

# Mass Shootings: An Interview with Criminologists Drs. Jillian Peterson and James Densley, the Argument for Data-Driven Nuance, and Steps for Prevention

*Brice Thomas, B.A., Jonathan Nowlin, M.A., David Puder, M.D.*

Mass shootings are a constant fear in American culture today. A 2019 poll reported that one-third of adults say they feel they “cannot go anywhere without worrying about being a victim of mass shooting” and “more than half of American teenagers worry about a shooting at their school.” While there are a variety of definitions, a mass shooting is generally defined as the murder of at least four people at one time. Why do mass shootings take place? Are there any commonalities between the perpetrators? Could these shootings have been stopped before they started? Are there any warning signs? What can we do to prevent such atrocities from happening?

In this episode, we speak with Jillian Peterson, PhD, and James Densley, PhD, who are professors of criminology. They have spent several years creating <https://www.theviolenceproject.org/>, which is the largest database on mass shooters. Throughout this article, we will include tables with data from the database, presenting the raw numbers and percentages. We hope this will give sobering insights into the complex nature of mass shootings.

Today they launch their new book, [\*The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic\*](#). Drs. Peterson and Densley share their expertise on mass shooters through their exhaustive research (including interviews with perpetrators) to give us an inside look into the common characteristics and intentions of mass shooters. This will help us better understand mass shooters so that we can work as a society to prevent future mass shootings.

Dr. Peterson, Dr. Densley, and Dr. Puder don't have any conflicts of interest to report.

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast “Psychiatry & Psychotherapy” **Episode 123** found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)

## Media Portrayal

“We worship that which we fear.”

Therefore, we should teach the public to fear the heroes...

One of the biggest issues with mass shootings is the massive amount of media coverage each occurrence receives. When it comes to mass shooters, there is an intense fear and fascination from the public at large. Similar to why documentaries featuring Ted Bundy, Zodiac, BTK Killer,

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and numerous other serial killers are immensely popular, mass shooters often achieve unnerving notoriety. As we will learn, mass shooters do not perfectly align with the profile of these serial killers, but the publicity remains similar for both.

One problem with the heavy publicity of mass shootings is that potential perpetrators may use previous mass shootings as blueprints for “success.” They see what can be achieved and follow suit. Coverage via news outlets and social media sites can be a dangerous contributing factor, because it suggests to struggling individuals that committing such an atrocity is an option. To prevent the unintentional encouragement of potential mass shooters, we must starve the oxygen of publicity from these events.

The issue starts with an intense desire for fame and publicity that is embedded in American culture. When potential mass shooters are struggling with isolation from society, they see an opportunity to be heard and remembered through immortalization by the media. Here are several ways to prevent further publicity:

1. Treat media coverage on mass shootings in the same manner as suicides. Reporting suicides does not focus on the detail of the event but rather the grief of the family and how to get help if one has thoughts of suicide.
2. Stop sharing the names and images of the perpetrators.
3. Talk about how to support families and communities who are grieving rather than focusing on the means and methods of the mass shooting.
4. Provide a way for possible copycats to connect with organizations who can help them deal with their issues in a positive manner (suicide reporting always has a suicide hotline number given).
5. Shift the attention to the survivors and true heroes of the situation rather than giving the perpetrator a stage due to their violent actions. Say the heroes' names and tell their stories.
6. Shift our unhealthy fascination from the perpetrators to the heroes by being intentional about who we are celebrating and remembering.

Another negative effect of publicizing mass shootings is that people fear greater restrictions on guns, which often leads to more gun sales. Although there are a few instances of armed civilians stopping potential mass shooters, it is well known that more guns lead to more access to people at risk of perpetrating mass shooting events. Both political parties should embrace common-sense gun safety laws, which include locking up guns at all times and comprehensive policies to stop people in crisis from accessing guns. Data on guns are reported at the end of this article for those interested in what types of guns are used in mass shootings.

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Secondly, reactive and fear-based approaches that come after the mass shootings have not been helpful. There is a multi-billion-dollar industry around school safety, school security, and workplace violence prevention, which is all focused on reaction. This contributes to greater fear and makes the threat more real. Making policy decisions based solely on fear does not create lasting public policy. We must better understand the life history and characteristics of mass shooters to find durable and preventive policy measures.

## **Victim, Perpetrator, or Both?**

“I didn’t meet any monsters. I met humans who had done monstrous things, but they were still humans.”

