

*In his book CARNAGE, Thomas Gabor examines the 1,000+ mass shootings in America in 2019-2020. Gabor offers solutions ranging from tackling persistent poverty and defusing vendetta-like conflicts to various gun law reforms.*

## **CARNAGE: Preventing Mass Shootings in America**

By Thomas Gabor

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# CARNAGE

PREVENTING MASS SHOOTINGS  
IN AMERICA

**THOMAS GABOR**

Author of *Confronting Gun Violence in America* and *ENOUGH!*

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# Table of Contents

<b>1 - Mass Shootings: Scale of the Problem.....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Consequences of Mass Shootings.....	2
The Many Types of Mass Shootings .....	6
The Present Study .....	9
The Odds of Becoming a Victim .....	10
The Tepid Federal Response to Gun Violence.....	12
Organization of This Book .....	15
<b>2 - Defining a Mass Shooting .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3 - Trends in Mass Shootings.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>4 - Explaining Mass Shootings in the United States .....</b>	<b>39</b>
Impact of High Gun Ownership Levels in the US .....	40
The Proliferation of Highly Lethal Firearms and Ammunition.....	41
Permissive Gun Laws .....	45
Persistent Poverty and Disinvestment.....	50
Social Isolation, Depression, and Disengagement of Youth .....	53
Mental Illness.....	57
Contagion and the Media’s Role.....	60
The Covid-19 Pandemic’s Impact on Violence .....	62
Racial Tensions and Reckoning .....	63
Routine Activities and Mass Shootings .....	65
Social Factors vs. Gun Availability: A False Choice .....	66
<b>5 - Mass Shootings in America—2019 and 2020.....</b>	<b>69</b>
Mass Shootings in 2019–2020.....	70
Mass Shootings by Region, State, City, and Community Size.....	70
The Victims .....	76
The Suspects.....	78
The Weapons.....	80
Race and Mass Shootings .....	81
High-Casualty Mass Shootings .....	83
Places Where Mass Shootings Occur .....	86
Circumstances and Motives of Mass Shootings.....	88

<b>6 - Preventing Mass Shootings: Social, Economic and Cultural Reforms.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Law Enforcement Initiatives and Limits .....	101
Importance of Police Legitimacy .....	103
Focused Deterrence .....	106
Violence Interruption .....	108
Improving the Physical Environment.....	110
Tackling Persistent and Concentrated Poverty.....	112
Focusing on Conflict Resolution Rather than Gangs .....	114
Combatting the Social and Psychological Conditions	
Underlying Gun Violence .....	116
Types of Shooters and a Five-Step Approach to	
Pacifying Them .....	118
<b>7 - Preventing Mass Shootings: Reforming Gun Policies .....</b>	<b>121</b>
Policies That Can Prevent Mass Shootings .....	123
Licensing of Gun Owners .....	124
Assault Weapons and High-Capacity Magazine Ban .....	126
Regulating and Cracking Down on Gun Carrying.....	128
Safe Storage.....	130
Regulating Firearm Dealers.....	132
Keeping Guns from Dangerous Individuals .....	136
Preventing the Spread of Mass Shootings.....	140
<b>Final Thoughts.....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Notes .....</b>	<b>147</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1. Odds of Being Murdered in Selected High-Income Countries .....	11
Table 2. Sources that have Tracked Mass Shootings .....	25
Table 3. Key Questions Tackled in This Study.....	29
Table 4. The Number and Severity of Public Mass Shootings from 1970-2013 .....	31
Table 5. Trends in Mass Shootings in America—2014–2020.....	34
Table 6. Number of Mass Shootings by Month, 2019 and 2020 .....	36
Table 7. Relationship Between Distressed Communities and Homicide Rates .....	53
Table 8. Civic Engagement by 18- to 29-Year-Olds.....	54
Table 9. Number of People Killed and Injured in Mass Shootings, 2019–2020 (1,029 cases).....	70
Table 10. Mass Shootings by US Region, 2019–2020 .....	71
Table 11. States with Most and Fewest Mass Shootings, Ranking on Gun Laws and Household Gun Ownership .....	74
Table 12. Cities with the Largest Number of Mass Shootings, 2019–2020.....	75
Table 13. Mass Shootings and Community Size, 2019–2020.....	76
Table 14. The Gender of Victims in Mass Shootings, 2019 and 2020 .....	77
Table 15. Age of Victims in Mass Shootings, 2019 and 2020 .....	78
Table 16. Law Enforcement Officers Shot in Mass Shootings and Firearms Used, 2019 and 2020 .....	78
Table 17. Injuries/Fatalities Sustained by Suspects, 2019–2020 .....	79
Table 18. The Gender and Number of Mass Shooting Suspects, 2019 and 2020.....	80
Table 19. Weapons Used in Mass Shootings, 2019 and 2020 .....	80
Table 20. Frequency of Rifles Used in Mass Shootings vs. Murders Overall .....	81
Table 21. Racial Composition of Communities and Mass Shootings, 2020 .....	82
Table 22. High-Casualty Mass Shootings (6+ victims killed and/or 10+ shot), 2019–2020.....	84
Table 23. Location of Mass Shootings, 2019-2020.....	88

*CARNAGE*

Table 24. Circumstances/Features of Mass Shootings,  
2019–2020 ..... 91

Table 25. Predominant Sites and Features of Mass Shootings,  
2019–2020 ..... 93

# 1

## **Mass Shootings: Scale of the Problem**

America had quite the year in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic infected about 20 million Americans, causing widespread suffering and leaving the economy in tatters. Millions of people sought relief due to the loss of employment and more than one hundred thousand businesses failed, creating enormous housing and food insecurity. Protests demanding racial justice persisted for months in response to questionable killings of Black people—mostly men—by police. Many schools, college campuses, businesses, and other organizations were forced to operate remotely. The nation also faced a presidential impeachment and an election viewed by many as the most consequential in memory. As if these events weren't enough, mass shootings exploded in 2020, worsening the gun violence crisis that has not been addressed by federal legislation for over 25 years.

