



# The mass murderer history: Modern classifications, sociodemographic and psychopathological characteristics, suicidal dimensions, and media contagion of mass murders

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## Abstract

Multicide and other mass killings are sufficiently dramatic to excite great interest from clinicians, criminologists and behavioral scientists. This paper revisits the history of the mass murderer, an entity that has progressively distinguished itself from the serial killer. The functional difference between mass and serial homicide is quite obvious, particularly in setting, time, victim status and modus operandi. Classification of these acts requires a number of parameters. The causes of mass murders are multiple and complex: although they rarely seem to be related to psychotic mental pathologies, they are always an expression of suffering that manifests itself in a psychological crisis that is both homicidal and suicidal. Several research teams have studied the sociodemographic and etiopathogenic characteristics of mass murderers and, in particular, the perpetrators of school killings. In addition to prevalent personality traits, these actions often jointly include suicides and homicides, which are brought together in the same psychic crisis. In keeping with the theory of little identity support, previous crimes influenced some mass murderers. Suicides and mass-murders are likely to be imitated. The media appears to play a crucial role in preventing the occurrence of imitation or copycat tragedies. The WHO recommendation regarding how to transcribe suicide and by extension, homicide, in the media is necessary.

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## 1. Introduction

Mass murder that arouses emotion and fear via information dissemination across different media, is a phenomenon that puzzles psychiatrists, sociologists, and politicians. The frequency of these events has increased in recent decades. School killings are increasing even in countries where firearm access is highly regulated. In the well-known Columbine tragedy, adolescents Eric and Dylan perpetrated a campus shooting. They killed 12 students and one teacher as well as wounded 24 additional victims. These murderers ultimately committed suicide. The deed had been premeditated months in advance. Although finding an explanation for their act is difficult due to their suicide, it is known that these teens did not suffer from a psychotic psychiatric disorder. However, Cho, the perpetrator of the school massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007, most likely suffered from schizophrenia that was both dissociated and delusional [1]. He committed suicide after killing his 32 victims. In fragmentary writings that were webcast during the murders, Cho clearly referred to the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre.

This paper revisits the history of the mass murderer, an entity that has progressively distinguished itself from the serial killer. Although many of these crimes have been described since Antiquity, the first definition was given by Dietz in 1986 while autogenic massacre emerged in Western society to become increasingly frequent. Although no precise epidemiologic data are available, several research teams have studied the sociodemographic and etiopathogenic characteristics of mass murderers and, in particular, the perpetrators of school killings. In addition to prevalent personality traits, these actions often jointly include suicides and homicides, which are brought together in the same psychic crisis. The media appears to play a crucial role in preventing the occurrence of copycat tragedies.

## 2. The history of the mass murderer

### 2.1. *Devotio, Amok, and the first famous mass murderers*

Although it wasn't referred to as a "mass murder" at the time of its first description, *Devotio* was perpetrated by a Roman soldier who crossed the enemy's lines to kill as many enemies as possible until he himself fell. *Amok* is an ancient

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Malaysian term used to describe a mythical man who killed everyone he came across until his rage decreased. These societal models of violence suggest the imitation and even contagion.

