

A Circle of Distortion: The Social Construction of Mass Murder in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, claimsmakers have asserted that the mid-1960s marked the beginning of an unprecedented and ever-growing mass murder wave in the United States. Recent research has shown, however, that mass murder was just as common during the 1920s and 30s as it has been since the mid-1960s. Using the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) and newspaper, network television news, and newsweekly magazine coverage as sources of data, this study examines why and how mass murder was constructed as a new crime problem. I suggest that the news media have figured prominently in the social construction of mass murder by heavily influencing which cases claimsmakers have selected as landmark narratives and, more generally, as typifying examples. Because claimsmakers have relied almost exclusively on national news coverage as a source of data, they have made a number of questionable claims about the prevalence and nature of mass murder since the high-profile cases represent the most sensational and least representative mass killings. And the news media have completed the circle of distortion by disseminating the bulk of the claims that have been made, leading to policies that have targeted the rarest aspects about mass murder. But not all of the solutions offered by claimsmakers have been accepted by policymakers. As a result, this study also looks at why claimsmakers tasted only modest success in constructing mass murder.

KEYWORDS: mass murder; multiple murder; social construction; landmark narrative; typifying example; media; history; gun control; workplace violence; and school shootings.

On July 14, 1966, Richard Speck committed one of the most notorious mass murders in American history when he killed eight student nurses in Chicago. The mass killing attracted an enormous amount of media attention and was dubbed the "crime of the century" by the coroner working on the case (*Time* 1966a: 19-21). A little more than two weeks later on August 1, 1966, the United States witnessed another catastrophic mass murder. This time, the location was the University of Texas at Austin, where 25-year-old student Charles Whitman climbed atop the 307-foot high campus tower and began shooting at passersby below. Whitman killed 16 and wounded 30 before he was fatally shot by police. Recalling that the Speck massacre was labeled the "crime of the century," Austin Police Chief Robert A. Miles observed, "It isn't anymore" (*Time* 1966b: 14-19).

Together, the Speck and Whitman murders were thought to have had a substantial impact on beliefs and perceptions about crime. These two incidents occurred on the cusp of a turbulent period in American society, as the 1960s brought forth political assassinations, the civil rights movement, urban riots, the war in Vietnam, and the rise of the youth counterculture. It was also a time in which crime rates were increasing dramatically. As two of the most celebrated crimes in recent memory, the

Speck and Whitman massacres figured prominently in discussions about the rise in crime and were later cited as examples of the general violence problem in the United States (Jenkins 1994). It was also believed that they had a profound influence on the public's fear of crime. Laverne (1997) argues that Richard Speck shattered people's perceptions of safety in their own homes, whereas Charles Whitman had an equally damaging effect on notions about safety in public places.

The Speck and Whitman killings have also played a significant role in shaping what is known about mass murder, which is generally defined as an incident in which a number of victims (at least three or four) are killed within a short period of time (i.e. 24 hours) (Dietz 1986; Duwe 2000, 2004; Fox and Levin 1998; Holmes and Holmes 1992; Levin and Fox 1996). During the 1980s, journalists, scholars, and other commentators began to assert that the mid-1960s marked the onset of an unprecedented and ever-growing mass murder wave. And the Speck and Whitman massacres were frequently cited as the bellwether of a sharp upward trend in mass murder activity. Results from a recent study have shown, however, that although the mid-1960s marked the beginning of a mass murder wave, it was not unprecedented. Rather, mass murder was nearly as

common during the 1920s and 30s as it has been since the mid-1960s (Duwe 2004).

Why, then, have claimsmakers seen the mid-1960s as the start of an unprecedented mass murder wave? Just as important, why did they make these claims, despite having no evidence? And why did these claims begin to emerge in the mid-1980s and not sometime earlier in the 1960s or 1970s, for example, at the beginning of the alleged increase?

This study attempts to address these questions by exploring why and how mass murder was constructed as a new crime problem in the United States. In the next section, I review the existing research and identify the contributions this study makes to the social constructionist literature. I then delineate why mass murder was identified as a new crime during the 1980s, who established ownership, how it has been typified, and what policies have been promoted to control it. Although some of the control measures proposed by claimsmakers were enacted, not all were embraced by policymakers. As a result, I also explore why claimsmakers were not as successful as they could have been, or perhaps should have been, in implementing the policies they promoted. I conclude by discussing the implications the findings from this study have for newsmaking criminology.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In contrast to the objectivist approach, which defines social problems in terms of their objective conditions, the social constructionist tradition views social problems as the product of “the activities of individuals and groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse 1977: 75). Constructionist research has generally noted that the news media help construct social problems by either making claims directly (i.e. primary claimsmaking) or, more often, by reporting the claims made by others (i.e. secondary claimsmaking). In the present study, however, I suggest that the news media have had a more profound, fundamental influence on the social construction of mass murder by shaping which cases claimsmakers have used as landmark narratives and, more generally, as typifying examples.²

For new and unfamiliar crime problems, news coverage is often the primary, and sometimes the only, source of information about the problem. This has been true with mass murder, where news accounts have been the main source of information on mass killings not just for the general public, but also for claimsmakers such as journalists, academics, interest group activists, and criminal justice professionals (Duwe 2000, 2004). Identifying what is newsworthy about mass killings is important, therefore, because the cases that stimulate greater media coverage are more likely to influence perceptions about the prevalence and patterns of mass

murder, and what can be done to control it.

Research on the content of crime news has consistently shown that the news media present a distorted image of crime. Although news organizations are obligated to inform the public, they are also businesses whose primary purpose is to create a profit (Brownstein 1995; Chermak 1994; Lotz 1991). In an effort to attract a large audience which, in turn, attracts more advertising revenue, news organizations have long presented crime news that over represents violent, interpersonal crime (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson 1992). Indeed, a number of studies have revealed that the most serious and least frequently occurring offenses such as murder, assault, and robbery are most often reported, while the far more prevalent property and white-collar crimes are less likely to receive coverage (Chermak 1994; Davis 1952; Graber 1980; Harris 1932; Humphries 1981; Marsh 1988; Sheley and Ashkins 1981).

Recent research likewise suggests that the news media present a distorted image of mass murder (Duwe 2000). Examining newspaper, network television news, and newsweekly magazine coverage of 495 mass killings that took place between 1976 and 1996, I found that although almost all mass killings are reported by newspapers, the majority are insulated in that they receive mostly local coverage. Only a small minority, however, attracted national newspaper coverage. Many of these incidents were also reported by the television networks in their evening broadcasts. But the most publicized mass killings were those reported by the newsweekly magazines, for they also received extensive newspaper and network television news coverage. The results revealed that high-profile massacres were significantly more likely to involve large numbers of fatal and wounded victims, stranger victims, public locations, assault weapons, workplace violence, interracial victim-offender relationships and, to a lesser extent, older offenders and gun use. Given that these were the most extreme and atypical mass murders, I argued that the greater coverage given to these massacres was part and parcel of the news media’s attempt to maximize the size of their audience and therefore their profits by catering to the public’s fascination with rare and sensational acts of violence.

The overemphasis placed on the most sensational and least representative mass killings, though hardly surprising, has significant implications for the social construction of mass murder. Because claimsmakers have uncritically and almost exclusively used news coverage (or more specifically, national news coverage) as the main source of information on mass killings, they have made a number of questionable assertions, not only about long-term trends in the prevalence of mass murder but also about the characteristics of the typical mass killing.

High-profile crimes have been the catalyst for the emergence of social problems such as youth disturbances (Cohen 1972), crimes against the elderly (Fishman 1978), adolescent drug abuse (Ben-Yehuda 1986), missing children (Best 1987), serial murder (Jenkins, 1988, 1994), and stalking (Lowney and Best 1995). Although these studies did not explicitly acknowledge the importance of celebrated cases in the identification of these problems, a few scholars have observed that the “discovery” of a new crime problem is often triggered by the occurrence of an event, or landmark narrative (Adler 1996; Chermak 2003; Nichols 1997). For instance, in his study on the social construction of money laundering, Nichols (1997) posits that the prosecution of the currency reporting violations at the First National Bank of Boston was a landmark narrative in that it led to the creation of a new crime category, money laundering, and was eventually regarded as the definitive example of this type of crime. The news media helped establish the Bank of Boston case as a landmark narrative, Nichols argues, by giving it considerably more coverage than other cases of money laundering and by presenting it as a distinctive, uniquely important case.

Following this research, I suggest that the occurrence of the highly publicized Speck and Whitman massacres in 1966 helps explain why claimsmakers saw the mid-1960s as the onset of an unprecedented mass murder wave. But this does not account for why claimsmakers did not begin to make their claims until the 1980s. The findings presented later show that the identification of mass murder as a new type of crime was also contingent on the emergence of another crime problem—serial murder. Nevertheless, I further explore the landmark narrative concept and the connections often seen among social problems by looking at the role that several high-profile massacres have played in the creation of three additional crime problems—assault weapons, workplace violence, and school violence.