From December 14, 2012, when 20 children and 6 adults were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut to July 2020, the Gun Violence Archive, a leading source on gun violence, has identified 2,654 mass shootings in America.<sup>1</sup> During that time, just three states were free of a mass shooting—North Dakota, New Hampshire, and Hawaii. Since 2013, there has been just one calendar week without a mass shooting. Mass shootings have become routine events in the US and it is not surprising to hear the young survivors of the 2018 St. Valentine's Day school shooting in Parkland, Florida refer to themselves as the "mass shooting generation."

While gun deaths in America exceed those of other advanced countries by a wide margin, mass shootings, while far too numerous, account for less than 2% of annual gun deaths.<sup>2</sup> Given this fact, some question why so much attention is paid by



the media and activists to mass violence as opposed to gun violence in general.

## **The Consequences of Mass Shootings**

Self-serving sensationalism is one reason for the media's special focus on mass shootings; however, the attention to these atrocities is justified by the fact that they devastate communities and our sense of safety. They have a disproportionate impact on a community and this impact may extend well beyond the affected community's boundaries. Large-scale mass shootings, in particular, may lead citizens throughout the country to reconsider attending a movie or festival, visiting a mall, or using public spaces. In fact, following two especially deadly mass shootings in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas on one weekend in August 2019, a Harris Poll found that a third of 2,000 Americans surveyed said their fear was so great they would avoid going to certain places or events.<sup>3</sup> Such fear has social, psychological, and economic impacts if potential customers and spectators stay home more often due to the fear of being caught in the middle of a shooting.

Perpetrators of mass shootings, whether randomly selecting victims or targeting multiple victims, also often injure and kill children and seniors who may simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The study conducted for this book shows that it is not uncommon for children under the age of one to be harmed in these incidents.

A 2020 survey conducted in Connecticut illustrates that mass shootings are top of mind for many people. More than 10% of that state's residents indicate that they have been, or are close to, someone who has been personally affected by a mass shooting.<sup>4</sup> More than 40% of residents stated that mass shootings are the violent crime they are most concerned about.

Mass shootings may have a psychological toll that is far more pronounced than what we might expect from observing the physical casualties alone. On October 16, 1991, G.

Hennard, a 35-year-old unemployed man who had been a member of the US Merchant Marines, drove his pickup truck through the front window of Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas. Armed with two semi-automatic pistols, he then proceeded to murder 23 customers and wound another 27 before killing himself. Hennard held racist views toward African Americans and Hispanics. Like a certain class of shooters, he was especially angry at women and targeted them specifically. As he was committing the mass murder, he yelled: "All women of Killeen and Belton [a neighboring city] are vipers! This is what you've done to me and my family! ...This is payback day!"<sup>5</sup> After being cornered by the police, Hennard fatally shot himself.

A health team assessed 136 cafeteria employees, customers, and first responders who had been at the scene in Killeen and followed them up for three years.<sup>6</sup> Nearly three in 10 (28%) met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Few had a complete absence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress. One year later, 18% of those at the scene continued to display PTSD, and three years later there was no significant decline in the prevalence of PTSD among these witnesses and first responders. The lesson here is that many of those who witness a mass shooting are profoundly affected by them. The trauma extends well beyond those who are shot and can be long-term.

Another illustration of the broad impact of mass shootings is the fear experienced by high school students. An American Psychological Association survey found that, for those between 15 and 21 years of age, mass shootings constitute the greatest source of stress, with three out of four feeling anxious about the possibility of being caught in the middle of a mass or school shooting.<sup>7</sup> Interviews of 19-year-olds conducted by Garrett Graff for *Politico Magazine* found that many mentioned the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting as the first significant news story they remember. A representative response as to the most salient events in their lives was provided by a student named Aidan, who said: "In the back of my mind, I would sit in class and I'd be like, all right, well, if something happens, how

## CARNAGE

am I going to escape? Am I going to hide? Am I going to jump out a window?”<sup>8</sup>

Some of the measures designed to mitigate school shootings have also raised the stress levels of K-12 students. Active shooter drills have been especially stressful and controversial.<sup>9</sup> These drills simulate real-life attacks and, often, they involve masked men with assault rifles bursting into classrooms. Teachers may be shot at with pellet guns and children as young as five are told to cower under their desks, while others are covered with fake blood. The goal is to prepare students and teachers for real attacks, but major teachers’ unions and advocacy groups want to ban the drills, arguing that they traumatize children. The president of the National Education Association notes that children wet their pants, cry, and believe they will die.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, following a drill, children are unable to focus in class or sleep at night.

