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An Analysis of Terrorism and Mental Health in Mass Shootings as Perceived by the Media

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AN ANALYSIS OF TERRORISM AND MENTAL HEALTH IN MASS SHOOTINGS
AS PERCEIVED BY THE MEDIA

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2016

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ABSTRACT

Public mass shootings are the rarest type of mass murder in the United States. Nevertheless, the media tends to focus on mass murders that appear to be the most newsworthy. The most sensational mass murders are those that have the highest victim count, that target perfect victims, and that occur in a public location. Terrorism and mental health are two separate frames that are often used by the media when reporting a mass shooting event. This creates a lack of accurate reporting that displays a distorted image of mass shootings and affects the public's perception. This study evaluated frames used by the media specifically terrorism and mental health as well as others that came up as a result of this study. Using the Active Shooter Incidents in the United States report, a sample of 75 mass shootings were selected that occurred between 2007 and 2017. This was a qualitative study and consisted of a content analysis of news reports for each of the mass shootings in the sample. Findings revealed several themes that are commonly used by the media when reporting on the mass shooting events. The most common frames found were mental health, terrorism, domestic violence, financial/employment struggles, lack of social skills/loner, political attacks, and criminal/violent backgrounds. Mental health was the most common frame used by media reports to describe motive for the attack. In addition, offenders that were identified as Muslim in the sample were all investigated as having possible terrorism ties. This analysis allowed for an overview of major themes that are commonly present in media reports. The wide sample used in this analysis included the most recent mass shootings in conjunction with the commonly researched mass shootings that have occurred in previous years which supplements the overall literature in this topic

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock shot several hundred rounds upon more than 22,000 attendees of the Harvest Music Festival that was held in Las Vegas, Nevada. He killed 58 and injured 441 victims. A year prior, on June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen burst into the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and killed 49 victims while injuring an additional 50. Both of these attacks were considered the deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history at the time they occurred (Criss, 2017). The media heavily reported on the events revealing all known details of the attacks and the offenders. Since the media is the only source of information where the public can gain insight on such occurrences, speculation can arise due to the lack of facts during the early reporting of a mass shooting incident.

Before details of the offender are released, the media usually conjectures the rationale behind the attack. One of the first themes that arises during early reporting is the possible ties to terrorism. In the absence of proper evidence being disclosed, many media sources devise a profile that reflects a foreign invader rather than a domestic assailant. Once the known facts are released, the framing either changes or remains stable depending on the offender's background. For instance, the Pulse shooting was framed as a possible terrorist attack after it was known that the offender was a Muslim American. Once the 911 calls, where Mateen pledged his allegiance to ISIS, were released it was confirmed that the attack itself was terror-based. As a result, the media placed more emphasis on the attack being terrorism rather than a hate crime (Hancock & Haldeman, 2017). On the other hand, the mass shooting in Las Vegas was framed quite differently. After it was revealed that the attack was committed by an American citizen who had no ties to Islam, it was no longer associated with terrorism. In fact, any ties to terrorism were

denied, and it was instead framed as a lone wolf shooter attack. Although both attacks were similar in nature they were framed as two separate offenses with different motivations.

Terrorism is a common frame brought up when a deadly mass shooting occurs. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has identified two types of terrorism which are international and domestic. International terrorists have ties to foreign terror-based organizations or nations and domestic terrorists have extremist views about movements within the U.S. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). The terrorist and the lone wolf are two separate frames for the same attack depending on if the attacker is a citizen or a foreigner. Offenders that commit an act due to terrorism are seen as more dangerous and evil than domestic attackers (Powell, 2011; Morin, 2016).

Another frame that is commonly used within mass shooting reports is that of mental health. Research shows that there are two separate sides of the spectrum demonstrating whether mental illnesses are the primary cause of mass shooting cases. Some studies assure that a mental illness is what drives an individual to commit a mass shooting while others argue that there are other factors in an offender's life that cause the motivation to pursue an attack (Atran, 2003; Duncan, 1995; Dvoskin, 2016; Langman, 2009; Lankford, 2013; Newman & Fox, 2009; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004; O'Toole, 2000; Post et al., 2009; Rosenwald, 2016; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Some contend that mass shootings occur due to social factors rather than behavioral ones, such as having a lack of ties to society that cause the assailant to go forth with a massive attack (Auxemery, 2015; Cantor, Mullen, & Alpers, 2000; Duwe, 2000; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997).

Focusing on murder events that happen to be the most shocking and sensational can result in the fabrication of a public scare that may be inaccurate and erroneous (Taylor, 2016). The

attention placed on a single offender profile for mass shootings completely disregards the most common types of attacks such as familicides and spreads an inaccurate consensus about mass shootings to the public. However, media outlets continue to seek newsworthy events, which include the most sensational murders.

The purpose of the present work is to focus on the terrorism and mental health frames that the media often uses when reporting public mass shooting events. This study will focus on mass shootings that end in mass murder. Public mass shootings are defined as attacks using firearms that target the general public other than or in addition to immediate family members. The intention of this research is to detail how often terrorism or mental health frames are used and discover additional frames that are used by the media to report on mass shootings. It will distinguish between actuality and exaggeration, as well as provide a discussion on the approach that should be considered. This type of research is important to pursue due to its contemporary nature. Framing mass shootings as terrorist attacks further creates fear within the public and justifies certain policies such as the war on terror, which has an underlying anti-Islamic connotation (Freedman & Thussu, 2012). Much discussion has been introduced about international terrorism being an immense problem in the United States and a push to classify foreign terrorist attacks as the worst types of mass murder only further validates this notion (Morin, 2016). This study is important because it will be able to address the current problem with news journalism and their reporting of mass shooting events. Terrorism and mental health are two frames often tied to mass shooting. As a result, a false consensus is created which condemns ethnic minority groups and individuals with mental illnesses. It is important to discuss the underlying issues with media frames which continuously affect the public's way of thinking.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2013, Congress deemed the definition of mass murder to be a killing of three or more persons during a single incident not counting the perpetrator (Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012, 2013). This definition was less restrictive than the one previously used by the FBI of four or more killings in a single event. It allowed the FBI to become involved in an investigation after three victims have been killed rather than wait until four. Out of all mass murders, over half of them are domestic murders also known as family annihilations (Duwe, 2007; Hickey, 2013). The public tends to overlook family annihilations when considering mass murders due to their lack of media exposure and focus instead on the most sensational murders (Duwe, 2007).

Considering all types of mass murder, since 1999, there has been an average of 31 incidents each year where four or more individuals have been killed in a single event (Krouse & Richardson, 2015). Mass murders are rare in occurrence and only make up about 0.2 percent of all homicides in the US. According to Duwe (2007), the first mass murder wave did not begin in the 1960s as frequently supposed, but in fact began in the 1920s. From 1900 to 1999 familicides consisted of almost half of all mass murders that occurred in the United States (Duwe, 2007). This is something that the public may be unaware of because most media attention is placed on public mass murders with a high victim count (Duwe, 2005; Duwe, 2007; Lankford, 2015; Duwe, 2017; Jarvis & Scherer, 2015). The high victim count mass shootings are rare in occurrence and according to some studies there has not been an increase in recent years (Lankford, 2016a). Nevertheless, a recent study done by the Congressional Research Service showed that the number of mass shootings increased slightly during 2009-2013, with a slight

increase in familicides and public mass shootings and a decrease in felony-related shootings (Krouse & Richardson, 2015).

The media place emphasis on certain aspects of mass murder and create an inconsistency in mass murder reporting, which leave many to question about who actually commit the most mass murders. The SHR estimates that most mass murders are committed by blacks (42%) with whites (41%) coming in a close second (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014). This is inclusive of all mass murders which include familicides, felony-related, and public mass shootings. When focusing only on public mass shootings, excluding gang and felony mass killings, *Mother Jones* found that from 1982 to 2017 whites have committed 64 percent of all mass shootings (Follman, Aronsen, & Pan, 2012). Duwe (2017) also concluded that the majority of mass shooter offenders are white. Offender characteristics vary depending on the type of mass murder being analyzed. Public mass shooter offenders are more likely to be white than black and felony-related mass murder is more likely to be committed by Latino or black offenders (Lankford, 2016b). All things considered, the media play a major role in disseminating this information to the public.