In addition to raising public awareness, landmark narratives serve as examples that typify the nature of newly discovered problems. Lowney and Best (1995) have noted, for example, that when claimsmakers typify a crime problem, they frequently use examples to characterize the offender, the victim, and the crime itself. Previous research has shown that claimsmakers often depict offenders as monsters or less than human (Cohen 1972; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978; Jenkins 1988; Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 1996), victims as innocent or blameless (Adler 1996; Best 1987; Kappeler et al. 1996), and crimes as random (Adler 1996; Best 1991, 1999; Kappeler et al. 1996; Lowney and Best 1995; Sacco 1995). Emphasizing these characteristics enables claimsmakers to highlight the problem’s harmful dimensions, elicit sympathy or support for their cause, and convey the

notion that the problem could affect anyone at any time. The typification process, which is ongoing and can sometimes change over time, is central to the construction of a crime problem because it shapes perceptions of the problem, which, in turn, shape the policies promoted to control it.

Because most constructionist research has focused on the efforts of primary claimsmakers, scholars often imply that claimsmakers deliberately select unusual and dramatic typifying examples to galvanize the public and attract policymakers’ attention. I argue, however, that claimsmakers’ selection of typifying examples is more opportunistic than deliberate, and that the way crime problems are usually typified is largely a reflection of the crimes that receive widespread publicity. In contrast to routine crime stories, which contain a primarily factual and brief account of what happened, high-profile crimes provide ample opportunities to make claims about new or recurring crime problems. The elevated attention and concern surrounding a celebrated case stimulates a greater need for understanding and explanation, enabling reporters and sources to make claims about what kind of problem the incident represents, how prevalent the problem is, and what can be done to control it. The use of high-profile cases to characterize the nature of crime problems helps explain why they are usually typified as random, the victims as innocent, and the offenders as monstrous deviants. However, considering that celebrated crimes are highly newsworthy because they are sensational and out of the ordinary, which is a response to the financial imperative to produce entertaining crime news, using these cases to typify crime problems can lead to distorted public perceptions and social policy.

Although a few studies have suggested that the news media figure prominently in the social construction of crime problems, none have fully examined the extent to which news coverage influences the identification and typification of a problem. In the present study, I look at how the news media’s presentation of mass murder has affected which cases claimsmakers have used as typifying examples. In particular, I measure the amount of news coverage given to 909 mass killings that took place in the United States between 1900 and 1999, and identify which cases claimsmakers used to typify mass murder. In the section below, I discuss the data and methods utilized to examine the social construction of mass murder.

DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this study are derived from two previous studies on mass murder (Duwe 2000; 2004). As discussed above, I analyzed newspaper, network television news, and newsweekly magazine coverage of 495 mass killings that took place in the U.S. between 1976 and 1996 (Duwe 2000). Because the FBI’s

Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) data contain incident, victim, and offender information on most homicides reported to the police since 1976, I utilized these data to facilitate the search for news accounts on mass killings, which I defined as incidents in which four or more victims were killed within a 24-hour period. After using the SHR to identify when and where mass murders occurred between 1976 and 1996, I searched the newspaper databases in Lexis-Nexis, CD Newsbank, and Dialog@CARL, finding 30,027 articles from 117 U.S. newspapers on the 495 massacres.³ I measured the extent of newspaper coverage given to each case by creating a newspaper score that took into account the number of stories devoted to each incident, the circulation of each newspaper, and the geographical distance between the location of the news source and the site where the mass murder took place.⁴

I studied network television news coverage by searching Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive, locating 104 mass murders reported by ABC, CBS, or NBC in their evening newscasts.⁵ To examine newsweekly magazine coverage, I searched the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (1976-1998), finding 23 mass killings that were reported by *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report*.⁶

In a more recent study, I examined the patterns and prevalence of mass murder in the United States from 1900-1999 (Duwe 2004). For cases that took place prior to 1976, I used the *New York Times* as the principal source of data. Searching the *Times*' index from 1900-1975, I located 875 articles on 260 incidents that occurred during the 76-year period.⁷ For cases that took place between 1976 and 1996, I used the aforementioned newspaper and SHR data. I employed a similar approach to collect data on cases that occurred between 1997 and 1999, using the SHR to facilitate the search for news accounts on mass killings.⁸ Overall, the data from these two studies contain 30,902 newspaper articles on 909 mass killings that occurred between 1900 and 1999. Further, of the 30,902 articles, 3,394 were stories presented by the *New York Times* on 540 mass murders that took place during the 100-year period (Duwe 2004).

Given that the data collected for these two studies constitute a vast array of print and broadcast media coverage of mass killings over a relatively long period of time, these data provide an excellent opportunity to examine the extent to which news coverage has affected the social construction of mass murder. Using the *New York Times* data from 1900-1999, which consist of 3,394 stories on 540 massacres, I look at the impact that long-term changes in the amount of media attention have had on the identification of mass murder as a new type of crime and, more generally, on perceptions about trends in the prevalence of mass killings. In addition to the *Times* data, I use the newspaper, network television

news, and newsweekly magazine data since 1976 to analyze the effect that news coverage has had on the typification of mass murder. Because these data measure the extent to which several types of news media reported mass killings, I examine whether the amount of news coverage has affected claimsmakers' selection of typifying examples.

To determine which cases claimsmakers selected as typifying examples, I reviewed the academic literature on mass murder in addition to the aforementioned newspaper, network television news, and newsweekly magazine data. More specifically, I analyzed claimsmaking activity by examining the content of 37 academic journal articles and books on mass murder; 20 feature stories on the topic of mass murder; 30,092 newspaper articles on 909 mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1999; and network television news and newsweekly magazine coverage of mass murders that took place between 1976 and 1996. In addition, I specify the identity of claimsmakers themselves (e.g. academics, journalists, and those who established "ownership") to determine whether they differed significantly in their selection of typifying examples.

"DISCOVERING" MASS MURDER

Since the mid-1960s, there has been a genuine increase in the frequency with which mass killings have occurred (Duwe 2004). This, however, is not what led claimsmakers to assert that the mid-1960s marked the onset of an unprecedented and ever-growing mass murder wave. Rather, this claim was predicated mainly on the rise in high-profile cases since that time.

Prior to the Speck and Whitman massacres in 1966, there were very few celebrated mass killings in the U.S. For example, in the deluge of publicity following the murders committed by Speck, the *New York Times* (July 15, 1966: A14) attempted to place the massacre in a historical context by listing previous instances of mass murder. Despite stating that, "mass murders abound in history," the *Times* painted a different picture of the American experience given that only five cases were mentioned.⁹ Among those discussed were infamous cases such as the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre and the 1949 mass shooting carried out by Howard Unruh in which he killed 13 and wounded 4 during a 12-minute walk along a neighborhood street in Camden, New Jersey. Also mentioned was the 1959 murder of the Herbert Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas. Although newspapers such as the *New York Times* reported this incident at the time it occurred, it did not become well known until Truman Capote wrote about it in his best-selling 1965 "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood*. The apparent paucity of mass killings in the U.S. before 1966 conveyed the impression that the Speck massacre was among the nation's first. Indeed, criminologist James Alan Fox was quoted in a 1991

newspaper article as saying that, “mass murder was not something that was in our vocabulary until Richard Speck” (*Houston Chronicle* 1991b: A11).

