



VIOLENCE
PREVENTION
PROJECT
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How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic

Dr. James Densley

The 49th Annual FMHAC Conference

March 29, 2024

Research reported in this presentation was supported by the National Institute of Justice under award number 2018-75-CX-0023.

THE *VIOLENCE* PROJECT

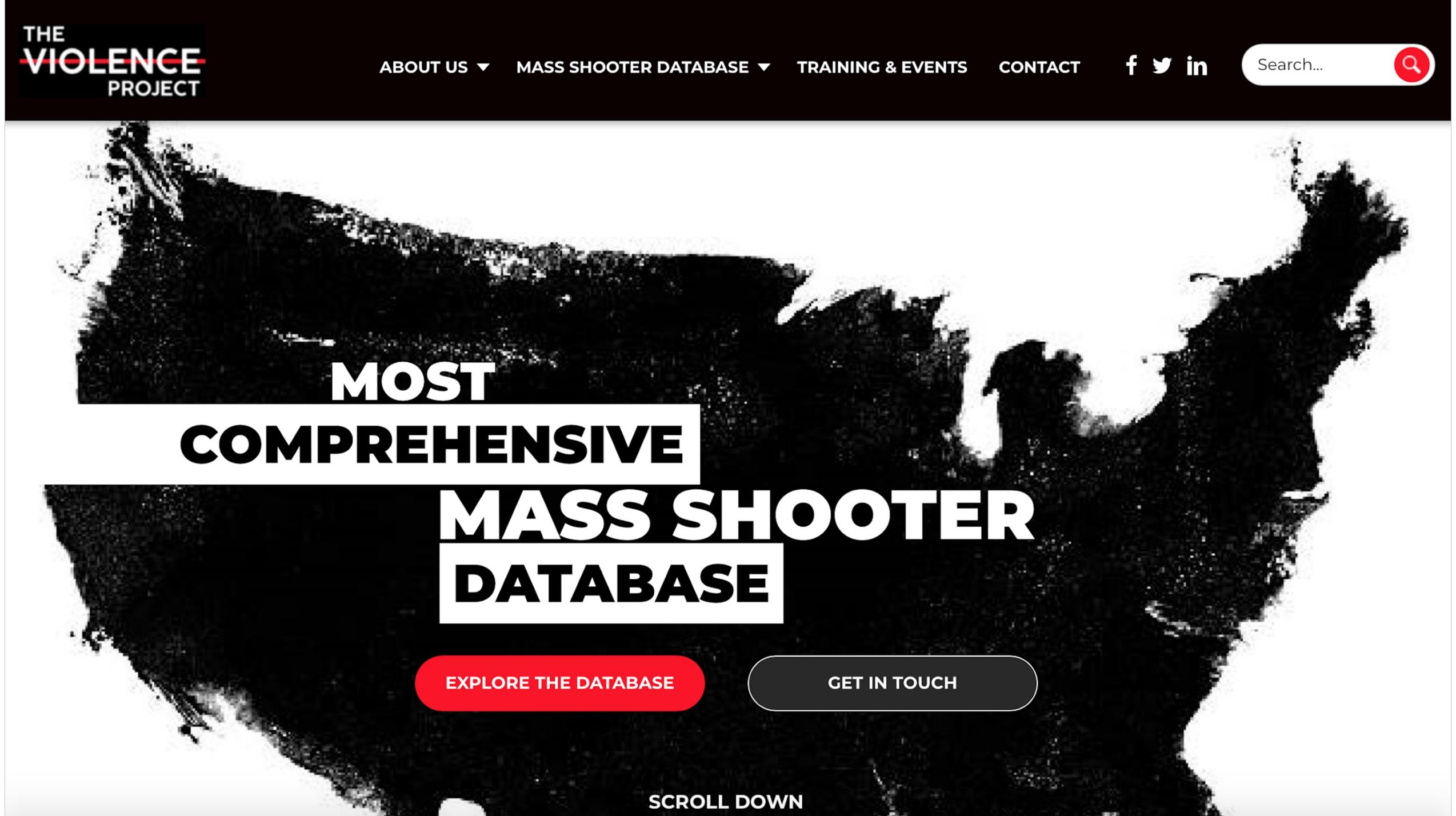
HOW TO STOP
A MASS SHOOTING
EPIDEMIC

*Jillian Peterson, PhD
& James Densley, PhD*



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A high-contrast, black and white map of the United States, rendered in a grainy, stencil-like style. The map is the background for the main text and buttons.

MOST COMPREHENSIVE MASS SHOOTER DATABASE

EXPLORE THE DATABASE

GET IN TOUCH

SCROLL DOWN

Database Timeline

Start: Aug. 2017

NIJ funding: Jan. 2018

Version 1: Nov. 2019

Version 2: Jul. 2020

Version 3: Mar. 2021

Version 4: Jul. 2021

Version 5: May 2022

Version 6: Jan. 2023

Version 7: Jul. 2023

Version 8: Jan. 2024

Want to see the most up-to-date data?

Download the full Mass Shooter Database with over 150 variables for free today.

REQUEST THE FULL DATABASE



Instructions: Filter the data by clicking on boxes and check marks. Add or remove boxes to see where shooters fit in each criterion. Hover the cursor over the categories to see a description of some of the less common terms.

Shooting location

- WORKPLACE
- RETAIL
- RESTAURANTS AND BARS
- RESIDENCE
- HOUSE OF WORSHIP
- K-12 SCHOOL
- COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY
- GOVERNMENT BUILDING OR PLACE OF CIVIC IMPORTANCE
- OUTDOORS

Current or former workplaces of perpetrators were the most common sites for mass shootings. Most of the shooters had been fired.

Almost all of mass shooters at restaurants, bars and retail establishments were strangers to those businesses, while perpetrators in workplaces, houses of worship, and schools and colleges tended to be current or former students and insiders known to the victims.

Dear Miss Peterson

8-21-18

I received your letter requesting to have an interview for your study.

Sorry I did not respond in a timely manner concerning this request, however

P.S. I guess isn't bliss but this is one of the insidious methods of brainwashing that has been taught to my race of people which is the overall outcome of our ignorant behavior. Conscious enlightenment about ones history & knowledge of self is a beautiful thing without it I would have let you trick me into further exploitation of my race of people & allowed you to continue to falsely portray us as monsters who have no regard for human life!! I know this wasn't the response that you was looking for, so please don't be put off or offended by my intellectual comments.

1. You mentioned that there were some scary and confusing incidents from your childhood-what were they?

I was shown pornography as a child and it disgusted me.

My father would sometimes hit or grab my mother. He was sometimes hard on me but he did it out of love.

2. What tests did you have trouble with in fifth grade? What happened as a result of you having trouble with those tests?

Vocabulary tests My grades suffered.

3. What was the situation when you were 11 years old were you?

My mother was raised on a mid-sized farm (cows, pigs, sheep, chickens, ducks, horses, corn, oats, barley, wheat), one of four children. Her mom & dad were hardworking, catholic, alcoholic & abusive (physically) to each other & their children. She had one child prior to meeting my father (my sister,

when she became pregnant with me, her dad wanted to kill my dad, so they took off & ended up in New Mexico, where I was born).

