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## Mass Shootings and the Media: How Race and Ethnicity Influence Media Coverage

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## **Abstract**

Topics related to crime and the criminal justice system comprise a majority of topics discussed in the media. This study explores how media coverage of mass shootings varies based on the racial or ethnic identity of the shooter. Topics examined include popular beliefs and misconceptions about the race of mass murderers, the role mass media plays in influencing public perceptions about race and crime related topics, and the alarming rate at which the public recognizes and accepts the media as a reliable source of information when official data sources provide a much different picture. Further analysis of the Columbine High School massacre and Virginia Tech shooting provides a more targeted and detailed examination of how the media dealt with the issue of race when reporting on these two shootings. Additional research focusing on a larger selection of mass shootings is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem in its entirety. Regardless, the mass media's representation of a shooter's race and ethnicity has serious policy implications for the criminal justice system and public intergroup relations, indicating that extensive changes in how the media reports information surrounding these events are required.

## **Keywords**

media, race, ethnicity, mass shootings, mass murders

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Topics related to crime and the criminal justice system comprise a majority of topics discussed in the media. This study explores how media coverage of mass shootings varies based on the racial or ethnic identity of the shooter. Topics examined include popular beliefs and misconceptions about the race of mass murderers, the role mass media plays in influencing public perceptions about race and crime related topics, and the alarming rate at which the public recognizes and accepts the media as a reliable source of information when official data sources provide a much different picture. Further analysis of the Columbine High School massacre and Virginia Tech shooting provides a more targeted and detailed examination of how the media dealt with the issue of race when reporting on these two shootings. Additional research focusing on a larger selection of mass shootings is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem in its entirety. Regardless, the mass media's representation of a shooter's race and ethnicity has serious policy implications for the criminal justice system and public intergroup relations, indicating that extensive changes in how the media reports information surrounding these events are required.

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### **Introduction**

On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen entered Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida and opened fire on unsuspecting patrons, killing 49 people and injuring 53 others (Bauerlein, Mcwhirter, & Calvert, 2016). This attack was only the latest in a growing trend of mass shootings across the United States, including the San Bernardino attack in 2015, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, the Aurora movie theater shooting in 2012, the Tucson shooting in 2011, the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, and the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. The Wall Street Journal reported in 2015 a significantly higher number of mass shootings have occurred in the United States compared to 13 other countries, with 133 mass shootings reported between 2000 and 2014. Although the United States represents less than 5% of the global population, its citizens have accounted for 31% of all mass shooters globally from 1966 to 2012, more than any of the other countries surveyed (Palazzolo & Flynn, 2015).

For many citizens, news media is a primary source of information on matters related to the criminal justice system and subsequently plays an important role in creating and maintaining public perceptions regarding social issues (Robinson, 2014). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the media to exaggerate social problems to the point where a moral panic ensues, resulting in misguided policies, myths, and stereotypes fueled by misinformation.

In the recent shooting at Pulse nightclub in Florida, the media widely reported on Mateen's ethnicity and proclaimed allegiance to the Islamic State, presenting this information as evidence that the shooting constituted a terrorist attack. It is important to understand how the news media frames mass

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shootings in terms of race and how the shooter's identity can influence their perceived motives. While the actions of white shooters are often attributed to mental illness, the media disproportionately portrays racial and ethnic minorities as calculated criminals who commit the majority of mass shootings in the United States. This disproportionate representation unduly influences public opinion about the persons who perpetrate mass shootings, ultimately promoting racial stereotypes that extend far beyond the initial target, misdirecting much of the necessary public discourse on the issue, and encouraging the creation of misguided public policies that can be harmful or ineffective. The media needs to take responsibility for their role in the unfair coverage of mass shootings and pursue increasingly accurate, data driven reporting.

### **Literature Review**

Existing literature reveals several well-established trends related to the media, crime, and race. Specifically, crime comprises a large portion of media content and this excessive coverage elevates the public's fear of crime by focusing disproportionately on random acts of violence instead of the offenses that actually comprise the majority of criminal activity: less serious property crimes (Callanan, 2012). Historically, mainstream media appeals to a predominately white, middle-class audience while racial and ethnic minorities are often underrepresented or portrayed in negative roles (Callanan, 2012; Tukachinsky, 2015). Additionally, media coverage of mass shootings is often error-laden and provides viewers with a distorted view of the shooter, the victims, and the actual event (Huff-Corzine, McCutcheon, Corzine, Jarvis, Tetzlaff-Bemiller, & Weller, 2014).

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The work herein explores existing beliefs about the racial and ethnic identity of mass murderers, the role that media plays in influencing public perception regarding crime and racial groups, the reliability of media as a data source; media coverage of the Columbine High School massacre and Virginia Tech shooting will also be compared to expose how the racial identity of a shooter can influence media portrayal.