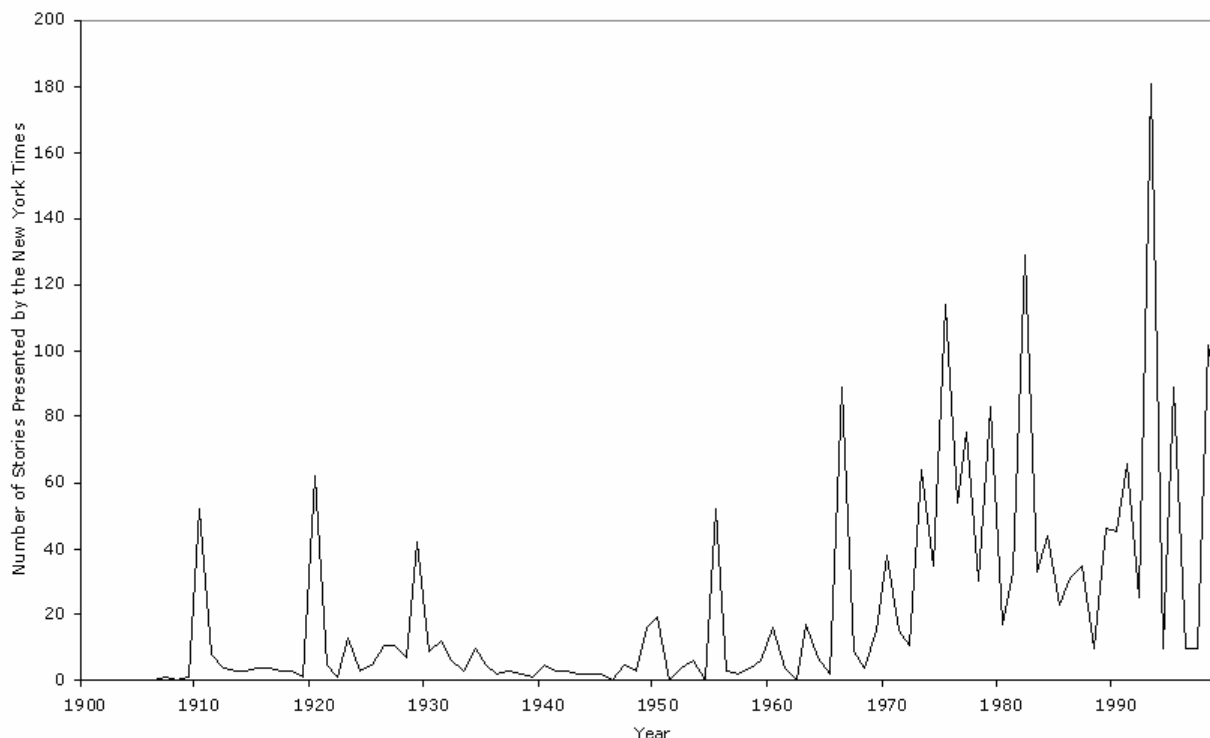
But as noted earlier, results from a recent study have shown that mass murder was nearly as common during the 1920s and 30s as it has been since the mid-1960s (Duwe 2004). In light of this, why have claimsmakers assumed that the recent mass murder wave is unprecedented? The most likely reason is that the earlier mass murder wave was qualitatively different from the one that began in the mid-1960s. The mass murder wave during the 1920s and 30s was composed mainly of familicides and felony-related massacres, which, then as now, are among the least newsworthy mass killings (Duwe 2000, 2004). The predominance of low-profile massacres during this wave may help explain why mass murder escaped the notice of claimsmakers, not only at that time but also later on in the 1980s when they began making claims about it. Conversely, one of the major reasons why the most recent mass murder wave attracted the attention of claimsmakers was because it contained a significantly greater number of mass public shootings, which, as noted previously, are the most newsworthy mass killings (Duwe 2000, 2004).

The increase in high-profile mass killings beginning in the 1960s is illustrated, to some extent, in Figure 1,

which shows the total annual number of stories the *New York Times* presented on 540 mass murders that took place between 1900 and 1999. To be sure, the *Times* does not encompass all of the news coverage devoted to mass killings for this period, but there is reason to believe it might be fairly representative. As one of America’s most prestigious newspapers, the *New York Times* has long been regarded as the standard bearer for print and broadcast media alike. Because the news media are highly self-referential (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987), it is reasonable to infer that other newspapers followed the *Times*’ lead and employed similar reporting practices with respect to mass killings. But even if this is not a reasonable inference, Figure 1 shows, at the very least, the extent to which one of America’s most influential newspapers covered mass killings from 1900-1999.

As seen in Figure 1, beginning in the 1960s there was a dramatic increase in the total annual number of stories the *New York Times* devoted to mass killings. Moreover, in Figure 2, we see that the annual average number of stories the *New York Times* reported per mass murder also increased in the 1960s, albeit much more modestly. Overall, the findings indicate that the 1960s marked the onset of a substantial rise in the amount of attention the *Times* devoted to mass murder.

Figure 1. *The Annual Number of Stories on Mass Murders Presented by the New York Times from 1900-1999.*



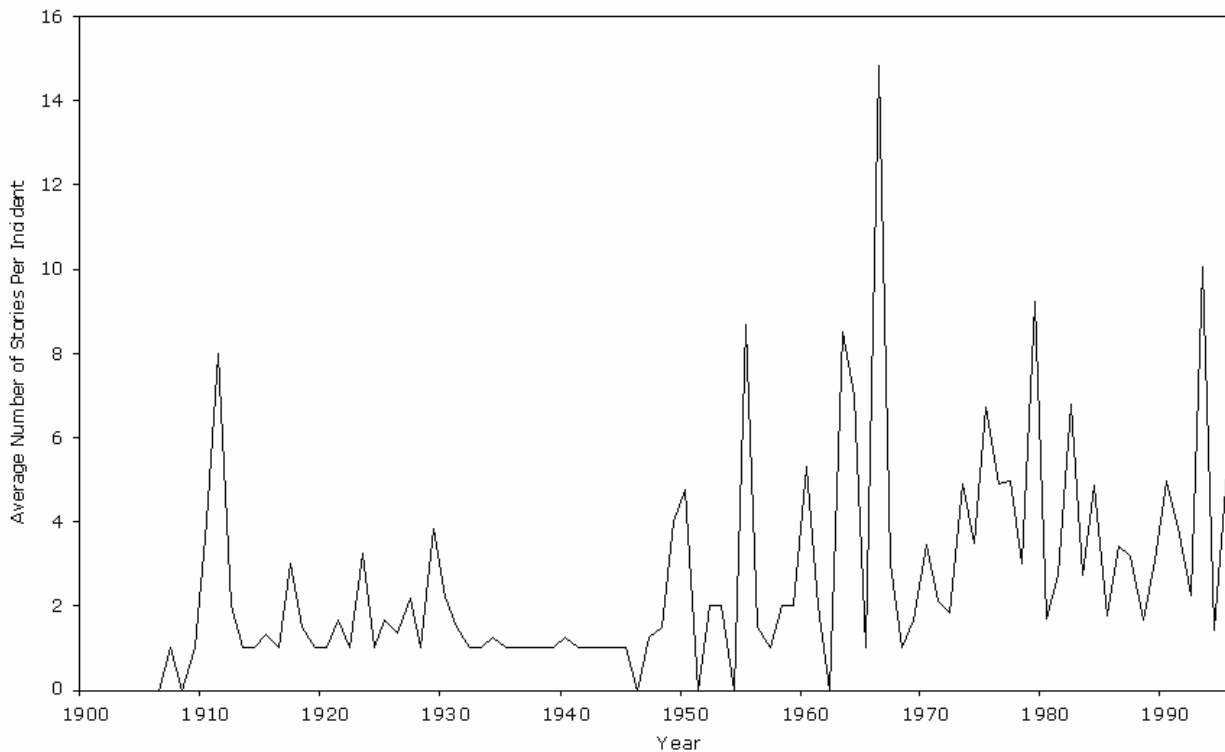
But if the “discovery” of mass murder was due exclusively to the recent rise in high-profile cases, why did claimsmakers start making claims during the mid-1980s, almost twenty years after the beginning of the increase? The answer to this question lies in the “discovery” of another crime problem—serial murder. Prior to the 1980s, the term ‘mass murder’ was widely used as a catchall phrase to refer to all incidents in which a number of persons were killed. But in the mid-to late-1960s, there was a dramatic rise in serial killings, or at least in the number publicized by the media (Hickey 1991; Jenkins 1994). The growing prevalence and publicity of serial killings caught the attention of several researchers during the mid-1970s, who coined the phrase ‘serial murder’ to describe a string of homicides in which one or more offenders killed a number of persons (at least 3) over a relatively long duration (i.e. days, weeks, months, or even years) with ‘cooling off’ periods between the murders (Busch and Cavanaugh 1986; Egger 1984; Gresswell and Hollin 1994; Jenkins 1994; Newton 1988).¹⁰

The creation of the serial murder concept was notable in that it gave rise to a classification scheme in which ‘multiple murder’, or ‘multicide’, replaced ‘mass murder’ as the umbrella term for homicides involving multiple victims. Under the new typology, multiple

murders were distinguished according to the amount of time over which the homicides took place. Whereas serial murders occurred over an extended period of time, mass murders were classified as incidents in which one or more offenders killed a number of victims (at least 3 or 4) over a short period of time (i.e. minutes or hours) (Busch and Cavanaugh 1986; Gresswell and Hollin 1994; Holmes and DeBurger 1985; Holmes and Holmes 1992; Jenkins 1994; Newton, 1988; Rappaport 1988; Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas 1988).