As we try to grasp the horrific events that occur in the world, it is human nature to categorize people as the victim or the villain, an age-old dichotomy. We want to put these stories into well-demarked boxes that are easy-to-understand. However, to prevent further mass shootings, we must gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of the individuals who commit these atrocities, because “the worse the crime the worse the story.” Some feel that when we begin to humanize these individuals, we minimize their horrible actions, hurt the victims, or absolve the perpetrator of responsibility. But in trying to understand the complex human stories that lead up to these tragedies, we do not detract from the horrific nature of their actions or absolve them from the punishment they deserve. Better understanding these shooters does not dilute the pain felt by families and victims. In fact, in better understanding the human beings behind these horrific events, we come closer to creating preventative measures.

Using labels for mass shooters such as “madmen” or “monsters” does not explain the motivation for this phenomenon. These labels do not help stop future mass shootings and may even prevent preventative measures. This is because using these terms effectively places the shooters in the “crazy” box, which allows us to move on rather than getting to the root of the issue. Arguments against mass shooters often point to either gun control issues or mental health instability, but the data presented here reveals a wide range of potential causes for these events. Only through a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding can we prevent mass shootings.

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## Trauma

School systems have multiple barriers in the prevention of mass shootings. First, there are simply not enough counselors, mental health professionals, and community resources. The bureaucracy in public schools can be overwhelming for counselors who are trying to help the student body. Counselors have told me that they often spend the vast majority of their time filling out paperwork rather than helping students. Teachers' kindness and relationships with students likely prevents many suicides and homicides, and many teachers become lay therapists due to the close connections with students. However, teachers also face obstacles in helping students, including large class sizes.

Given that the database reveals many psychosocial factors preceding mass shootings, we can better understand how teachers, school counselors and mental health professionals are key in helping to prevent these events. However, these professionals need more support to fulfill their important roles and prevent mass shootings.

<b>Trauma</b>			
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Bullied	No	129 out of 160	80.6%
	Yes	31 out of 160	19.4%
Raised by single parent	No	94 out of 124	75.8%
	Yes	30 out of 124	24.2%
Suicide of parent	No	119 out of 125	95.2%
	Father	6 out of 125	4.8%
	Mother	0 out of 125	0%

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Childhood trauma	No	5 out of 65	7.7%
	Abused by father	15 out of 65	23.1%
	Abused by mother	4 out of 65	6.2%
	Other major trauma	30 out of 65	46.2%
	Abused by other family member(s)	2 out of 65	3.1%
	Abused by other party	6 out of 65	9.2%
	Abused by both parents	3 out of 65	4.6%
Childhood socioeconomic status	Lower class	49 out of 124	39.5%
	Middle class	58 out of 124	46.8%
	Upper class	17 out of 124	13.7%
Adult trauma	No	127 out of 159	79.9%
	Yes	32 out of 159	20.1%

## Crisis

“Too often we’ve said ‘unless the legislator does something then we can only do nothing.’”

The database reveals that 84% of mass shooters were in crisis in the days or weeks leading up to the shooting. A crisis is considered a marked change in baseline behavior that puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others and/or prevents them from being able to function. An unfortunate commonality with many school shootings is that faculty and students were not shocked to discover who the perpetrator was. Most of the time, the perpetrator had been on people’s radar due to previous threats. Many were known to be depressed or suicidal, and many had a history of being excluded within the school and greater community. This means that while people close to potential shooters often have concerns about them, these students did not receive the interventions they needed. This is because faculty and students often do not know what to do, which can lead to exclusionary and severe interventions like criminal charges,

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suspension, and expulsion. However, these actions do not address the underlying problem and often serve to heighten students' disdain towards the school and their community.

<b>Crisis</b>			
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Recent or traumatic breakup	No	130 out of 168	77.4%
	Yes	38 out of 168	22.6%
Recent or traumatic change in work status or trouble at work	No	75 out of 166	45.2%
	Yes	91 out of 166	54.8%
Signs of being in crisis	No	28 out of 171	16.4%
	Yes	143 out of 171	83.6%
Timeframe of when signs of crisis began	Days before shooting	19 out of 143	13.3%
	Weeks before shooting	23 out of 143	16.1%
	Months before shooting	41 out of 143	28.7%
	Years before shooting	60 out of 143	42.0%
Recent or ongoing stressor	No	53 out of 173	30.6%
	Yes	120 out of 173	69.4%
Inability to perform daily tasks	No	133 out of 175	76.0%
	Yes	42 out of 175	24.0%