Overall, one third of all public mass shootings occur in the United States (Lankford, 2016a). In addition, guns are used more often in mass murders than in single-victim homicides (Duwe, 2005). Mass shooting offenders in the U.S. use more weapons than offenders in other countries (Lankford, 2016a). In addition, they are more likely to attack open commercial sites, schools, officers, and warehouses (Duwe, 2000; Duwe, 2005; Lankford, 2016a). Public mass shooters tend to plan their attacks in advance and may choose to target stranger victims in a public location instead of solely attacking those with whom they have a relationship (Newman et al., 2004). A study found that an offender's likelihood of dying increased as an additional victim

was killed. Offenders who died had a higher victim count than those who lived, and they used more weapons during the attack (Lankford, 2015).

Terrorism and Mass Shootings

Terrorism is a violent act that does not target the victims directly but intends to send a broader message to the target population or government entity (Morin, 2016). The two distinct types of terrorism identified by the U.S. government are international and domestic terrorism. International terrorism is defined as individuals or groups committing an attack due to inspiration or association to foreign terrorist organizations or nations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Domestic terrorism, on the other hand, is defined as an attack committed by an individual or group that is “inspired or associated with primarily U.S.-based movements that espouse extremist ideologies of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Since 1990, terrorism attacks have significantly lowered over the years (La Free & Bersani, 2014). Moreover, there is a higher number of terrorist attacks in more urbanized cities, while counties with high concentrated disadvantage have a lower number of terrorist attacks (LaFree & Bersani, 2014). After the 9/11 terrorist attack, the media shifted its focus on what the government was emphasizing during that time and called it the “War on Terror”. This gave an opportunity for the media to use certain reporting strategies that focus solely on events that fit a certain agenda (Freeman & Thussi, 2012; Reese & Lewis, 2009). The media is drawn to stories that are seen as shocking and sensational (Duwe, 2000; Duwe, 2005; Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). As a result, they create a perfect platform for terrorists that want to make a public display targeted at the U.S. government or other international audiences (Nacos, 2007; Tuman, 2009).

Media coverage is framed in a certain way which tends to influence the public's perspective of that particular issue (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). There is a strong misconception about what terrorism looks like in the United States due to the unclear picture that has been heavily influenced by the media. International terrorism is seen as Muslims and Islam working together to take down what is seen as "Christian America," while domestic terrorism is simply seen as a troubled individual committing an isolated attack (Powell, 2011). Foreign terrorists are depicted more negatively than domestic ones (Powell, 2011; Morin, 2016). Motives for domestic attackers are categorized as trying to create public fear, sending an anti-government message, or seeking public attention. In contrast, motives for foreigner attackers are avenging Muslims that have been killed, Islamic terrorism, and just to plain and simply kill (Powell, 2011). Morin (2016) conducted a similar study comparing the Fort Hood and Navy Yard attacks. Results showed that both attacks were similar in occurrence but were framed in two separate ways by the media. The Fort Hood mass shooting was framed as a terrorist attack where it focused on the perpetrator's religion and previous life, while the Navy Yard mass shooting focused less on the offender's background and more on the crime itself (Morin, 2016). Overall, Lankford (2012) found that suicide terrorists, school shooters, and rampage shooters are similar in reasoning and all go forth with an attack knowing the outcome.

Attackers that appear to be Muslim are suspected as terrorists before verifying their religious identity (Powell, 2011). This only further pushes the Muslim as a terrorist stereotype without acknowledging other reasons that may be leading to their attack. According to Spaaij (2010), the US had the most numerous cases of lone wolf terrorist attacks and the primary reasons for them were white supremacy, Islamism, nationalism, and anti-abortion. Most ideological shooters tend to have a racist ideology and commit their attacks due to racial hatred

(Capellan, 2015; Gruenewald, 2011). Solo actor terrorism attacks occur more frequently in higher developed countries because terrorism organizations do not tend to survive long enough without being disrupted (Young & Dugan, 2014). In the United States, lone wolf attacks are the deadliest types of terrorist attacks because of such high counterterrorism efforts (Phillips, 2017). Additionally, Capellan (2015) found that offenders that base their attacks on a certain ideology are more likely to kill and injure a larger number of people than non-ideological shooters. The findings show that ideological shooters are more likely to target strangers in locations without a personal connection (Capellan, 2015). As a result, much research concludes that the U.S. may have such a prevalent issue with these types of attacks because of the ease of accessibility to firearms (Duwe, 2005; Lankford, 2016a; Phillips, 2017; Spaaij, 2010; Young & Dugan, 2014).

Mental Health and Mass Shootings

When the media reports a mass shooting event, one of the topics that is often brought up is mental health. There is a common misconception that all mass shooters suffer from a mental illness and that it is the primary motivator for their attack. The research on this subject matter is split when it comes to the reasoning behind an offender going forth with a mass shooting attack. Some researchers have found that a mental or behavior disorder is only present in a small number of mass shooting cases (Atran, 2003; Dvoskin, 2016; Post et al., 2009; Rosenwald, 2016). Other studies have shown that most mass shooters suffer from a mental disorder such as depression or suicidal thoughts (Duncan, 1995; Langman, 2009; Lankford, 2013; O'Toole, 2000; Newman & Fox, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002). There is an unclear distinction between social factors and psychological reasons when it comes to mass shooting

offenders. Like the media, some are quick to blame a mental illness while others are unconvinced on a single motivator for such violent measures.

Mental illness is something that is frequently mentioned in the media but may be misrepresented (Duwe, 2000). Most mass murders are committed by perpetrators who are not considered insane but rather quite competent (Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). Fox & DeLateur (2014) concluded that mass shooters are not likely to be crazed killers that just snap. They carefully plan their attack and maintain their composure through it all (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Another study found that the main motivator for a mass murder offense is a triggering event rather than mental illness. Nevertheless, offenders who committed an attack due to mental illness often had a higher number of victims (Taylor, 2016). Mass murders are rarely related to any mental illness. Rather, the suffering that they have endured may cause a psychological break from reality (Auxemery, 2015). Offenders of mass shootings are not likely to be psychotic but may experience signs of depression due to unfair life chances that they have experienced (Fox & Fridel, 2016). In addition, they usually have no social supports and lost their social identity which is the primary cause for their criminal act (Cantor, Mullen, & Alpers, 2000). There are social aspects in offender's lives, that are not often discussed, but which may be the primary motivators for their attack. Unless the media begins focusing on these social components, the blame will primarily be placed on mental illnesses.

Meloy et al. (2004) directed a study comparing adult mass murderers and adolescent mass murderers to outline similarities and differences between both. Results demonstrated that about 50% of the mass murderers had a mental illness and most suffered from depression. In addition, most perpetrators had a triggering event before the attack which was emotionally or mentally disturbing (Meloy et al., 2004). School shooters are more likely to suffer from lack of

social ties, isolation, rejection, and a dysfunctional family, and have had trouble integrating into a communal setting (Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). A study found that school shooters, assassins, and lone wolves are similar in that they all share depression, personal crisis, and a history of weapon use (McCauley, Moskalenko, and Van Son, 2013). Furthermore, lone wolf terrorists appear to have high levels of psychological disturbance (Spaaij, 2010). Individuals suffering from a serious mental illness are less likely to target stranger victims and commit a multiple-victim attack (Matejkowski, Fairfax-Columbo, Cullen, Marcus, & Solomon, 2014)

This shows that a mass shooter's mental health is not the only factor that should be discussed but that events from their personal life should also be considered. The media's focus on blaming certain aspects such as mental health may lead to lobbying efforts for unnecessary solutions. Placing restrictive policies due to psychiatric reasons on the second amendment right have limited benefits when it comes to decreasing the number of mass shooters (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Subsequently, the public must come up with better strategies and solutions that will reduce the stigma of individuals with mental illnesses and protect the public from potential harm.

Media Reporting of Mass Shootings

The newsworthiness of an event is of primary importance to reporters and they tend to disseminate information that will obtain a large audience reach. The media tends to adopt the misconception that most mass shooters are committed by individuals in a public setting, targeting strangers, with the shooter suffering from suicidal thoughts (Fox & Levin, 1998; Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). Then again, that is not the case. Public mass shootings make up a small

percentage of all mass murders (Duwe, 2000; Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). As a result, only the ones that are deemed as newsworthy make it out of the local scene.