After the distinction between the two types of multiple murder was first publicized by the media during the early 1980s (Jenkins 1994), it was soon clear that serial murder had captured the imagination not only of the media and the general public but of scholars, too. Fox and Levin (1994) have attributed the imbalance to the fact that serial murder poses a greater threat to law enforcement, generates more fear and anxiety, and is more sensational. While these are certainly valid points, it is important to emphasize that the media’s initial interest in serial murder during the early 1980s was due, in no small part, to the FBI’s promotion of the problem. Before the 1970s, the FBI’s interest in serial murder and, more specifically, in psychological profiling was virtually nonexistent. This was largely due to the enormous influence of longtime Director J. Edgar

Figure 2. *The Annual Average Number of Stories Per Mass Murder Presented by the New York Times from 1900-1999.*



Hoover, who eschewed the “soft sciences” and psychological approaches to crime (Douglas and Olshaker 1995). Thus, it was not until after Hoover’s death in 1973 that the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) began devoting more attention to psychological profiling. Even though members of the BSU were given permission in 1978 by then-Director William Webster to provide profiling consultation to local and state law enforcement agencies, profiling was still regarded with some suspicion by many in the Bureau (Douglas and Olshaker 1995).

But the emerging serial murder problem provided the BSU with an opportunity to establish profiling as a legitimate investigative technique and, more importantly, to garner support for the newly proposed Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), which had drawn fierce opposition from those who questioned its constitutionality (Jenkins 1988). During the late-1970s, however, the serial murders committed by the likes of Edmund Kemper, John Wayne Gacy, and Ted Bundy captured a wealth of media coverage. The FBI capitalized on the increased publicity by supplying the media with grossly exaggerated figures on the scale and prevalence of serial killings. Moreover, the Bureau depicted serial murder as a crime without historical precedent, and ultimately won support for VICAP, which became operational in 1984. Although the FBI were later the first to correct their hyperbolic claims, they still helped create the enduring impression that the 1960s marked the beginning of an unprecedented increase in serial killings (Jenkins 1988, 1994).

It is within this context that claims about mass murder first began to appear. The creation of the serial murder concept narrowed the meaning of the term mass murder. Although popular use of the new, more limited definition was evident as early as 1984, there was still a tendency, especially early on, to conflate the two types of multiple murder. For claimsmakers, then, it seemed reasonable to assume that mass murder, like serial murder, had increased dramatically since the mid-1960s. After all, before 1966 there were, as noted above, a dearth of well-known mass killings. But from the summer of 1966 to the mid-1980s when claimsmakers began making claims about mass murder, there had been a fairly steady flow of well-publicized cases. And the Speck and Whitman massacres provided claimsmakers with highly visible, familiar and, thus, credible landmark narratives to support the claim that the mid-1960s marked the beginning of an unprecedented mass murder wave.

In 1985, shortly after the initial claims about mass murder had been made, Levin and Fox published their groundbreaking work on multiple murder in which they moved beyond the single case study approach, which had theretofore dominated the literature, by examining 42 cases of mass and serial murder. As the authors of a

landmark study, Levin and Fox (1985: 19) were among the first to emphasize the historical significance of the Speck and Whitman killings, stating that these incidents marked the “onset of the age of mass murder in the United States.” In the years following 1985, this was a claim that was repeated numerous times by others besides Levin and Fox.

ESTABLISHING OWNERSHIP

Once mass murder was redefined and identified as a new crime, it was soon clear that criminologists James Alan Fox and Jack Levin established ownership of the problem.¹¹ Six years after they published their pioneering book on multiple murder in 1985, the *New York Times* claimed it was still widely regarded as the most authoritative work on the topic (*New York Times* October 19, 1991: A6). Consequently, when the news media began devoting more attention to mass murder in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they turned to the experts on the subject—Fox and Levin.

During my search for and examination of more than 31,000 newspaper, network television news, and newsweekly magazine accounts on 909 mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1999, I located 17 newspaper articles, two television news broadcasts, and one television program that explored the general topic of mass murder. Given the extensive search procedures used and the voluminous number of media reports examined that cover a relatively long period of time, the 20 feature stories found likely encompass most, if not all, that were presented on mass murder since the early 1980s. The news media used a total of 47 sources for the 20 stories. Since some of the sources were quoted in more than one story, there were a total of 24 different “experts” cited by the media. Of the 24 experts, 17 were academics, three were law enforcement personnel, three were non-academic psychologists or psychiatrists, and one was a legal director of an advocacy group. Fox and Levin were, by far, the most quoted authorities on mass murder, as they were used as a source in 11 and 10 stories, respectively. The next most quoted expert was forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz, author of a 1986 article on mass murder, who was used as a source in three stories. The remaining 21 authorities were quoted in either one or two stories.

THE TYPIIFICATION OF MASS MURDER

After mass murder was identified as a new crime, efforts were made to characterize what kind of problem it was. One of the earliest instances came in a 1984 article that appeared in the *New York Times*. In discussing the then-recent massacre committed by James Huberty at a McDonald’s restaurant in San Ysidro, California, the article reported that, “mass

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Mass Murders Used as Typifying Examples, 1900-1999.

Variables	Media Examples	Academic Examples	Fox & Levin Examples	Overall Examples	Mass Murder Overall, 1976-99	Mass Murder Overall, 1900-99
Avg. Newspaper Score ^a	1135.16	4350.73	2562.86	2402.52	126.95	126.95
Pct. Reported by TV Networks ^b	71%	74%	68%	64%	21%	21%
Pct. Reported by Newsweeklies ^c	44%	48%	43%	34%	5%	5%
Avg. # of NYT Stories ^d	14.14	58.72	25.74	33.17	4.59	6.29
Average Death Toll	13.82	15.52	15.58	13.46	5.22	5.39
Average Wounded Count	8.37	64.44	18.64	34.19	4.31	3.97
Weapon Use						
Percent Gun Use	82%	74%	73%	75%	69%	67%
Percent Other Weapon Use	15%	26%	22%	21%	17%	21%
Percent Fire	3%	0%	5%	4%	14%	12%
Victim/Offender Relationship						
Percent Stranger Victims	55%	63%	53%	51%	24%	24%
Percent Family Victims	18%	18%	22%	27%	40%	44%
Pct. Acquaintance Victims	27%	19%	25%	22%	36%	32%
Public Setting	77%	78%	75%	70%	27%	28%
Assault Weapon Use	18%	22%	15%	12%	3%	2%
Workplace Massacres	29%	26%	33%	27%	5%	5%
Felony-Related	18%	4%	13%	13%	25%	22%
Interracial	21%	30%	25%	24%	9%	8%
Percent White Offenders	76%	70%	76%	74%	61%	67%
Average Offender Age	34.78	33.89	34.34	33.63	29.19	30.12
Percent Offenders 30-49	59%	54%	49%	52%	36%	37%
Percent Offenders over 50	6%	7%	10%	7%	4%	5%
Percent Offenders Male	97%	100%	95%	96%	94%	93%
Percent Suicidal Offenders	47%	56%	48%	48%	24%	29%
Avg. Offender Count	1.18	1.22	1.10	1.23	1.30	1.28
Percent White Victims	86%	82%	81%	84%	72%	78%
Average Victim Age	29.84	35.38	33.81	32.23	28.02	27.51
Pct. Victims Age <16 or >40	52%	50%	58%	58%	56%	55%
Percent Victims Male	52%	53%	55%	56%	55%	55%
Region						
Midwest	35%	30%	28%	35%	26%	27%
East	18%	22%	27%	25%	23%	26%
South	12%	22%	15%	13%	29%	26%
West	35%	26%	30%	27%	22%	21%
N	34	27	40	56	649	909

^a Based on data from 1976-1996 (N=495), the newspaper score measures the extent to which 495 mass killings from 1976-1996 were reported by 117 newspapers. It is based on the total number of stories, the circulation of each newspaper, and the geographical distance between the location of the news source and the site where the mass murder took place (see footnote 3 for further details on the calculation of the newspaper score).

^b Based on data from 1976-1996 (N=495), this variable measures whether mass murders that took place between 1976 and 1996 were reported by ABC, CBS, or NBC in their evening newscasts.

^c Based on data from 1976-1996 (N=495), this variable measures whether mass murders that took place between 1976 and 1996 were reported by *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report*.

^d Based on data from 1900-1999 (N=540), this variable measures the number of stories the *New York Times* presented on mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1999.

murderers like Mr. Huberty kill groups of people in a single outburst" (*New York Times*, August 27, 1984: A1). In Levin and Fox's (1985: 3) book published the following year, they claimed that mass killers were not "crazed, glassy-eyed lunatics" which was, according to

them, the prevailing image of mass murder at the time. Rather, they emphasized how "extraordinarily ordinary" mass killers were. Levin and Fox later modified their views, however, when they began serving as sources for feature stories on mass murder. For example, they started making the important distinction between mass and serial murder, which they did not do in their book.

In addition, they developed a profile of the typical mass murderer, which the news media began to disseminate.