With a new grandson & a collie puppy they went back home & modified my grandfather. Mom worked as a care provider at the State mental home in Colquhoun, N.C. She worked hard, kept a clean house, cooked

two - three meals a day & cared for us kids () as well as she knew how. She was quick to punish when we did wrong, cursed & smoked (rarely

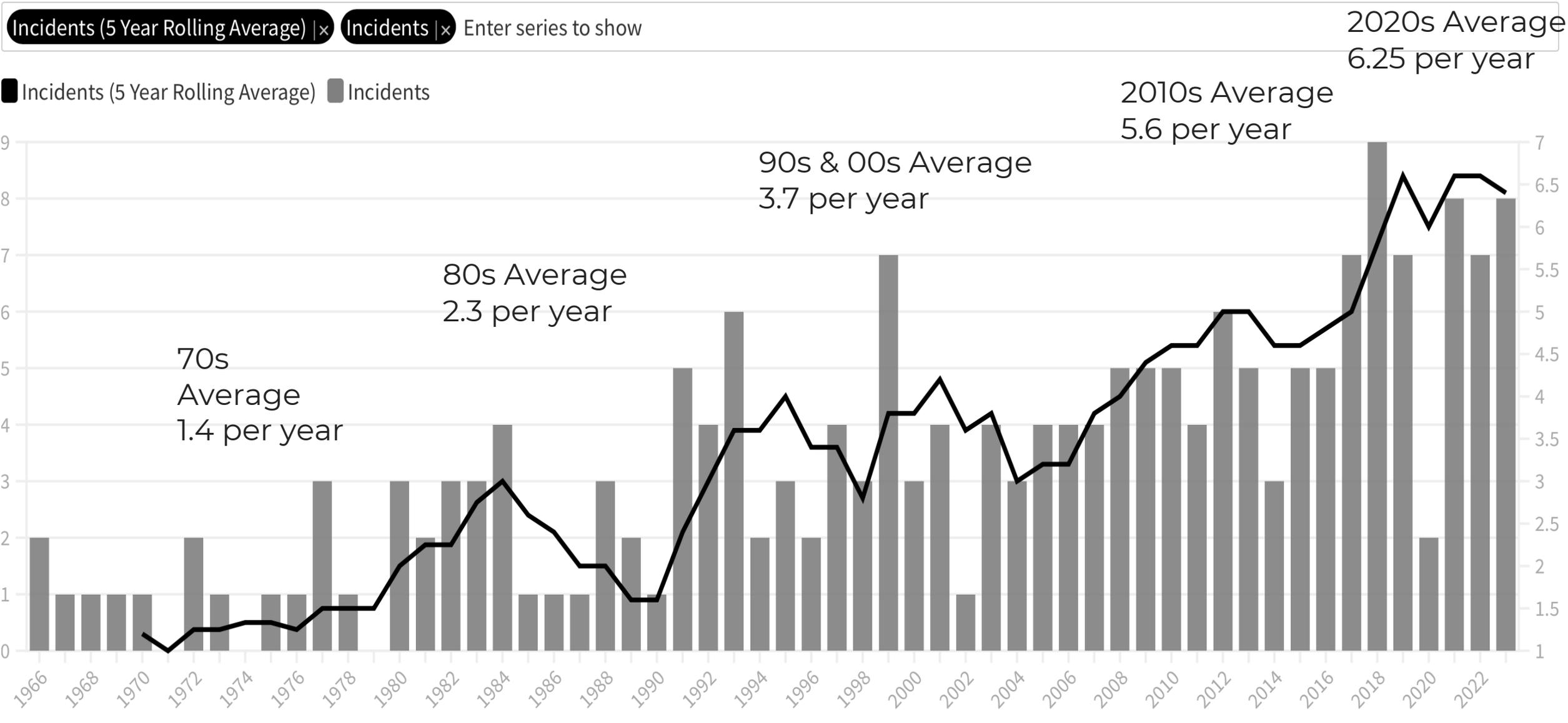
had a shotgun seat belt.

Different sources, different numbers

- Deaths?
- Injures?
- Active shooter only?
 - [The FBI defines an active shooter](#) as an individual engaged in attempting to kill people in a confined space or populated area.
- Felony crimes, including robberies and gang violence?
- Domestic violence?

