

Mental Illness, the Media, and the Moral Politics of Mass Violence: The Role of Race in Mass Shootings Coverage

Scott W. Duxbury¹, Laura C. Frizzell¹,
and Sadé L. Lindsay¹

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Abstract

Objectives: We examine how news media portrays the causes of mass shootings for shooters of different races. Specifically, we explore whether White men are disproportionately framed as mentally ill.

Methods: The study examines a unique data set of 433 news documents covering 219 mass shootings between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2015. It analyzes the data using logistic regression.

¹ Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Scott W. Duxbury, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University, 238 Townshend Hall, 1885 Neil Avenue Mall, Columbus, OH 43202, USA.

Email: duxbury.5@osu.edu

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Media coverage frequently circulates negative stereotypes of racial minorities during moral panics about crime (Carlson 2016; Cohen 2011; Collins 1999; Feagin 2006; Garland 2008). Moral panic refers to public concern about a social problem disproportionate to its actual impact, typically pertaining to a perceived threat to social or moral order (Cohen 2002). Moral panics often arise as a response to a “folk devil”: a cultural, racial, or ethnic group whose behavior is perceived as responsible for the social problem causing moral panic. Folk devils are established when a group is blamed for a social problem, usually by circulating negative stereotypes and exaggerated claims about the groups’ behaviors through media coverage (Cohen 1976:1). For example, media coverage of crime uses coded language (e.g., “thug” and “gangbanger”) and deploys imagery of Black and Latino offenders, conflating crime with Black and Latino men (Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz 2004; Russell 1998; Surette [1990] 2010). Consequently, crime news coverage often casts Blacks and Latinos as racial folk devils amid moral panic surrounding crime.

While the racialization of folk devils through news coverage has long been recognized as a key component of many moral panics surrounding crime (Carlson 2016; Cohen 2011; Collins 1999; Critcher 2003; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), little research has examined the role of *whiteness* in media coverage of mass violence. This is a surprising omission. Since the Columbine massacre, mass shootings have spurred much moral panic in the United States (Cohen 2002), as they are the most common and widely covered form of mass violence (Duwe 2000, 2004; Fox and DeLateur 2014; Fox and Levin 2003). Further, academic and public coverage of mass shootings focuses on events with young White perpetrators, and the dominant narrative for the causes of mass shootings has fixated overwhelmingly on shooters’ mental health (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Fox and Fridel 2016;

Newman et al. 2004). Yet, while moral panics surrounding crime typically establish a racial folk devil, moral panic surrounding mass shootings—a uniquely egregious form of violent crime—has not established White men as a racial folk devil, instead focusing on individual perpetrators' mental health (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Fox and Fridel 2016; Newman et al. 2004). This empirical incongruence raises a broad question pertinent to research on moral panics and racialization in crime news coverage: What social processes inhibit the creation of a racialized *White* folk devil?

Research examining this question is germane to understanding the racialization of crime news coverage and moral panics surrounding crime. As Hier and others (2002, 2008) argue (Hall et al. 1978), perceptions of culpability for social problems are closely linked to extant social hierarchies. Assigning blame for a social problem to a folk devil can serve to justify the marginalization of disenfranchised groups (Cohen 1976, 2002; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Hall et al. 1978; Hier 2008) or, in the case of crime news coverage, perpetuate problematic perceptions of race and criminality (Collins 1999; Critcher 2003; Russell 1998; Surette [1990] 2010). Thus, exploring how blame is assigned to offenders of different races in media coverage of mass violence offers a novel contribution to research on moral panics and crime news coverage by identifying whether and how blame is diverted from a privileged social group—in this case, White men—when they are implicated in a moral panic.

To address these questions, we focus on the case of mental illness in media coverage of mass shootings. Although mass shootings are not a routine form of crime, exceptional events are often theoretically generative because they offer an ideal-typical case to study certain social processes (Burawoy 1998). Moreover, while mass shootings are rare, moral panic surrounding mass shootings has been widespread for decades (Cohen 2002; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), representing a common or “routinized” moral panic. Within the context of mass shootings coverage, mental illness narratives are a theoretically generative lens through which to examine racialization and blame assignment. Mental illness has emerged as a dominant media narrative for extreme gun violence in recent years (Fox and DeLateur 2014; McGinty et al. 2014); yet, research highlights that there are racial differences in how mental illness is assigned, both formally through diagnosis and informally through discourse (Conrad 2007; Hansen

and Roberts 2012; Hirschfield et al. 2006; Ramey 2016). Further, some evidence suggests that mentally ill White men may be perceived as less culpable for their violence compared to mentally ill men of color (Chen et al. 2015). Such patterns raise the possibility that mental illness—as an informal ascription (i.e., a folk category) rather than a formal diagnosis—provides a coherent narrative through which blame is diverted from White men, while the same may be less true for Black men and Latinos.