Although the news media ran a few feature stories on mass murder after the much-publicized massacres committed by James Huberty in 1984 and Patrick Sherrill in 1986, it was not until the late 1980s that the press began devoting serious attention to the “growing” mass murder problem. Indeed, of the 20 feature stories I located, 15 appeared between 1988 and 1993. These stories were usually presented in the wave of publicity following one or more high-profile massacres. To put the incident (or incidents) in perspective, the news media turned to the experts, who provided commentary on trends in the prevalence of mass killings and on what constitutes the typical mass murder. As noted earlier, claimsmakers unanimously asserted that mass murder was on the rise. To their credit, however, scholars like Fox and Levin rightly noted that it was still an infrequent occurrence. For example, in a 1991 newspaper article, Levin stated that,

The only positive thing I can tell you that might be comforting to some people is that...it's still rare. And you're more likely to contract leprosy than you are to be killed by a mass murderer (*Dallas Morning News*, October 17, 1991: A25).

In the feature stories from 1988-1993, Fox and Levin introduced their profile of the typical mass killer. In a newspaper article presented after the 1991 massacre committed by George Hennard, Fox claimed that,

mass murderers fit a fairly rigid profile. They tend to be white males in their 30s or 40s who have a long history of frustration and failure. They tend to be loners, or people who feel isolated. And they either own guns or are very familiar with them (*Washington Post*, October 19, 1991: A13).

In another article, Levin estimated that in 95 percent of mass murders, there is a precipitating event such as a divorce or job termination (*Dallas Morning News*, October 17, 1991: A25). A number of claimsmakers also depicted mass murderers as highly suicidal. After the heavily publicized 1989 massacre committed by Marc Lepine in Montreal, Elliott Leyton, author of *Hunting Humans*, claimed that “mass killers make their social statement and then die, either by their own hand or a hail of police bullets” (*Maclean's*, April 21, 1986). Similarly, Jack Levin asserted in a 1993 newspaper article that, “in 95 percent of all mass murder cases, the killer dies on the spot, either by his own hand or by police” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, January 13, 1993: A4).

Claimsmakers also characterized the nature of mass murder through the use of typifying examples. For instance, in discussing the topic of mass murder after

the shooting spree carried out by George Hennard, a *Washington Post* article reported that, “Hennard fits what experts say is the classic profile of a mass killer” (*Washington Post*, October 19, 1991: A13). Likewise, a 1993 newspaper article reported that, “Gian Luigi Ferri was a textbook case of a mass murderer,” after he killed 8 and wounded 6 at a law office in San Francisco (*The Ottawa Citizen*, July 5, 1993: A6). And in discussing the 1993 mass murder committed by Colin Ferguson, James Fox declared that, “Ferguson is as classic and typical as you can get” (*Arts & Entertainment Network* “Massacres,” 1996).

In Table 1, I describe the characteristics of the cases used by claimsmakers as typifying examples of mass murder. After examining the content of 37 academic journal articles and books on mass murder; 20 feature stories; 30,092 newspaper articles; network television newscasts on 104 mass killings from 1976-1996; and newsweekly magazine accounts on 23 massacres from 1976-1996, I identified the cases claimsmakers cited to illustrate the nature of mass murder as well as the identity (news media/journalist or academic) of claimsmakers themselves. Because Fox and Levin have played a prominent role in constructing mass murder, I also depict the characteristics of the mass killings they cited as typifying examples in their media interviews and academic work. Furthermore, to shed light on the extent to which the typifying examples used by claimsmakers differed from mass murders in general, Table 1 displays the incident, victim, and offender characteristics of 909 mass killings that occurred between 1900 and 1999. Considering that the principal source of data on 260 mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1975 are news accounts from the *New York Times*, which is a biased source of data for several incident and victim characteristics (Duwe, 2004),¹² I also show the overall patterns of 649 mass murders that occurred between 1976 and 1999.

Table 1 reveals there is not much difference between the typifying examples used by Fox and Levin (“Fox & Levin Examples” column), other academics (“Academic Examples” column), and the news media—namely, journalists (“Media Examples” column). This is because they used many of the same cases to typify mass murder. More important, though, the cases used by claimsmakers were, by far, the most heavily publicized mass killings. For example, the newspaper score in Table 1 is a measure of the extent to which 495 mass killings were reported by 117 newspapers from 1976-1996. The results show that the average newspaper score of mass murders used by claimsmakers (see the “Overall Examples” column) was 20 times the overall average (see the “Mass Murder Overall, 1976-99” and “Mass Murder Overall, 1900-99” columns). Moreover, 64 percent of the mass killings used by claimsmakers were reported on network television

newscasts, which is nearly three times the percentage (21%) of mass murders in general. Further, 34 percent of the incidents used by claimsmakers were reported by newsweekly magazines, which is almost seven times the percentage (5%) of mass killings overall. Finally, the average number of stories the *New York Times* presented on mass murders used as typifying examples (33.17) was five times the overall average (6.29).

These findings indicate that claimsmakers clearly prefer to use high-profile mass murders as typifying examples. But as Table 1 shows, the heavily publicized typifying examples used by claimsmakers are hardly representative of mass murder. Indeed, compared to mass killings in general, the 56 cases used as typifying examples were more likely to involve larger body counts, stranger victims, public locations, assault weapon use, workplace violence, interracial victim-offender relationships, older, suicidal offenders, and slightly more likely to involve gun use and white offenders. Not coincidentally, most of these characteristics have been shown to significantly increase the newsworthiness of a mass murder (Duwe, 2000). The results further show that claimsmakers were less likely to use felony-related massacres and familicides as typifying examples.

The near exclusive use of high-profile cases as typifying examples is likely due to the fact that news coverage is by far the most accessible source of information on mass killings. Unlike hate crimes, for example, there is neither a government agency nor an interest group that has specifically collected data on mass killings. Although the SHR represent an invaluable source of information on mass murder, scholars have, with few exceptions, not utilized these data. Instead, they have relied almost entirely on news coverage or, more specifically, national news coverage. As noted earlier, the vast majority of mass killings are insulated in that they receive mostly local coverage. Conversely, only a small minority attract extensive national attention. Claimsmakers have used the cases that garner extensive national attention as typifying examples because these are the cases with which they are the most familiar. But these are also the cases with which the general public is the most familiar. Using high-profile cases as typifying examples thus serves claimsmakers' interests in that they are trying to call attention to a new crime problem, and well-publicized, sensational cases are more likely to help them achieve that goal. In doing so, however, claimsmakers have presented a distorted image of mass murder because, as shown above, the high-profile cases constitute the least representative examples of mass murder. This is significant because, as the next section illustrates, the popular image of mass murder has shaped the policy proposals to control it.

THE SOLUTIONS TO CONTROL MASS MURDER

The policy proposals to control mass murder have consisted of stronger gun laws, especially a ban on assault weapons, and efforts to prevent workplace and school violence. But crime problems can be framed in a number of ways. That mass murder has been framed mainly as a gun problem and, to a lesser extent, as a workplace and school violence problem is a reflection not only of the most publicized mass killings, but also of the values and interests of claimsmakers themselves, particularly those who have established ownership. For instance, mass murder could easily be framed as a domestic violence problem given that familicides are the most common mass killing (Duwe 2000; 2004). Indeed, from 1900-1999, familicides comprised almost half of 909 mass murders that occurred in the United States (Duwe 2004). Moreover, various interest groups relating to domestic violence were already in existence by the mid-1980s, when mass murder was being constructed as a new crime problem. However, mass murder has not been framed as a domestic violence problem largely because familicides seldom attract national media attention (Duwe 2000). The mostly local coverage not only insulates these cases in that they are generally known only on a local basis, but it also inhibits the opportunity for claimsmaking.

Mass murder could also be framed as a mental health problem. Indeed, in a 1988 newspaper article, forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz stated that he "never came across one who wasn't at least partially interested in suicide" (*New York Times*, January 3, 1988: A16). He added that, "Depression is very common and easily treated. If we are sensitive to it we could prevent suffering, a few suicides and perhaps the occasional incident of mass murder." According to Fox and Levin, however, mass murder is not a mental health problem. Recall, for example, that in their earliest work, they emphasized that mass killers were not "crazed, glassy-eyed lunatics," but were "extraordinarily ordinary." Moreover, they have argued that mass murder is not a mental health problem because it is unpredictable. Levin has claimed, for example, that, "There simply aren't many warning signs to recognize mass murder" (*Dallas Morning News*, October 17, 1991: A25). Further, as Fox stated in a 1991 newspaper article,

You cannot spot them...of the thousands who fit the profile, there are very few who will kill anyone, much less commit mass murder. It's a very large haystack and very few needles" (*Houston Chronicle*, October 20, 1991: A1).