One study compared millions of social media tweets and posts by students 90 days before and 90 days after active shooter drills were conducted.<sup>11</sup> Increased rates of depression and anxiety were displayed as words such as “afraid,” “struggling,” “nervous,” “therapy,” and “suicidal” were more likely to be used after the drills.

A Morning Consult poll in May 2020 found that those born from the mid-1990s (Gen Z) state that, after the coronavirus pandemic, the issue with the greatest impact on their worldview has been mass shootings, including Sandy Hook, Parkland, and Las Vegas.<sup>12</sup> They say that these events have had a greater impact on them than the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the “Black Lives Matter” movement, and the “Me Too” movement.

Mass shootings are also very costly from an economic perspective. Gun violence costs the US an estimated \$280 billion a year when direct medical costs, rehabilitation, criminal justice system costs, lost income, victim support, lost tax revenue, and quality of life costs are taken into account. These figures do not include such items as the disruption of

businesses in the aftermath of a shooting.<sup>13</sup> Another study has found that the annual cost to the medical system alone is \$170 billion, just for those gunshot wound victims requiring one major operation.<sup>14</sup>

Consider the mall shooting in Clackamas Town Center near Portland, Oregon in December 2012.<sup>15</sup> More than 150 police officers responded from 13 law enforcement agencies. The investigation lasted more than three months and produced a report nearly 1,000 pages in length. Following the shooting, the 1.5-million-square-foot mall shut down for three days during the peak of the holiday shopping season in order to calm the public, make repairs, and ramp up security. As a result, 188 stores lost revenue while the mall was closed.

Mass shootings are defined in this book as incidents in which four or more people, excluding the shooter, are shot in a single event and at one general time and location. This definition does not require that the injuries be fatal. There is some subjectivity involved with regard to the location as victims may be shot in different rooms of a house or both inside and outside a nightclub and that would still qualify here as one location. Seldom are all the victims found in the exact same spot. When victims are shot by the same suspect(s) at an entirely different location or time, that would be evidence of a spree killing.

The scale of America's problems with guns requires that we act with urgency. Over 100 Americans die from gunfire each day, and the US is a major outlier when compared with other advanced countries. For example, the US has 25 times the gun homicide rate as other high-income countries, when the incidents in these countries are combined and adjusted for population differences with the US.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the US, which has less than 5% of the world's population, accounts for a third of the mass shootings on the planet.<sup>17</sup> Unlike natural disasters, such as hurricanes and tornados, and even epidemics, gun-related deaths and injuries are not confined to specific years or seasons; nor are they transient. While there may be some seasonal variation—an issue explored in the study conducted

for this book—there is a steady parade of gun homicides and mass shootings throughout the year.

### **The Many Types of Mass Shootings**

Mass shootings are varied and often complex events. They usually defy simplistic explanations such as: “He went on a rampage because he was mentally ill,” “The young man targeted his former school because he was expelled or bullied,” or “The employee shot his colleagues because he was mistreated by his employer or co-workers.” While these factors may help explain certain mass shootings, they are necessarily incomplete. If every mentally disturbed individual, bullied student, or disgruntled employee committed a mass shooting, America would have millions rather than a few hundred mass shootings a year. There are clearly other factors that lead a minute fraction of individuals afflicted with mental illness or unhappy at work or school to commit a massacre. There are also many shootings in which none of these factors apply.

As an illustration of how mass shootings differ, consider several high-profile events since 2007. On February 14, 2018, N. Cruz, a 19-year-old former student of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, returned to his former school with an assault-style rifle and murdered 17 students and staff, wounding an additional 17. In the years leading up to the shooting, law enforcement agencies received numerous tips regarding his threatening behavior, including his desire to “shoot up a school,”<sup>18</sup> His online posts indicated a fascination with weapons, as well as extremist, hate-filled views toward various minority groups. Fellow students seemed to believe that if one of their peers was to commit a school shooting, it would be Cruz.

By contrast, S. Paddock, the 64-year-old man responsible for America’s worst mass shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017 (58 killed, 413 injured, and many more hurt due to the stampede to avoid the gunfire) offered no discernible hints of

the carnage he planned to unleash. He gradually brought an arsenal of AR-10 and AR-15 rifles to his suite at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and equipped the rifles with bump stocks, which allow semi-automatics to mimic automatic weapons (machine guns) in their rate of fire. Paddock committed suicide during his assault, and extensive analysis following his death revealed no specific motive for the massacre. His brain was examined by Stanford University pathologists and revealed no abnormalities. Post-mortem investigations revealed no clear clues that would have foretold the massacre.<sup>19</sup>

Mental illness was a more critical factor in the shooting of 32 people at Virginia Tech University on April 16, 2007. The shooter, S. Cho, displayed numerous signs of mental illness prior to the shooting as he was diagnosed with a mood disorder, received counseling at the university, and was found by a court to be a danger to himself<sup>20</sup>. Cho committed suicide as his rampage was about to be ended by responding law enforcement officers. Cho, who was born in South Korea, was armed with two handguns and 19 high-capacity magazines, rather than an assault rifle. Unlike the vast majority of mass shooters, Cho released a “manifesto” that is in part incoherent and in which he railed against those who had done him harm, including “snobs,” “Charlatans,” and “hedonists.”<sup>21</sup>

Another broad category of shooter includes those who target specific individuals at a workplace, in the family, or in the context of a group- or gang-related conflict. These individuals do not attack indiscriminately, although individuals not targeted may fall victim to the shooter’s rage or be hit by a stray bullet or debris. On May 31, 2019, G. Martin, 45, a veteran assemblyman at Henry Pratt Company in Aurora, Illinois, shot executives at the plant upon hearing that he had been fired.<sup>22</sup> He then took his rage out on the plant floor, shooting at co-workers. Martin died in the incident from a police officer’s bullet.

