



Evaluate, assess, and employ strategies that mitigate risk of intelligent threats, specializing in active shooters.

Active Shooter Statistics: Understanding the Issue

Who defines the term “active shooter”? Who defines the term “mass shooting”? Who determines which shootings get news media coverage?

The term “active shooter” has been defined by multiple U.S. government agencies that include the White House, the Department of Justice, the Department of Education, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. These agencies have agreed upon defining an active shooter as, “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use firearm(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection.” The FBI tweaks this definition by changing “individual” to “individuals” (i.e., more than one shooter) and omitting the word “confined” (i.e., the shooter is attempting to kill people in a populated area that is not necessarily confined).

The salient points of this definition are that an active shooter is someone who is:

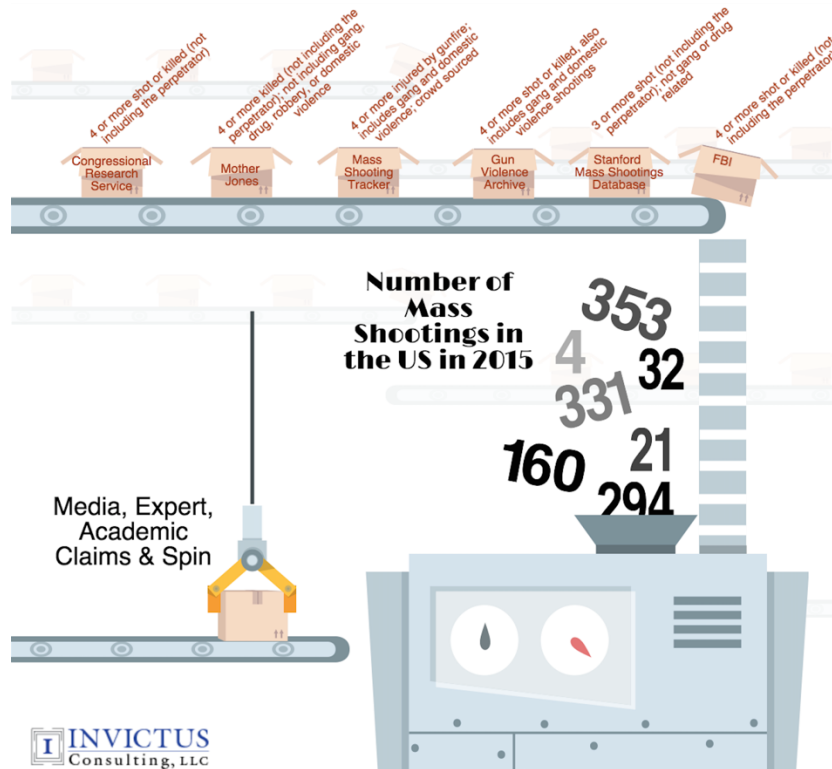
- attempting to kill people
- by shooting them
- in a populated area
- with no particular rhyme or reason for who they aim at

This definition is relatively straightforward and is generally used for statistics, research, or claims made about active shooters. This definition tends to eliminate gun violence due to gang violence and drug violence (as these shooters tend to shoot specified – rather than random – targets). It also tends to eliminate domestic violence where an individual shoots family members in the home (which is neither random nor in a populated area).

The more unresolved matter is the definition of “mass shooting”. Different news outlets, media organizations, academic institutions, government institutions, journalists, academics, interest groups, activists, security experts, and criminal justice professionals have different definitions, complicating both the statistics themselves and the claims made based on the statistics.



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Individuals and organizations that present statistics about active shooters and mass shooting events tend to pull their data from one of a handful of sources: The [FBI](#); the [Congressional Research Service](#); the [Mass Shooting Tracker](#); the [Gun Violence Archive](#); the [Stanford Mass Shootings Database](#); and other lesser used sources like [Mother Jones](#) or [Wikipedia](#).

Each source defines mass shooting slightly different. Most consider a mass shooting to be at least four people shot not including the perpetrator. The question is

whether the people shot have to die or not in order for it to be considered a mass shooting – some sources classify a shooting as a mass shooting if four or more people have been shot even if none of them die; other sources quantify a mass shooting by how many people died at the hands of the perpetrator. The other vexing point is whether to include gang violence and drug related shootings in the definition. Because the generally agreed-upon definition of an active shooter is someone who is randomly choosing targets, gang and drug related shootings generally do not make sense to include in the data set. With that said, there is a social justice element to that discussion, where leaving out gang and drug related killing marginalizes and glosses over certain minority groups that are beset by such forms of violence. That is an issue for another discussion, but it does throw another ingredient into the pot. Should a gang shooting that leaves 10 dead be considered a “mass shooting”?