The media tend to show a distorted view of the mass shooting occurrence. According to the media, most mass shootings are committed by white young to middle-aged men in a public location. However, based on the Supplementary Homicide Reports, the plurality of mass murders are committed by young black men in a residence (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014). One study found that random attacks due to paranoid thinking are the least common form of mass murder (Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). Oftentimes, the mass murderers that are the most newsworthy are those who have the highest victim count, portray perfect victims, are publicly taken place, and use assault weapons (Adler, 2012; Duwe, 2000; Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012; Paulsen, 2003; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). In addition, another newsworthy characteristic are those killers that are on the run and that include other sensational elements (Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012).

Even though there is much media attention placed on white shooters, there is a considerable coverage of offenders of Asian descent (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). A study indicated that homicide incidents committed by whites and Asians are reported more often than those committed by Blacks and Hispanics (Paulsen, 2003). Similarly, another article concluded that attackers were suspected as Muslim based on their looks and their name before obtaining verification (Powell, 2011). This only further stigmatizes ethnic minorities and places a negative connotation onto the group. The framing of the Orlando attack focused solely on a terrorist attack and invalidated the dangers that are felt by minority group members (Hancock & Haldeman, 2017). Such framing, in turn, leads to the public perpetuating the idea of “otherness,” which leads to a negative perspective and marginalization of minority groups (Powell, 2011).

Mental Health versus Terrorism in the Media

Within the media, terrorism attacks by a foreigner have a higher threat to the country than an attack by a mentally ill individual (Powell, 2011; Morin, 2016). When it comes to comparing domestic and foreign mass shootings, domestic ones have a greater focus on mental illness than do those tied to terrorism (Powell, 2011). Attacks that have a higher victim count are usually those where the attacker is suicidal (Lankford, 2015). However, suicidal terrorists are no different than regular suicide attackers in that they have common social problems that trigger them into committing the attack (Lankford, 2012). Terrorists have the same motivations and social disconnects as regular mass shooters, but they are not perceived that way by the public. A main problem with both types of acts being committed is the ease of availability to weapons. This is due to the U.S. having easier access to firearms and few restrictions to them (Duwe, 2005; Phillips, 2017). Even though both attacks are very similar in motive, they are not framed equally through the media. Continuing this frame through the media will only further push exclusion of specific individuals and generate stigmatization of both mental illnesses and foreign groups.

The purpose of this study is to analyze media reports of mass shootings and explore the different frames used by news platforms to describe the motive for the attack. The term frame is defined as the focus that the media chooses to report social events through by using language that influences individuals' perception. News platforms report through different frames by attributing meanings to words and phrases in order to adhere with the agenda setting. This study will evaluate how often the media brings up possible ties to terrorism when reporting on a mass shooting event. In addition, it will acknowledge the mention of mental health by the media when

attempting to report reasoning behind the attack. It is important to look at mental health because it is a matter that is often tied to a mass shooting event in the media. There are many individuals that struggle with a mental health problem but they do not exert violent behaviors. Focusing on a single detail of an offender may perpetuate an exaggerated view of the types of mass shootings that occur in actuality. This will be an exploratory study that will bring some insight on the distinctive common frames used by the media. Its purpose is to investigate, through a content analysis, how the media over-uses the same frames to report on mass shootings which can affect the perception of their larger audience.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Data

The data that were used for this study are from the Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000-2016 report conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This report focuses on active shooters as defined as “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area” by the White House, U.S. Department of Justice/FBI, and other government agencies (Blair & Schweit, 2014). However, in the definition, the word “confined” is omitted to prevent from overlooking possible active shooter events that occurred out in the open. This report does not include shootings that occur due to gang and drug violence or shootings ascribed to contained residential or domestic disputes. This is similar to the data collection methods of the Mother Jones database that only takes into account public mass shootings with no relation to felony or gang involvement (Follman, Aronsen, & Pan, 2012). The most recent report was published on October 3, 2017, and includes a focus on a total of 220 active shooter incidents that occurred from 2000 to 2016. This included events where a shooting was actively in progress and where other individuals were in peril of being targeted. Since this report was recently disseminated, it did not include data for the 2017 year. In order to include the most recent mass shootings in this study, data from the year 2017 were gathered using the Mother Jones, as well as the Gun Violence Archive website. The mass shootings that were selected for 2017 followed the methodology used in the collection process of the Active Shooter Incidents’ report.

This research was conducted using qualitative methods and focused on analyzing the different frames that become present when the media report on mass shootings. The aim of this study is to focus on two frames: terrorism and mental health. Using a content analysis of newspaper reports, an analysis was realized of a sample of mass shooting events to explore the framework that journalists commonly employ. To limit the large number of news platforms that report on mass shootings, the three major national newspapers that had the highest circulation rate in 2013 were used: *The Wall Street Journal*, 2,378,827; *The New York Times*, 1,865,318; and *USA Today*, 1,674,306 (Media Alliance for Audited Media, 2013). This helped in limiting media reports that may not have such a significant impact on the public's perception due to their limited coverage and low circulation rates.

Since the national newspapers focus predominantly on high coverage news stories, other news platforms were considered in these cases. Other news platforms that were used in the cases with lack of coverage were *The Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *CNN News*, *Associated Press*, *Washington Post*, and local newspapers in the cases with only local media reporting available. The benefits of focusing on news platforms with a great level of popularity is that they have a high number of stories, national readership, and different viewpoints. Reports coming from these platforms are able to reflect the public sentiment felt after a public mass shooting, the description of the offender, and surrounding details that this research seeks to explore

The level of coverage was measured depending on the number of media reports that were available during 24 to 72 hours after the attack. This number was obtained by searching the offender's name on LexisNexis and totaling the number of articles present in the search. After identifying the number for each offender, they were grouped into three categories: low, medium, and high. The cases that had less than 200 articles were labeled as low, 200 to 900 were medium,

and cases with over 900 articles was high. These specific ranges were chosen by taking into account the mean, median, mode, and range from the sample.

Sample

The sample frame used was a time span of 10 years, specifically from 2007 to 2017. The data for 2007 to 2016 was obtained from the Active Shooter Incidents report while the data from 2017 was gathered individually using online datasets such as Mother Jones and Gun Violence Archive. This allowed for a contemporary study of mass shootings over the last 10 years, which were prime years for media technology. The rise of the internet occurred during this time and this allotted for media reports to be disseminated to the public at a higher and quicker rate. The internet has allowed for information to be distributed to individuals through social media sites and other popular platforms. Therefore, looking at this time frame provides insight on the change of media frames over time due to an increase of online exposure.

A sample of 75 mass shootings that occurred throughout the past 10 years were obtained for this research. The cases were selected from the Active Shooter data based on meeting a specific definition for this study. It aimed to mirror the definition that the Congressional Research Service used in their report, but with the updated definition of mass murder implemented by Congress in the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012 (2013) of three or more victims killed in a single event not including the offender. This study specifically looked at mass shootings that end in mass murder. Thus, mass shooting for the purpose of this study was defined as three or more victims murdered in a multiple homicide episode “with firearms, within one event, and in one or more locations in close proximity” (Krouse & Richardson, 2015). The Active Shooter report focused on shootings in public places,

those that occur in more than one location, and that are unrelated to other criminal acts.

Therefore, this sample also had these characteristics.

The number of media reports obtained for each mass shooting are between three and five and will vary per case depending on the publicity of that certain event. Those with a higher number of victims had more news reports available as mentioned in the literature (Adler, 2012; Duwe, 2000; Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012; Paulsen, 2003; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). In addition, this study focused on reporting 24-72 hours after the event. This allowed for an analysis on bias that may be perceived when first reporting on a mass shooting event. It is important to focus on this time frame because the public interest is often heightened during this time due to the widespread fear that a single mass shooting generates. Furthermore, the number of cases that were gathered per year are as follows: seven in 2007, four in 2008, six in 2009, five in 2010, five in 2011, ten in 2012, five in 2013, six in 2014, eight in 2015, seven in 2016, and twelve in 2017. Past research has had similar or smaller sample sizes which have been of 48 shooters (Langman, 2015), 41 shooters (Vossekuil et al., 2002), 27 shooters (Newman et al., 2004), 14 shooters (O'Toole, 2000), 9 shooters (Newman & Fox, 2009), and double or single case studies in other research. The aim of this research is to add to the literature already available on this topic and explore the mass shootings that occurred within the last decade.