Mass shooters may also be motivated by an ideology. On December 2, 2015, S. Farook and T. Malik, a married couple, attacked a San Bernardino (California) Department of Health

## CARNAGE

training event, killing 14 and injuring 22 at the scene. Farook was US-born and of Pakistani descent, whereas Malik was a green-card holder from Pakistan. According to the FBI, they were homegrown extremists inspired, but not directed, by foreign terrorist groups.<sup>23</sup> The couple was influenced by radical sites on the Internet and, in their communications to one another, they expressed a commitment to Islamic militancy and martyrdom. They had accumulated a large arsenal of weapons, ammunition, and bomb-making equipment in their home.

These five cases alone demonstrate the wide variety of mass shootings and the folly of seeking one explanation and prevention strategy that applies to all these events. Mass shooters are from every racial and age group, they may be psychologically stable or mentally ill, they may or may not be ideologically motivated or loners, they may select their victims carefully or be indiscriminate in picking their targets, and they vary in the type of weapons they use.

An examination of just one category of mass shooter, individuals launching school attacks, illustrates the many motives driving these individuals. Studies undertaken by the US Secret Service have found that there is no useful profile of a student attacker nor of the type of school that has been attacked.<sup>24</sup>

*Attackers varied in age, gender, race, grade level, academic performance, and social characteristics. Similarly, there was no identified profile of the type of school impacted by targeted violence, as schools varied in size, location, and student-teacher ratios. Rather than focusing on a set of traits or characteristics, a threat assessment process should focus on gathering relevant information about a student's behaviors, situational factors, and circumstances to assess the risk of violence or other harmful outcomes.*

The Secret Service report is therefore telling us that, rather than trying to predict who will undertake an attack or where it will occur, the emphasis should be on assessing risks when threats or concerning behaviors occur. This guidance is based on their finding that many shooters telegraph their intentions by communicating them to peers, displaying behaviors eliciting concern, posting disturbing social media content, or acquiring firearms.

Despite our inability to predict who will attack a school, a workplace, a church, people at a gathering, or family members, determining the predisposing factors, triggers, and key contextual factors can help prevent and mitigate the impact of these shootings. For example, many school shooters have grievances with classmates or school staff, relationship issues, access to firearms, interest in violent topics, mental health or behavioral issues, and negative home life factors (e.g., a divorce). The presence of a number of these factors may warrant close scrutiny in cases in which a threat is reported and harms can be prevented by counseling and support or mitigated by ensuring that the individual posing a hazard does not have easy access to a firearm.

## **The Present Study**

This book reports on a study, conducted by this author, of 1,029 mass shootings occurring in the US in 2019 and 2020. The analysis relied on the Gun Violence Archive, an online resource that tracks mass shootings throughout the US. The purpose of this study was to determine the annual number of and trends in mass shootings, the different categories of shootings, the locations in which they tend to occur, characteristics of suspects and victims, motives, weapons of choice, and the role of mental illness and domestic violence. Strategies to prevent the different categories of mass shootings are then proposed.



### **The Odds of Becoming a Victim**

Table 1 illustrates the odds of being murdered in the US and selected advanced countries. It is apparent that the US stands alone, relative to other high-income countries, with regard to its rates of lethal violence. Still, the table shows that, even in the US, just one in about 29,000 people are murdered each year with a firearm. It is even more unusual for a shooting to involve more than one person. Just 10% of all homicides involve more than one victim.<sup>25</sup> To shoot or kill a larger number of people, preparation is more likely to be necessary and the perpetrator must have access to firearms that can fire quickly with a minimum of reloading. A certain level of shooting prowess may also be needed to shoot multiple victims. Perpetrators must also be angry enough and sufficiently callous to produce mass casualties. Furthermore, as law enforcement usually responds quickly to mass shootings, the perpetrator must be willing to risk being shot and killed by the police. These elements of mass shootings ensure that, while far too many occur in America, the odds that the average citizen will be a victim of a mass shooting is quite low, although the odds are not uniform for all segments of the population.

**Table 1. Odds of Being Murdered in Selected High-Income Countries**

COUNTRY AND YEAR USED FOR THE CALCULATION	# OF FIREARM HOMICIDES	ODDS OF BEING MURDERED WITH A FIREARM	ODDS OF BEING MURDERED BY ANY MEANS
<b>USA (2014)</b>	10,945	1 in 29,000	1 in 20,000
<b>ISRAEL (2011)</b>	81	1 in 95,000	1 in 51,000
<b>CANADA (2013–2014)</b>	131	1 in 271,000	1 in 69,000
<b>FINLAND (2012)</b>	17	1 in 319,000	1 in 61,000
<b>SWITZERLAND (2013)</b>	18	1 in 452,000	1 in 140,000
<b>AUSTRALIA (2013)</b>	35	1 in 655,000	1 in 106,000
<b>SPAIN (2012)</b>	51	1 in 918,000	1 in 129,000
<b>GERMANY (2011)</b>	61	<1 in 1,000,000	1 in 121,000
<b>UK (2011–2012)</b>	38	< 1 in 1,000,000	1 in 97,000
<b>JAPAN (2008)</b>	11	<1 in 10,000,000	1 in 197,000

Source: Table reproduced from T. Gabor, *Confronting Gun Violence in America*, p. 8.