Harsher penalties are often advanced as a solution for crime problems, but not for mass murder. One obvious reason for this is that mass killers already tend

to receive the maximum punishment allowed by law. But another reason that stiffer penalties are considered unnecessary may be due to the popular, albeit erroneous, belief that the vast majority of mass killers die at the scene of the crime.¹³

Mass Murder as a Gun Problem

As the two most quoted authorities on mass murder, Fox and Levin have figured prominently in framing it as a gun problem. In their profile noted above, they identified access to, and familiarity with, firearms as a characteristic typical of mass murderers for several reasons. First, according to Fox and Levin (1998), firearms are the most effective means of mass destruction. As Levin stated in a 1991 newspaper article, "It's very difficult to kill a lot of people with a knife. They just won't hold still" (*Dallas Morning News*, October 17, 1991: A25). Second, in their own research they found that the percentage of gun use is significantly greater among mass murders (79%) than among single-victim homicides (68%) (Fox and Levin, 1998). It is important to point out, however, that Fox and Levin obtained an inflated percentage of gun use for mass murder by excluding every fire-related case reported to the SHR. When I attempted to account for the fire-related cases in the SHR data, I found that the difference in levels of gun use between mass murder and ordinary homicide essentially washes out (Duwe, 2000). Finally, Fox and Levin have alleged that mass murders have recently become more lethal. In their 1994 book, they contend that, "the increased availability of high-powered, rapid-fire weapons...is...a large part of the reason why the death tolls in mass murders have climbed so dramatically in the recent past" (Fox and Levin, 1994: 270).

In discussing the ways to control mass murder, Fox and Levin (1994) have reasoned that conventional gun control measures, such as background checks and waiting periods, would not necessarily prevent massacres from occurring because few mass killers have criminal records and most carry out their attacks after much planning and deliberation. Instead, they argue that the most effective gun control policy for mass murder would be to ban rapid-fire weaponry and oversized ammunition clips. They point out that although this may not prevent mass murders from occurring, it might reduce the number of people harmed in such attacks.

But Fox and Levin are not the only ones who have framed mass murder as a gun problem, for others have also made claims, including journalists, law enforcement officials, politicians, attorneys, academics, gun control activists, and friends and family members of mass murder victims. Beginning with the 1966 massacre committed by Charles Whitman, claimsmakers have frequently capitalized on the

extensive publicity surrounding high-profile mass public shootings to call for stronger gun laws. For example, after James Huberty gunned down 21 at a McDonald's in 1984, gun control advocates used this incident to argue for handgun registration, waiting periods, and bans on machine guns and armor-piercing bullets (Andrews 1984).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, gun control proponents began calling for a ban on assault weapons, i.e. semiautomatic and automatic handguns and rifles with a military-style appearance. The event largely responsible for initiating the frenzy over assault weapons was the Stockton, California mass murder committed by Patrick Purdy in January of 1989 in which he used an AK-47 rifle to kill 5 Asian-American children and wound 30 others. Indeed, a 1995 article in the *Chicago Tribune* (May 29, 1995: 5M) recalled that, "the massacre of five children as they ran screaming that sunny January morning, and the wounding of 30 others, including a teacher, packed such emotional power it ignited the nascent anti-assault weapons movement." Bob Walker, legislative director of Handgun Control, Inc., added that the Stockton schoolyard massacre "was clearly the single event that captured people's attention" (*Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 1995: 5M).

The massively publicized Purdy massacre sparked a flurry of claimsmaking activity on the part of gun control proponents and helped lead to changes in gun laws. In response to the massacre, California Governor George Deukmejian and Attorney General John Van de Kamp both held press conferences, vowing to pass an assault weapon ban. Robert M. Ackerman, Dickinson School of Law professor, responded to the tragedy by stating that, "what the recent school tragedy in Stockton, Calif., bears out is that semiautomatic assault rifles like the AR-15 and AK-47 are the weapons of choice of mass murderers" (Ackerman 1989: A7). While this claim is patently false—as only four percent of mass murders are committed with any kind of assault weapon, never mind assault rifles—it is important because it illustrates the notion often held by supporters of gun control in the years following the Stockton massacre that outlawing assault weapons such as the one used by Purdy will avert future outbreaks of mass murder (Duwe 2000, 2004). Indeed, in the wake of the Stockton massacre, the state of California passed the Roos-Roberti Weapon Control Act, which banned the sale and possession of assault weapons. Moreover, several months later the Bush Administration banned the importation of foreign-made assault weapons, even though gun control proponents later contended that this piece of legislation was a largely symbolic gesture that did not target the real problem—domestic-made assault weapons.

In the years following the Stockton massacre, a string of heavily publicized and, thus, highly visible mass public shootings provided gun control proponents with additional opportunities to renew the call for stronger gun laws—namely, a federal assault weapons ban. For example, after Joseph Wesbecker used an AK-47 to kill 8 and wound 12 in Louisville, Kentucky in 1989, California Representative Pete Stark warned that, “there will be more and more mindless mass murders until the President and Congress put controls on the sales of assault weapons” (*Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1989: I22). Moreover, California Senator Dianne Feinstein asserted that, “a federal (assault weapons) ban could have saved lives” (*Washington Post*, July 27, 1993: A17) after Gian Luigi Ferri used a TEC-DC-9 semiautomatic pistol to kill 8 and wound 6 at a San Francisco law office in 1993. The claimmaking opportunities afforded by the occurrence of several high-profile mass murders involving the use of assault weapons during the late 1980s and early 1990 ultimately proved successful for gun control activists, who scored a major victory in 1994 when Congress passed a federal assault weapons ban.

Mass Murder as a Workplace Violence Problem

Around the same time that assault weapons were identified as a new crime problem, a movement began that sought to heighten awareness of workplace violence. By most accounts, 1986 marked the beginning of the rise in workplace violence for that was the year in which Patrick Sherrill, a postal worker, killed 14 and wounded 6 at the post office in Edmond, Oklahoma. The view that the Sherrill massacre was the vanguard for the increase in workplace violence is expressed by Kelleher (1997: 86) who states that, “Patrick Sherrill’s crime in 1986 inaugurated the modern era of the violent workplace and forever changed the traditional American view of a safe work environment.”

The reverberations of Sherrill’s lethal attack were widespread, for Kelleher (1997: 169) notes that, “even though Patrick Sherrill was not the first employee to commit mass murder in the workplace, his crime garnered significant national attention in the media and among several government agencies, such as the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). His actions marked the first widespread, public recognition of the potential for massive and lethal violence in the workplace.” Moreover, the Sherrill massacre prompted a Congressional hearing on the issue of violence in the U.S. Postal Service (United States House of Representatives Committee on Post Office and Civil Service 1987). Thus, in many ways, Patrick Sherrill did for workplace violence what Patrick Purdy

did for the assault weapons movement. That the Sherrill and Purdy massacres were largely responsible for inciting the hysteria over workplace violence and assault weapons is consistent with Adler’s (1996) contention that a catalyst is needed to stimulate the identification of a new crime problem. And consistent with Nichols (1997), these massacres were landmark narratives in that both were regarded as the definitive example of the problem they represented.

In the years following the Sherrill massacre, the workplace mass murders committed by the likes of David Burke, Richard Farley, and Thomas McIlvane (to name a few) received a great deal of publicity, giving claimsmakers opportunities to solidify the perception that workplace violence was a “growing menace” (DiLorenzo and Carroll 1995). The McIlvane massacre was especially noteworthy because he, like Sherrill, was a postal worker who exacted revenge at the workplace, this time the post office in Royal Oak, Michigan in the fall of 1991. His deadly rampage also led to Congressional hearings (United States House of Representatives Committee on Post Office and Civil Service 1992) and, along with a handful of other violent acts by postal workers, helped seal the reputation of the U.S. Postal Service as ground zero for the alleged explosion of violence that rocked the American workforce.

Due in part to the prominence that workplace violence achieved as a result of the high-profile mass murders, federal agencies such as the CDC, NIOSH, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began to conduct research on workplace violence and eventually announced their findings in 1993. As Larson (1994) mentions, though, the misinterpretation of these findings produced a heightened level of concern. The BLS, for example, found that homicide is the second-leading cause of workplace fatalities, a fact not lost on newspaper reporters who, according to Larson (1994: A1), “often insert this finding when reporting the latest murder by a disgruntled employee, conveying the impression that workers are to blame for elevating homicide to the number two position.” Along the same lines, since mass murders committed by disgruntled employees dominated the initial depiction of workplace violence, the findings that there were between 750-1,000 victims of workplace homicide annually imparted the faulty notion that current or former employees were responsible for most, if not all, of these incidents. Research later showed, however, that disgruntled employee violence constitutes a small portion of workplace violence, as evidenced by the findings that co-workers account for only 6 percent of violent acts in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1994) and roughly the same percentage of workplace homicides (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1995; Windau and Toscano 1994).