### **Popular Beliefs about Race and Mass Murders**

Media coverage of mass shootings notably varies based on the race of the shooter and therefore influences public perception of crime related to race. Lankford (2016) explored the popular assumption that most mass murderers are white by assessing data from 242 cases of mass murder from 2006 to 2014 in the United States involving 308 mass murderers. After also comparing this to data detailing the race and ethnicity of 87,052 other murderers, Lankford (2016) concluded that the racial composition of mass murderers and all other murderers is approximately equivalent, with a disproportionate amount of black and Latino persons in each category.

White offenders comprise a larger portion of mass murderers, which may be why many people assume that the majority of mass murderers are white. Lankford (2016) further explains that racial and ethnic stereotypes negatively influence viewers' beliefs regarding people who commit crimes, and these stereotypes can be either conscious or unconscious biases. Lankford's (2016) article provides a foundation for the discussion of several sources that expand on particular instances of stereotyping.

### **The Influence of Media on Public Perception**

Several studies have examined the ways in which the media can influence public opinion related to both crime and

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race (Callanan, 2012; Tukachinsky, 2015). In one such study Callanan (2012) sought to understand how various forms of crime-related media reports influence white, Latino, and African American peoples' perceptions of crime in their neighborhoods and their fear of crime in general. The statewide survey of 3,712 California residents inquired about newspapers, local television news, television crime-reality programs, and television crime dramas as the four types of crime-related media and independent variables in the study. The respondents' stated fear of crime was treated as the dependent variable. Although the study did not reveal any significantly different impacts across racial or ethnic groups, the findings do suggest that crime-based reality programs and television news increase fear of crime compared to other media sources like newspapers and television dramas, which have relatively little impact. However, Callanan (2012) acknowledges the difficulties involved with measuring media consumption and recommends further studies that incorporate more variables related to media viewership.

Tukachinsky (2015) explored how media depictions of race and ethnicity negatively influence self- and group-perceptions of marginalized groups and promote viewers' acceptance of racial stereotypes. Her findings suggest that it is difficult, although not impossible, to encourage positive intergroup relations and she states that the internet is to blame. The internet as a media source ideally allows for more journalistic freedom to voice opposing views and confront existing stereotypes, but the reality is that most of the media content people access online only promotes these stereotypes. Tukachinsky (2015) concludes that media regulation is not a viable option and improving minorities' access to media would be incredibly difficult. However, she does suggest that media

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literacy programs established in schools and in local communities can serve to educate the public about the influence of media representation and the negative consequences of such representations as well as increase overall social awareness of the problem.

### **The Reliability of Media as a Data Source**

Previous literature establishes that the media has the power to influence public perceptions about crime and promote racial stereotypes (Callanan, 2012; Tukachinsky, 2015). Although researchers and the public both question the reliability of information coming from the media, Huff-Corzine and colleagues (2014) observed that the media is still used as a data source for mass murder statistics in the United States. Therefore, they conducted a study to compare mass media data sources on shootings to two official crime data sources: the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) and the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). The authors focus specifically on mass murders involving four or more fatalities (excluding the perpetrator) that occurred between 2001 and 2010 and conclude that the mass media presents a very different representation of mass murders than what official data sources provide (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014). Specifically, the media promotes the idea that mass murderers are usually young, white males when in actuality they are more likely to be black (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014). These findings actually align with known trends for the majority of criminal activity, which establish that racial and ethnic minorities comprise a disproportionately high percentage of offenders (Lankford, 2016). The authors ultimately conclude that, although the media provides important coverage on mass murders, often the information reported results in a distorted view of the crime.

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This occurs most often with incidents involving black offenders or black victims, and also occurs in frequently overlooked locations such as highways, roads, or alleys; the second highest number of incidents studied in this data set occurred in these three, easily accessible public places (the highest number occurred in a residence or home) yet received comparably little media attention (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014).

### **Comparing Media Coverage of Two Mass Shootings**

Several studies have examined the correlation between race and media coverage with a specific focus on the Columbine High School massacre and the Virginia Tech shooting (Chen, Purdie-Vaughns, Phelan, Yu, & Yang, 2015; Sung-Yeon, Xiaoqun, & Holody, 2012). A 2012 study by Sung-Yeon, Xiaoqun, and Holody compared news media coverage of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting with the Columbine shooting in 1999 to see how both were framed in terms of race. The authors examined news articles published following each shooting and conducted agenda-setting and framing analyses by coding specific words and references in the articles as they related to the variables being studied. The agenda-setting variable considered whether or not the article contained a race attribute, while the framing variables coded for the racialization of the perpetrator or crimes, racial generalization of criminal culpability, racialization through stereotyping, and the prominence of racialization in the articles. Sung-Yeon, Xiaoqun, and Holody (2012) concluded that media coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting included more information about the shooter's race and ethnicity compared to articles about Columbine. The authors acknowledge that the results do not suggest that racial attributes of the Virginia Tech shooting impacted media coverage as much as they had

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hypothesized, but did conclude there was still a noticeable influence (Sung-Yeon et al., 2012).