The first modern descriptions of mass murders use diverse nosographic frameworks which attest to the emergence of this concept on psychiatric and criminological levels. Galvin, MacDonald, and Kahn reported the story of John Graham who was found guilty in 1957 of having placed a bomb in his mother's suitcase. The suitcase exploded during a long-haul flight, consequently killing 44 passengers. Graham's motive was to obtain life insurance payout. The experts at the time suggested that the perpetrator suffered from schizophrenia and sociopathy [2]. They found few predictors of violence in his childhood (i.e., MacDonald's famous triad of enuresis, pyromania, and cruelty to animals). Issues of security and the monitoring of certain potentially dangerous people based on clinical childhood diagnoses were raised. However, the killings perpetrated by Graham introduce another primary issue: the possible imitation or contagion of the act. In fact, Graham emulated Albert Guay who had exploded a Quebec Airways plane in flight using the same method. The investigators probed Graham by drawing on that earlier case. The term "mass murderer" was used for the first time ten years later for another famous criminal, Ernest Wagner, who killed his wife and children before opening fire on bystanders the next day [3]. Suffering from a persecution delusion, Wagner was found to not be responsible for his actions and spent the rest of his life in an asylum [4]. That this family killing was the extension of his delirium illustrates the concept of criminal responsibility and the loss of judgment. Finally, the Charles Whitman murders are another textbook example that occurred during the same period. After killing his wife and mother, Whitman initiated a shooting on the University of Texas campus, later characterized as the first school killing ever to be described. Commissioned by a judicial inquiry, Whitman was autopsied in accordance with his testamentary intentions. Forensic doctors discovered a large brain tumor that may have been a criminogenic determinant. Thus, the first famous mass murders consisted of a vicious murder (John Graham), a family killing (Ernest Wagner), and a school killing (Charles Whitman). These three historical cases are heuristic and paradigmatic: at the time, they called public safety and psychiatry into question and raised the issues of criminal responsibility and criminal screening to predict violence.

### *2.2. The features of a mass murderer are different to those of a serial killer*

A mass murderer is differentiated from a serial killer based on temporal and geographic criteria. In 1986, Dietz [5] first defined mass murder as multiple homicides committed by a single individual within a single unit of time in the same place. This definition opposes that of a serial killer who eliminates many victims using the same method but usually in distinct places at different times. Dietz [5] conventionally

limited the maximum timeframe of a mass murder to 24 hours. Award focused on the timing of a single process, which is determined in a moment of expression and a continuous action [6]. He provides a more flexible timeframe for the completion of a mass murder: a week may pass between the first and last homicide. Likewise, location is difficult to strictly define. A murder can take place in several phases, such as the inaugural family killing at home, followed by a continuation of the killings in another, possibly public, place. The aforementioned acting out corresponds to a spree murder. According to Ressler and Burgess [7,8], mass murderers simultaneously execute at least four victims in one place, whereas the spree murderer commits at least two homicides in the same timeframe but at different locations. Unlike the serial killer, there is no emotional lull between killings for either spree murderers or mass murderers [7,8]. In addition to time and place, the severity of injury (e.g., slight injuries, serious injuries, and death) and the status of the victims in relation to the murderer interact in ways that depend on whether the killer is a mass murderer or a serial killer. The FBI distinguishes single, double, and triple homicides from mass murders, which are four or more simultaneous homicides. Rather than merely count the corpses, we are interested in both the deceased and those injured by the same criminal [9]. This new criterion allows us to include more epidemiological studies. Whereas mass murderers abandon their wounded at the crime scene, the serial killer rarely leaves an opportunity for his or her victims to escape. In addition, the victims of mass murderers are either specific (e.g., parents, colleagues, co-students, and designated persecutors) or strangers who may be randomly encountered on the street. Within a single mass murder, however, specific victims (e.g., the family) are often killed prior to the shooting of random victims. Again, serial killers differ in method because they never choose their victims at random, they are interested in specific people. Finally, firearms are used in almost all mass murders, whereas serial killers favor close contact with their victims preferably via strangulation or stabbing.

### *2.3. Modern classifications of mass murders*

As early as 1986, Dietz [5] described three subtypes of mass murders: family killings, pseudo-commandos, and set-and-run murders. The prototypical family killer is a depressed man, often an alcoholic, who shoots every member of his family before turning the gun on himself. Firearms fascinate pseudo-commandos [10]. They premeditate their murders well in advance to execute a shooting in a public place. The pseudo commando is driven by strong feelings of anger and resentment, flowing from beliefs about being persecuted or grossly mistreated [10]. Finally, the set-and-run killers flee before the result of their crime (e.g., once the poison is administered or the car bomb is set). Unlike Dietz's classifications, Kelleher [9] established categories for the principal motives of the crime; specifically, these killers include the rejected lover, the hate criminal, the revenge murderer, and the sex criminal. In his nosography, Kelleher includes mass murders committed by the

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