Mass shootings: Diametrically opposed social media users starting to agree that enough is enough
8 July 2022, by Keyonna Summers

The verdict? Despite major differences of opinion on the motives behind and solutions to mass gun violence, right-leaning respondents who favor gun rights and left-leaning proponents of gun control are starting to converge in their belief that enough is enough and change is needed.

"Our analysis suggests that the emotional reactions to these horrific incidences of violence are not that far apart from each other," wrote Blankenship and Brookings Institution co-author Carol Graham.

"The current discourse is overwhelmed with cynicism and pain that seems to unearth every associated injustice felt by right- and left-leaning users. Without compromise from both sides, no consensus is possible," they added. "We hope this analysis can provide an opening toward a solution where one did not seem to exist before."

Takeaways

- Researchers combed Twitter for tweets reacting to the Buffalo shooting from May 7-16, and for Uvalde from May 17-31. Social media users were divided into two groups—left-leaning and pro-gun control or right-leaning and pro-gun rights—based on self-reported data in their Twitter bios. Users who didn't indicate their political affiliation were excluded from the analysis.
- Tweets and visual cloud mapping of hashtags showed that Republican users were more likely to focus on "whataboutism," the alleged hypocrisy of not mentioning deadly crimes committed by non-white men, and the locations that President Joe Biden did or didn't visit after such crimes. Meanwhile, Democrats were more likely to focus on the victims, guns, white supremacy, and what they view as
the complacent nature of right-wing media.

- Analysts distilled users' emotions from yellow-face emojis. Both right- and left-leaning users showed more anger and sadness to the Uvalde and Buffalo shootings than other Twitter users. However, conservative users were more likely to report feeling fear, often associated with posts related to conspiracy theories about motives behind the shootings. The second most-reported emotion was anger surrounding media coverage. Anger was the more prominent emotion expressed by those who identified as liberal, surrounding things like the shooters' reported motives. For the Uvalde shooting, both camps voiced anger at police inaction and fear for schoolchildren.

Additionally, unlike in earlier mass shootings that the researchers analyzed, there was almost no mention of religion or God in the Buffalo or Uvalde instances—signaling to analysts that both right- and left-leaning users are focused less on the shock of such tragedies and more on collective emotional trauma and concerns for public safety.

"There is consistency across both groups that gun violence is an issue that needs to be addressed," the authors wrote. "While the main obstacle is the Republicans' unequivocal refusal to discuss gun control, that refusal will not change unless Democrats show a willingness to compromise on the extent of restrictions and to accept that there are millions of people in the U.S. that are horrified by the violence but are not willing to give up their right to own guns."

Blankenship continues to study the issue and said she was dismayed to see the same patterns emerge in wake of the recent Fourth of July mass shooting in Highland Park, Ill.

"On social media, alongside the panic and sorrow, came the same allegations of 'whataboutism' and wild speculations of the shooter's identity and political beliefs," Blankenship said. "These claims are not new and are often spread in high-profile cases, as seen in our research dating back to the 1 October shooting on the Las Vegas Strip."

So, what happens now?

"If it's anything like the previous shootings," she said, "the online discourse will boil down to the same cynicism and accusations concerning the motives of the shooter and users of opposing views or tweets saying this can 'never happen again,' until the next time when it does—with the pain and cynicism burrowing deeper."

More information: Report: www.brookings.edu/blog/up-fron ... sts-of-gun-violence/

Provided by University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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