Medical Xpress

# Psychologist gives advice on how news media can better handle the reporting of mass shootings

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Mass shootings have become part of life in the United States, with deadly attacks occurring with an unsettling frequency. Since 2006, the

U.S. has seen more than 200 mass killings with four or more victims, according to USA Today. Following these tragedies, the news media often produces wall-to-wall coverage—but is it possible that this coverage may actually be helping to fuel the problem?

Paul Perrin, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences at Virginia Commonwealth University, writes in the latest issue of *American Psychologist* that research suggests that the news media plays a key role in the "contagion" of mass shootings. Perrin recently discussed his article and possible steps the media should consider to more responsibly cover the tragedies.

**In your article, you point to recent studies that suggest news coverage of mass shootings leads to more mass shootings, much like how news reporting on suicide can lead to more suicides. What does the latest research tell us about this mass shooting "contagion?"**

Recent research has begun to document that additional mass shootings, including those in schools, can be spread by media coverage of the initial shooting. This is a term that psychologists call "contagion." We have known for many years that contagion operates with regard to suicide: Media reports of suicides have consistently been shown to increase the rates of suicide in populations exposed to those reports. And now research is finding similar effects for mass shootings. We even see evidence of this motivation to get into the media limelight in the writings of some recent shooters.

## What advice would you give to the media about reporting on mass shootings?

My advice to media outlets would be to approach the coverage of mass shootings with the same degree of caution and discretion that they have

approached the coverage of suicide for a long time. It is generally well-known among professional journalists who have taken courses in media ethics that sensationalist portrayals of suicide are a bad thing and increase suicide rates. And most of the time, except in the cases of celebrity or high-profile suicides, the media is actually pretty good about omitting information on suicide as a mechanism of death or about not providing dramatic and detailed descriptions of the suicide. This is clearly not the case with mass shootings. Twenty-four-hour news outlets, as well as many other evening news or online sources, tend to provide as many details as possible about the shooting.

## While the media obviously needs to cover these tragedies, are there any practical steps you'd recommend that the media do to minimize the potential for contagion?

The World Health Organization has developed an evidence-based set of recommendations for media portrayals of suicide. These include avoiding language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems; avoiding prominent placement and undue repetition of stories about suicide; avoiding explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide; avoiding providing detailed information about the site of a completed or attempted suicide; wording headlines carefully; exercising caution in using photographs or video footage; taking particular care in reporting celebrity suicides; showing due consideration for people bereaved by suicide; and providing information about where to seek help. Implementing similar recommendations for media coverage of suicide has been shown to decrease suicide rates. These same guidelines can and should be used in media portrayals of mass shootings.

## Is it realistic, in your view, to expect the media to

**downplay mass shootings? The media would likely argue that they're doing their job of reporting the news, and giving the public the information it needs and wants.**

It is obviously in the interests of the media to allure viewers. At the end of the day, that's how most media sources earn money, by selling advertisements, and you can only do that when you have a large number of viewers. So as long as media outlets can get the public interested in the stories of shootings by presenting every detail, by having "experts" analyze the motivations of a particular mass shooter, by showing the shooter's bedroom and interviewing his family and friends, there will be tremendous momentum for media outlets to continue what they are doing. But I think that if the media becomes more aware that science suggests they are contributing to the problem of the epidemic of mass shootings we are currently seeing in the U.S., we have a shot at getting them to change their reporting strategies, just as they have responsibly done with suicides. There is an important difference between giving the public the information it needs in order to realize that mass shootings are becoming a major social problem in the U.S., and providing an opportunity for an unnecessary level of voyeurism into a horrific tragedy.

**More information:** Translating psychological science: Highlighting the media's contribution to contagion in mass shootings: Comment on Kaslow (2015). psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=b … uy&id=2016-00913-006

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