



Responding to violence with guns: Mass shootings and gun acquisition



Lacey N. Wallace*

Penn State Altoona, Department of Criminal Justice, 101G Cypress Building, 3000 Ivyside Park, Altoona, PA 16601, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 September 2014

Received in revised form 2 March 2015

Accepted 3 March 2015

Available online 20 March 2015

Keywords:

Mass shooting

Gun purchase

Gun ownership

Violence

ABSTRACT

Although some sources have observed an increase in the number of gun purchases following mass shootings, empirical research investigating this pattern is limited. Appraisal Theory suggests that mass shootings contribute to fear of victimization through media exposure. Desire for self-protection is the primary reason many individuals own and purchase guns. This paper examines this link by assessing the effects of six mass shootings that took place in the 2000–2010 time period. This study examines effects for gun acquisition nationally and regionally as well as timing-specific patterns in gun acquisition following these events. Gun acquisition counts are approximated from the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). Results indicate a positive but delayed association between mass shootings and the number of NICS background checks. Implications of this finding for violence and possibilities for future research are discussed.

© 2015 Western Social Science Association. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Early on the morning of December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother at their Newtown, Connecticut home (CNN, 2014). Later that same morning, Lanza entered nearby Sandy Hook Elementary School with an assault rifle and two pistols. In total, Lanza shot and killed six adults and twenty children (CNN, 2014). In the wake of this shooting, investigators determined that the guns used by Lanza belonged to the family; Adam had learned to use the weapons as a child. This finding, as well as the shooting itself, spurred a heated public discussion of gun control (U.S. News & World Report, 2013). While some argue that restricted gun ownership can prevent future violence, others suggest that gun ownership enables citizens to protect themselves. As stated by National Rifle Association (NRA) Vice President Wayne LaPierre, “The only thing

that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (Castillo, 2012).

LaPierre is not alone in this belief; the NRA boasts 4.5 million members, claiming a substantial increase since the Sandy Hook shooting (Kessler, 2013). Personal safety is the number one reason Americans, NRA members or otherwise, own firearms (Swift, 2013). Fear and perceptions of safety, however, can be influenced by media coverage of violence. As one example, Kupchik and Bracy (2009) find that print media coverage of school violence frequently relies on emotional accounts rather than objective facts, highlights the potential for violence in schools, and generally frames school violence as a serious and escalating problem. These characteristics of media coverage make the threat of school violence seem greater to readers than empirical evidence would support (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009).

If feelings of safety and security are affected by media coverage of mass shootings and other violence, are more guns actually purchased as a result of these events? Though recent news stories suggest this is the case (Thompson, 2012a, 2012b), empirical research testing these claims is

* Tel.: +1 814 949 5261; fax: +1 814 949 5774.
E-mail address: LNO106@psu.edu

lacking. This paper aims to rule out alternative explanations and to assess the patterns and duration of these effects. Are effects regional, national or both? Are effects immediate or delayed? Permanent or temporary? Does the location or type of victim affect impact? Is gun acquisition driven by fear or fear of gun restrictions?

Existing research indicates that ownership of firearms and demand for firearms is sensitive to political and social context. McDowall and Loftin (1983), for example, find that demand for handguns in Detroit increases when the number of police decrease or when citizens feel that crime rates are too high. Existing research also shows that fear of crime is predictive of owning firearms for personal protection (Cao, Cullen, & Link, 1997; Lizotte, Bordua, & White, 1981; Young, 1985). Further, a positive association between handgun ownership and viewing police reality shows on television is noted by Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2004).

Testing the link between mass shootings and gun acquisition is vital since gun ownership may have unintended effects for violence. Some studies, for instance, find a positive association between homicide rates and rates of gun ownership (Cook & Ludwig, 2006; Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2002; Siegel, Ross, & King, 2013). Positive associations also exist between suicide and gun ownership, so much so that the proportion of suicides attributable to firearms is a frequently used gun ownership proxy (Kleck, 2004; Miller, Azrael, Hepburn, Hemenway, & Lippmann, 2006). Research by Kleck and Gertz (1995), however, find that using a gun for protection decreases the likelihood of violent crimes being completed or resulting in victim injury. Given these associations, it is important to assess how mass shootings affect gun acquisition.

Beyond investigating this question, this paper makes two key contributions to existing literature. First, this study assesses the impact of mass shootings at several time points and across varying contexts. It may be the case, for instance, that school shootings have a different association with gun acquisition than other types of shootings because of the age of the victims. Examining mass shootings at multiple time points is also critical to ensure results are not artifacts of other events or political context at a particular time point. Replicating findings for several mass shootings also diminishes the possibility that observed effects are due to chance. Second, this study tests for both regional and national effects since some mass shootings receive more widespread news attention than others.

1.1. *Media and fear*

Most individuals learn of mass shootings through mass media. As a result, the media can shape how the general public perceives and reacts to these events. Some individuals react by taking self-protective measures like purchasing a firearm. Appraisal theory provides one explanation for how this can occur. A key argument of this theoretical perspective is that emotions, including fear, are elicited based on an individual's subjective interpretation of a situation, event, or any other observation (Scherer, 1999). An individual's interpretation of an event may be based on its

basic characteristics, significance for the individual's life, the individual's coping potential, or how the event fits with a person's unique history and values (Scherer, 1999).

Using these dimensions, how might mass shooting events be evaluated by members of the general public? First, mass shootings involve a level of violence that may be perceived as novel, threatening, or difficult to understand (Hoffner, Cohen, & Valdivia, 2012). Second, these events are generally perceived as surprising and unexpected, even when later news accounts reveal that the shooter's past history was characterized by mental illness, substance use, or prior violence. The seemingly random nature of these events may lead individuals to feel a loss of control, making coping more difficult (Hoffner et al., 2012). Further, mass shootings of innocent victims contradict mainstream values of justice and safety. Across each of the dimensions noted above, mass shootings would be expected to elicit feelings of fear. However, all of these statements assume that individuals are reacting to objective facts. Media outlets may skew reality, possibly increasing fear.

An individual's response to media coverage of crime will vary based on many factors including sensationalism, location of the crime, and extent of coverage, among others (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Riddle, Eyal, Mahood, and Potter (2006), in a study of college students, find that the way behaviors are presented in media, such as graphicness and explicitness, is more influential in perceptions of what is violent than the amount of violence presented. As mentioned previously, Kupchik and Bracy (2009) find that print media coverage of school violence relies heavily on emotional accounts, highlights the potential for violence and victimization in schools, and frames school violence as a serious and escalating problem. In general, these representations do not fit with reality. Inaccurate portrayals of criminal offenders are common. Minorities are frequently over or misrepresented in local news media (Klein & Naccarato, 2003). Regardless, Klein and Naccarato (2003) find that more than 70% of their respondents in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, believe that the local news gives them an accurate depiction of the real world.

Addressing mass shootings specifically, Altheide (2009) describes how officials linked discussions of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting to discussions of terrorism post 9/11. This contributed to public fears and concerns with national security. Other researchers identify the school shooting moral panic of the 1990s as an example of the link between mass shootings and public fear (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Rocque, 2012). Duwe (2000), in particular, finds that the news media are more likely to sensationalize and overemphasize the most atypical instances of mass murder. As Rocque (2012) notes, some of these incidents involve middle-class shooters in middle-class areas. These attract a disproportionate amount of media attention because they are acts of violence that do not occur in the inner city or other impoverished areas as some might expect (Rocque, 2012). Comparing media portrayals of urban school violence, including shootings, to similar incidents in rural settings, Menifield, Winfield, Homa, and Cunningham (2001) find that newspapers are

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/140014>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/140014>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)