

'Media contagion' is factor in mass shootings, study says

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People who commit mass shootings in America tend to share three traits: rampant depression, social isolation and pathological narcissism, according to a paper presented at the American Psychological Association's annual convention that calls on the media to deny such shooters the fame they seek.

"Mass shootings are on the rise and so is media coverage of them," said Jennifer B. Johnston, PhD, of Western New Mexico University. "At this point, can we determine which came first? Is the relationship merely unidirectional: More shootings lead to more coverage? Or is it possible that more coverage leads to more shootings?"

Johnston and her coauthor, Andrew Joy, BS, also of Western New Mexico University, reviewed data on [mass shootings](#) amassed by media outlets, the FBI and advocacy organizations, as well as scholarly articles, to conclude that "media contagion" is largely responsible for the increase in these often deadly outbursts. They defined mass shootings as either attempts to kill multiple people who are not relatives or those resulting in injuries or fatalities in public places.

The prevalence of these crimes has risen in relation to the [mass media](#) coverage of them and the proliferation of [social media](#) sites that tend to glorify the shooters and downplay the victims, Johnston said.

"We suggest that the media cry to cling to 'the public's right to know' covers up a greedier agenda to keep eyeballs glued to screens, since they

know that frightening homicides are their No. 1 ratings and advertising boosters," she said.

The demographic profile of mass shooters is fairly consistent, she said. Most are white, ostensibly heterosexual males, largely between the ages of 20 and 50. They tend to see themselves as "victims of injustice," and share a belief that they have been cheated out of their rightful dominant place as white, middle class males.

"Unfortunately, we find that a cross-cutting trait among many profiles of mass shooters is desire for fame," she said. This quest for fame among mass shooters skyrocketed since the mid-1990s "in correspondence to the emergence of widespread 24-hour news coverage on cable news programs, and the rise of the internet during the same period."

She cited several media contagion models, most notably one proposed by Towers et al. (2015), which found the rate of mass shootings has escalated to an average of one every 12.5 days, and one school shooting on average every 31.6 days, compared to a pre-2000 level of about three events per year. "A possibility is that news of shooting is spread through social media in addition to mass media," she said.

"If the mass media and social media enthusiasts make a pact to no longer share, reproduce or retweet the names, faces, detailed histories or long-winded statements of killers, we could see a dramatic reduction in mass shootings in one to two years," she said. "Even conservatively, if the calculations of contagion modelers are correct, we should see at least a one-third reduction in shootings if the contagion is removed."

She said this approach could be adopted in much the same way as the media stopped reporting celebrity suicides in the mid-1990s after it was corroborated that suicide was contagious. Johnston noted that there was "a clear decline" in suicide by 1997, a couple of years after the Centers

for Disease Control convened a working group of suicidologists, researchers and the media, and then made recommendations to the media.

"The [media](#) has come together before to work for good, to incite social change," she said. "They have done, and they can do it. It is time. It is enough."

More information: Session 1246: "[Mass Shooters and the Media Contagion Effect](#)," Symposium, Thursday, Aug. 4, 1 - 2:50 p.m. MDT, Mile High Ballroom 4F Level 3, Ballroom Level, Colorado Convention Center, 700 14th Street, Denver.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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