A second study by Chen and colleagues (2015) examined how the attitudes of white Americans in regards to a shooter's race are influenced by causal attributions (instances where one's behavior is attributed to race or mental illness). Focusing on the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings, the authors determined that causal attributions of the shooter's behavior to race or mental illness significantly influence how people evaluate the racial group of the shooter in general. The findings of this article have significant implications for media depictions of minority groups and criminal justice policies because they support the notion that negative portrayals of someone associated with their race often extends to other members of the same race (Chen et al., 2015). Although this particular article evaluated white Americans' perceptions of Korean Americans, the conclusions apply to any instance where opinions regarding members of a group are formed based on their race.

### **Discussion**

Examined collectively, the literature presents a complicated and somewhat overwhelming view of the intersection between race and mass shootings in the media. Disregarding for a moment the coverage of mass shootings in the media, a review of several facts concerning the media as a source of information reveals significant trends. Mass media and, in particular, news media are major sources of information for a large portion of the population; however, they primarily appeal to white middle-class audiences. Additionally, crime related topics comprise much of what is reported in the news but the media allocates a disproportionate amount of coverage to serious

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and violent crimes when, in actuality, the average viewer is more likely to be the victim of a nonviolent property crime. Finally, despite being a major source of information, the news media is not immune from making mistakes, providing misinformation, or exaggerating the topics they widely report on. This confluence of shortcomings means that mainstream media, which serves as the primary information source on crime and the criminal justice system for many citizens, plays a significant role in influencing public policy and opinion on these topics.

The addition of racial or ethnic identity to the discussion further complicates the issue. Racism, racial profiling, and negative or prejudicial stereotypes occur on a regular basis despite an influx of progressive efforts as part of the Civil Rights Movement and more recent reforms in the criminal justice system. The disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities exists in all areas of the criminal justice system from initial police contact to imprisonment, and this includes mass shooters. Notably, the misunderstanding that racial and ethnic minorities are more involved with criminal activity does not extend to mass shootings. This might seem beneficial, as it implies that people may recognize that the majority of mass shooters are white males but, unfortunately, this is not the case. Authors of two studies comparing the media's coverage of the Columbine High School massacre and the Virginia Tech shooting conclude that racial differences of a shooter are acknowledged and reported by the media even if it is unintentional (Chen, et. al, 2015; Sung-Yeon, et al., 2012). More concerning, however, is the extent to which media coverage of the shooter's race can and does influence viewer opinion about an entire group of people, unjustly based on one widely reported story or event.

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The literature discussed in this research explored only two highly publicized mass shootings, one of which (Columbine) occurred a year prior to the 15-year period in which 133 mass shootings occurred in the United States (Chen et al., 2015; Sung-Yeon et al., 2012). Additionally, the examples discussed herein compared reports of mass shootings with one white or one Korean American shooter, but not reports on shooters of any other ethnicities. Further research must be conducted to investigate how perceptions of a shooter and their race vary across a larger demographic area and whether similar conclusions apply to shooters who are African American or of Middle Eastern descent. It is feasible that future research will support the findings of studies like the two discussed here. Arguably, the most significant problem with stereotyping mass shooters based on race or ethnicity is that it can deepen the divide between entire groups of people based entirely on the color of their skin. While the actions of white shooters are not generally excused by the media, they are often rationalized as being a result of the shooters' mental illness and are described as uncharacteristic or unexpected events. This type of portrayal rarely applies to non-white shooters, whose own mental illnesses or motivations are overshadowed by their more obvious physical differences.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a straightforward or easy solution for resolving the issues associated with media coverage of mass shootings and the connection to racial identity. It is established that media regulation is not a viable option, especially considering how easily accessible and widespread information is through the internet and social media forums. Suggested changes include the fostering of positive intergroup relations, promoting media

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literacy programs through schools and communities to educate the public about the consequences and influence of media representation, and increasing overall social awareness about media influence (Tukachinsky, 2015). While such changes may theoretically help to address these issues, it is extremely difficult to effectively enact these proposed changes. As the recent shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando demonstrates, other compounding issues such as the fear of terrorist activity, Islamophobia, and conflicting views on gun control are unfortunately tied to the concept of race. Ultimately, the media needs to take more responsibility for accurate reporting and must strive to objectively report facts supported by official data sources. This may be a difficult feat to undertake considering the vast range of media outlets, and there is no guarantee that viewers will respond to these changes in a positive manner or modify their existing biases as a result, but without an attempt at such changes, the current reporting trends will only continue to aggravate tensions and promote division.

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