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Notably depressed mood	No	123 out of 177	69.5%
	Yes	54 out of 177	30.5%
Unusually calm or happy	No	169 out of 175	96.6%
	Yes	6 out of 175	3.4%
Rapid mood swings	No	126 out of 175	72.0%
	Yes	49 out of 175	28.0%
Increased agitation	No	58 out of 176	33.0%
	Yes	118 out of 176	67.0%
Abusive behavior	No	101 out of 176	57.4%
	Yes	75 out of 176	42.6%
Isolation	No	104 out of 177	58.8%
	Yes	73 out of 177	41.2%
Losing touch with reality	No	117 out of 176	66.5%
	Yes	59 out of 176	33.5%
Paranoia	No	133 out of 176	75.6%
	Yes	43 out of 176	24.4%

Some teachers report having a “teacher gut,” which senses kids in crisis. But many feel uncomfortable reporting their instincts, thinking that the reporting of students in crisis will result in punitive action rather than more beneficial supportive interventions. In addition, many peers of mass shooters are aware of problems, but they also fail to report their concerns due to fears of being labeled a ‘snitch.’ Finally, parents in these communities too often ignore signs of crisis or downplay concerning behavior by attributing them to a kid’s personality. In each of these scenarios, people in a position to report concerning behavior choose not to, which results in the person in crisis not getting the help they need. Unfortunately, this propagates the cycle of violence.

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Another major structural barrier to preventive care for perpetrators is the reliance of healthcare on employment. Many insurance plans are received through employers, which means that one is out of luck without employment. The pandemic, in particular, has revealed holes in this system since many people have been unable to work. Because the healthcare system is too expensive for ordinary people to afford insurance, many have great difficulty accessing the care they need. This is a structural barrier to preventive care in many areas of healthcare, including mass shootings.

## Is it linked to psychopathy?

“Mass Shootings are suicides. But, they’re suicides meant to make headlines.”

Surprisingly, the vast majority of mass shooters do not align with the qualities outlined by the psychopathy checklist. There exist some links with the factor two signals (e.g., impulsivity), but most factor one personality indicators (e.g., callousness, manipulation, or emotional flatness) do not fit the profile of mass shooters.

Below are data of the mental health characteristics of mass shooters.

<b>Health and Mental Health</b>			
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Suicidality	No	47 out of 174	27.0%
	Yes, at any point before shooting	57 out of 174	32.8%
	Intended to die in shooting but had no previous suicidality	70 out of 174	40.2%
Hospitalization for	No	141 out of 175	80.6%



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psychiatric reasons	Yes	34 out of 175	19.4%
Voluntary or involuntary hospitalization	Voluntary	5 out of 35	14.3%
	Involuntary	30 out of 35	85.7%
Prior counseling	No	123 out of 174	70.7%
	Yes	51 out of 174	29.3%
Voluntary or mandatory counseling	Voluntary	33 out of 51	64.7%
	Mandatory	14 out of 51	27.5%
	Both	4 out of 51	7.8%
Prescribed psychiatric medication	No	132 out of 173	76.3%
	Yes	41 out of 173	23.7%
Treatment in the 6 months prior to shooting	No	39 out of 75	52.0%
	Yes	36 out of 75	48.0%
Mental illness	No signs of psychiatric diagnosis	55 out of 177	31.1%
	Mood disorder	27 out of 177	15.3%
	Thought disorder	30 out of 177	17.0%
	Other psychiatric diagnosis	9 out of 177	5.1%
	Both mood and thought disorders	17 out of 177	9.6%
	Signs of mental illness but no diagnosis	39 out of 177	22.0%
Role of psychosis in shooting	Psychotic symptoms played no role	122 out of 175	69.7%
	Psychotic symptoms played a minor role	19 out of 175	10.9%

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	Psychotic symptoms played a moderate role	16 out of 175	9.1%
	Psychotic symptoms played a major role	18 out of 175	10.3%
Autism spectrum disorder	No	162 out of 173	93.6%
	Diagnosed or extremely likely	11 out of 173	6.4%
Substance use and abuse	None	71 out of 159	44.7%
	Drank alcohol casually	10 out of 159	6.3%
	Marijuana	12 out of 159	7.6%
	Other drugs	17 out of 159	10.7%
	Problem with alcohol and drugs	24 out of 159	15.1%
	Problem with alcohol	24 out of 159	15.1%
Health issues	None	131 out of 175	74.9%
	Yes	39 out of 175	22.3%

The presence of suicidality represents a major division between mass shooters and those who exhibit psychopathy. Most mass shooters plan to die in the act either by killing themselves or being killed by the police. It is a different mentality entering a crime with the expectation that it is one's final action. Surprisingly, this makes mass shootings more akin to an act of suicide rather than homicide. This represents an important shift that we must make as a society, because it will determine how we choose effective deterrents and preventive measures.