The sample of media reports was collected using a keyword search in LexisNexis, Google News, and ProQuest U.S. Major Dailies. The keywords used were the first and last name of the mass shooting offender. The filter added was the time frame of the attack which started at the date of the attack and ended three days following the attack. This provided a broad search to allow for the selection of specific articles. The three highest circulated newspapers were perused first and then others were looked at as well. Each news report collected was analyzed for

different media frames describing the mass shooting event. Once the different frames and sub frames were gathered, they were categorized based on larger groupings. The primary frames to focus on were mental health and terrorism, but additional frames were expected to appear which will serve the purpose of this exploratory study. This will provide an organized structure to begin the framework dissecting process.

Analytical Strategy

Using the list of the 75 mass shootings, descriptive statistics were obtained for all mass shootings including the variables of gender, age, race, location, region, offender outcome, victim-offender relationship, average number of victims killed and wounded, and level of news coverage. Most of this information was available from the Active Shooter report but some was obtained from media reports. The values for race were Black, White, Asian, American Indian, Two or more races, and Hispanic was included to make an ethnic distinction. Region was measured using the Census Bureau's definition of the four major regions in the United States. Level of news coverage was identified by the number of articles available when searching the offender's full name in LexisNexis. The parameters were identified by grouping the mass shootings into three distinct categories based on their proximity to the average: low was less than 200, medium was 200 to 900, and high was over 900. The overall information was coded into categories, and percentages for each were calculated for reporting. This allowed for contextual evidence to support the content analysis findings. It also permitted for the offenders' demographics to be reported as information about the overall sample.

Pan and Kosicki's (1993) "qualitative framing analysis" was used for in-depth content analysis. The framing analysis includes four dimensions of news that affect how they are framed:

“script structures” or the narrative of an event that makes it newsworthy, “thematic structures” or the major themes present in a story, “rhetorical structures” or a journalist’s stylistic elements that add to the story, and “syntactic structures” or reporters’ choice of words (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). This study used specifically the thematic structures to guide the analysis of the 75 mass shootings. The primary two themes that this study focused on were the terrorism and mental health frames. By using the thematic structures framing analysis dimension, it allowed for a proper evaluation on the presence of these frames when discussing a mass shooter and how either terrorism or mental health are consistently emphasized in a story. This research was not limited to these two frames but also worked inductively to analyze any other frames that came to surface during the analysis. A categorization process was put into place to identify articles that were framed a certain way to identify the offender’s motivation.

The unit of analysis was mass shootings. Since the focus of this study was to analyze story frames, they were coded accordingly. The data were coded and categorized based on the different frames that came up. This included terrorism, mental health, hate crimes, domestic violence, and emotional triggers. If any other frames arose they were categorized and included as well. Sub-themes that emerged were classified under the broader heading to distinguish distinct classifications that came up in the analysis. They were analyzed as such and discussed in-depth in the findings section. The last step will consist of comparing the results to prior literature and open up a broad discussion on media frames.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Sample characteristics that were obtained for the 75 mass shootings are shown in Table 1.

There was a total of 78 offenders; three of the mass shooting events were committed by two shooters at the same time. The majority of the sample was male (95%) which is reflective of the literature (Duwe, 2004; Duwe, 2007; Follman, Aronsen, & Pan, 2012; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; & Lankford, 2015). Additionally, 59% of the offenders in the sample were white and 46% were between the ages of 30 and 49. Most of the offenders died during their attack, specifically, 41% of offenders committed suicide and 28% were killed by police. Most attacks in the sample were committed in the western region (37%) and almost a third of the total attacks were committed in the South (31%). Furthermore, 41% of the offenders in the sample targeted stranger victims and most attacks were committed in a place of commerce (41%). News coverage of the 75 mass shooting events was almost evenly distributed among low, medium, and high coverage.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Sample of 75 Offenders

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	74	95%
Female	4	5%
Race		
White	46	59%
Black	10	13%
Hispanic	7	9%
Asian	11	14%
American Indian	2	3%
Mixed	2	3%
Age		
Under 18	2	3%
18-29	31	40%
30-49	36	46%
Over 50	9	12%
	<i>N</i> = 78	

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Offender Outcome		
Suicide	32	41%
Killed by Police	22	28%
Apprehended	24	31%
	<i>N</i> = 78	
Region		
Midwest	16	21%
Northeast	8	11%
South	23	31%
West	28	37%
Victim/Offender Relationship		
Family Victims	16	21%
Acquaintance Victims	28	37%
Stranger Victims	31	41%
Location		
Commerce	31	41%
Education	9	12%
Government	8	11%
Health Care	3	4%
House of Worship	5	7%
Open Space	14	19%
Residence	5	7%
News Coverage		
Low	24	32%
Medium	28	37%
High	23	31%
	<i>N</i> = 75	
Average Number of Victims		
Killed	7.47	—
Wounded	11.47	—

There are some variables from Table 1 that when viewed simultaneously, depict notable differences. When looking at news coverage, cases that were high in media coverage did not include any mass shootings that targeted family victims. Out of the 23 high coverage cases, 17 (74 percent) targeted stranger victims and six targeted acquaintances. Additionally, the top 12 cases with the highest total victim count are all high in media reporting. This ties into the research that states that mass shootings with the highest victim count and that target stranger

victims have the highest media coverage (Adler, 2012; Duwe, 2000; Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012). Another finding that was discovered in the media reports was that 13 of the 75 offenders were military veterans and one was in law enforcement. In addition, four offenders were described as attempting to join the military or police academy but were unable to do so.

After categorizing each of the 75 mass shootings based on the primary frame used by the media, the percentages for each category are present in Figure 1. The frame used most often by media reports was the mental health frame (24 percent). There were 18 cases that discussed a mental illness as being the primary motivator for the attack. Financial/employment struggles were present in 16 cases (21 percent) which included 10 cases of workplace violence. Additionally, 14 cases (19 percent) were related to domestic violence that started in the home and affected other individuals not initially involved. The category of lack of social skills/loner made up 7 cases and 10 percent of the sample. There were four terrorism cases in the sample and another four related to a criminal or violent background. Furthermore, four of the cases were described by the media as having no motive for the attack. No primary reason was reported for either attack that fit into any of the previous categories. The following sections will go in depth into each category framing and will discuss the overall percentages of total frames and sub frames present in the mass shooting cases.