Unlike natural disasters and epidemics, mass shootings are intentional and thus preventable. They are not “acts of God” or natural phenomena that are difficult to control. In addition, unlike the case of pathogens, we do not become immune to gun violence. In fact, the unrelenting parade of gun deaths and mass shootings is corrosive, forcing an increasingly fearful population to remain ever-vigilant in planning their daily activities. Ultimately, the problem infects our daily lives and undermines the trust citizens have in one another. For many, this may lead to their withdrawal from social activities that would connect them to others and promote mental well-being.

Given current rates of gun mortality, if the US fails to take significant action in relation to gun violence, we can expect another half million deaths from gunfire over the next 10 years. The increasing mortality in America—close to 40,000 people died of gunfire in 2017 and 2018—and the rising death toll

from mass shootings is occurring despite advances in the treatment of bullet wounds over the last two decades<sup>26</sup> and improvements in emergency care and response. Surgeons are telling us that they are seeing more patients with multiple bullet wounds and firearm injuries that cannot be treated.

Dr. Jeremy Cannon of the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine says the following about the damage produced by the high-velocity bullets fired by an AR-15 assault-type weapon: "The tissue destruction is almost unimaginable. Bones are exploded, soft tissue is absolutely destroyed. The injuries to the chest or abdomen—it's like a bomb went off."<sup>27</sup>

With improvements in survival rates following shootings, we would expect to see a reduction in the annual gun violence death toll. Rather, we are seeing more fatalities over the last few years than previously, suggesting that medical advances may be masking what might be an even greater increase in gun-related death had survival rates remained the same.<sup>28</sup> The rising mortality and volume of mass shootings point to the proliferation of weapons that are increasingly lethal, such as military-grade rifles and pistols capable of being equipped with high-capacity magazines.

### **The Tepid Federal Response to Gun Violence**

To illustrate the scale of the problems associated with guns, consider hurricanes, which have ramped up over the last few years. Since 2016, a number of very powerful hurricanes have threatened the Atlantic Coast of the US, including, Matthew (2016), Irma (2017), and Dorian (2019). Despite the power of these storms and the potential for massive property damage, on average, 100 Americans die each year as a result of these storms. Nevertheless, in 2019, with Dorian approaching, the federal government issued emergency declarations for four states: Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina. Contrast this with the fact that 40,000 gun deaths per year fail to elicit

any such declaration nor any significant national gun legislation to deal with the gun violence scourge and its disproportionate impact on certain communities.

In addition, for over 20 years, Congressional Republicans even denied federal funds for research through the Dickey Amendment, preventing studies from proceeding on the nature and extent of gun violence, as well as policies that might prove effective in reducing it.<sup>29</sup> These members of Congress were acting at the behest of the gun lobby, which became panicky about research in the 1990s that was revealing the true risks associated with firearms kept in the home.

Consider the amount of federal funding for sepsis, a potentially life-threatening condition caused by the body's response to an infection. This condition kills about the same number of Americans as gun violence; however, research funding available to study it is more than one hundred times that available for gun violence.<sup>30</sup> With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen a major mobilization in the development of vaccines and trillions of dollars of relief, but we continue to see little in the way of investment in solutions to gun violence and the families and communities shattered by the problem.

The gun lobby's role in getting lawmakers to block law reforms and obstruct research is just one part of the story of why the US has failed to advance in these areas. Another part of this story is the decades-long effort by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other gun rights organizations to promote the false narrative that guns are an effective tool for self-protection and that they are far more likely to be used to thwart criminals than as a tool to commit crimes and intimidate others, including victims of domestic violence. This campaign has succeeded in convincing most Americans that a gun in the home makes occupants safer<sup>31</sup> despite compelling evidence to the contrary.<sup>32</sup> The gun lobby's efforts have frustrated the desire of the vast majority of Americans for meaningful gun regulation.

The gun lobby has also advanced a distorted view of the Second Amendment to convince Americans that they have virtually an absolute right to own firearms that dates back to the drafting of the Constitution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, historically, the Second Amendment was interpreted by the courts as the right to bear arms within the context of militia service only. For example, in *United States v. Miller* (1939), two defendants who had been prosecuted for failing to register and pay a tax for possessing and carrying a sawed-off shotgun across state lines argued that such requirements under the National Firearms Act violated their Second Amendment rights.<sup>33</sup> The US Supreme Court ultimately ruled that such a weapon had no role in an organized militia and was therefore not protected by the Second Amendment.