Just as disgruntled employee violence is a rare form of workplace violence, so, too, are workplace massacres a rare form of mass murder. From 1900-1999, these incidents occurred, on average, less than once every two years, accounting for only five percent of 909 mass killings (Duwe 2004). Despite their infrequent incidence, workplace massacres occurred in almost every decade prior to the 1980s. Nevertheless, the frequency of these cases, which are almost invariably widely publicized, began to accelerate during the 1980s and 1990s, which helped foster the recognition of workplace violence as a serious problem. In doing so, workplace massacres shaped the perception of the problem that, in turn, justified the implementation of violence prevention programs as well as increased involvement by government agencies such as the CDC, NIOSH, and OSHA.

Mass Murder as a School Violence Problem

Most recently, mass murder has been framed as a school violence problem. Beginning in 1997, a string of school shootings took place throughout the United States. Luke Woodham killed three and wounded seven in Pearl, Mississippi; Michael Carneal fatally shot three and wounded five more in Paducah, Kentucky; Kip Kinkel murdered four and wounded 22 in Springfield, Oregon; and Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden shot fifteen victims, five fatally, in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998. But the incident that came to define the essence of the school violence problem was the now infamous Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. Garnering international media coverage and intense public interest, the Columbine massacre has served as the landmark narrative for the school violence problem and has prompted fevered debate over the influence of the media—especially violent video games—on the nation's youth as well as the implementation of “zero tolerance” policies in many schools that have targeted student behavior such as bullying, violent threats, and the possession of firearms and illicit substances.

Prior to 1997, there were, indeed, mass murders that had taken place in schools. Andrew Kehoe killed 43 victims, most of them children, with explosives in Bath, Michigan in 1927; school principal Verling Spencer fatally shot five colleagues in Pasadena, California, in 1940; Paul Orgeron killed six victims with a bomb on a Houston schoolyard in 1959; Patrick Purdy killed five, as mentioned previously, at a Stockton, California schoolyard in 1989; and Eric Houston murdered four victims at a high school in Yuba, California in 1992.

None of these incidents, however, were committed by juveniles. Of 828 mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1996, there were 47 incidents (6%) that involved 65 juveniles as offenders. Not one of the 47 incidents, however, was a mass public shooting, which, prior to 1997, had been committed exclusively

by adult males. Instead, juvenile mass murderers are more likely to either kill their parents and siblings in a familicide or to be involved in a felony-related massacre.

The series of school massacres that began in 1997 was thus, to a large extent, a historically new phenomenon. But the identification of juvenile mass killers as a new problem is, in several important respects, also a microcosm of mass murder in general. Recall, for example, that even though there was a mass murder wave in the 1920s and 1930s, which was comprised mainly of familicides and felony-related massacres, mass murder was not identified as a new crime problem until the incidence of mass public shootings began to accelerate in the 1960s. Similarly, prior to 1997, juvenile mass murderers were not recognized as a problem because they, for the most part, committed familicides and felony-related massacres, which are the least newsworthy mass murders, i.e. they receive mostly local coverage. But when juveniles began using guns to kill large numbers of innocent victims in public locations—factors that significantly increase the newsworthiness of a mass murder—it was only then that they were identified as a new problem.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASS MURDER: A CASE OF MIXED RESULTS

Although claimsmakers achieved some success in constructing mass murder, there are several reasons why they were not more successful. First, unlike other crime problems such as serial murder, for example, wherein claimsmakers grossly exaggerated its incidence, scholars like Fox and Levin noted that even though mass murder was on the rise, it was still rare. As a result, this may have tempered the urgency to “do something” about the mass murder problem.

Second, although Fox and Levin established ownership of mass murder, there were never any claimsmakers who had a vested interest in promoting the problem. If anything, the news media promoted the mass murder problem by presenting feature stories and editorials in response to high-profile cases. As Best (1991) points out, however, problems constructed by the press are often short-lived because media attention is ephemeral. Although there are, on average, two mass murders a month, which given the seriousness of the crime would be enough to sustain interest, only a small minority gain widespread publicity. Consequently, because there are only about four or five high-profile cases per year, the supply of incidents is usually too low to attract and maintain prolonged media coverage. However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were several times when high-profile cases clustered together, prompting the news media to run feature stories on the growing problem of mass murder.

Finally, claimsmakers limited their chances for success by framing mass murder as a gun problem. To be sure, claimsmakers effectively used high-profile mass murders to bring about a federal assault weapon ban in 1994. However, some of the more ambitious proposals to control mass murder, such as a ban on handguns, were met with resistance due to the entrenched debate over gun control.

CONCLUSION

Even though mass murder rates were relatively high during the 1920s and 1930s, mass murder was not identified as a new crime until the frequency of mass public shootings began to accelerate in the 1960s. Indeed, from 1900-1965, there were only 21 mass public shootings that took place in the United States. From 1966-1999, however, there were 95 (Duwe 2004). The growing incidence of these cases—which are the most newsworthy and, thus, highly visible mass killings—shaped perceptions about the prevalence and patterns of mass murder and helped produce three “spin-off” problems—assault weapons, workplace violence, and school shootings. If mass murder produces another “spin-off” problem in the future, it stands to reason that it will likely be another variant of a mass public shooting (e.g. “church shootings” or, if women ever begin committing mass public shootings, “female violence”).¹⁴

The findings presented in this study show that the news media have had a decisive influence on the social construction of mass murder. This influence, however, has led to a number of distorted claims. The distortion emanates from the news media’s financial obligation to attract as many consumers as possible in order to turn a profit, which involves selecting informative yet entertaining stories for presentation. With respect to crime news, the emphasis on the unusual and the melodramatic has produced an overrepresentation of violent, interpersonal crimes and an underrepresentation of the far more prevalent property and white-collar crime. But with mass murder, the distortion results not so much from whether incidents get reported—since almost all receive at least local coverage—but from the extent to which they get reported. Although the nationally-publicized mass killings are more familiar to both claimsmakers and the general public, they are the least representative examples of mass murder. Those making claims about mass murder, however, have not demonstrated an awareness of the ways in which the celebrated cases are biased as a sample of mass murder in general. Therefore, by uncritically using the atypical high-profile cases, claimsmakers have made a number of questionable assertions, which have, in turn, led to policy proposals that have targeted rare aspects of mass murder such as assault weapon use and workplace and school violence. And the news media have been the

chief means through which these claims have been promulgated, thus completing the circle of distortion.

But considering that news organizations must be profitable in order to survive, perhaps it is too much to expect the news media to deliver news that depicts the social reality of mass murder—or crime for that matter—nearly as accurately as government statistics or social science research. After all, journalists are not trained as criminologists and are bound by a different set of constraints; most notably, the tight deadlines under which they operate. Moreover, given that the news media have to attract as many consumers as possible, news organizations are compelled—to a large extent—to give the public what it wants. And since the inception of the penny press in the early nineteenth century, the public has consistently shown that it wants news not only about crime, but about unusual, dramatic, violent crimes. However, the distortion seemingly inherent to crime news simply places a greater responsibility on researchers to recognize and take into account the limitations of using news accounts as a source of data, much as they do with official crime data like the Uniform Crime Reports.

ENDNOTES

1. The ideas expressed in this article represent the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Minnesota Department of Corrections. The author would like to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

2. More specifically, decisions that the news media and, in particular, journalists make about the newsworthiness of an incident determine the extent to which it gets reported. The amount of news coverage given to an incident, as this study shows, influences whether claimsmakers will use it as a typifying example. This does not mean, however, that journalists are not claimsmakers. On the contrary, reporters make claims directly or report those made by others (usually those considered to be “experts” or official sources) in both “hard” news stories and “soft” feature stories. Nor does it mean that journalists are not affected by the values, standards and practices of their profession; that is, like other claimsmakers, they are influenced by the news to which they are exposed. After all, journalists are often avid consumers of the news not only for future story ideas, but also to keep an eye on the competition, i.e. rival news organizations (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987).

3. I found newspaper articles in the three databases by using connected search terms that included the name of the city or county in which the massacre took place along with a descriptive word like “murder,” although I used other terms such as “homicide,” “shot,”

“shooting,” “stabbed,” “slayings,” “killed,” “dead,” “fire,” and “arson.” Depending on the database, I initially placed limits on the search in terms of the dates covered (i.e. month and year in which the incident occurred) in order to cut down on the number of items returned. For the cases that could not be found with the initial pair of search terms, I broadened the investigation so that the state name was used in place of the city or county name, while the time frame was extended to approximately five years after the crime took place. In addition, although I also used “mass murder” as a search term, this phrase was seldom helpful in locating news accounts on specific cases as it was generally reserved for only the most publicized incidents. It was helpful, however, in locating “feature” stories on the topic of mass murder.