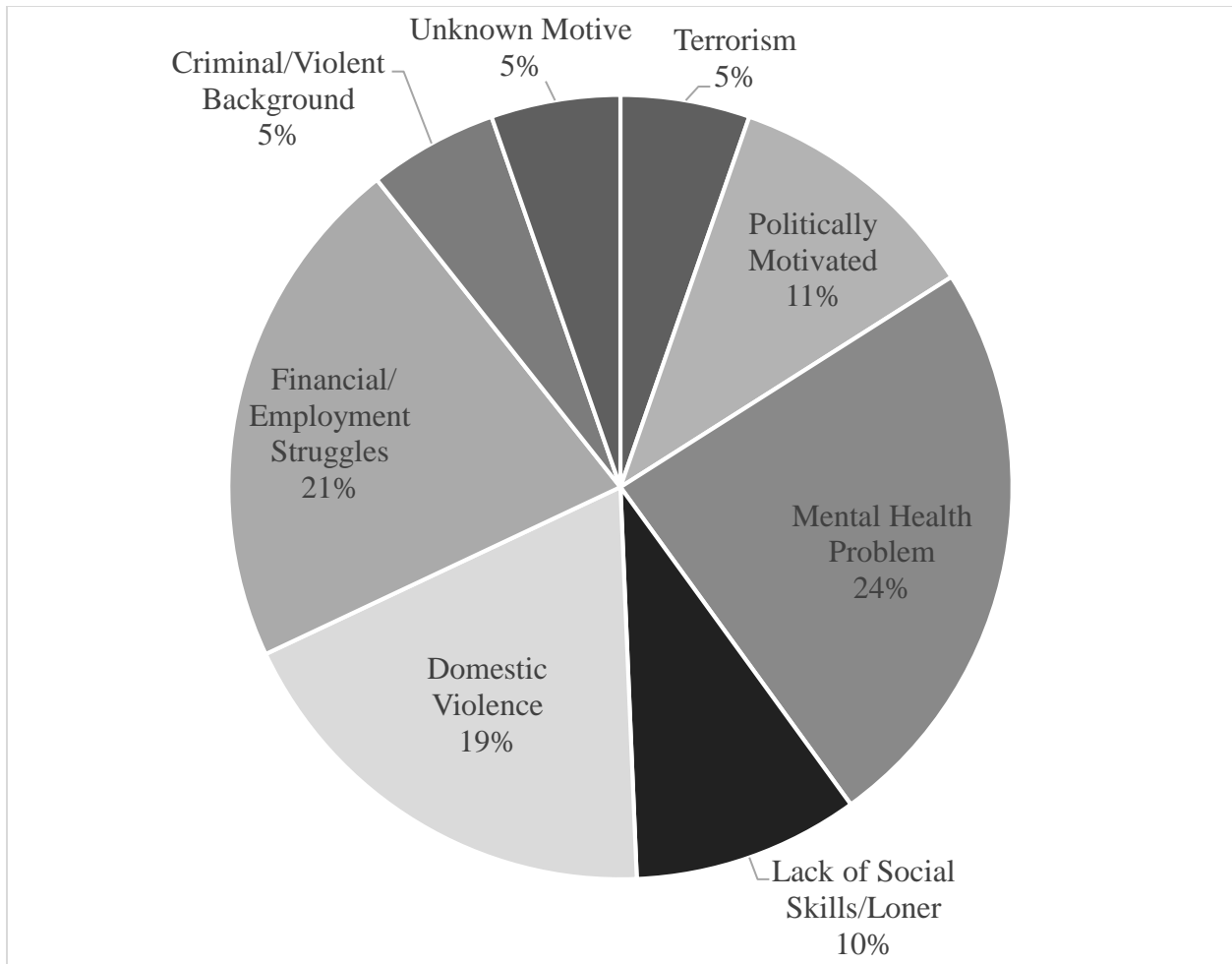


Figure 1: Percentage of Main Themes Present in Total Sample

Racial/Ethnic Characteristics

Mention of race or ethnicity was rare within the news reporting of a mass shooting event. Out of the 75 mass shooting cases, 29 of them mentioned the offender's race (39%). It is noteworthy to discuss, however, the racial differences between offenders that were reported. Out of the 29 that included descriptions of race, only six of them were white. Out of those six, four were described as being possible hate crimes and two were providing description of the offender. Another interesting finding to note is the disproportionate reporting on race from the media.

Within the sample there are 32 offenders that are identified as being non-white. Out of those 32, 23 of them, or 72 percent, had a description of their race within news articles. The offenders that were most often described by a racial characteristic were Asian. This fits with findings from other studies that mention that Asians tend to have considerable media attention when it comes to homicides (Paulsen, 2003; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017).

Almost one-third of all offenders that were described by racial/ethnic features were Asian. In addition, all of the offenders who were described as being Asian were identified specifically through their ethnic ties rather than race. For instance, Nidal Hasan was described as “an American-born Muslim of Palestinian descent” and One Goh as “a naturalized American born in South Korea.” Both offenders were U.S. citizens but were still depicted as being foreign, which only further produces a stigma of “the other” (Powell, 2011). Similarly, Omar Mateen, the Pulse nightclub shooter, was described as the “American-born son of Afghan immigrants.” His attack specifically, targeted a gay nightclub, yet much of the media reports focused on his ethnic and religious background (Hancock & Haldeman, 2017).

Moreover, an interesting finding to note is that of immigration status. Table 2 shows that out of the 29 offenders who were described by their ethnic background, 10 (34%) discussed either the offender being an immigrant themselves or a child of an immigrant family. Some of the descriptors were “Bosnian immigrant who survived war,” “Vietnamese immigrant, he struggled with English,” “Naturalized citizen who was born in Mexico”, “A former Pakistani national who had formerly lived in Saudi Arabia” and “His mother, who is from Malaysia, took an active role at planning his social life.” In the majority of the articles, the framing of the mass shooting was a mental health, or another social issue rather than it being related to a foreign or terrorism attack. Yet, a single sentence depicting their immigration status was seen within news

articles. Only three of the 10 offenders were tied to terrorism. As for the rest, their immigration status served as a characteristic that distinguished them from other types of mass shooters and further separated them from being related to the country where they are residing (Morin, 2016).

Table 2: Race and Ethnic Characteristics Summary

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Racial/Ethnic Descriptors	29	39%
<i>N</i> =	75	
Race		
White	7	24%
Black	6	21%
Hispanic	4	14%
Asian	8	28%
American Indian	2	7%
Mixed	2	7%
Immigration Status Descriptors	10	34%
First generation	8	28%
Second generation	2	7%
<i>N</i> =	29	

Mass Shooting Media Frames

Terrorism

From the total 75 mass shooting events in the sample, there were 19 (25%) that mentioned the word terrorism. As shown in Table 3, 12 of those 19 found no ties to terrorism and that the FBI was not investigating that as a motive. Over half of them had high news coverage of the mass shooting event. Some of the notable ones that were initially investigated for possible terrorism but found lack of evidence was the Virginia Tech shooting, the Aurora movie theater shooting, the Fort Hood Army Base shooting, and the Las Vegas Country Music Festival

shooting. They were all high in news coverage due to having a large number of victims. Even though police found no connection to terrorism, the news articles made the apparent distinction that the mass attack was not due to a foreign entity that is oftentimes the most feared (Morin, 2016).

The other seven of the total 19 were found initially to have possible ties to terrorism. One was investigated by the FBI as a case of domestic terrorism due to it being a hate crime against a specific racial group. The other 6 were non-white shooters and four, specifically, were Muslim. One of them was committed by a black male and was at first being investigated as a possible terrorist attack due to its proximity to a military base and in the other investigators were leaning more towards it being a mental health motivated attack. There were only four offenders in the sample that were identified as being Muslim by news reports and all were investigated as having possible terrorism ties.

Table 3: Terrorism Frame Traits

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Terrorism	19	25%
<i>N</i> =	75	
Race		
White	10	53%
Black	1	5%
Hispanic	2	11%
Asian	6	32%
Investigation Outcomes		
No ties to terrorism	12	63%
Possible terrorism	7	37%
<i>N</i> =	19	
Possible terrorism		
Domestic terrorism, white offender	1	14%
Foreign terrorism, Muslim offender	4	57%
Concluded not terror-based	2	29%
<i>N</i> =	7	

The New York Times described Nidal Hasan as “An American-born Muslim of Palestinian descent, he was deeply dismayed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but proud of his Army job. He wore Middle Eastern clothes to the convenience store and his battle fatigues to the mosque.” They also shared that “The Federal Bureau of Investigation became aware earlier this year of Internet postings by a man calling himself Nidal Hasan. The postings drew attention because they favorably discussed suicide bombings. But the investigators are still not clear as to whether the writer was Major Hasan.” (Krauss & Dao, 2009). Even though this was one of the first articles to report on the attack, most of the discussion throughout was about its possible connection to terrorism. Without being sure about the connection to the offender the article, nevertheless, mentioned that to add to the terrorism frame. A day later, *The New York Times* posted another article saying “After two days of inquiry investigators concluded it was not part of a terrorist plot. Shooter acted out under a welter of emotional, ideological, and religious pressures” (Johnston & Schmitt, 2009).