## Is it linked to medications?

In the 2022 update of the Mass Shooter Database, out of 182 cases of mass shooters, there were only 34 with known mental health treatment in the past 6 months. Out of the 182 there

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were only 43 that had ever been prescribed psychiatric medications (the rest had no evidence of being on a psychiatric medication).

Here is a list of the people who were on a psych medications at some point in their life (it was unclear from the database at what point they were on it in their past):

- #9 unspecified sleep aid
- #21 Thorazine
- #36 unspecified depression medication
- #37 unspecified
- #38 Prozac
- #59 Haldol, Cogentin
- #66 unspecified anxiety/depression/OCD medications
- #66 medications
- #69 Prozac
- #70 Elavil, Trazodone
- #72 Luvox
- #73 Ritalin
- #79 19 unspecified medications
- #80 Prozac, Trazodone
- #83 Unspecified
- #87 Unspecified
- #92 Unspecified
- #95 Prozac
- #102 Paroxetine, Ativan
- #103 Ritalin, Zoloft, Mellaril, Pamelor, Effexor XR
- #104 Prozac
- #106 Prozac, Zyprexa, Depakote, Paxil, Cogentin, Risperdal, Lithium, Cylert, Seroquil, Clozaril, Xanax
- #107 Unspecified
- #109 Unspecified
- #110 Lexapro, Xanax, Ambien
- #122 Unspecified
- # 123 Unspecified
- #126 Zoloft
- #128 Trazodone, Mirtazapine, Temazepam, Wellbutrin
- #134 Trazodone
- #136 unspecified

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#138 Xanax, Prozac, Paxil  
#139 unspecified  
#140 unspecified  
#141 unspecified  
#148 unspecified  
#149 Prozac, Guanfacine, Concerta  
#154 Valium  
#155 Clonazepam, Celexa, Ambien, Atomoxetine, Strattera, Wellbutrin  
#158 Clonidine, Focalin, Risperidone  
#170 Xanax  
#171 unspecified  
#179 Lexapro, Intuniv  
#180 unspecified

As you can see, most of the mass shooting did not have psychiatric medication as a treatment and most did not receive mental health services in the 6 months prior to the event.

## **Changes in Modern Times**

Last-stand suicidal mass shootings are prevalent in America, because perpetrators have access to guns and the media provides a final platform. Interestingly, homicides in the United States have decreased in the last 40 years, while mass shootings have increased. This begs the question: what is causing the rise in mass shootings? Early childhood trauma and major life stressors have been common throughout human history, but what *has* changed in today's society is the prevalence of media and social media. This has created polarized debates that incite us to anger against particular groups and may lead to devastating actions. Media outlets also provide a platform to repeatedly tell the stories of mass shooters.

Easy access to firearms is another development in the modern age, which gives perpetrators the ability to carry out mass shootings. Even children are able to access guns, because gun safety protocols are not always followed. In fact, 80% of school shooters gained access to firearms from their parents or grandparents because the weapons had not been locked up properly. (If your weapons are not locked up and you are reading this, stop and go lock them up right now.) While this represents an opportunity for better laws and policies, every gun owner can affect change now by practicing gun safety. As a society, we must choose to secure weapons to prevent kids from accessing them. This is a common sense preventive action that can be done immediately. Please share this information.

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<b>Weapons</b>			
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Notable or obsessive interest in firearms	No	108 out 165	65.5%
	Yes	57 out of 165	34.6%
Firearm proficiency	No experience	14 out of 152	9.2%
	Some experience	55 out of 152	36.2%
	More experience	28 out of 152	18.4%
	Very experienced	55 out of 152	36.2%
Other weapons or gear	No	111 out of 178	62.4%
	Yes	67 out of 178	37.6%

## What is the Racial Breakdown of Mass Shooters?

- The table below shows the overall percentage of mass shooters, but different races tend to show up in certain settings more often. In the audio interview, Dr. Peterson commented the following:
  - High school shooters are disproportionately white (84.6%)
  - University shooters are disproportionately Asian (44.4%)
  - Workplace shooters are disproportionately black (29.1%)

<b>Shooter Background</b>			
178 total shooters in the database. N = number of	N out of Known	%	Mean (range)