The media and other experts who make claims about gun violence or active shooter events or mass shooting incidents pull their data from various sources, leading to conflicting and disparate claims. “Mass shootings are on the rise!” “Mass shootings are at the same level they’ve been since the 1960s!” “Mass shootings aren’t on the rise.” “Mass shootings have become more common in the U.S.” “Mass Murder in the U.S. is declining.” As the graphic above demonstrates, for 2015 the range of mass shootings in the U.S. ranges from 4 to over 350. That



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is a startlingly large range, and it can be explained by the fact that different claims makers obtain their data from different sources.

A claims maker is anyone who uses data to make a claim. This could be a journalist, an academic, an activist, a criminal justice professional, a security professional, a news media outlet, an educational institution, a special interest group, or any number of other individuals, groups, or organizations. Grant Duwe of the Minnesota Department of Corrections has shown that news coverage is the primary source of information about crime for both the public in general and the various breeds of claims makers. If everyone is getting their information from the news media, we need to ask ourselves some important questions about this information/data.

News media have a directive to inform the public about news worthy events. The question is: what is “news worthy”? News media are for-profit businesses that may distort (either willfully or not) the image of crime in order to improve their ratings. Bad news sells more than good news; crimes that are outliers and sensational sell more than crimes that are common. Because there is a limited amount of air time, news media pick and choose what to report on, and if they consistently choose the more sensational and outrageous crimes, the overall trend *seems* to be that all crime is sensational and outrageous. Insert a national debate about crime, where *everyone gets their information from the news media*, and it quickly becomes clear that the claims being made are based on hand picked and incomplete data.

With that said, researchers have aggregated mass shooting data from past events in the United States and determined that most active shooters fit the profile of:

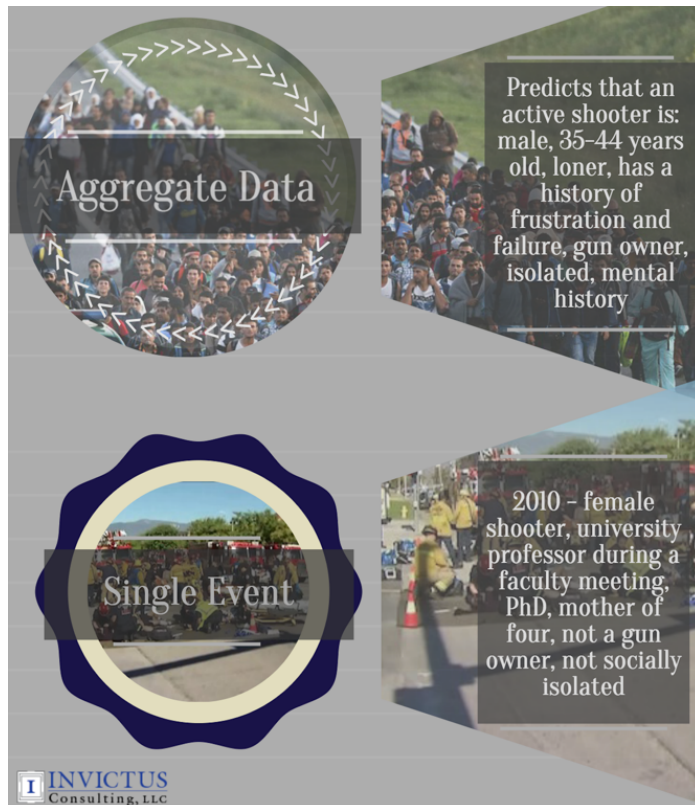
- male
- 35-44 years old
- isolated individual, loner
- history of frustration and failure
- history of mental instability

The problem with aggregate data (where groups of data are combined to create summary statistics) is that there is a chasm between patterns in the data and a single active shooter or a unique mass shooting event. Mass behavior may be predictable, but no one person is predictable. A simple example of this concept may be seen at a local sporting event. The aggregate data (say data taken from the past 10 years of home basketball games at Main High School) indicates that the crowd will erupt in cheers of “Goooooo Tigers!” when a 3-point shot is made. Does this pattern in the data imply that every single individual sitting in the



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stands will yell this cheer? No, of course not. Some individuals may not engage in this cheer for any number of reasons (they're tired, they're on the phone, they support the opposing team, etc.). Does this mean the aggregate data (predicting that the crowd will cheer "Goooooo Tlgers!") is useless or incorrect data? Again, the answer is no. The data clearly point to the fact that the crowd will cheer when a 3-point shot is made. The point here is that the aggregate data do not effectively predict the behavior of every individual – only the crowd as a whole in this example.



While the above is a simplified example, it can help inform us about the flaws in active shooter and mass shooting data. The aggregate data indicate that active shooters are usually 35-44-year old men who own a gun; have a history of mental instability, failure, and frustration; and are socially isolated loners. Does this mean that every 35-44-year old man who owns a gun and has a history of mental instability and failure and is socially isolated is going to gun down people in his community? The answer again is no. In fact, *most* men aged 35-44 who own a gun will never shoot anyone. Many people can fit the profile of the aggregate data but have done nothing wrong and never intend to commit crime.