Similarly, Mohammad Abdulazeez and Omar Mateen both had other reasons to commit a massive attack against others, but the primary frame used in media reports was terrorism. For instance, the Abdulazeez family stated that he suffered from depression for several years but the FBI was investigating the shooting as possible terrorism. *The New York Times* reported that “the case is being handled as a terrorism investigation, though officials cautioned they still hadn't determined a motive for the shooting. Federal Bureau of Investigation officials said they hadn't yet found evidence of a connection to the Islamic State group.... Law-enforcement and intelligence agencies are now trying to determine if Mr. Abdulazeez made connections, or drew inspiration, on the Jordan trip to commit an act of violence once he returned to the U.S.” (Ellis, Devlin, & Campo-Flores, 2015). News articles described Mateen as being homophobic, abusive,

and being mentally unstable. However, reports described his attack as being terror-based due to his 911 call claiming allegiance to ISIS and prior involvement in investigations conducted by the FBI. *The New York Times* stated that “Mr. Mateen was an observant Muslim, but never expressed sympathies for terrorist organizations or radical Islamists” (Blinder, Healy, & Oppel, 2016). On the other hand, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote that he “traveled to Saudi Arabia and alarmed co-workers with claims of links to extremists -- troubling hints of a homegrown terrorist but not enough to lead the Federal Bureau of Investigation to conclude he was a clear threat” (Devlin & Frosch, 2016). A majority of the reports mentioned his religious ties to the Islamic State without addressing other possible reasons for the attack. Both attacks were framed as being a terrorism-tied before discovering the full details of the offender. The media mentioned them being investigated as terrorism attacks and reported on details that help in supporting that specific frame.

There was only one attack that did not have any other described motive other than it being a terrorist attack. The San Bernardino mass shooting involved Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik, husband and wife who had international terrorist ties. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that “law-enforcement officials said the couple... appeared to have been radicalized, inspired by an overseas group to carry out what is being investigated as the most deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil since Sept. 11, 2001” (Devlin, Paletta, & Audi, 2015). They also reported that, “Shortly before the attack, law-enforcement officials said, Ms. Malik posted a message on Facebook pledging allegiance to the head of the Islamic State terror group” (Devlin, Paletta, & Audi, 2015). All appeared to point toward them being motivated by religious reasons. For this case in particular, there were no other indications of other factors that influenced their motive.

Politically Motivated

There were 15 out of 75 attacks (20%) that were politically motivated, not including terrorism attacks. Table 4 shows the different traits that were found regarding the political attacks frame. Out of the four white-on-black crimes, only three were being investigated as hate crimes. One attack was not being investigated as a hate crime during the early stages of reporting due to the insufficient amount of supporting evidence. *The Wall Street Journal* mentioned, “Mr. England wrote on his Facebook page that his father had been shot to death on April 5, 2010, by a black man... and used racial slurs to describe him” (Bustillo, 2012) while *The New York Times* stated that “police officials said it was too early in the investigation to say precisely what motivated Mr. England and Mr. Watts, and they stopped short of describing the shootings as hate crimes.” (Fernandez & Channing, 2012). It may have been seen as if it were a hate crime due to people of color being targeted but it was not investigated by law enforcement as being such.

Table 4: Politically Motivated Frame Traits

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Politically Motivated	15	20%
<i>N</i> =	75	
Race		
White	9	60%
Black	5	33%
Mixed	1	7%
Type of Political Attack		
Hate Crime	4	27%
Black Nationalism	2	13%
Racial Tensions	3	20%
Anti-government	3	20%
Anti-Christian	3	20%
Domestic Terrorism	1	7%
<i>N</i> =	15	

Out of the three attacks that were identified as hate crimes, only one of them was seen as a domestic terrorism attack. Wade Page shot upon a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin, misidentifying the individuals wearing turbans as being Muslim. “Page's associations with right-wing extremists had drawn attention before from federal investigators, who looked into the possibility that he was providing funding to domestic terrorist groups” (Hennessy-Fiske, Bennett, & Hinkel, 2012). *The New York Times* described him as “an army veteran and a rock singer whose bands specialized in the lyrics of hate... had long been among the hundreds of names on the radar of organizations monitored by the Southern Poverty Law Center because of his ties to the white supremacist movement” (Goode & Kovaleski, 2012). Nevertheless, the other two hate crimes were committed by white supremacists against a minority group member as well. Frazier Miller targeted a Jewish Community center while Dylann Roof shot inside an African Methodist Church. Both expressed similar hatred towards minority groups. Miller “was long known to law enforcement as a white supremacist and former Klansman who spewed visceral hatred of minorities” (Kesling, 2014). Roof's Facebook profile picture showed him “wearing a black jacket adorned with two flags – one from apartheid-era South Africa, the other from white-ruled Rhodesia –that have been adopted as emblem by modern-day white supremacists” (Robles, Horowitz, & Dewan, 2015).

Five of the 15 politically motivated attacks were committed by a black individual due to racial tensions. Two of them, specifically, were related to black nationalism. Three racially motivated attacks were due to feeling racially discriminated against and counterattacking the people that they felt victimized by. For instance, two of them were workplace violence related mass shootings. In one, the offender felt wronged about his recent work suspension and he complained about racism at work since he was the only African-American truck driver (Duff-

Brown & Collins, 2011). The other mass shooting consisted of the offender calling his mother saying, “I killed the five racists that was there that was bothering me.” He complained often about racial harassment at the job (“Gunman,” 2010). All three focused their attack on people that they thought had wronged them and that they felt had unfairly discriminated against them.

In contrast, two of the racially motivated attacks were targeting police officers. Despite the fact that both attacks occurred ten days from each other, they both expressed anti-government ideas that further grew their hatred against law enforcement. Micah Johnson during the attack expressed that “he wanted to kill white people, especially white officers” (Sullivan, Hauslohner, & Alexander, 2016). *USA Today* reported that he was upset about the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent police shootings that had occurred that year (Madhani, 2016). Similarly, Gavin Long “was affiliated with an antigovernment group called the New Freedom Group” (Levitz, Lazo, & Campo-Flores, 2016). In the same article, they reported that in the city of Baton Rouge social relations were tense since the police shooting of Alton Sterling. Long, like Johnson, was upset at the recent police shootings and his messages online only kept increasing in hatred against law enforcement (Sahagun & Kaleem, 2016).

Anti-government sentiments were present in three of the 15 politically motivated attacks. One shooter specifically was worried about government mind control while the other wanted to overthrow the government and start the libertarian armed revolution (“Giffords,” 2011; Pearce, Glionna, & Walberg, 2014). Robert Dear, conversely, targeted a Planned Parenthood clinic due to anti-abortion sentiment. The Planned Parenthood CEO stated that “He was motivated by opposition to safe and legal abortion” and the shooter himself repeated to police the phrase “no more baby parts” during arrest (Fieldstadt, 2015). In addition, there were three mass shootings that expressed Anti-Christian sentiment. Based on media reports, two were primarily committed

due to mental health reasons and one was due to domestic violence. Two of the attacks were committed in a church while one targeted a community college. Devin Kelley, went to the church that his mother-in-law attended to commit his attack. However, religion was not his primarily motivator. He had a history of domestic violence (Yousseff, Cook, & Gershman, 2017).

Mental Health

There were a large percentage of news articles that mentioned mental health as a possible motive. The conclusion of this section was not only due to the offender’s history of mental health issues but also it is inclusive of family or others discussing the offender’s mental health as if it were the reason for the attack. Out of the 75 mass shooting events in the sample, 29 or 39 percent, mentioned mental health as a possible motivator for the attack. The traits for this frame are shown in Table 5. There were drastic differences in victim/offender relationships that are worth mentioning in this section. Within the 29 cases mentioning the offender’s mental health, 15 involved stranger victims, 9 were acquaintance victims, and 5 were family victims. The percentages were higher amongst stranger victims and acquaintance victims compared to family victims. Another finding is that only six of the 29 offenders were apprehended, eight were killed by police and over half of them committed suicide. All percentages are disproportionate to the sample data with suicide having a higher percentage.

Table 5: Mental Health Frame Traits

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Mental Health	29	39%
	<i>N</i> = 75	

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Race		
White	16	55%
Black	2	7%
Hispanic	4	14%
Asian	5	17%
Mixed	2	7%
Offender-Victim Relationship		
Stranger	15	52%
Acquaintance	9	31%
Family	5	17%
Offender Outcome		
Suicide	15	52%
Killed by Police	8	28%
Apprehended	6	21%
Motives		
Mental Health Only	4	14%
Additional Surrounding Factors	25	86%
	<i>N</i> = 29	

From those 29 attacks, 18 of them were framed as the offender’s mental health being the primary motivator for the attack. For instance, some descriptions for Seung Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, were that teachers were disturbed by his violent writings and that he took prescription medicine for treatment of his psychological problems (Fernandez & Santora, 2007). Isaac Zamora was described as being an “emotionally disturbed man” who was “required to undergo a mental health evaluation upon his release... But Mr. Zamora could not afford the evaluation” (Frosch, 2008). Aaron Alexis who shot inside the Washington Navy Yard was described as having heard voices, had previous shooting incidents, and was taking antidepressants (Trip & Shanker, 2013). A similar case was that of Esteban Santiago who opened fire at the Fort Lauderdale Airport. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that “Mr. Santiago told federal officials weeks before the shooting that the government was trying to control his mind

and forced him to watch terror propaganda videos” (Zusha, Maloney, & Campo-Flores, 2017). He said he was hearing voices in his head and was sent for mental health treatment.