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	Age			35 (15-70)
Gender	Male	174 out of 178	97.8%	
	Female	4 out of 178	2.3%	
Race	White	94 out of 169	55.6%	
	Black	36 out of 169	21.3%	
	Latinx	15 out of 169	8.9%	
	Asian	11 out of 169	6.5%	
	Middle Eastern	8 out of 169	4.7%	
	Native American	3 out of 169	1.8%	
	Other	2 out of 169	1.2%	
Immigrant	No	149 out 176	84.7%	
	Yes	27 out of 176	15.3%	
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	170 out of 174	97.7%	
	LGB	4 out of 174	2.3%	
Religion	None	15 out of 89	16.9%	
	Christian	51 out of 89	57.3%	
	Muslim	9 out of 89	10.1%	
	Buddhist	4 out of 89	4.5%	
	Atheist	4 out of 89	4.5%	

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	Cultural spiritual	6 out of 89	6.7%
	Jewish	0 out of 89	0%
Education	Less than high school	21 out of 130	16.2%
	High school/GED	34 out of 130	26.2%
	Some college/trade school	50 out of 130	38.5%
	Bachelor's degree	12 out of 130	9.2%
	Graduate school/advanced degree	11 out of 130	8.5%
School performance	Poor	29 out of 85	34.1%
	Average	19 out of 85	22.4%
	Good	37 out of 85	43.5%
Birth order	Only child	11 out of 99	11.1%
	Oldest child	27 out of 99	27.3%
	Middle child	23 out of 99	23.2%
	Youngest child	35 out of 99	35.4%
	Twin	3 out of 99	3.0%
Relationship status	Single	83 out of 171	48.5%
	Boyfriend/girlfriend	28 out of 171	16.4%
	Married	32 out of 171	18.7%
	Divorced/separated/widowed	27 out of 171	15.8%
Shooter was a parent	No	120 out of 172	69.8%

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	Yes	52 out of 172	30.2%
Employment status	Not working	101 out of 169	59.8%
	Working	68 out of 169	40.2%
Employment type	Blue collar	115 out of 169	76.2%
	White collar	13 out of 169	8.6%
	In between	23 out of 169	15.2%
Military service	No	129 out of 178	72.5%
	Yes	44 out of 178	24.7%
	Joined but did not make it through training	5 out of 178	2.8%
Military	Army	19 out of 48	39.6%
	Navy	9 out of 48	18.8%
	Air Force	4 out of 48	8.3%
	Marines	10 out of 48	20.8%
	Coast Guard	2 out of 48	4.2%
	National Guard	4 out of 48	8.3%
Community involvement	No involvement	92 out of 48	61.3%
	Somewhat involved	30 out of 48	20%
	Heavily involved	14 out of 48	9.3%
	Formerly involved but recently withdrawn	14 out of 48	9.3%



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## Myths Debunked

There are several myths surrounding mass shooters, largely due to media coverage that presents statistics in a biased manner. Here we present data from the Mass Shooter Database, which provides a more complete picture into mass shootings and debunks many of these commonly-reported myths.

Myth: The motivation is the same every time

- Some shooters' crimes are motivated by racism and hatred, which lead to targeted shootings.
  - White supremacists are largely responsible for racially-motivated shootings (12 out of 176 known cases).
  - Some churches are targeted based on hatred.
- Some shooters have experienced racism themselves, which may contribute to the preceding crisis in their life.
  - It motivates them to take revenge (more common in the workplace).
  - The workplace can be a symbol of unmet goals and frustrations, which can be interpreted through race.
  - Both the real and perceived view of racism in the workplace can lead to disgruntled employees in crisis who choose to take out their anger in the workplace.
- Mass shootings are nuanced. To say that one reason is the only cause for mass shootings is not appropriate. Below is a list of motivations sourced from the Mass Shooter Database.

<b>Grievance and Motivation</b>			
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Motive: Racism	No	160 out of 176	90.9%
	Yes, targeting people of color	12 out of 176	6.8%