Mass Public Shooting Incidents and Deaths in the United States, 1966–present

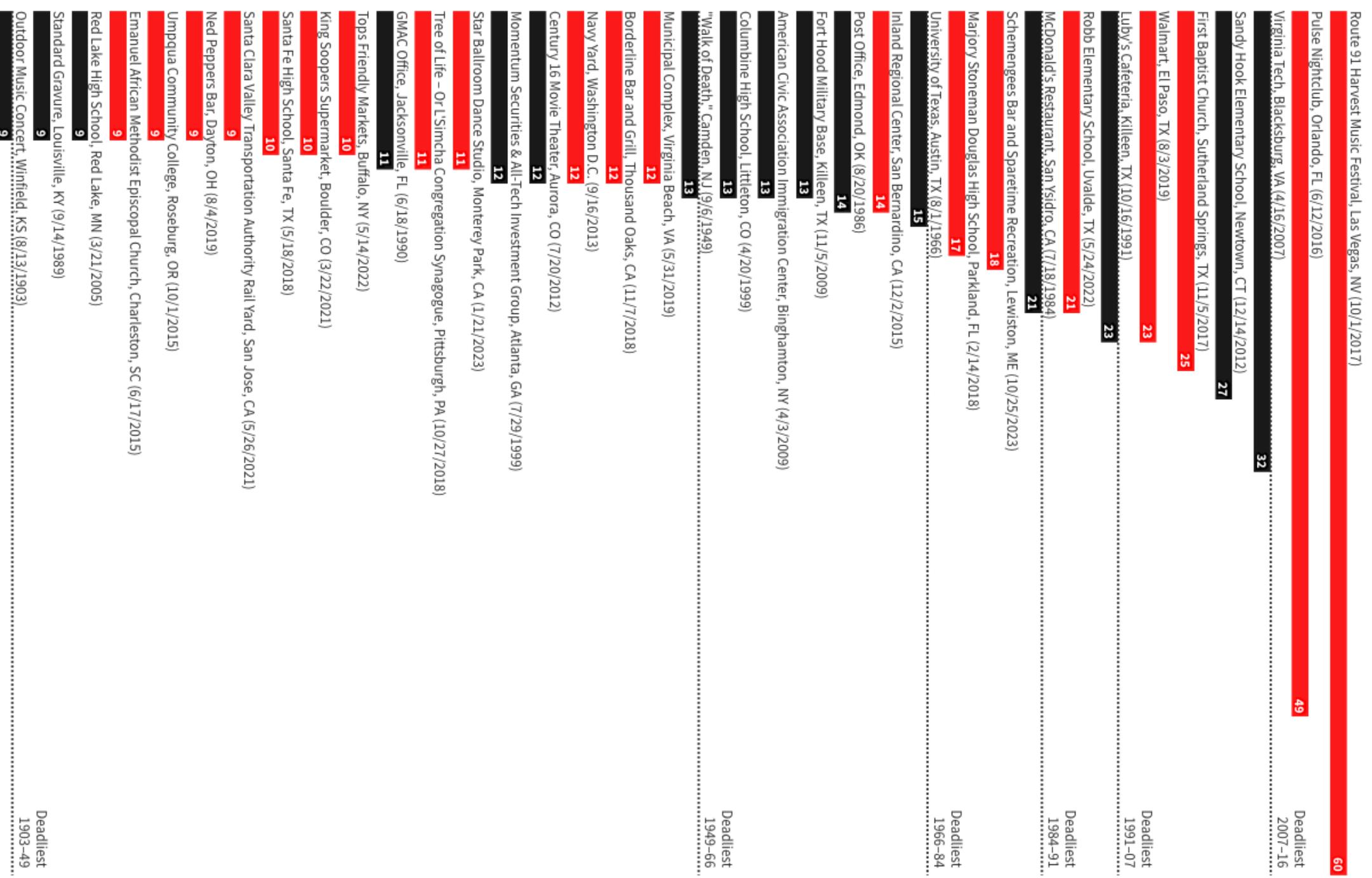
N=193 Shootings, 1,391 Deaths



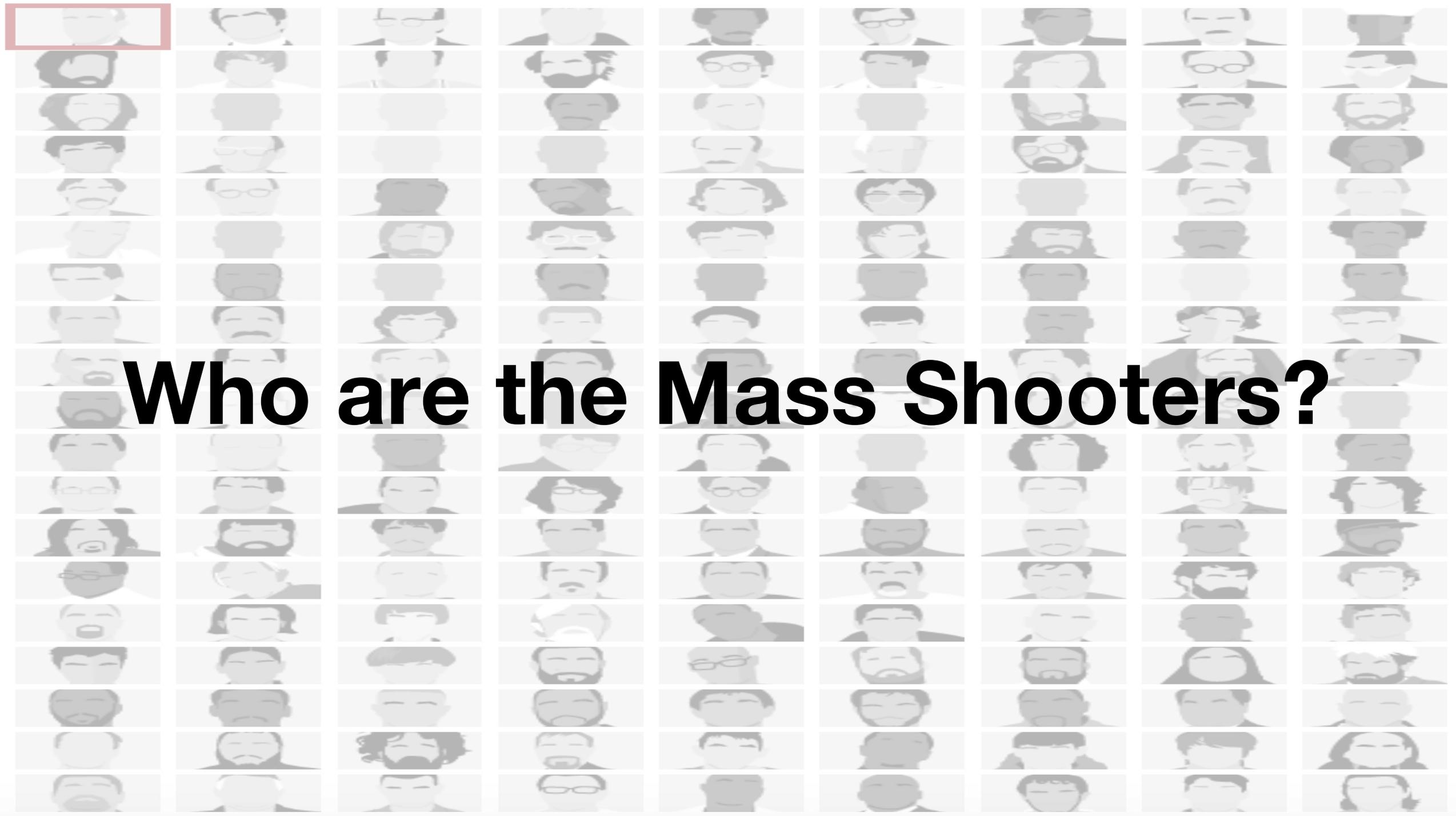
Source: [The Violence Project](#)

Deadliest US Mass Public Shootings, 1903–present

Last 10 Years in Red



N Deaths

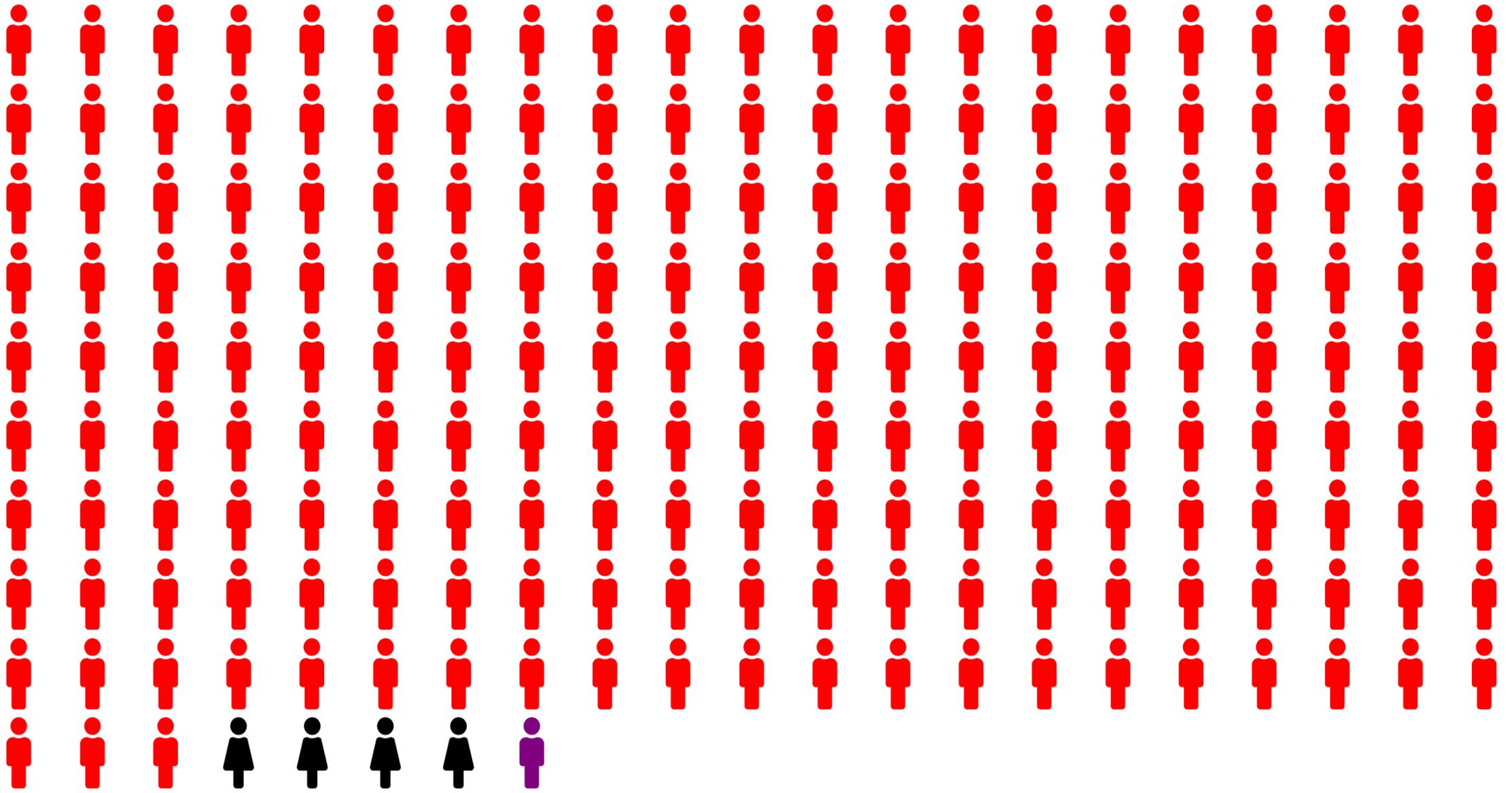


Who are the Mass Shooters?

