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## Considering What Counts: Mass Shooting Math

Joel Best

*University of Delaware*, joelbest@udel.edu

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## Considering What Counts: Mass Shooting Math

### Abstract

News reports often cite statistics about the number of mass shootings. It is important to appreciate the definitions used when counting mass shootings. Different definitions produce very different statistical outcomes.

### Keywords

counting, mass murder, mass shootings, social construction

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### Cover Page Footnote

Joel Best is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware. His books include *Damn Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press 2001), *More Damned Lies and Statistics* (University of California Press 2004), *Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads* (University of California Press 2006), *Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data* (University of California Press 2008), *The Stupidity Epidemic: Worrying about Students, Schools and America's Future* (Routledge 2011), *American Nightmares: Social Problems in an Anxious World* (University of California Press 2018), and *Is That True? Critical Thinking for Sociologists* (University of California Press 2021). His papers in *Numeracy* include a perspective ("Birds—Dead and Deadly: Why Numeracy Needs to Address Social Construction") in the journal's first issue (Jan. 2008).

Headlines during the summer of 1966 featured two terrible crimes: on July 13, Richard Speck stabbed and strangled eight student nurses in Chicago; and on August 1, Charles Whitman shot some 45 people (killing more than a dozen) from the clock tower on the University of Texas campus. The juxtaposition of two sensational crimes involving many fatalities within a three-week period led commentators to begin talking about the problem of *mass murder*.

Over the years, other names for categories of serious violent crimes devised by journalists, criminologists, law enforcement officials, or politicians have received a good deal of public attention. Spree killings, femicide, serial murder, kids with guns, freeway violence/shootings, going postal, workplace violence, and school violence/shootings have all had their moments in the spotlight. Today, of course, commentaries are much more likely to speak of *mass shootings*.

Obviously, these categories can overlap. Charles Whitman's rampage was labeled a mass murder when it happened, but we now consider it a mass shooting. At the time, what seemed most remarkable was the number of people Whitman killed (*mass murder*); today, our focus is on the fact he used guns to kill them (*mass shooting*). While we would all agree that Richard Speck committed a horrible crime, we tend to think of it as an unusual incident—there aren't many cases where multiple people are killed with a knife. In contrast, Whitman's crime—like Columbine, Sandy Hook, the Pulse nightclub, Uvalde, and other notorious shootings—seems to fit neatly in the category of mass shootings, an example of a larger social problem.

Mass shootings are the focus of intense debates, not because anyone defends them, but because people disagree about what the appropriate policies governing firearms ought to be. This is where numeracy enters the picture. Increasingly, those concerned about mass shootings invoke statistics to support their arguments, so that commentaries about a new case often emphasize that it was the Xth mass shooting in this calendar year. Which raises some questions: who counts mass shootings? And how do they go about counting them?

The answers may surprise some people. The FBI—the source for most crime statistics—doesn't count mass shootings. Nor do other federal agencies. Although public health authorities sometimes claim that gun violence ought to be viewed as a public health problem, congressional opponents of gun control measures have blocked funding for the CDC to study the topic. As a result, data collection on mass shootings has become the responsibility of private entities, such as *Mother Jones* magazine or the Violence Project's Mass Shooter Database.

Fortunately, the Internet makes such counting feasible. Researchers can search news reports and other online accounts for reports of shooting incidents, determine which cases count as mass shootings, and then compile information about them.

But wait. What counts as a mass shooting? Presumably some number of people must be shot, but how many? Do some of them have to die, and if so, how many

deaths are necessary for it to be considered a *mass* shooting? Many mass shootings end with the death of the shooter, who either is killed by someone else (usually a law enforcement officer) or commits suicide. Should the shooter’s death count toward the total number of fatalities? And what if the deaths occur during the course of a crime such as an armed robbery or a drug deal—should the incident still count as a mass shooting? These questions may seem macabre, but they need to be asked and answered. If we want to count mass shootings, we need to decide what does and doesn’t count.

For some time, a commonly used definition of mass shootings required that at least four people be killed by the shooter. However, in recent years, the number of deaths required by some databases for an event to be classified as a mass shooting has fallen to three. Why? Very simply, the journalists and activists keeping track of mass shootings tend to view this as a serious problem. Obviously, setting the lower limit at three deaths means that there will be more mass shootings to count than if the limit is set at four. Some tallies also count the shooter’s death toward that total—which again will generate a higher death toll.

Definitions affect the resulting counts. One analysis compared seven databases that kept track of mass shootings in 2019. The database with the narrowest definition (the incident had to occur in a public place and involve indiscriminate violence [i.e., this excluded armed robberies, gang violence, and domestic violence] that resulted in the deaths of at least four people [not counting the shooter]) calculated that there had been 6 incidents during the entire year. In contrast, the database with the broadest definition (the incident could occur in any place, under any circumstances, so long as at least four people [including the shooter] were injured [i.e., fatalities were unnecessary]) identified 503 incidents during the same year (Smart and Schell 2021).

As always, defining what you are going to count determines how many cases you’ll count (Stone 2020). That’s certainly true for mass shootings, but it is also true for absolutely every other statistic we encounter. When we start tossing numbers around, we ought to be sure we understand how people arrived at those figures.

## References

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