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	Yes, targeting white people	4 out of 176	2.3%
Motive: Religious hate	No	168 out of 177	94.9%
	Anti Semitism	4 out of 177	2.3%
	Islamophobia	1 out of 177	0.6%
	Angry with Christianity	4 out of 177	2.3%
	Both Anti Semitism and Islamophobia	0 out of 177	0%
Motive: Misogyny	No	170 out of 177	96.0%
	Yes	7 out of 177	4.0%
Motive: Homophobia	No	175 out of 178	98.3%
	Yes	3 out of 178	1.7%
Motive: employment issue	No	137 out of 177	77.4%
	Yes	40 out of 177	22.6%
Motive: economic issue	No	158 out of 178	88.8%
	Yes	20 out of 178	11.2%
Motive: legal issue	No	156 out of 178	87.6%
	Yes	22 out of 178	12.4%
Motive: relationship issues	No	152 out of 178	85.4%
	Yes	26 out of 178	14.6%
Motive: interpersonal conflict	No	142 out of 178	79.8%
	Yes	36 out of 178	20.2%
Motive: fame seeking	No	166 out of 178	93.3%
	Yes	12 out of 178	6.7%

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Motive: other	No	131 out of 178	73.6%
	Yes	41 out of 178	23.0%
	Generalized anger	6 out of 178	3.4%
Motive: unknown	No	141 out of 178	79.2%
	Yes	37 out of 178	20.8%

Myth: Violent video games are to blame for mass shootings

- Violent video games have been a popular scapegoat for mass shootings, but the data does not align with this myth. Only 14% of mass shooters played violent video games according to the Mass Shooter Database.

Video Games			
		N out of Known Data	%
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Played violent video games	No	94 out of 177	53.1%
	Yes	25 out of 177	14.1%
	Played unspecified video games	14 out of 177	7.9%
	NA (pre-1992)	44 out of 177	24.9%

## Individualism in Mass Shootings

“One of the frustrating things is people are looking for the profile of the mass shooter, right? And what our research is saying is there’s not really a profile, but there are pathways.”

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In America, there exists the notion that if an individual works hard and does what they are supposed to do, they will be successful. Unfortunately, those who find themselves in crisis are often not living up to this ideal. Some of these individuals look for who they can blame for their plight, which leads to intense anger against that individual or group. Mass shootings target the individual, group, or whoever is to blame for their grievances. For perpetrators, feelings of shame, isolation, hopelessness and depression often predate identification of a grievance, which they can then point their anger towards. So, whereas, the types of grievance and anger pointed outward vary, shame, isolation, hopelessness and depression is a common pathway.

## Online Communities Worsen the Problem

Human beings are naturally attracted to ideas and frameworks of thinking. In response to isolation, people look for comradery to support their own frameworks. For example, in the last 20 years, some mass shooters have shared their desire for getting involved in a mass shooting on social media. It is common for people in crisis to seek answers through a community with similar predicaments, which aids in finding models of behavior.

Unfortunately, the internet is readily available with communities, answers, and examples of others who have walked the path of violence. The issue is that not all information is beneficial. Similar to how looking up symptoms on the internet can provide worst-case scenario diagnoses, an individual who feels isolated and hopeless can easily find poor examples of how to deal with their crisis. Chat rooms and forums are filled with people willing to give their advice or express the same negative ideologies. While this creates a sense of comradery and community for perpetrators, the consequences are devastating.

<b>Social Contagion</b>			
		N out of Known Data	%
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Interest in past mass	No	128 out of 176	74.9%

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violence	Yes	43 out of 176	25.2%
Relationship with other shooting(s)	No	153 out of 178	86.0%
	Yes	20 out of 178	11.2%
Legacy token (something left behind)	No	134 out of 177	75.7%
	Yes	43 out of 177	24.3%
Connection to pop culture	None	162 out of 178	91.0%
	Explicit reference	6 out of 178	3.4%
	Tangential reference	10 out of 178	5.6%
Well-planned	No	124 out of 171	72.5%
	Yes	47 out of 171	27.5%
Performance (will to representation)	No	161 out of 178	90.5%
	Yes	17 out of 178	9.6%

Finally, it is common to leak the plan for a mass shooting prior to the event. The data below tells the story of who they tell and when.

<b>Leaking Information</b>			
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Social media use related to shooting	No	64 out of 176	36.4%
	Yes	43 out of 176	24.4%
	NA, pre-1999	69 out of 176	39.2%
Leakage (communication to a	No	98 out of 177	55.4%

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third party of an intent to do harm) prior to the shooting	Yes	79 out of 177	44.6%
Leakage- how?	In-person	53 out of 78	68.0%
	Letter	3 out of 78	3.9%
	Other writing	5 out of 78	6.4%
	Phone / text	6 out of 78	7.7%
	Internet / social media	10 out of 78	12.8%
	Other	1 out of 78	1.3%
Leakage- who?	Mental health professional	3 out of 78	3.9%
	Immediate family	5 out of 78	6.4%
	Wife/girlfriend	15 out of 78	19.2%
	Police	2 out of 78	2.6%
	Coworker/supervisor	14 out of 78	18.0%
	Friend/neighbor	8 out of 78	10.3%
	Classmate	7 out of 78	9.0%
	Teacher/school staff	2 out of 78	2.6%
	Waitress/bartender/clerk	5 out of 78	6.4%
	Other	17 out of 78	21.8%
Specific	Nonspecific (threatened violence)	45 out of 80	56.3%
	Specific (threatened shooting)	35 out of 80	43.8%