In the majority of cases, mental health wasn't the only factor in the offender's motive to commit a mass attack. Of the 18 cases that were framed as mainly being a mental health related shooting, 14 had other circumstances that were present. Specifically, three of them were disgruntled employees, five struggled through relationship problems, two lived through traumatic events, and three faced rejection, had anti-government sentiment, and financial problems. All are reasons that could have driven the offenders to commit their attacks; however, they were not the primary motive of the attack according to media reports. Two attackers, moreover, were depicted as outstanding students who were not expected to commit a mass shooting due to their long-term aspirations. Since the shootings came as a surprise to those close to them, mental health reasons were the easiest target to blame. This is similar to what the research says that most mass shooters experience a psychological break from reality due to their social life experiences (Auxemery, 2015; Meloy et al., 2004). They are not likely to be mentally insane due to the extensive planning that a mass shooting takes (Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997).

In a workplace shooting, a Chicago Tribune article mentioned that after Andre Engeldinger lost his job he walked in and began firing but also reported that the offender's family said he had struggled with mental illness his entire life (Bailey, 2012). Similarly, in the Fort Hood Army Base shooting, *The New York Times* wrote that Ivan Lopez “was being treated for depression and anxiety, and had been prescribed Ambien to help him sleep” and that “he was angry with the Army when returned home for his mother's funeral... was upset that he had initially been given only 24 hours to attend” (Lyman, 2014). In the Elliot Rodgers mass shooting the media described him as “simmering and disturbed” and that “he was prescribed psychotropic

drugs but declined to take them” (Gold, 2014). However, they also added that he had trouble making friends due to his isolation and “he viewed himself as a sophisticate and a catch, and reserved much of his venom for attractive women, who he believed spurned him, and men who had more success in dating.” (Gold, 2014). These reports all include a mental illness tied to the mass shooting offender as a way to validate their reasoning to commit such a heinous act. There may be other situational factors in the offender’s life but they are not generally enough to distinguish them from the way a “normal human” being would act like.

Lack of Social Skills/Loner

Another frame that had a prominent mention within the reporting of mass shooting events was the social skills of the offender. Out of the 78 total mass shooters, 19 of them (25 percent) mentioned that the offender kept to themselves or was a loner. Most of the reports quoted people who knew the individual. Seven of the 19 were tied to the mental illness and just served as support for the mental health frame. However, the other 12 worked in identifying a lack of social ties that the offender had. An interesting finding within this frame is the racial differences. Out of the 19 that were identified as being loners, 13 were white, four were Asian, and two were mixed but identified more as being white. There was not much racial diversity within this frame, and it was mainly dominated by offenders that were white.

Some the descriptors that the media used were “evoked extreme loneliness,” “preferred living in places of extreme isolation,” “withdrawn and quiet, spent most of his time indoors,” and “his mom pushed him out of the house and told him to make friends.” Reporting of the high-profile Sandy Hook shooting, described shooter, Adam Lanza, as being “unusually withdrawn and socially maladroit... evoked feelings of sympathy, not fear from teachers and the few

classmates who even noticed him” (Audi, Troianovski, & Dawsey, 2012). He was carefully monitored and encouraged to join clubs in order to socialize. Most of the cases discussed the offender being kept to themselves and preferring to stay away from social interactions. In a contrasting case, Stephen Paddock, the Las Vegas shooter, was described as having no prior signs leading to his attack. *The New York Times* described him as “history pointed to an unmoored and highly conventional life... he drew little attention, unless it was for his extreme propensity to keep to himself. He displayed no strong religious or political views” (Delreal & Bromwich, 2017). However, within the same article they mentioned that he had no criminal history but was described as a “lone wolf.” *The Wall Street Journal* also described him having a preference for staying to himself and being very quiet (Lovett, Bauerlein, & Hobbs, 2017). Even though everything the media reported about Paddock was contradicting to the typical mass shooter profile, they nevertheless focused on his preference to being alone.

Domestic Violence

Even though domestic violence was not a focus within this study, there was a significant number of cases that focused on that framing and; therefore, it is important to be discussed. Out of the 75 mass shooting cases, 16, or 21 percent, were related to domestic violence. Table 6 displays the traits that were found in the domestic violence frame. In thirteen of the 16 domestic violence related cases, the shooter shot their spouse/partner or their former spouse/partner. In the three other cases, two of the offenders had a prior history of domestic violence and the other shooter committed the attack in the workplace where he was served a restraining order from his former girlfriend. The race of the offenders varied with 11 being white, two were Hispanic, two were black and one was Asian. An important finding is that three of the 16 offenders were

military veterans and one was a deputy. Additionally, six of the 16 domestic violence-related cases mentioned mental health reasons as a possible factor in the attack. Most of the domestic violence related attacks stemmed from a recent divorce, argument, restraining order, custody battle, or jealousy reasons. An interesting finding is that only two of the 16 attacks were high in news coverage. Those two attacks were against stranger victims which validates that domestic violence cases do not get as much media coverage as those targeting unknown victims in a public location (Duwe, 2007).

Table 6: Domestic Violence Frame Traits

Variable Name	Count	Percentage
Domestic Violence	16	21%
<i>N</i> =	75	
Race		
White	11	69%
Black	2	13%
Hispanic	2	13%
Asian	1	6%
Shooting Characteristics		
Shot spouse/partner	13	81%
Prior DV history	3	19%
Mental Health	6	38%
Offender Outcome		
Suicide	8	50%
Killed by Police	5	31%
Apprehended	3	19%
Victim-Offender Relationship		
Stranger	3	19%
Acquaintance	2	13%
Family	11	69%
<i>N</i> =	16	

The framing of these types of attacks focused on previous police involvement with domestic disputes or their ongoing court battles. For instance, Devin Kelley who opened fire at

the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, “beat his wife, cracked his toddler stepson’s skull and was kicked out of the military... His first wife, Tessa Kelley, divorced him while he was confined” (Blinder, Philipps, & Opper, 2017). In another case, CNN reported about Radcliffe Haughton that “At a restraining order hearing Thursday, the wife, Zina, begged the court for protection, saying her husband would surely kill her. With her voice shaking, she outlined how he'd threatened to throw acid in her face” (Mungin, 2012). A common factor in these types of cases is that there was a trigger that led to the anger driven attack on their spouses or partners. Some common descriptors were “convicted of domestic battery for trying to strangle girlfriend he lived with,” “got into an argument with his girlfriend,” “gunman apparently enraged over a custody battle,” “was due in court for a hearing on whether to make a temporary injunction permanent,” and “he became angry when he heard she was dating others.” All cases were similar in how they were executed but most were described as being unexpected. In all of these specific cases, the domestic issue surpassed the private residence onto a public that were uninvolved and that were present at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Financial/Employment Struggles

Exactly 24 out of 75 mass shootings (30 percent) were related to employment or financial losses. Specifically, 15 of those 23 attacks were relating acquaintance victims with 14 being workplace violence incidents and one school shooting. From the 14 that involved workplace violence, only 2 of them were high media coverage. These two mass shootings were the Fort Hood Army Base shooting and the Washington Navy Yard Building shooting. Both of these shootings involved government areas which were specifically tied to the military. The offenders were the two out of the three military veterans present within the 14 workplace shootings. Ivan

Lopez, who was the offender in the Fort Hood Army Base shooting that occurred in 2014, “expressed disgruntlement with how the Army treated its troops... complained that he didn't have as much time as he wanted to spend with his young daughter.” (Phillips, Barnes, & Koppel, 2014). On the other hand, Aaron Alexis was primarily described as having mental health issues leading to the attack but also “was locked in a dispute over money with the company that contracted him to work for the Navy” (Carter, Lavandera, & Perez, 2013). In another case, Amy Bishop opened fire onto faculty in the University of Alabama and was described: “Dr. Bishop, who appeared to have had a promising future in the biotechnology business, had recently been told she would not be granted tenure... This would have been the final semester of Dr. Bishop's sixth year” (Dewan & Robbins, 2010). All of these cases described financial issues that the offender was going through that may have led them to go through with their attack. Even if it was not the primary motive, it was a factor that pushed their mind towards such drastic decision.