Gender of US Mass Public Shooters, 1966–present

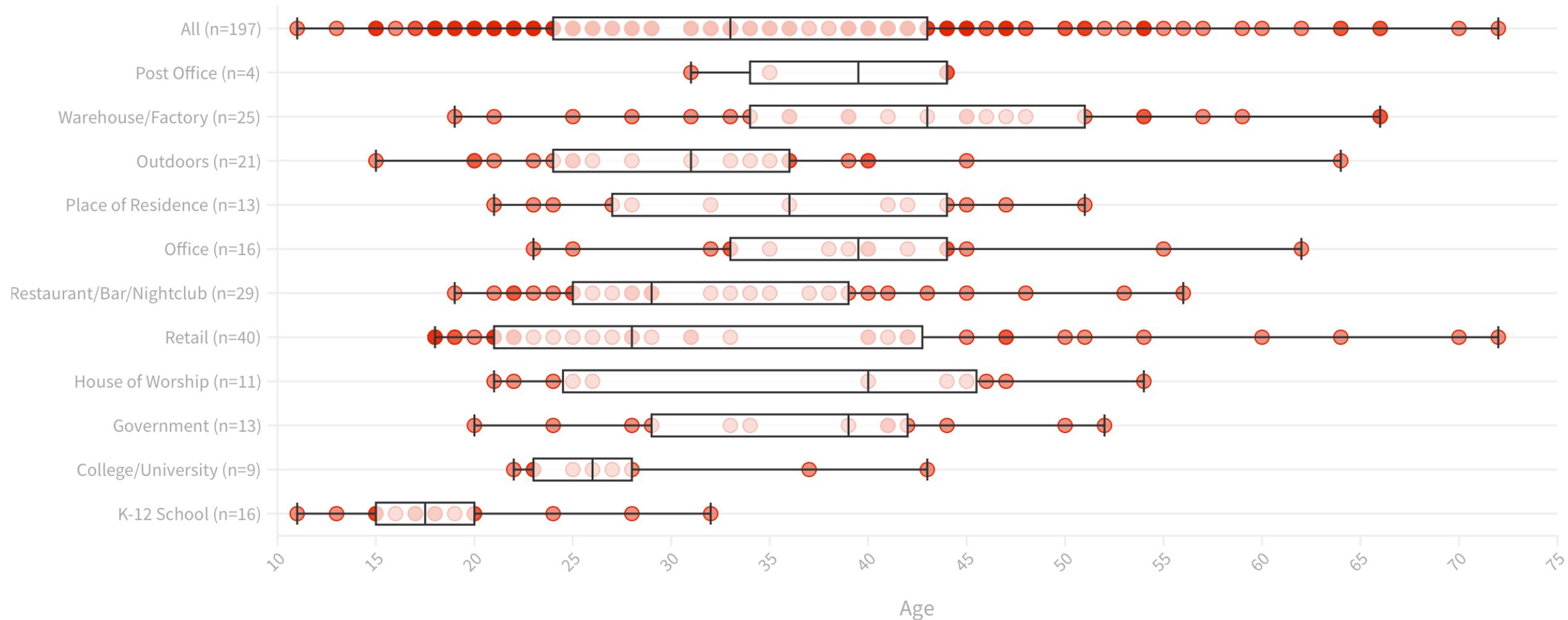
N=197

♂=1 ♂ Male ♀ Female ♄ Transgender



Age of US Mass Public Shooters by Location, 1966–present

N=197



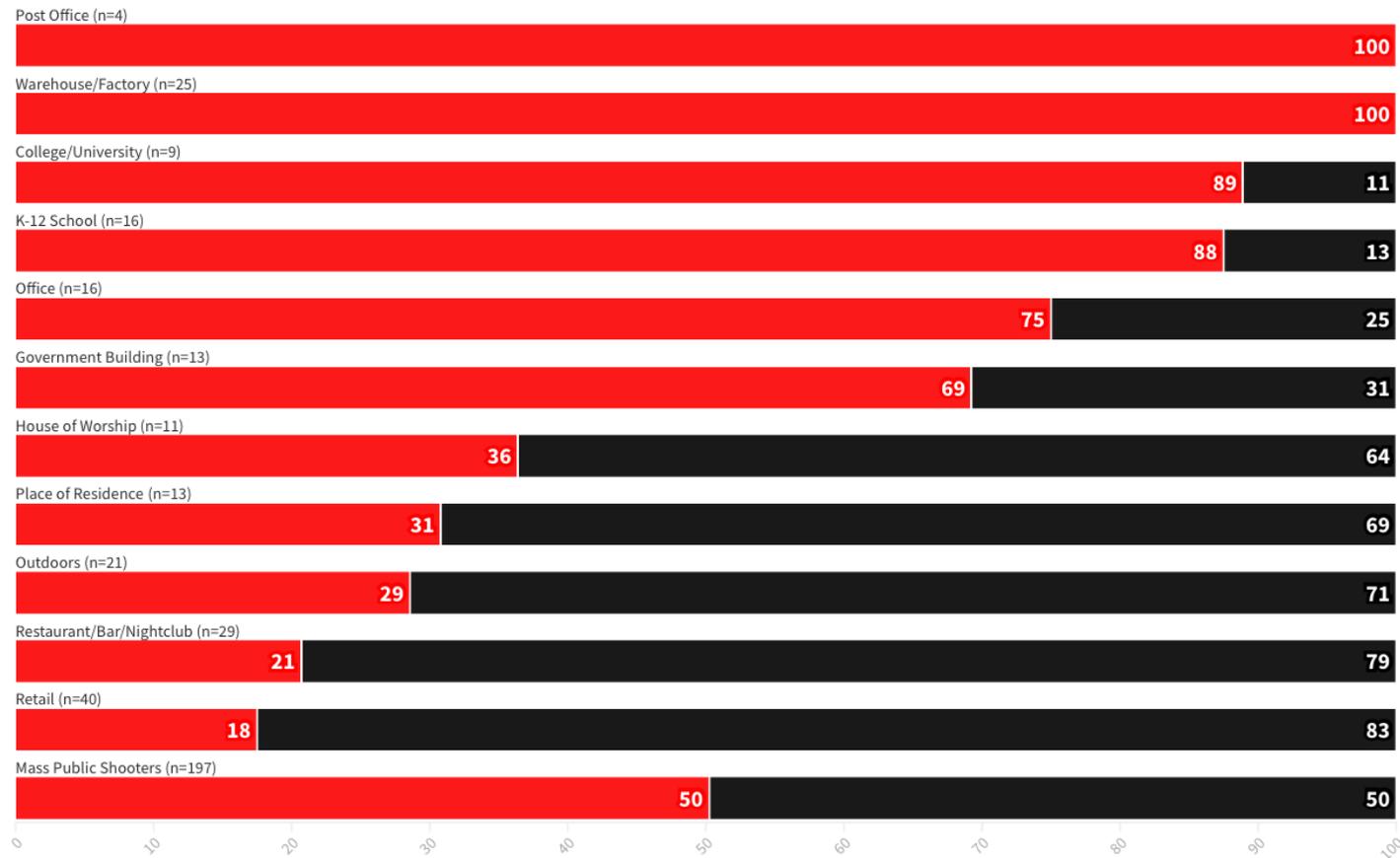
Source: [The Violence Project](#) • Range = 11–72; Mean = 34; Median = 33; Mode = 28

1. Shooters are insiders

US Mass Public Shooters with an Existing Relationship to the Shooting Site, 1966–present

N=197 (% shown)