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## **Mass Shooting Prevention**

### *Connection*

Isolation is often the last phase a person in crisis goes through before committing a mass shooting. All of the mass shooters interviewed agreed that intervention was possible. Therefore, we conclude that connecting with people who exhibit concerning changes in behavior such as isolation can be life-saving.

### *Sharing on Social Media*

Be conscientious of what you share on social media. Sharing clips or stories that have to do with mass shooters will increase their attention and publicity, which can encourage a last-stand mentality for those who are already toying with the idea.

### *Gun Safety in the Home*

Make sure any weapons in the home are safely secured so that they are inaccessible to children and anyone who may be a danger to themselves or others.

### *Crisis Intervention Training*

Individuals who are on the pathway to becoming a mass shooter will certainly need professional mental help, but everyone is able to act as a barrier to mass shootings. With skills in crisis intervention, one is equipped to navigate discussions with individuals showing signs of being in crisis. These interventions may prevent the person from making decisions that could harm themselves or others.

### *Better Reporting Methods*

Institutions need to give employees, teachers, and students a better way to report possible behavioral red flags that do not result in punitive-only responses. Both teachers and students are rightly concerned about reporting suspicious behavior, because they do not think the response will be helpful or are afraid of being ostracized themselves. Reporting negative behaviors should be met with a mental health check-in rather than immediate punishment, which can increase the chances of retaliation.

### *More Mental Health Professionals*

Schools are woefully understaffed with mental health professionals. Counselors must have the time and space to intentionally connect with students before they are overcome with shame, hopelessness, and anger.

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## Combatting Hopelessness

It can be easy to lose hope with every mass shooting that is reported, but refusing to give up and committing to an attitude that does not give celebrity status to perpetrators is an essential step toward prevention.

## Conclusion

“Only when you understand those stories can you really start to appreciate where people are at and then you can move towards prevention and that’s the goal.”

The main focus of *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic* is to show that there is something we all can do to help prevent mass shootings. While legislative action may be required in certain areas, we must start working as a society towards preventing these crimes rather than reacting to them. The Mass Shooter Database reveals that there is no cut-and-dry profile of these shooters but rather a much more nuanced path to becoming a perpetrator. We must stop turning these individuals in crisis into pseudo-celebrities, because this will only encourage copycats to do the same. Being aware of people who demonstrate signs of shame, hopelessness, depression and isolation is crucial in preventing shootings from taking place. We must remember there are always opportunities for prevention. If you are a mental health professional, you are part of the solution and can play a vital role. But we also must think outside our offices and hospitals to bring forth systemic change that rid our society of these tragic and all-too-common events.

## Supplemental Data

Location and Scene			
178 total shooters in the database. N = number of shooters who meet the criteria out of the known data. Also reported below is how many of the 178 have known data and the percentage of the occurrence based on the known data. This table was compiled from analysis of the database: (2021. Mass Shooter Database. Version 4.0. Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.theviolenceproject.org">www.theviolenceproject.org</a> )		N out of Known Data	%
Region	South	66 out of 178	37.1%
	Midwest	25 out of 178	14.0%



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	Northeast	29 out of 178	15.7%
	West	59 out of 178	33.2%
Area	Urban	92 out of 178	51.7%
	Suburban	43 out of 178	24.2%
	Rural	43 out of 178	24.2%
Location Type	K-12 School	13 out of 178	7.3%
	College University	9 out of 178	5.1%
	Government building / place of civil importance	6 out of 178	3.4%
	House of worship	11 out of 178	6.2%
	Retail	33 out of 178	18.5%
	Restaurant/bar/nightclub	23 out of 178	12.9%
	Workplace	55 out of 178	30.9%
	Place of residence	14 out of 178	7.9%
	Outdoors	14 out of 178	7.9%
Insider/Outsider	Insider	77 out of 178	43.3%
	Outsider	101 out of 178	56.7%
Armed person on the scene when shooting started	No	152 out of 177	85.9%
	Yes	25 out of 177	14.1%
Type of armed person	None	151 out of 176	85.8%
	Law enforcement	19 out of 176	10.8%
	Civilian	6 out of 176	3.4%