Criminal/Violent Background

Out of the 75 mass shootings, 20 of them (27 percent) included discussion on the offender's violent or criminal background. Eleven of the 20 offenders had prior arrests which varied from misdemeanors such as DUI or drug possession or felonies such as violent crimes. Eight of the eleven offenders with a criminal past were white and three were black. Only one of the offenders that had a criminal background had high media coverage of their attack. That was Dylann Roof who was charged for a hate crime due to targeting an African Methodist Church. Washington Post reported that “In February, Roof was arrested and later charged with felony possession of Suboxone, a narcotic prescription drug” (Guo, 2015). In another case, Maurice Clemmons, who opened fire at Forza Coffee Shop, was described as having “an extensive violent

criminal history from Arkansas and recently was arrested and charged in Pierce County in Washington state on suspicion of third-degree assault on a police officer and second-degree rape of a child” (Wingfield & Worthen, 2009).

The other nine of the 20 offenders were identified as having a history of violence or being described as having violent tendencies. Three of the nine attacks were highly covered mass shootings which included the Washington Navy Yard shooting, the Pulse nightclub shooting, and the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas shooting. In all three high-profile cases, there were other primary motives to committing the attack but the offender’s violent histories served as a factor in the description. For instance, the Navy Yard shooter was primarily described as having mental health issues but also reported that “throughout his adult life, Alexis had grievances and episodes of anger that stuck in the memories of those around him” (Horwitz, Minora, & Fisher, 2013). Similarly, Mateen, the Pulse nightclub shooter, was described as being violent and often beating his ex-wife during their marriage (Young & Diebel, 2016). However, this attack was primarily framed as being a terrorist attack. The descriptors of prior violence were used as a way to add to the offender’s motive to commit a mass attack rather than primary motive.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, this exploratory research discovered several themes present in news articles' reporting of mass shooting events. The offenders in this sample that were identified as Muslim were all treated as terrorism-led attacks by the media. Morin (2016) had similar findings when comparing the Ft. Hood and Washington Navy Yard shootings. Nidal who is Muslim, was primarily discussed as committing a terror-based attack while Alexis' background was not mentioned and rather his mental health was to blame for the attack. This only further stigmatizes the Muslim community through othering and negative stereotypes based on appearance of an individual (Morin, 2016; Powell, 2011). Focusing on one specific frame such as terrorism may negate the feelings of the community that was actually affected by the crime (Hancock & Haldeman, 2017). In addition, there were three hate crimes committed by white supremacists and only one was considered an act of domestic terrorism. This expresses the idea that foreign offenders will be seen as a higher threat to the public than domestic shooters (Powell, 2011).

The other theme that this study focused on was mental health in mass shootings. According to Duwe (2000), the media tends to associate mass shooting events to an offender with a mental illness, but the prevalence of that may be misrepresented. According to previous research only a small number of cases are committed by an individual struggling with a mental health issue (Atran, 2003; Dvoskin, 2016; Post et al., 2009; Rosenwald, 2016). The findings showed that 37 percent of the cases mentioned a mental health diagnosis as possible cause for the mass shooting. From the 17 cases that specifically discussed a mental illness as being the primary motive for the attack, 14 of them had other external factors in their life that may have influenced their decision. One-fourth of the mass shootings were committed solely due to a

mental health problems which means 3 out of 4 were committed due to other external factors. This demonstrates that mass shooting offenders are more likely to have personal problems or life pressures leading to depression rather than actually being psychotic (Fox & Fridel, 2016).

Other themes that came up in the study and that were categorized were domestic violence, lack of social skills/loner, financial/employment struggles, and criminal/violent background. Specifically, there were 16 domestic violence related cases in the study. This is important to address because as Duwe (2000) mentioned they are the most common type of mass murder but the least publicized. In addition, it is essential to note that 72 percent of the minorities in the total sample were identified by race/ethnicity within media reports. Like the research mentions, Asian offenders appeared to be significantly overestimated by the media (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017). Previous research has also found that the most newsworthy mass murder cases are those that have a high victim count, that target stranger victims, and that use an assault weapon (Adler, 2012, Duwe, 2000; Gekoski, Gray, & Adler, 2012; Paulsen, 2003; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Meredith, 2017).

This research, nevertheless, encompasses limitations that need to be taken into account. Since this is a qualitative study, it does not quantify many of the figures mentioned with statistical analysis. Therefore, the results may or may not be statistically significant due to the focus being on the actual content from media reports. Additionally, the results are not generalizable to the population because the sample size includes only 75 mass shooting events. The majority of the sample was obtained from the Active Shooter Report published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The entire sample of 160 active shooters was not used due to the focus being on mass shootings where 3 or more victims died during the attack. The purpose of this study was to analyze a specific type of mass murder; therefore, results cannot be applied

to all types of mass murder. This specific sample was selected in order to focus on media reports that caused the most societal impact and that increase the public's overall interest. Another limitation of using a content analysis is that it is based on the perception of the researcher analyzing the data. Qualitative data depends on interpretation of certain information. It was vital to have a pre-understanding during the planning process to limit bias. In addition, the information being studied may come from journalists that are likely to pursue subjective stories or report non-factual information. It is important to take this in consideration but also look at the positive elements that this study seeks to uncover. Not only were the different frames analyzed but this study showed the importance that the media's role plays in the public's way of thinking.

The research in place was conducted as an overall view of mass shootings within the last decade and its purpose was to analyze the media frames most commonly used. Several frames were discovered in addition to mental health and terrorism that were the primary focus of this study. The overall most important finding was that mass shootings derive from different causes and social aspects of an offender's personal life and that is something that should be further discussed by media sources. Placing too much emphasis on mental health or terrorism may belittle other reasons and motives that play a strong part in an individual's actions. Motives for mass shootings should not be immediately tied to a single cause but should be discussed more openly to uncover the actual social problems present.

Future research should continue the discussion on how mental health and terrorism are being used by the media and how it may be affecting the opinions and thoughts produced by the public reading the framed discourse. According to research, blaming mental health may generate negative attitudes against individuals with mental illnesses and aid in the formation of unwarranted stereotypes (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; McGinty, Webster, & Barry, 2013). It is

important to focus on attitudes on mental health and how the public perceives individuals with a mental health problem when it is consistently being tied to a mass shooting event. Similarly, pushing terrorism frames on Muslim offenders may foster adverse typecasts and promote othering without focusing on the actual social problems in effect (Hancock & Haldeman, 2017; Morin, 2016; Powell, 2011). Continuing research on framing of terrorism attacks may discover a certain level of language and discourse that the media uses on attacks being committed by foreign individuals. With many cases falling within the domestic violence frame, it is important to continue research within this area. Domestic violence mass murders are usually seen as simply a “domestic issue” rather than a public concern. However, this study showed that several cases started due to a domestic dispute but moved towards targeting innocent bystanders. Research should focus on uncovering the prevalence of domestic mass murder and continuing support efforts for victims fleeing a domestic violence situation. Lastly, studies should continue focusing on the racial aspects of mass shootings. Specifically, research should compare how different racial/ethnic groups are identified in the media and discuss the rhetoric that is often used.

Focusing on a single matter such as mental health when it comes to mass shootings should not be the only concern. There are additional factors that come into play in the decision-making of a mass shooting attack. Putting government efforts towards banning individuals with mental health issues from owning guns should not be the only solution to the ordeal. There should be a wider approach to determining what is the best way to protect the public from an active shooter as well as victims inside their own home. The media should focus less on individual blame and instead discuss surrounding factors of a mass shooting attack. This will avoid negative stigma and stereotypes often brought up about specific groups. Ultimately,

researchers should help in providing evidence-based information that generates the most practical preventive methods for events that place the public at risk.

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