■ Insider ■ Outsider



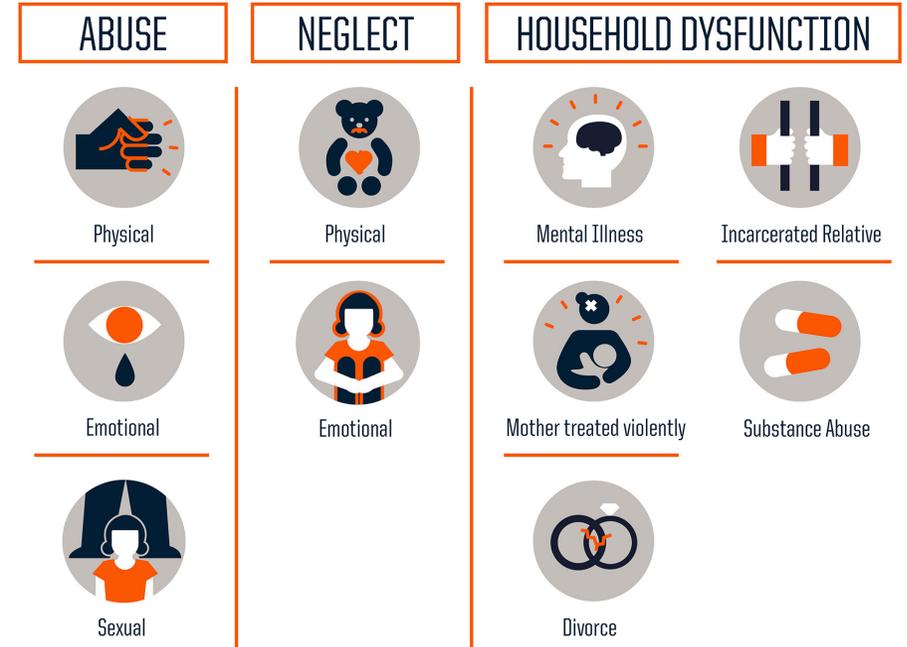
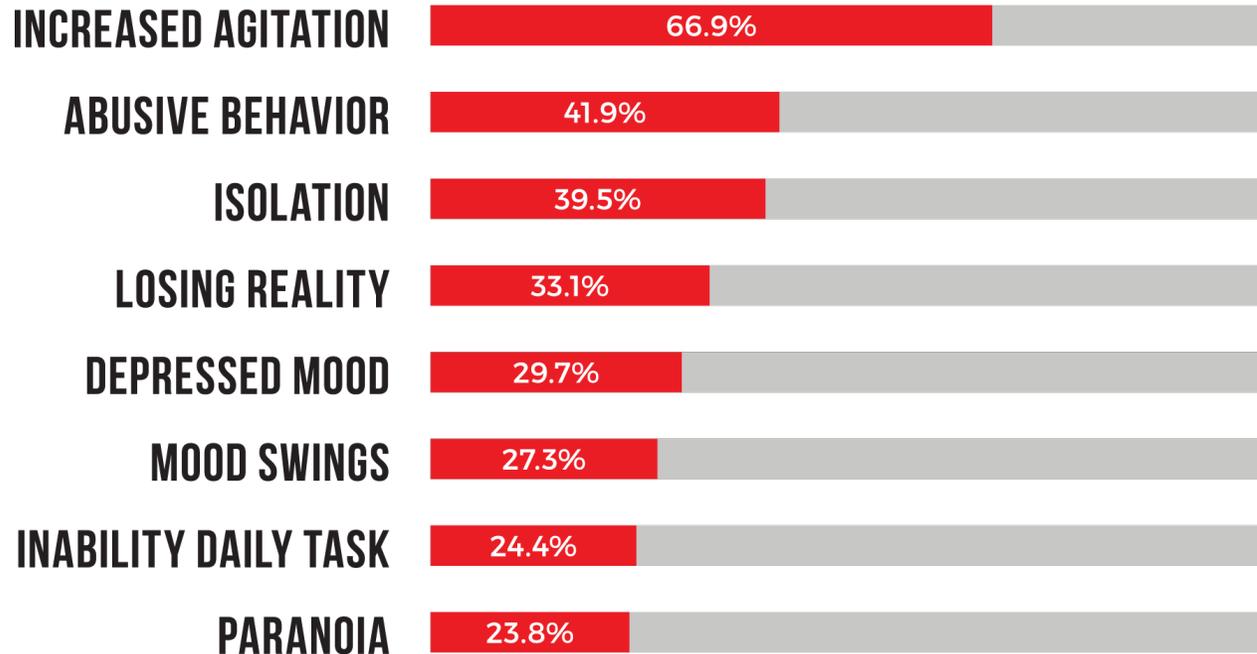
30%

Workplace Shooters

Source: [The Violence Project](#) • Defined as current or former students or employees, frequent patrons, or parishioners. 59 of 197 total mass shooters were

2. Shooters are in crisis

Total: 82%



OPINION

We Profiled the ‘Signs of Crisis’ in 50 Years of Mass Shootings. This Is What We Found.



Give this article



1.7K

By Jillian Peterson and James Densley

Jillian Peterson is a professor of criminology at Hamline University. James Densley is a professor of criminal justice at Metro State University. Together they run the [Violence Project](#).

Is crime a warning sign?

Know to police: 25%

Criminal record: 57%

Prior conviction: 38%

History of physical violence: 33%

History of domestic violence: 36%

CBS NEWS

U.S. >

Maine gunman is the latest mass shooter with a military background. Experts explain the connection.

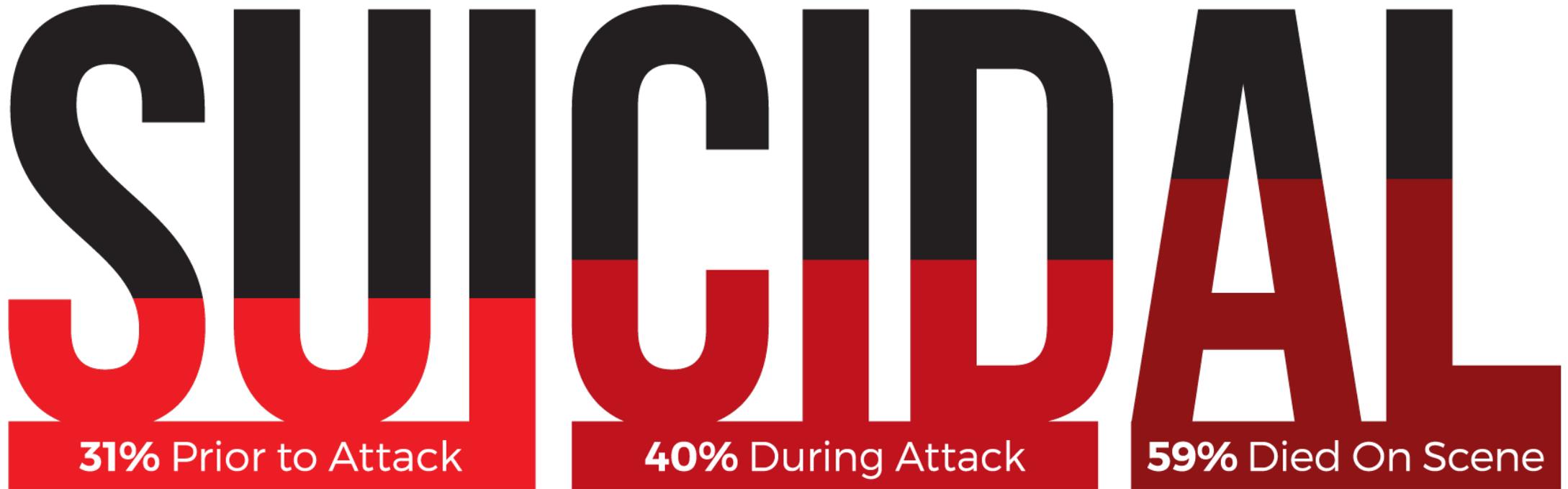
Mental illness?

Role of Psychotic Symptoms in Mass Shootings



Peterson, J., Densley, J., Knapp, K., Higgins, S., & Jensen, A. (2022). Psychosis and mass shootings: A systematic examination using publicly available data. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 28(2), 280–291. <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000314>.

3. Shooting is a final act



The First Modern School Shooter Feels Responsible for the Rest

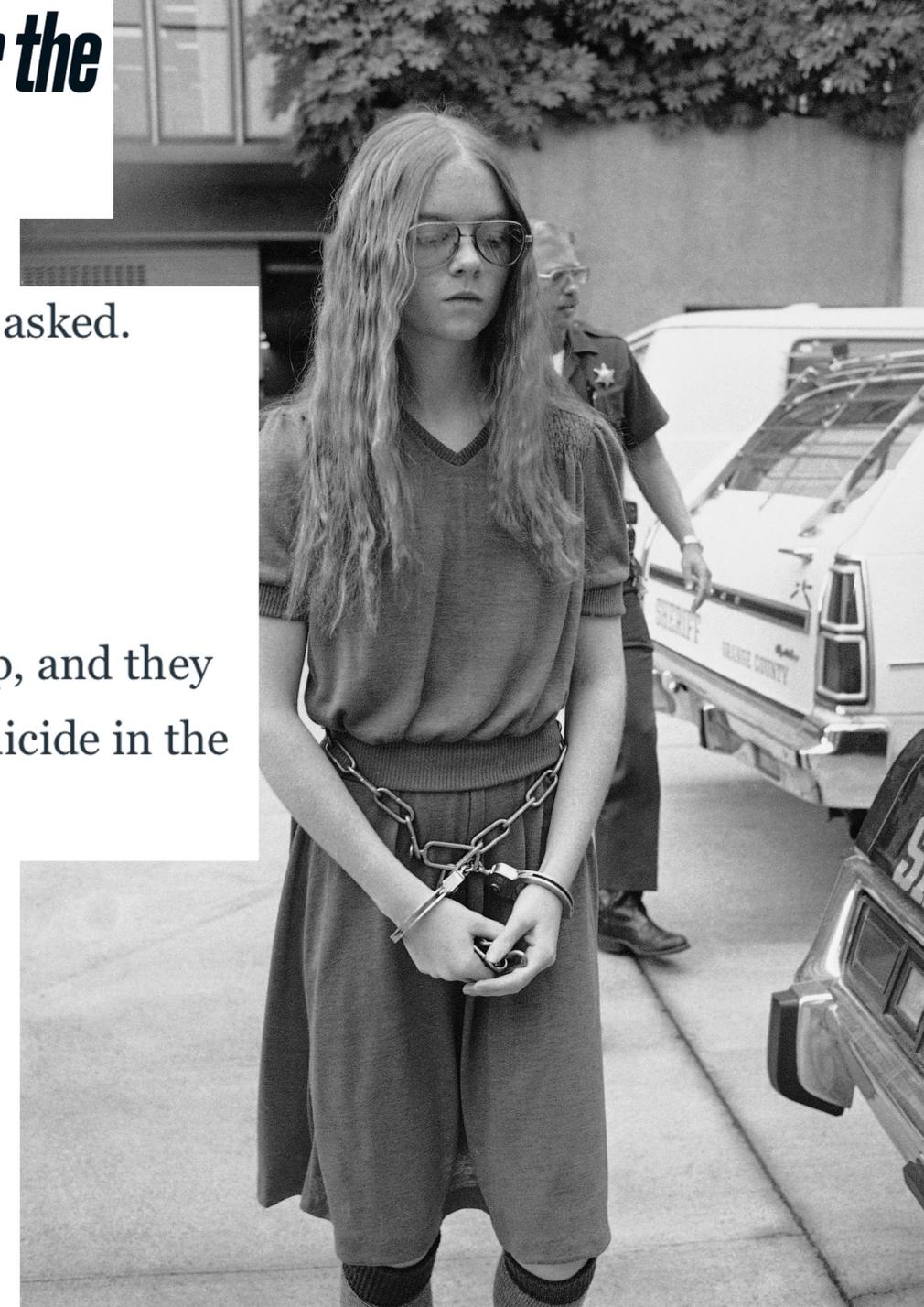
“So, why did you commit this crime?” the head parole commissioner asked.