Moral Panics and Mass Shootings Coverage

Moral Panics, Race, and Crime

Moral panics often arise when powerful actors personify social problems by labeling certain people or groups as folk devils (Cohen 2002; Goode and Ben-Yahuda 1994). While much research examines the actions that moral panics inspire, less considers the content and discourse around their production (Hier 2002). Consequently, few studies have considered what social processes inhibit the creation of a racial folk devil.

Racial folk devils are established when a racial group is “defined as a threat to social values and interests [and] its nature is presented in stylized and stereotypical fashion by the media” (Cohen 1976:1). As Garland (2008) observes, a host of moral panics about crime has targeted racial minorities and personified them as folk devils. Racial minorities are typically cast as

folk devils through criminalization narratives (Carlson 2016; Garland 2008; Russell 1998; Surette [1990] 2010), which draw attention to offenders' moral weakness or history of offending. Crime news coverage utilizes criminalization narratives and contributes to the criminalization of racial minorities by circulating images of minority offenders (Collins 1999; Surette [1990] 2010). An apt example of how criminalization narratives establish racial folk devils is through media coverage of gang violence. Media coverage often describes violent crime in communities of color as spurring from gang conflict, even when this may not be the case (Linnemann and McClanahan 2017; Sullivan 2005). Consequently, gang violence is typically cast as a blight endogenous to communities of color, reflective of innate, or cultural criminality (Metcalf 2012; Russell 1998; Surette [1990] 2010).

Media Coverage of Mass Shootings

Although mass shootings have been widely acknowledged as causing moral panic for over two decades (Altheide 2009; Cohen 2002; Frymer 2009; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), young White men have not been cast as racial folk devils; instead of offering exaggerated claims about White men's inclination to violence, coverage typically draws attention to individual offenders' mental health or the social circumstances leading up to a shooting (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Klein 2013; Leary et al. 2003; McGinty et al. 2014). Yet, little empirical research has considered what social processes inhibit the establishment of White men as a folk devil in moral panic surrounding mass shootings.

Widespread public and scholarly interest in mass shootings has sired a long line of research that attempts to explain how a seemingly normal person becomes a mass shooter. This body of work places causal emphasis on adolescent notions of masculinity (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Tonso 2009), bullying (Klein 2013; Leary et al. 2003), social isolation (Newman et al. 2004), identity crisis (Katz 2015), and the questionable mental health of perpetrators (Fox and DeLateur 2014; McGinty et al. 2014; Metzl and MacLeish 2015). Only recently have researchers asked how perceptions of mass shooters affect media coverage. One key finding from this literature is that media narratives for the root causes of mass shootings have shifted over the years. Early coverage of mass shootings following the Columbine massacre discussed the events as domestic terrorism (Altheide 2009). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, outlets replaced this narrative with the rhetoric of bullying scares and adolescent heartbreak (Klein 2013; Leary et al.

2003). More recently, the horrific Sandy Hook shooting of 2012 shifted the explanatory narrative once again, such that the dominant media explanation for mass shootings is now shooters' questionable mental health (Fox and DeLateur 2014; McGinty et al. 2014).

Yet, some scholars lament that the media describe many mass shooters as mentally ill (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Metzl and MacLeish 2015). Such studies argue that the media presuppose mental illness because a perpetrator's willingness to commit a mass shooting conforms to popular understandings of mental disorder. In these regards, mental illness acts as an informal ascription or "folk category" that fills in for abnormal or otherwise unexplainable behavior. Instead, some scholars argue that recent media attention to mass shooters' mental health is a cultural reaction to sensational events where many victims are injured in shared public spaces (McGinty et al. 2014).