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<b>Crime and Violence</b>			
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Criminal record/police contact	No	58 out of 175	33.1%
	Yes	117 out of 175	66.9%
Previous homicide(s)	No	163 out of 177	92.1%
	Yes	14 out of 177	7.9%
History of physical violence	No	59 out of 172	34.3%
	Yes	113 out of 172	65.7%
History of domestic abuse	No	114 out of 178	64.0%
	Abused romantic partner	35 out of 178	19.7%
	Abused other family member(s)	16 out of 178	9%
	Abused romantic partner and other family member(s)	13 out of 178	7.3%
History of sexual offenses	No	149 out of 178	83.7%
	Yes	29 out of 178	16.3%
Gang association	No	175 out of 178	98.3%
	Yes	3 out of 178	1.7%

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Terror group association	No	168 out of 178	94.4%
	Yes	10 out of 178	5.6%
Hate group association	No	154 out of 178	86.5%
	Hate group association	10 out of 178	5.6%
	Other radical group association	2 out of 178	1.1%
	Inspired by a hate group but no direct connection	7 out of 178	3.9%
	Website or chat room postings relating to hate or hate groups	5 out of 178	2.8%
Bully	No	126 out of 164	76.8%
	Yes	38 out of 164	23.2%

<b>Resolution of Case</b>			
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On scene outcome	Killed self	69 out of 178	38.8%
	Killed on scene	35 out of 178	19.7%
	Apprehended	72 out of 178	40.5%
	Apprehended, then suicide before trial	2 out of 178	1.1%

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Attempt to flee	No attempt, resigned to die	144 out of 177	81.4%
	Tried to escape/keep living freely	33 out of 177	18.6%
Insanity defense at trial	No	30 out of 174	17.2%
	Yes	31 out of 174	17.8%
	N/A (dead before trial)	105 out of 174	60.3%
	Trial pending	8 out of 174	4.6%
Criminal sentence	N/A	109 out of 166	65.7%
	Death penalty	20 out of 166	12.1%
	Life without parole	16 out of 166	9.6%
	Life imprisonment (with possibility of parole)	14 out of 166	8.4%
	Hospitalization	5 out of 166	3.0%
	Juvenile detention	2 out of 166	1.2%

<b>Firearms</b>			
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Classification	Handgun	216 out of 386	56.0%
	Shotgun	43 out of 386	11.1%
	Rifle	46 out of 386	11.9%
	Assault rifle/submachine gun	81 out of 386	21.0%

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Caliber	Small	46 out of 340	13.5%
	Medium	132 out of 340	38.8%
	Large	162 out of 340	47.7%
Gun used in shooting	No	91 out of 364	25.0%
	Yes	262 out of 364	72.0%
	Yes, but only for suicide attempt	11 out of 364	3.0%
Modified	No	313 out of 383	81.7
	Yes	70 out of 383	18.3
Extended magazine	No	250 out of 291	85.9%
	Yes	41 out of 291	14.1%
When obtained	Less than one month prior to shooting	90 out of 296	30.4%
	More than one month prior to shooting	206 out of 296	69.6%
Legal purchase	No, illegal	104 out of 302	34.4%
	Federal Firearms Licensed dealer	126 out of 302	41.7%
	Unregulated private sale	12 out of 302	4.0%
	Legal but specific source unknown	60 out of 302	19.9%
Illegal purchase	No, legal	247 out of 300	82.3%
	System failure (background check missed something, records not reported)	12 out of 300	4.0%
	Straw purchase	7 out of 300	2.3%

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	Lying and buying	10 out of 300	3.3%
	Illegal street sale	4 out of 300	1.3%
	Illegal but specific source unknown	13 out of 300	4.3%
	Legal sale but illegal possession	7 out of 300	2.3%
Assembled with legal parts	No	295 out of 298	99.0%
	Yes	3 out of 298	1.0%
Gifted	No	294 out of 300	98.0%
	Yes	6 out of 300	2.0%
Theft	No	255 out of 300	85.0%
	Theft/"borrowed" from family or friend	34 out of 300	11.3%
	Theft other	3 out of 300	1.0%
	Theft at the scene of the shooting (taken from law enforcement or security guard)	8 out of 300	2.7%
Unknown	No	301 out of 386	78.0%
	Yes	85 out of 386	22.0%

## *Acknowledgments:*

*This article was supported by ["Mental Health Education & Research"](#).*