

White mass shooters receive sympathetic media treatment

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White mass shooters receive much more sympathetic treatment in the media than black shooters, according to a new study that analyzed coverage of 219 attacks.

Findings showed that white shooters were 95 percent more likely to be described as "mentally ill" than black shooters.

Even when black shooters were described as mentally ill, the [coverage](#) was not as forgiving as it was for whites responsible for similar kinds of attacks, said Scott Duxbury, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at The Ohio State University.

"There's a big difference in how black and white mass shooters are covered in the [media](#)," Duxbury said.

"Much of the media coverage of white shooters framed them as sympathetic characters who were suffering from extreme life circumstances. But black shooters were usually made to seem dangerous and a menace to society."

For example, when shooters were framed in the media as mentally ill, 78 percent of white attackers were described as being victims of society—as being under a lot of stress, for example—versus only 17 percent of black shooters.

Duxbury conducted the research with Laura Frizzell and Sadé Lindsay,

also sociology doctoral students at Ohio State. Their study appears online in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.

The researchers defined mass shootings as those in which four or more victims were shot in a single event, not including the perpetrator.

They used two news data sources to collect 433 media articles or transcripts about 219 randomly selected mass shootings in the United States from 2013 through 2015.

The researchers controlled for a variety of factors that could influence coverage, including the number of victims; whether any victims were women, children, family or romantic partners; whether the perpetrator committed suicide; whether the [shooting](#) took place in public; and whether the shooting was framed as gang violence.

After taking these factors into account, findings showed that whites were 95 percent more likely than blacks to be described in coverage as mentally ill. Latinos were 92 percent more likely than blacks to be described as mentally ill in media reports.

Shootings that were murder-suicides had significantly higher odds of being attributed to mental illness, as did those that occurred in public places.

But the number of victims, or whether the victims were women or children, were not related to whether the shooter was labeled as mentally ill.

The researchers identified several themes in articles that framed mass shooters as mentally ill. The most common theme—found in about 46 percent of the articles—was that the shooter was a "victim of society." This included articles that said the shooter was "going through a lot," was

"stressed out" or "suffered abuse as a child."

About 28 percent of articles that framed shooters as mentally ill offered testimony to the attacker's good character, while another 21 percent said the shooting was unexpected or out of character. Another 14 percent said the shooter came from a good environment.

But these descriptions were almost always about white shooters, Duxbury said.

"Black shooters who were described as mentally ill never receive testament to their good character and the media never describe the shootings as out of character," he said.

"And only white shooters were ever talked about as coming from a good environment."

The researchers contrasted the coverage of two mass shooters—Josh Boren, a white man, and David Ray Conley, a black man.

"The comparison between Conley and Boren is striking. Both shooters were adult men who murdered their families. Both had a history of domestic violence and drug abuse and both had received treatment for mental illness. However, whereas the media described Josh Boren as a quiet, gentle man—a teddy bear—coverage of Conley described him as perpetually violent, controlling and dangerous," the researchers said.

The researchers also analyzed shootings that were described as gang affiliated, because these attacks almost always involved minority shooters. Here the most consistent themes in coverage involved the criminal history of the perpetrators, their status as a public menace and the problems of the community.

These results provide a marked contrast with coverage of other [mass shootings](#), Duxbury said.

"When the media frame a mass shooting as stemming from [gang violence](#), they talk about the perpetrators as being perpetually violent and a menace to society," he said.

"But when a shooting is attributed to [mental illness](#), the media treat it as an isolated incident, or the result of the pressures on the perpetrator."

More information: Scott W. Duxbury et al. Mental Illness, the Media, and the Moral Politics of Mass Violence, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0022427818787225](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427818787225)

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