Following the NRA's long campaign to promote the view that the Second Amendment guaranteed a right to bear arms to individuals outside of militia service—a view characterized by former Chief Justice Warren Burger as “one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American public”—the US Supreme Court did rule in the 2008 *Heller* decision that individuals had the right to own an operable gun in the home for protection.<sup>34</sup> However, writing for the majority in the 5–4 decision, Justice Antonin Scalia, a hunter and a conservative, made it clear that this right was not unlimited and that laws regulating the carrying of firearms, denying gun ownership to felons and the mentally ill, and prohibiting the carrying of dangerous and unusual weapons did not violate the Second Amendment. Court rulings since *Heller* show that the vast majority of gun laws currently being proposed do not violate the Constitution and merely require political will to pass.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, not only does the Constitution permit the enactment of laws regulating gun ownership, carrying, and storage, but an emerging number of scholars, including this writer, are asserting that the government's first duty is to protect its citizens.<sup>36</sup> The human rights group Amnesty International argues in a 2018 report, *In the Line of Fire*, that the US has breached its commitments under international human rights

law. AI writes: “The USA has failed to implement a comprehensive, uniform and coordinated system of gun safety laws and regulations particularly in light of the large number of firearms in circulation, which perpetuates unrelenting and potentially avoidable violence, leaving individuals susceptible to injury and death from firearms.”<sup>37</sup>

The human rights group asserts that nations should establish robust regulatory systems, including licensing, registration, restriction of certain weapon types, safe storage requirements, research, and policy development. Nationally, the US has done little or nothing in relation to any of these policies over the last 25 years. AI notes that countries not only have obligations to protect the life of individuals from state agents but from actual or foreseeable threats at the hands of private actors as well. Violence is especially foreseeable in low-income neighborhoods with persistently high levels of violence, poor public services, and policing that may not comply with international standards.

### **Organization of This Book**

The primary aim of this book is to increase our understanding by discussing trends in and explanations for mass shootings, as well as by presenting the results of an analysis of mass shootings occurring in 2019 and 2020. Solutions based on the evidence and the different types of mass shootings are then presented. It is important to understand the daily shootings that occur in America. The smaller number of high-casualty, planned gun massacres (Las Vegas, Orlando, Sandy Hook, Parkland), while deserving examination in their own right, provide a misleading picture of mass shootings as a whole. The motives and measures required to prevent incidents in which a perpetrator is trying to inflict mass casualties and kill people indiscriminately are very different from more limited attacks that target specific people or that arise from spontaneous disputes. The everyday mass shootings that often occur in communities inhabited largely by people of color

receive less coverage and are less likely to convey the humanity of the victims.<sup>38</sup>

Chapter 2 discusses the definition of mass shooting adopted in the present study and the source used to identify mass shootings occurring in 2019 and 2020, as well as the reasoning behind these choices. You will see that the choices made regarding how we define mass shootings have an enormous impact on the number of shootings we find. Chapter 3 addresses the following question: Are mass shootings becoming more frequent and lethal? The chapter also covers the factors accounting for this trend.

Chapter 4 explains the high levels of mass shootings in the US. Explanations include the high rates of gun ownership and permissive gun laws, persistent poverty, the growing rates of depression and suicide among the young, and the role of social contagion—i.e., the idea that some shooters are influenced by previous shooters and try to emulate and outdo those that have gone before them in the carnage they produce. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study of over a thousand mass shootings occurring in 2019–2020. The chapter displays regional and state differences in the number of mass shootings; identifies the cities with the largest number of shootings; explores suspect and victim characteristics, weapons used, and the link between race and mass shootings; and examines high-casualty shootings and the settings in which they occur and the most common features/motives of shootings.

Chapters 6 and 7 present some recommendations aimed to reduce the number of shootings or at least to mitigate them. Chapter 6 focuses on societal factors other than changing gun laws, such as law enforcement initiatives, violence interruption, modifications of the physical environmental, tackling poverty, and promoting peaceful conflict resolution. Significant progress in preventing mass shootings cannot be achieved without tackling social conditions as most mass shootings are committed in environments fraught with hopelessness and danger. Chapter 7 presents solutions to mass shootings that include a licensing system for gun owners, a ban on military-

*Preventing Mass Shootings in America*

style weapons, greater regulation of gun carrying, a safe storage requirement, increased regulation of dealers, and ensuring that those posing a grave danger to the community cannot acquire or possess firearms.



### 3

## Trends in Mass Shootings

While adopting different definitions of mass shootings and varying time frames, a number of studies point in the same direction: Mass shootings are becoming more frequent and more lethal.

A study by the Congressional Research Service examined public shootings in which four or more people were killed over a 44-year period from 1970 to 2013.<sup>60</sup> The study found that, with the exception of the 1990s, when the average number of fatalities per incident declined modestly, these events became more frequent and lethal over time (Table 4). When fatal and nonfatal injuries were considered, casualties nearly doubled from 7.5 per incident in the 1970s to 13.7 per incident in the 2010s.

**Table 4. The Number and Severity of Public Mass Shootings from 1970-2013**

<b>YEARS</b>	<b>INCIDENTS PER YEAR</b>	<b>VICTIMS MURDERED PER INCIDENT</b>
<b>1970-79</b>	1.1	5.5
<b>1980-89</b>	2.7	6.1
<b>1990-99</b>	4.0	5.6
<b>2000-09</b>	4.1	6.4
<b>2010-2013</b>	4.5	7.4

Source: Congressional Research Service

My own analysis in *Confronting Gun Violence in America* pointed in the same direction.<sup>61</sup> I used *Mother Jones'* list of mass shootings from 1982–2015. This source also focused on

## CARNAGE

public shootings as opposed to domestic, felony, or gang-related incidents. The analysis showed that the number of mass shootings per year more than doubled from the 1980s and 1990s to the 2000s. From 2010 to 2015, the number of cases per year nearly doubled once again from the 1990s and 2000s and more than quadrupled from the annual number of cases in the 1980s. Total fatalities per year increased each decade, but the number of fatalities per shooting was highest in the 1980s. This situation was due to the impact of two very large mass killings on the relatively small number of incidents in the 1980s. It may also be the case that lower-casualty mass shootings in the more distant past and the pre-Internet era may be missed more often than high-casualty shootings, thereby artificially raising the average number of fatalities per incident.