Interestingly, race is rarely considered as a determinant of mass shootings narratives. Perhaps because the most highly publicized shootings tend to have White perpetrators, many researchers assume that there is too little racial variation in mass shooting perpetration to analyze (Fox and DeLateur 2014; Fox and Levin 2003; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein 2013; Leary et al. 2003; Newman et al. 2004). However, recent research indicates that this may not be the case and that many mass shootings simply do not capture the public eye. Fox and Fridel (2016) study a range of mass shootings over the past 15 years, finding that many shootings that stem from interpersonal conflicts, such as bar fights or domestic violence, go unreported. This suggests that there may be more variability in mass shooting perpetration than previously assumed.

One implication of selective media coverage of mass shootings is that the media may disproportionately assign mental illness to explain Whites' involvement in mass violence. A distinct line of literature in the medicalization of social problems—in this case, the assignment of mental illness (Conrad 2007)—suggests that perceptions of disorder are unevenly allocated in terms of existing racial hierarchies. For example, when White children misbehave, authority figures are more likely to perceive the misbehavior as an isolated incident stemming from a treatable behavioral problem (Bussing et al. 2012; Kim, Losen, and Hewitt 2010; Ramey 2016; Slade 2004). Similarly, Hansen and Roberts (2012) argue that social problems afflicting Whites are more likely to receive medical responses than social problems afflicting Blacks. As discussed above, media coverage of crime is often congruent with extant beliefs about race (Carlson 2016; Critcher 2003; Hier 2008). Thus, much like Whites' delinquency (Bussing et al.

2012; Kim et al. 2010; Slade 2004), Whites' involvement in mass violence may be perceived as stemming from disorder, while the same may be less true of Black men and Latinos. We expect that media coverage will be significantly more likely to frame White mass shooters as mentally ill than Black or Latino shooters (Hypothesis 1).

Traditionally, research on moral panics has noted that Black and Latino men are frequently cast as racial folk devils. Like Black men, Latinos suffer from comparable criminalization narratives, typically related to drug trading and violence (Harris, Evans, and Beckett 2011; Welch et al. 2011). However, recent literature also argues that racial hierarchy in the United States falls on a continuum rather than a dichotomy between Whites and all people of color (Burke and Embrick 2008; Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch 2013). In this racial continuum, Blacks and Whites fall on polar ends and all other racial groups are intermediately stratified (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2010). This research suggests that there may also be differences between racial minorities regarding how frequently they are framed as mentally ill. Thus, we expect that the media will be more likely to frame Latinos as mentally ill compared to Blacks (Hypothesis 2).

Data

Some basic definitional issues arise in the study of mass shootings—a common problem in criminology more broadly (Gottfredson and Hirschi

1990). Newman et al. (2004) propose mass shootings as a type of “rampage” shooting that occur in public places, especially those that have symbolic significance and a high victim account. Alternatively, Katz (2015) offers a conceptualization of mass shootings as “intimate massacres” where shooters attempt to reinvent themselves by attacking a place that holds social meaning for the shooter. While these approaches have theoretical strengths, they are difficult to operationalize since they require some understanding of shooters’ intentionality. Slightly older literature distinguishes between school shootings and other forms of mass violence, such as workplace massacres or terrorism (Duwe 2000; Fox and Levin 2003). We employ an inclusive definition of mass shootings because we are interested in media coverage of mass shootings and the media routinely use the term “mass shootings” to refer to a plurality of shootings in different settings with different causes (Fox and Fridel 2016), any of which may elicit or facilitate moral panic. Thus, we define mass shootings as an active shooting where four or more victims are shot in a single event, excluding the perpetrator. This is the most widely used definition in empirical literature, including prior studies of mass shootings news coverage (Duwe 2004; Fox and DeLateur 2014; Fox and Fridel 2016; Towers et al. 2015).

We base our study on a unique data set of 433 news documents covering (nested in) 219 mass shootings between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2015. We selected this time period because it follows the rise of mental illness as the dominant narrative for extreme gun violence (McGinty et al. 2014). As discussed by Hodson (1999), establishing firm inclusion and exclusion criteria in documentary analysis is necessary to ensure consistency in the sample. Selecting a three-year window ensures that we are able to evaluate variation in a relatively large number of shootings, while minimizing the risk of some exogenous or uncontrollable event affecting the nature of the moral panic we are investigating. Corroborating this, McGinty et al. (2014) show that the frequency of media references to mental illness as a cause of gun violence remains relatively stable in the years prior to our observation window.