If the database search for an SHR-recorded incident was unsuccessful, I examined indexes from the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Los Angeles Times* to locate cases that might have been missed by the search terms used in the databases. For the few incidents found by inspecting these five newspaper indexes, I conducted a follow-up database search to more easily account for these cases.

Once a case was located, I used the offender’s or victim’s name (most often the offender) in a succession of follow-up searches to uncover all additional news reports that may have been missed by the previous search terms. The attempt to maximize the detection of every news report on a given mass murder was apparently successful considering that 30,027 articles from 117 newspapers were found on the incidents occurring between 1976 and 1996. The 117 newspapers were published in 41 of the 50 states, providing a national representation of newspaper coverage. After the search for each case was completed, I recorded the identity of each news source for a given case and examined the content of each of the 30,027 articles to record additional incident, victim, and offender data not provided by the SHR. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, I also examined the content of these articles for claimsmaking activity.

4. More specifically, I gave each mass murder located through the database search a newspaper score that measured the extent to which it was reported. The newspaper score derived from a scale developed on the premise that national public perceptions of mass murder are more likely to be influenced by cases that receive prominent and widespread news coverage. As such, I gave greater weight to articles in newspapers with larger circulations and to reports by news outlets that were geographically distant from the site where the massacre took place. The reasoning behind placing greater emphasis on these aspects of news coverage was to

offset the bias that might be produced by simply measuring the newspaper score as the total number of news reports on a given mass murder. For instance, under such a scoring system a mass killing that garnered strictly local yet heavy media coverage might have a newspaper score greater than a more widely reported massacre that had fewer news reports, but had a more even distribution of local and nonlocal coverage.

I assigned each newspaper article on a given mass murder a value ranging from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater prominence and visibility of news coverage. The values were based on both the circulation of the news source and the geographical relationship between the locations of the mass killing and the news source. On the basis of circulation, I placed newspapers in three categories: national, major, and non-major. The *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* were placed in the national category because of their large circulation, their reputations for offering readers a national coverage of the news and because together they contribute to a sense of geographic representation. Newspapers other than these five were assigned to the major category if their circulation figures were among the top fifty daily newspapers according to *Editor & Publisher Yearbook* (1985-1997). I placed all remaining newspapers in the non-major or regional category. Greater importance was given to the newspapers in the national category because of the large readership and national prominence associated with these newspapers, whereas newspapers in the non-major category were weighted less than those in the major category because of their smaller circulation.

A news report was considered local if the location of the news source was within a 100-mile radius from the site where the mass murder took place. Thus, local news reports generally encompassed incidents occurring within the town, city, county, or metropolitan area of the reporting news source while massacres occurring outside this territory were regarded as nonlocal. I gave greater weight to nonlocal news reports because they tend to increase public awareness of a mass murder more than articles from local news sources.

I assigned a value of 7 to articles by any of the newspapers in the national category on nonlocally occurring mass murders. For example, if the *Washington Post* reported a mass killing that occurred in Chicago or Kansas City, the article was given a value of 7. I gave values of 6 and 5 to reports from newspapers in the major and non-major newspapers, respectively, when the mass murder occurred nonlocally. I assigned a value of 4 to reports on locally covered incidents by any of the newspapers in the national category. I gave values of 3 and 2 to articles on locally occurring murders from newspapers in the major and non-major categories, respectively. If a massacre

took place in Chicago, for example, and was reported by the *Chicago Tribune*, a value of 4 was given to the article, whereas a value of 3 was assigned to an article from the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on a mass murder occurring in San Diego. Finally, I gave a value of 1 to news reports from the major newswires found in the Lexis-Nexis and Dialog@CARL databases. Although this type of source was used to account for cases that did not receive newspaper coverage, the value given to newswire reports was also recorded for the incidents that were reported by newspapers. I calculated a newspaper score for each mass murder by summing the values given to each newspaper article I located on that mass murder.

5. As in the newspaper search, I located television news reports by using a variety of search terms pertaining to characteristics such as date (e.g. month and year), location (e.g. city or state), and names of the victims and offenders. I created a dichotomous variable, TVNEWS, by assigning a value of “1” to the 104 cases that were presented by ABC, NBC, or CBS in their evening newscasts, and a value of “0” to the 391 massacres that did not receive coverage.

6. Searching the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* for the years 1976-1998, I located newsweekly magazine accounts on mass killings by examining the articles listed in the “murder” category. I created a dichotomous variable, WEEKLY, by giving a value of “1” to the 23 massacres reported by either *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report*, and a value of “0” to the incidents that did not receive coverage.

7. I located articles on mass killings that took place between 1900 and 1975 by examining the description of each story listed in the following *New York Times* index categories: murders and attempted murders, shootings (this category was introduced in 1948), arson, fires, bomb explosions (changed to “bomb explosions, plots, and warnings” in 1930 and then to “bombs and bomb plots” in 1957), and mass murder (introduced in 1982). The story descriptions in the *Times* index often provided enough information to identify the cases that were mass killings. For some cases, however, it was not as readily apparent whether they were mass murders because their story descriptions were either too vague or too brief. I gathered news reports on any case that might be a mass murder to increase the chances of locating every mass killing reported by the *Times*.

The search identified 403 cases that were potential mass murders. After reading the news accounts on these cases, I determined that 259 met the criteria for mass murder classification. The other 144 cases were excluded because the news reports indicated that they

were spree or serial murders, they did not meet the four fatal victim requirement, or they occurred outside the U.S. There was at least one instance in which the *New York Times* failed to index a story on a mass killing. When reading the *Times’* coverage of the murders committed by Richard Speck, I found an article on the familicide committed by Elias Vargas in Newark, New Jersey on July 22, 1966. The *Times* reported that Vargas killed himself after murdering his common-law wife and three children. Short of poring over every page of every edition of the *New York Times* from 1900-1975, it is difficult to know with certainty how many articles on mass killings were missed because they were not listed in the index. It is worth noting, however, that I did not find any additional unlisted cases when I examined the *Times’* coverage of mass killings from 1976-1999.

After including the Vargas case, the search revealed that 875 *New York Times* articles were found on 260 mass killings that occurred between 1900 and 1975. I examined the articles to record incident, victim, and offender data on the same variables used for the 1976-1999 period. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, I also examined the content of these articles for claimsmaking activity.

8. I used a similar methodology to collect data on mass murders that occurred between 1997 and 1999. The SHR indicated that 83 incidents involving four or more victims took place during the three-year period. After identifying when and where these incidents occurred, I searched the newspaper database in Lexis-Nexis, using the same search terms described above for cases that took place between 1976 and 1996. I found articles on all 83 incidents. As in the search covering the 1976-1996 period, I located news accounts on 18 mass killings not reported to the SHR. In addition, I removed 16 cases that were not mass murders because they were inaccurately recorded by the SHR. Of the 10 incidents involving the use of fire, I excluded four because the fire was ruled an accident, or because the offenders were not convicted of murder. Overall, I identified 81 mass killings that took place between 1997 and 1999.

9. Actually, eight cases were mentioned, but three were incidents that would now be classified as spree or serial murders.

10. A third type, spree murder, was also identified. Although it was originally conceptualized as a category that comprised multiple murders committed, mostly one at a time, over the span of a few days or a week, the spree murder type has often been used as a residual grouping for cases that do not easily fit into the other two categories.

11. One reviewer questioned whether academics can actually “own” problems. There is evidence from the literature, however, that scholar-advocates have owned problems before. For example, in their study on the social construction of domestic violence, Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1993) note that academics Murray Straus and Richard Gelles established ownership of the problem and have played a decisive role in how it has been typified.

12. More specifically, a multivariate logistic regression analysis was performed on the data from 1976-1999, which contained 280 mass killings reported by the *New York Times* and 369 incidents that had not. The results revealed that the death toll, wounded count, gun use, other weapon use, stranger victims, public settings, vulnerable victims (i.e. under the age of 16 or over the age of 40), and region in which the incident took place (i.e. East coast) significantly increased the odds that a mass murder would get reported by the *New York Times* (Duwe 2004).

13. Research has shown, for example, that only about one in five mass murderers commit suicide after the homicidal event (Duwe 2000, 2004). Still, the incidence of suicidal behavior among mass killings is at least five times that of ordinary homicides, where the incidence of homicide-suicide is between 1.6 and 4.0 percent (Duwe 2000, 2004; Stack, 1997).

14. Of the 116 mass public shootings that occurred between 1900 and 1999, not one was committed by a female. Instead, the mass murders committed by females tend to be familicides in which they kill their children and, occasionally, their spouse or boyfriend.

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