed.

Another matter concerns “when” mass murder occurs. Mass murder should occur at one time, and in one place in order to be considered a mass shooting. Most researchers agree that “mass” murder is committed within a 24-hour period. Here “one time” indicates that the killings may take place within a few minutes or several hours. Contrarily, a spree killing occurs within a 30-day period, and a serial killing tends to occur repeatedly over more than 30 days (Holmes & Holmes, 2001; Lee & McCrie, 2012).

The last issue is related to the “place” of the mass shooting rampage. Mass shootings may be committed at just one place or more than one geographic location if conducted over a short period (Holmes & Holmes, 2001). “One place” does not strictly mean just one geographic site or building. SMS can occur in one place, typically in K-12 school settings or multiple locations on college and university campuses, within a relatively short time frame.

Thus, in this article, SMS is defined as a homicidal criminal incident with a minimum of three dead victims that occurred within 24 hours at one location or another related place within the boundary of school property if the same offender committed multiple shootings (Lee & McCrie, 2012). It is any criminal act in the school setting committed with lethal weapon.

Dimensions of SMS

This article presents findings from data analyses based upon 71 cases from 1966 to 2013 that were collected by the author. The focus is on several characteristics that emerged from the data regarding the individual shooters, circumstances surrounding incidents, and weapons that were used.