We used *News Bank* and *Lexis Nexis* to identify a representative pool of news reports covering mass shootings that occurred in our observation period. We constructed our sample by first identifying every news document that offered any motive or explanation for the shooting and for which the race of the perpetrator could be ascertained, which totaled roughly 5,000 documents. Next, we employed systematic random sampling to collect a manageable data set of documents covering mass shootings from this pool of articles. We created an interval size, k , and then selected every k th

document in the global list of mass shootings coverage. The interval k was established by dividing the number of total cases by n (Singleton and Straits 2005). In our study, $k = 11$ (5,000/440). To correct for potential selection bias—a common problem in analyzing news data where news document samples overrepresent widely covered events (Earl et al. 2004; Martin 2005)—we collected a maximum of 15 documents per shooting. The final sample consists of 433 documents covering 219 events or roughly 1.9 documents per shooting.¹ An extended discussion of sampling design is provided in the Online Supplementary Materials.

The resulting 433 documents were coded following methods and recommendations employed in similar research (Dixon and Martin 2012; Earl et al. 2004; Hodson 1999; Roscigno et al. 2015). We coded variables for the number of injured victims, number of victims killed, the sex of victims, whether the document references shooters' mental health or gang involvement, whether the shooting was the result of a domestic or romantic affair, the race and age of the assailant, the year of the shooting, whether the perpetrator committed suicide during the shooting, the level of news coverage, and the setting of the shooting.² In cases where a document provided a picture of the suspect or perpetrator, we coded race in line with the picture (and surname for Latinos). Otherwise, we used Internet searches of the assailant's name and details of the shooting to find other documents or news sources that provided a picture of the assailant.³ Three-coder reliability was high at 91 percent. In the few cases where there were disagreements, we reconvened and discussed the issue until we reached a consensus. We provide additional details on coding and interrater reliability in the methodological supplement.

Analytic Strategy

Our dependent variable of interest is whether a news document references a shooter's mental illness. The variable is binary; thus, we use logistic regression. Because we are interested in how the media frame shooters based on their race, we code for whether mental illness was mentioned in relation to the shooter, regardless of the context. For example, if a document states that the perpetrator showed no prior signs of mental illness, then we coded this as a 1. Likewise, if a document states the perpetrator had a history of depression, we also coded the response as a 1. If a document never mentions the trait, we code this as 0. This is because our outcome variable is the frame

that a news document employs, which includes both the cause that media outlets present for the shooting and what media outlets may present as an expected or reasonable cause of the shooting.⁴ Following this coding, 15.47 percent of the documents reference a shooters' mental illness.

Our main independent variable of interest is the shooter's race, and we include several covariates shown to be important predictors of media coverage of mass shootings in prior research (Duwe 2000; Maguire, Weatherby, and Mathers 2002). Over half of the documents refer to Black shooters, whereas one-quarter refer to White shooters and 10 percent refer to Latino shooters.⁵ We include the count of total victims and the number of victims killed, as well as the setting of the shooting. These are key controls because those shootings that attract the most media attention tend to both have the highest victim counts and to occur in public places (Duwe 2000; Newman et al. 2004). In addition, we control for other potential theoretical confounders, namely, whether the perpetrator committed suicide, whether they shot women or children, and whether they shot a family member or romantic partner. As McGinty et al. (2014) suggest, the vulnerability of some victims may account for variation in the framing of mental illness; thus, the apparent egregiousness of a shooting may increase if the shooter targeted women, children, or their own family. This latter variable is especially important since roughly 40 percent of mass shootings in the last 15 years have stemmed from familial tension or had domestic victims (Fox and Fridel 2016). We also control for whether the article describes the shooting as a murder-suicide because suicidal ideation is an indicator of mental illness.⁶ Similarly, coverage of a shooting framed as gang violence may be less likely to invoke the mental illness narrative because there is already an explanatory frame for the crime. Thus, we control for whether an article frames the shooting as gang violence. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for these variables.