“Because I wanted to die,” she said. “I was trying to commit suicide.”

“Why pick the school across the street?” the commissioner asked.

“Because I knew that if I fired on the school the police would show up, and they would shoot me and kill me,” she said. “And every time I had tried suicide in the previous year I had screwed it up.”

The Grover Cleveland Elementary School shooting,
San Diego, CA
January 29, 1979
The principal and a custodian were killed
8 children and a police officer were injured



What
is
wrong
with
me?



What
is
wrong
with
them?

4. Shooters leak plans

25% studied others, left legacy tokens

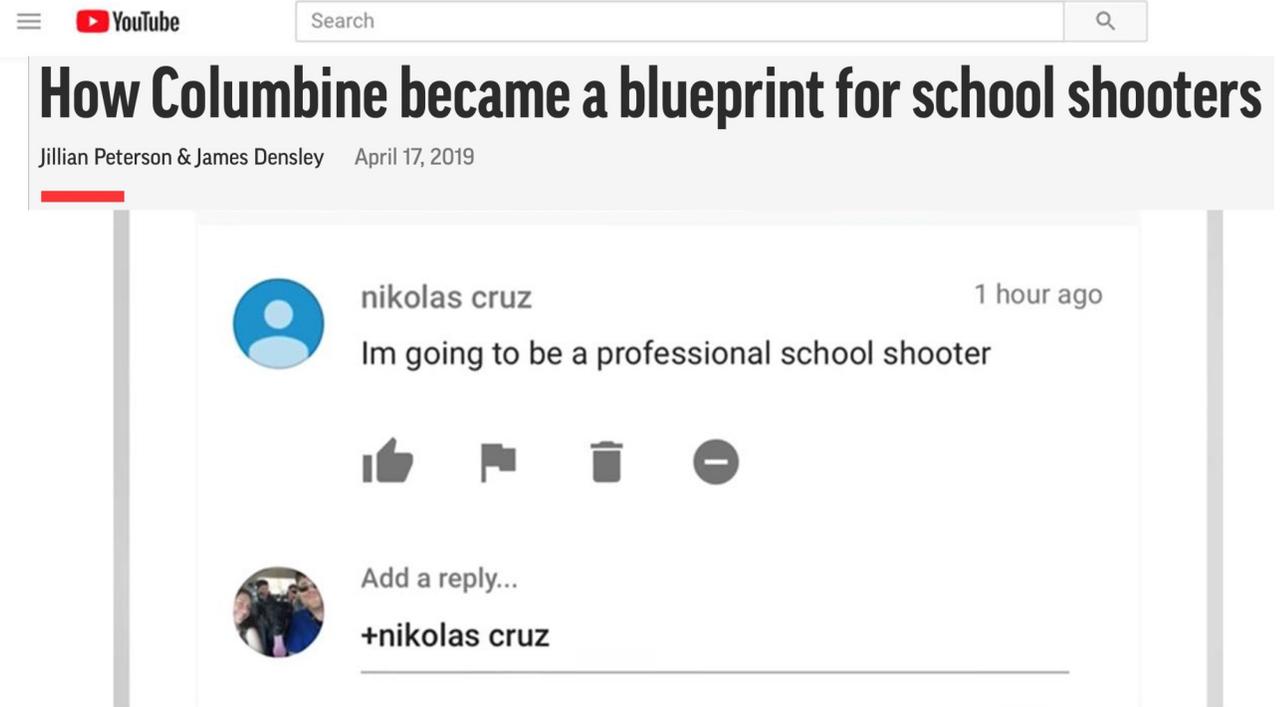
50% leaked their plans ahead of time (mostly in person to peers or co-workers)

Predictors:

- Age
- Prior counseling
- Suicidality

Communication of Intent to Do Harm Preceding Mass Public Shootings in the United States, 1966 to 2019

Jillian Peterson, PhD; Gina Erickson, PhD; Kyle Knapp, BA; James Densley, PhD



The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top, there is a search bar and the YouTube logo. The video title is "How Columbine became a blueprint for school shooters" by Jillian Peterson & James Densley, dated April 17, 2019. Below the video player, a tweet is displayed. The tweet is from the user "nikolas cruz" and was posted "1 hour ago". The text of the tweet is "Im going to be a professional school shooter". Below the tweet text are icons for liking, reporting, deleting, and muting. At the bottom of the tweet, there is a section for replies, with the text "Add a reply..." and a plus sign followed by the name "nikolas cruz".

#7 ON TRENDING

The FBI came to visit me today about Nikolas Cruz

How Mass Public Shooters Use Social Media: Exploring Themes and Future Directions

Jillian Peterson¹, James Densley², Jamie Spaulding¹, and Stasia Higgins¹

Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines social media use among public mass shooters in the United States as an extension of a comprehensive database of 170 mass shooters from 1966 to 2021. Here, we report findings from a systematic content analysis of public data and detailed timelines that were constructed for 44 mass shooters' social media habits and change to those habits during the period of time leading up to their shooting. The paper also presents as a case study, a sentiment analysis, and term-linkage network for one perpetrator's total 3,000 tweets. Several themes were found in the data—there were shooters who changed their posting habits and in some cases, stopped using social media entirely in the lead up to their crime; shooters who used hate speech and were "radicalized" to violence online; shooters with a demonstrable interest in violence, who referenced past mass shooters in their own communications; shooters who exhibited signs of mental illness and suicidality; shooters who were already known to authorities; and shooters who like those described above, actively posted while shooting, presumably to boost their own celebrity status. The findings from this study provide insight into commonalities among mass shooters in terms of their social media usage, which could lead to new pathways for prevention and intervention.

Keywords

mass shooting, violence, social media, mental health

During Friday Prayer on 15 March 2019, two consecutive mass shootings occurred at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. A gunman killed 51 people and injured 40 more in an attack that he live-streamed on Facebook from a head-mounted camera. In the highly disturbing video, the gunman drives to the first mosque, walks inside, and shoots multiple people before leaving the scene in his car and narrating his journey to the next mosque. The video was taken down within 20 min by Facebook, but anything posted online leaves a digital fingerprint, so versions of it stayed live (Peterson & Densley, 2021b). Within 24 hr, Facebook banned 1.5 million versions of the video footage—1.2 million of which the company stopped from being uploaded at all (Peterson & Densley, 2021b). However, one copy of the video lingered on its platform for 6 hr, and another on YouTube for 3 hr. The quick and seemingly unstoppable spread of this video typifies how social media has changed mass public shootings: they can be watched unedited and go viral.