The aggregate data shows patterns in the data, but it does not predict a single active shooter or mass shooting event. Likewise, not every mass shooter fits this profile. For example, very few school shooting perpetrators fit this profile – these shooters are usually much younger than 35-44 and, especially if they are a minor, do not own the gun(s) used. In another example, if one's definition of mass shooting includes gang and drug violence, the perpetrators of these shootings often don't fit the profile of being socially isolated loners.

The other problem with aggregate data goes back to the issue above, namely that most claims makers obtain their information from the news media. Depending on where a claims maker gets their data, the data itself (before its even assessed and aggregated and had statistics run



on it) may be skewed, causing skewed claims. Of course the agenda of the claims maker often distorts the data and claims anyway. When an individual or organization makes a claim about mass shootings or gun violence or active shooters, they are doing so with a predetermined motive in mind. For example, a gun lobby may choose to use data showing that there were only four mass shootings in 2015 to make the claim that legislation is unnecessary to prevent shootings. The mayor of a town where a gruesome mass shooting occurred may choose to present data to make the claim that mental illness (not lack of security or incompetence on the part of government) caused the event. The mother of a shooting victim may go on national television and choose to use data indicating that there were 353 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2015 to make the claim that all schools are unsafe. People make claims and support those claims with data all the time. The questions are: What is the agenda of the claims maker? What data are they using to substantiate that claim?

Claims makers of all shapes and sizes are going to continue to use data and make claims about active shooters and mass shooting events. Journalists, academics, law enforcement, government entities, security experts, activists, and lobbyist will all continue to explore and discuss this social dilemma. As security professionals, Invictus Consulting will continue to use data to explore and discuss the topic of active shooters, but we understand and acknowledge that there are flaws in the data. We also understand, though, that for all the faulty data, having a plan in place of what to do in the case of an active shooter is an increasingly necessary facet of a security management plan.

The bottom line is this:

We know there are flaws in the data about active shooters and mass shooting events. People make claims using different sources of data, and often they pick the data source that will substantiate their claim. With that said, active shooters and mass shootings are a reality in the U.S., and individuals, schools, companies, and organizations should take threats seriously and have a plan in place in case an active shooter opens fire.



What can you do with this knowledge?

- You've already begun to address this issue by reading this report.
 - Always take claims and data with a grain of salt.
 - Ask yourself what the agenda or motives are of the claims maker.
 - Ask yourself where the claims maker obtained their data.
- Understand that no matter what the agenda of the claims maker and their source of data, it behooves you to have a plan in the event that someone open fire around you.
- Have a physical security survey and assessment done of your premises/building/campus.
- Create a risk management plan and put it into effect.
- Contact a [physical security and risk consulting firm](#) to discuss how security professionals can guide you through this process.

Sources:

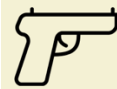
Duwe, G. (2005). A Circle of Dsirtortion: The Social Constrution of Mass Murder in the United States. *Western Criminology Review* 6(1), 59-78.



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Active Shooters

Discussing the Statistics



What We "Know" From Past Events

Sex of Shooter

Mass Shootings in the US, 2000-2015



Male (93%) Female (4%) Unknown (3%)

Military Experience of Shooter

Mass Shootings in the US, 2000-2015



No (48%) Yes (10%) Unknown (42%)

Shooter Relationship to Incident Location

Mass Shootings in the US, 2000-2015



Local Government (2%) None (11%) Place of Business / Employment (16%) Place of Recreation (17%) Place of Residence (34%) Place of Schooling (14%) Unknown (6%)

How Reliable Are These Statistics?

News accounts are the MAIN SOURCE of information about mass shootings for both the general public and "experts" such as journalists, academics, interest group activists, and criminal justice professionals.

News media chooses what to publicize and makes decisions about the newsworthiness of an incident. The amount of news coverage given to an incident influences whether it is used by experts as a typifying example.

How is new media coverage determined? Is it by how sensational the incident is? How many people died? How far outside the norm the incident is?

What defines "mass shooting"? 4 or more casualties? 3 or more people shot? Indiscriminate shooting? Not gang related?

As long as there are multiple definitions of "mass shooting", and as long as there is varying priority given to the news coverage of shootings, the data used by experts is inherently flawed.

What Does This Mean?

As security experts, we know there are flaws in the data

Take claims about mass shooting data with a grain of salt

You still need to have a plan in place for the possibility of an active shooter regardless of how flawed the data are

Sources: Duwe, G. (2006) A Circle of Obsession: The Social Construction of Mass Murder in the United States. Western Criminology Review 6(1), 59-75. Stanford Mass Shootings in America, courtesy of the Stanford Geospatial Center and Stanford Libraries