The cable news network CNN has examined the country's deadliest mass shootings over a 70-year period from 1949 to 2019.<sup>62</sup> Those shootings in which 10 or more victims were killed were included. The list did not include domestic and gang-related incidents. Of the 26 mass shootings identified, 13 (50%) took place in the last 10 years and 17 or nearly two out of three occurred since 2007.

Louis Klarevas of Columbia University traced gun massacres in which six or more victims died back to 1966, the year in which C. Whitman, the former Marine sharpshooter, climbed up to the observation deck atop the University of Texas Tower in Austin and opened fire, killing 14 people and wounding 31 on the campus below.<sup>63</sup> Klarevas found that the number of gun massacres fluctuated within a narrow range (15–22 per 10-year period) over the first four decades of his study (1966–75, 1976–85, 1986–95, and 1996–2005). However, the number of these incidents increased dramatically to 39 from 2006–2015. He found that the death toll per incident also increased steadily over time, with the exception of 1996–2005. During 1966–75, an average of about seven people were killed per massacre. This number rose to an average of nine fatalities from 2006–2015. Klarevas' study showed that the number and lethality of high-

casualty mass shootings have risen, especially from the mid-2000s.

The finding that the number of mass shootings has risen and that many of the deadliest mass shootings have occurred in the last decade or so is striking in light of significant improvements in the medical response and treatment of bullet wounds over the last 70 years. As an illustration of improving survival rates, an Indiana study conducted in the 1970s found that mortality rates for gunshot wounds to the abdomen declined sharply over time. These rates fell from 60% in the 1930s to 13% by the 1960s.<sup>64</sup> Thus, survival rates during that time more than doubled (from 40% to 87%).

More recently, emergency room doctors who treat individuals with gunshot and knife wounds indicate that survival rates have risen due to the spread of hospital trauma centers, the increased use of helicopters to transport patients, improved training of first responders, and lessons learned from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. C. William Schwab, a surgeon and director of the Firearm and Injury Center at the University of Pennsylvania, states that many more people are being saved than was the case just 10 years ago.

To illustrate, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Electronic Injury Surveillance System-All Injury Program show that serious assaults by gunfire requiring a hospital stay rose by 47 % to 30,759 in 2011 from 20,844 in 2001.<sup>65</sup> For the same years, homicides in the US declined by about 20% from 15,980 in 2001 to 12,664 in 2011. Thus, despite a large increase in serious injuries by firearm, the mortality rate declined.

Andrew Peitzman, chief of general surgery and trauma services at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, notes that trauma doctors have revolutionized the care of gunshot wounds over the last 30 years.<sup>66</sup> Peitzman adds that the typical shooting of 30 years ago often involved a .22-caliber Saturday Night Special, while the common shooting today involves a

## CARNAGE

9mm semiautomatic pistol, which has larger bullets and can fire more quickly. The typical shooting victim today has at least three bullet wounds.

Whether it is due to a larger number of motivated offenders or more lethal weapons, or some combination of the two, it is clear that despite improvements in the medical response and treatments, deaths continue to rise. The medical advances are masking what would otherwise be even a more serious situation.

More immediate trends provide little comfort as mass shootings seem to have become a daily occurrence in America and there are days when multiple incidents occur. Table 5 shows that mass shootings, as defined in this study, have increased noticeably from 2014. In 2014, the Gun Violence Archive recorded 269 mass shootings. From 2015 to 2018, the number of mass shootings fluctuated between 335 and 382 incidents per year—about one incident per day. In 2019, mass shootings reached a new level, with 417 incidents in a single year—more than one per day. In 2020, the record number of mass shootings reached in 2019 was obliterated. The record number of 417 reached in 2019 was reached on September 3, 2020, after just eight months of the year had elapsed. A total of 612 mass shootings was recorded for 2020, an increase over 2019 of 46.8% and more than double the number of cases seen in 2014. On July 5, 2020, there were 15 mass shootings and few days went by in 2020 without at least one mass shooting.

**Table 5. Trends in Mass Shootings in America—2014–2020**

YEAR	# OF MASS SHOOTINGS
<b>2014</b>	269
<b>2015</b>	335
<b>2016</b>	382
<b>2017</b>	346
<b>2018</b>	337
<b>2019</b>	417
<b>2020</b>	612

Source: Gun Violence Archive

## *Preventing Mass Shootings in America*

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a marked impact on mass shootings. Looking at Table 6, we see that as of the end of March 2020, the month in which many states began to lock down, there were just four more cases in 2020 than in 2019 (71 to 67). In the initial wave of the pandemic, the largest number of states had stay-at-home and related orders during the month of April.<sup>67</sup> Given the restrictions, it is not surprising that the number of mass shootings declined from 2019 to 2020 during that month (33 to 26). By the end of May 2020, many states had begun to ease their restrictions and the number of mass shootings again exceeded those in 2019, but not by a wide margin (62 to 48).