One common problem in quantitative analyses of news documents is the abundance of missing values (Earl et al. 2004; Hodson 1999). News documents regularly vary in the extent to which they report idiosyncrasies of an event, so missing data are common. Missing values were present for the following controls: sex of the victims, the age of the shooter, the number of victims killed, and the setting of the shooting. We corrected missing values by first identifying multiple other documents covering the same event from the full population of identified articles and imputing the majority value from the retrieved documents. For example, if a document did not report the age of the victims, we retrieved three documents that did and recorded the most commonly reported value. If a majority could not be reached,

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	Mean (SD) or %	Range
Mental illness	15.47	
Race		
Black	57.05	
White	24.48	
Latino	10.39	
Other	8.08	
Number of victims	6.04 (3.91)	4 to 31
Number of victims killed	2.28 (2.34)	0 to 14
Setting of shooting		
Private	40.41	
Business	28.41	
Public	25.64	
Other	5.54	
Sex of victims		
Female	18.47	
Male	28.18	
Female and male	48.31	
Unknown	5.13	
Gang violence	22.63	
Domestic violence	23.82	
Children shot	20.79	
Murder-suicide	20.32	
Age of shooter	30.05 (11.38)	15 to 72
Level of news coverage		
Local	69.13	
State	17.78	
National	13.09	
Year of shooting		
2013	31.18	
2014	35.10	
2015	33.72	
Total documents	433	

the observation was not included in the model. This approach is conceptually similar to merging values from multiple data sets and is a standard tactic for handling missing values in quantitative analyses of documents (Allison 2002; Hodson 1999; Little and Rubin 2002).

Since multiple documents cover the same event, many observations are nonindependent due to nesting in the data (e.g., documents nested in shootings). Nonindependence can skew variance estimates. To correct, we cluster

our standard errors according to the nesting structure.⁷ We present results from sensitivity analyses in the methodological supplement.

Results

Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting the Framing of Mass Shooters' Motives.

Independent Variables	Mental Illness
	Odds Ratio (SE)
Race (vs. Black)	
Whites	19.40** (1.85)
Latinos	12.11* (1.06)
Other	30.09* (1.35)
Number of victims	1.10 (.115)
Number killed	1.20 (.123)
Setting (vs. private)	
Business	5.50 (.950)
Public	4.90* (.772)
Other	4.60 (.959)
Gang violence	2.14 (.819)
Murder-suicide	12.59** (.739)
Age of shooter	1.04 (.019)
Sex of victims (vs. women only)	
Men	1.36 (.944)
Men and women	2.39 (.910)
Unknown	21.60** (1.08)
Children shot	1.65 (.617)
Domestic-related	0.365 (.845)
News source (vs. local)	
Regional	1.17 (.486)
National	2.65 (.564)
Year (vs. 2013)	
2014	1.72 (.665)
2015	1.02 (.622)
Constant	0.001*** (1.83)
Log likelihood	-98.12
Model χ^2	176.86***

Note: Standard errors are clustered.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Seven documents were omitted because of missing data problems.
2. We also coded for whether the shooter was a woman. However, less than 1 percent of observations had a female shooter. Thus, the frequency of female perpetrators was too low to analyze. Similarly, we also sought to examine whether the race of the victims affected how the shooting was framed. However, victims' names were rarely identified. In cases where victims were named, we were rarely able to pinpoint a picture of the victim via search engine. Thus, we did not incorporate this variable into analysis.
3. This was common when the original news source provided a picture of the assailant, but the image was not available through the *Lexis Nexis* or *US News Bank* document.

4. Although we included negative cases in our coding schemata, they were rare occurrences. Only eight articles referenced mental health when it was not present. Results do not substantively change in sensitivity analyses where these cases are excluded.
5. Other racial groups include Asian, Native American, mixed race, and Middle Eastern. If race could not be determined, the article was not included in the data set.
6. We did not code reports of shooters who had committed suicide as a reference to their mental health. However, if a document referred to a shooter entertaining suicidal thoughts prior to the shooting, we coded this as a reference to the shooter's mental health.
7. Clustering standard errors is appropriate when nesting structures are not strong, as in our sample. Results were robust to multilevel random intercepts modeling in sensitivity analyses. We checked final models for multicollinearity; no variance inflation factor exceeded 3. We also conducted a Hosmer-Lemeshow test and examined a separation plot to ensure that the models were not affected by outliers and had overall good fit.

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Author Biographies

Scott W. Duxbury is a doctoral student at The Ohio State University. His work focuses on punishment, drug markets, and social networks. He has been published in *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *Social Networks*, and *Sociological Methods and Research*.

Laura C. Frizzell is a doctoral student at the Ohio State University. Her research focuses on race, gender/sexuality, and the etiology of crime/delinquency. Her research has been published in *Social Science and Medicine*.

Sadé L. Lindsay is a doctoral student at The Ohio State University and Ruth D. Peterson fellow of the American Society of Criminology. Her research examines racial injustice, moral panics, and incarceration. Her research has been published in *The Prison Journal*.