In addition to live-streaming their attacks, mass shooters in recent years have posted online while perpetrating them. The perpetrator of the 2018 mass shooting at the Borderline

Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, which killed 11 checked his phone and made two posts to social media during the incident (Ventura County Sheriff's Office, 2021). During the 2017 attacks at Pulse, a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, which killed 49, the shooter checked Facebook and Twitter to make sure his massacre was going viral (Peterson & Densley, 2021b). In addition, having already stabbed his two housemates and another man to death, the 2014 shooter in Isla Vista near UC Santa Barbara, filmed himself from behind the wheel of his BMW and uploaded to YouTube his intent to exact "retribution" on a world he believed had wronged him (Garvey, 2014). The video spawned copycats and in parts of the internet, the shooter is worshipped as hero.

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Social Media + Society
January-March 2023: 1–15
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Original Investigation | Public Health

Communication of Intent to Do Harm Preceding Mass Public Shootings in the United States, 1966 to 2019

Jillian Peterson, PhD; Gina Erickson, PhD; Kyle Knapp, BA; James Densley, PhD

Abstract

IMPORTANCE Understanding the motivation of a mass shooter's intent to do harm can help practitioners and policy makers develop more effective intervention strategies.

OBJECTIVE To examine the prevalence of communication of intent to do harm, known as leakage, in a sample of 170 mass public shooters from 1966 to 2019; the characteristics of perpetrators who do and do not leak their plans; and whether leakage is a form of fame-seeking behavior or a cry for help among individuals who are in crisis or suicidal.

DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS This cross-sectional study included perpetrators who killed 4 or more people in a public space from 1996 to 2019 and were included in a comprehensive database of US mass shootings. That database was built from August 2017 to December 2019, and analysis took place from January to May 2021.

MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES Leakage was identified and coded using publicly available records. Any communication to a third party of an intent to do harm prior to the shooting was coded as leakage. Logistic regression models were used to examine the risk factors associated with leakage. Models estimating leakage were examined to assess the 2 hypothesized pathways to leakage (the cry-for-help model and the fame-seeking model).

RESULTS The 170 participants in this sample included 166 (97.7%) male perpetrators and 3 (2.3%) female perpetrators, with a mean (SD) age of 34 (12) years. Overall, 161 participants had known race and ethnicity: 11 (6.8%) Asian individuals, 35 (21.7%) Black individuals, 14 (8.7%) Latinx individuals, 7 (4.4%) Middle Eastern individuals, 3 (1.9%) Native American individuals, 89 (55.3%) White individuals, and 2 (1.2%) individuals with other race and ethnicity. Overall, 79 mass shooters (46.5%) leaked their plans. Of perpetrators who leaked their plans, 35 (44.3%) leaked specific plans about a mass shooting, and 44 (55.1%) leaked nonspecific plans about generalized violence. The study findings indicate that leakage was associated with receiving counseling (odds ratio, 7.0, 95% CI,

Key Points

Question What factors are associated with a mass shooting perpetrator's decision to communicate their intent to do harm?

Findings This cross-sectional study of 170 perpetrators found that nearly half leaked their plans, with 44.3% of them leaking specific plans about a mass shooting. Leakage was associated with receiving counseling and suicidality, which suggests it may be best characterized as a cry for help from perpetrators prior to their act.

Meaning These findings suggest that leakage is a critical moment for mental health intervention to prevent gun violence.

Author affiliations and article information are listed at the end of this article.



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An Exploration of K–12 School Shooting Threats in the United States

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²Department of Criminal Justice, Metropolitan State University

³Department of Criminal Justice, University of Central Florida

⁴Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Grinnell College

This exploratory study examines approximately 1,000 shooting threats made at K–12 schools gathered from publicly available news reports over a 4-year academic period, including prepandemic, pandemic, and postpandemic data. The content analysis finds violent threats increased dramatically in 2021–2022. A majority of individuals who make school shooting threats are male students at large public high schools, which is consistent with those who perpetrate mass shootings at K–12 schools. However, those who threaten shootings are a more diverse population than perpetrators themselves in that they are a wider variety of ages and nearly one fifth are female. Text analysis identified words indicating the specificity of a threat and showed threats tended to be both negative and angry. In 40% of cases, it was unclear if the threat was real or a joke/hoax, yet the most common outcome was to arrest the individual making the threat and charge them with a felony. This study concludes with a call for research to better understand who makes school shooting threats and the challenges to this line of research.

Public Significance Statement

The results of this exploratory examination of 1,000 school shooting threats over a 4-year period show that threats are increasing. Those who threatened school shootings were a more diverse group than perpetrators of school shootings; and in 40% of cases, it is unclear if the threat is real or a joke. Future research is needed to understand and design appropriate intervention strategies for various forms of threats.

Keywords: school violence, school shooting, mass shooting, threat assessment, gun violence

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000215.supp>

Threats of school shootings are a serious concern for schools and communities, yet it is currently unknown the extent to which they are happening, where they are happening most frequently, who is making them, the nature of

the threats, and how schools are responding to them. This exploratory study is the first step to understanding the nature and extent of school shooting threats in the United States in an effort to identify trends and patterns, inform future research, and help to promote school safety and prevent violence from occurring. The present study examines approximately 1,000 K–12 school shooting threats gathered from publicly available news reports over a 4-year period. It explores the content of the threats using text-based sentiment analysis and public reporting on threats to answer the following research

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The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.
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Email: jpeterson68@hamline.edu



Domain experts to decode the “code of the tweet” and de-escalate tensions



(Patton et al., 2018)

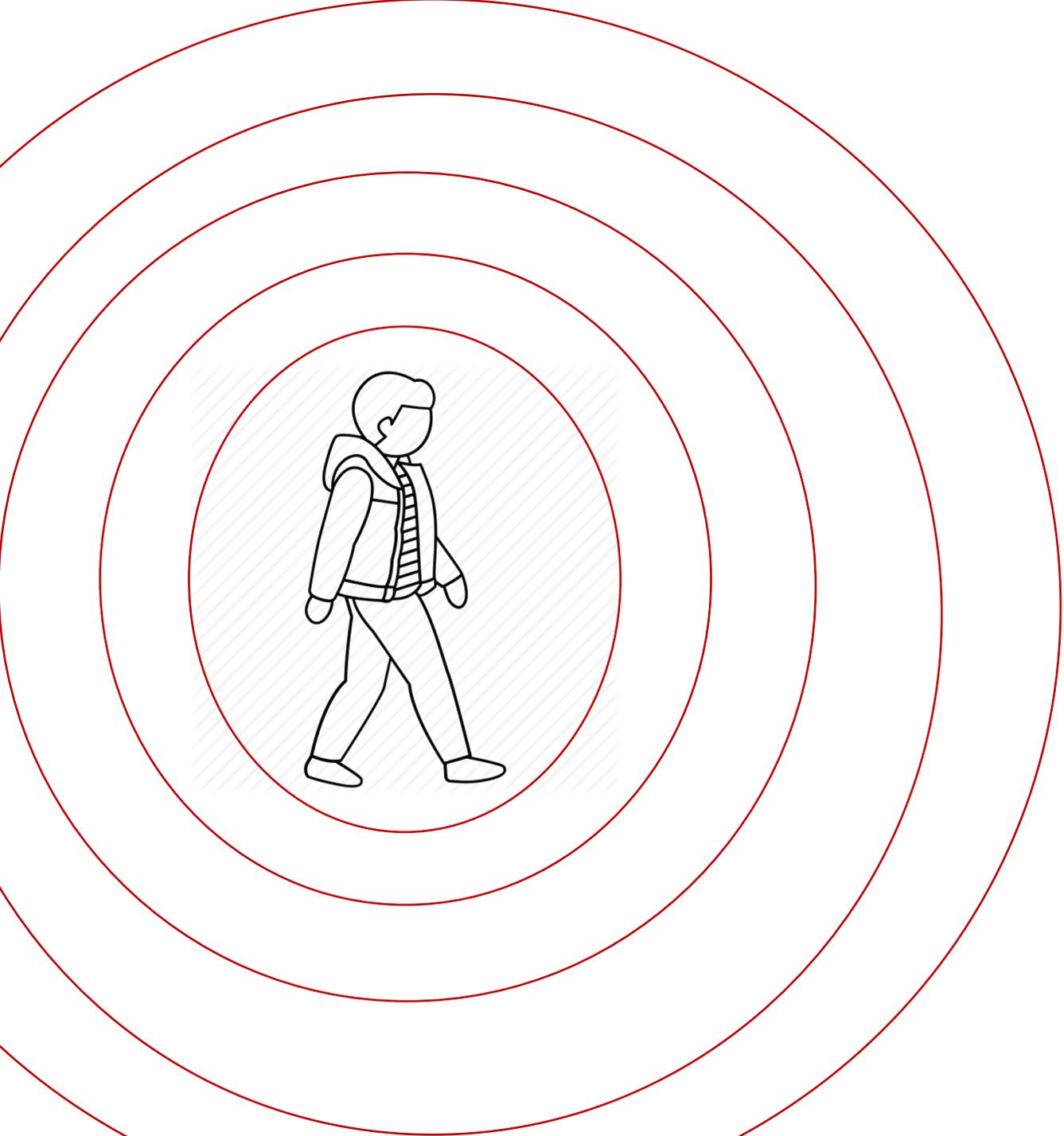
What this means for prevention

Insiders: Physical security alone is insufficient

In crisis: Know the signs, crisis intervention

Suicidal: Suicide prevention, not punishment

Leakage: Reporting systems, relationships



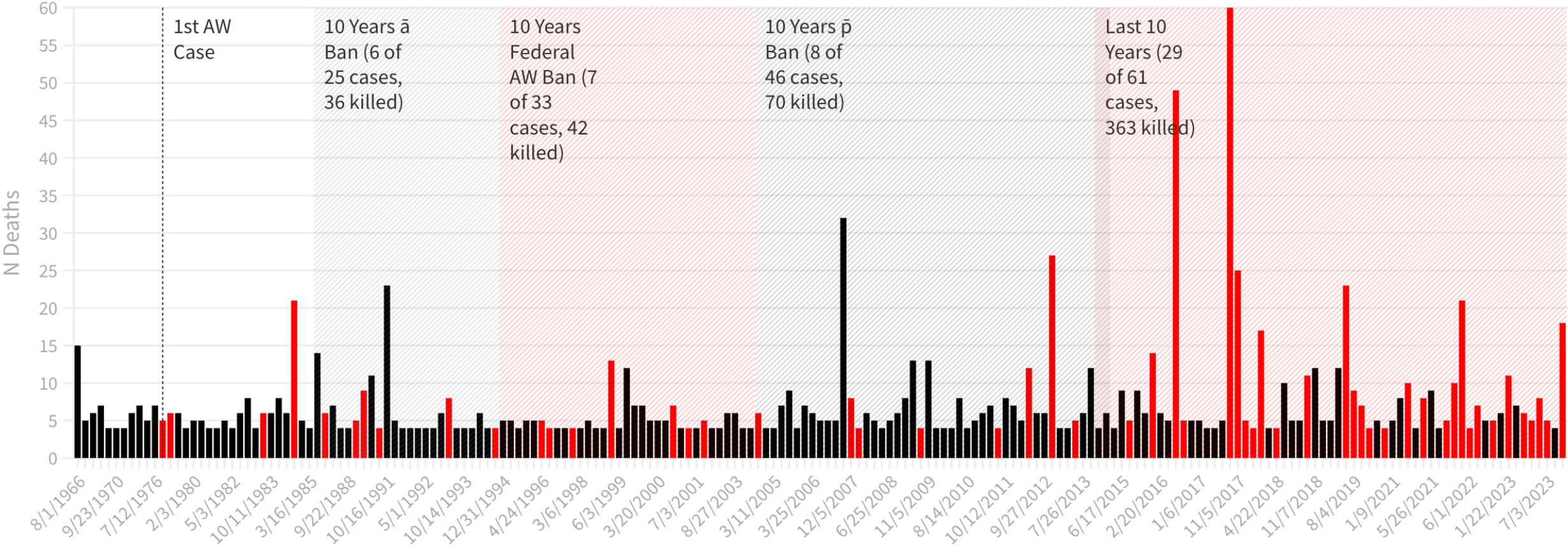
Diffusion of Benefits



Prevalence of Assault Weapons in 193 US Mass Public Shootings, 1966–present

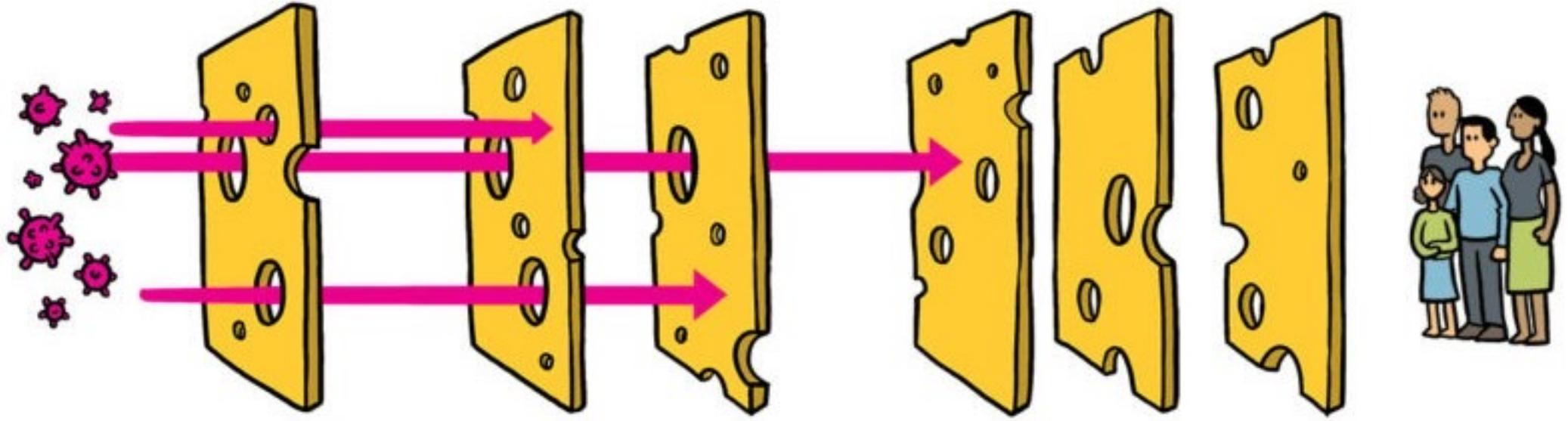
Assault Weapons in Red

55 of 193 cases (28%), including 18 of the 36 deadliest mass shootings (50%), and 544 of the total 1,391 mass shooting deaths (39%)



Source: [The Violence Project](#) • AW use by decade: 1966–69 = 0 of 5 shootings; 1970–79 = 2 of 10 shootings (20%); 1980–89 = 6 of 23 shootings (26%); 1990–99 = 7 of 37 shootings (19%); 2000–09 = 7 of 37 shootings (19%); 2010–19 = 19 of 56 shootings (34%); 2020–present = 15 of 25 shootings (60%).

Assault weapons are defined as any automatic firearm or any semi-automatic gun that can accept a detachable ammunition magazine and includes one or more additional features unnecessary for sports or self-defense, such as a folding, telescoping or thumbhole rifle stock.



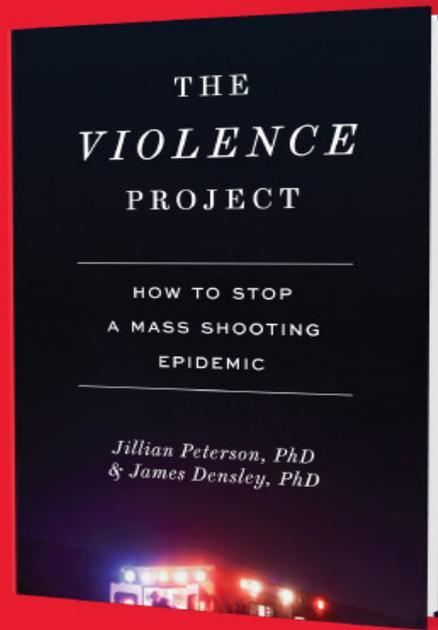


I WAS ALMOST A SCHOOL SHOOTER

"When you literally have nothing to lose you can do anything and that thought is absolutely terrifying."

Aaron





“One of the most comprehensive studies of the subject”

—*Wall Street Journal*

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD



ABRAMS
PRESS

www.theviolenceproject.org

Thank you