The increase in mass shootings in 2020 could not be accounted for by the normal seasonal uptick in these incidents. From January to May 2019, there was an average of just under 30 mass shootings per month, while in the same months of 2020 there was an average of 31 mass shootings per month. In the summer months of 2019 (June to August), mass shootings averaged 45 cases per month, a 52% increase from January to May of that year. However, in 2020, there was a 177% increase in cases from the first five months of the year to the summer months (31 to 86 cases). Thus, seasonal variations could not account for the near tripling of mass shootings from June to August 2020. In the summer of 2020, there was an astounding average of nearly three mass shootings per day!

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**Table 6. Number of Mass Shootings by Month, 2019 and 2020**

<b>MONTH</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>JANUARY</b>	27	25
<b>FEBRUARY</b>	20	21
<b>MARCH (2020 LOCKDOWNS BEGIN)</b>	20	25
<b>APRIL</b>	33	26
<b>MAY (2020 LOCKDOWNS LIFTING)</b>	48	62
<b>JUNE</b>	53	95
<b>JULY</b>	42	88
<b>AUGUST</b>	40	78
<b>SEPTEMBER</b>	34	67
<b>OCTOBER</b>	33	51
<b>NOVEMBER</b>	32	50
<b>DECEMBER</b>	34	25
<b>TOTAL</b>	416*	613*

Source: Gun Violence Archive

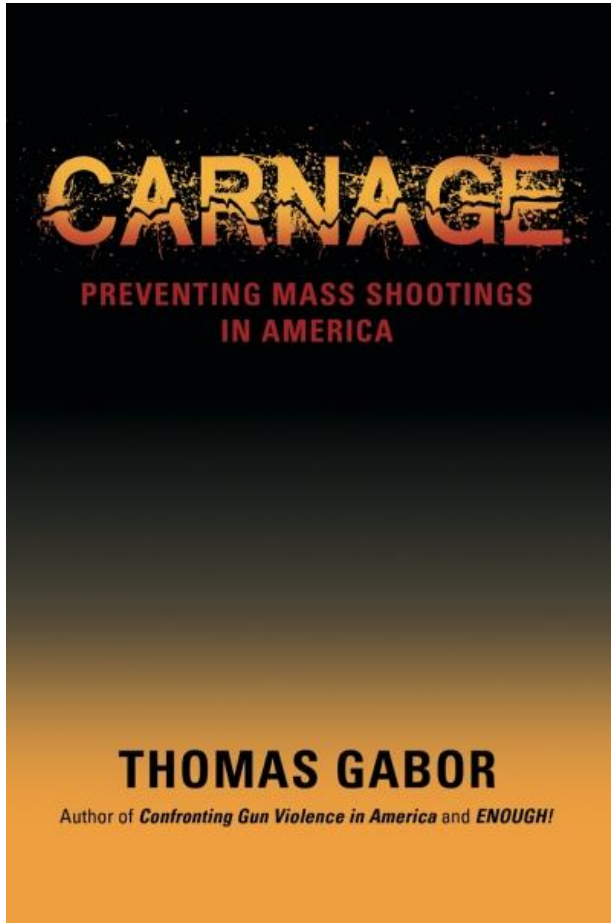
\*May be slight variation from GVA’s website as they may add or delete a case if information becomes available that changes its status as a mass shooting

Just as many states were emerging from their lockdowns, a second major issue that has long dogged this country came to the fore on May 25, 2020. That evening in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd, an African American man recently unemployed due to the pandemic, was purchasing cigarettes with what the clerk believed was a counterfeit \$20 bill.<sup>68</sup> The young clerk called police and two officers arrived. By that time, Floyd was sitting in a car nearby with two other people. Officer Thomas Lane approached the vehicle, pulled out his gun, and instructed Floyd to show his hands. Lane pulled Floyd out of the car and, subsequently, Floyd resisted being handcuffed. Once handcuffed, he became compliant, as he had been when the police initially approached his vehicle. A struggle did occur when officers tried to put Floyd in their squad car.

Officer Derek Chauvin arrived at the scene and he and other officers were involved in a further attempt to put Floyd in the

police car. Floyd complained he was claustrophobic and Chauvin pulled Floyd away from the passenger side, causing him to fall to the ground, where he lay face down, still in handcuffs. This is when witnesses began to film Floyd, who appeared to be in a distressed state. While restrained by officers, Chauvin placed his left knee between Floyd's head and neck. For just under eight minutes, Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck. Transcripts obtained from bodycams worn by the officers showed Floyd complained over 20 times that he could not breathe. He pleaded for his mother and begged for his life. He knew that he was about to die.

The killing of George Floyd by police was met with revulsion by Americans of every race and ignited protests throughout the country. The frustration and economic suffering spawned by the pandemic-related lockdowns, as well as the anger and despair brought on by the killing of Floyd and several other African Americans by the police, were powerful factors in the surge of mass shootings seen in the summer and fall of 2020. Chapter 4 discusses these and other factors shaping the US's status as a global outlier in its high volume of mass shootings.



*In his book CARNAGE, Thomas Gabor examines the 1,000+ mass shootings in America in 2019-2020. Gabor offers solutions ranging from tackling persistent poverty and defusing vendetta-like conflicts to various gun law reforms.*

## **CARNAGE: Preventing Mass Shootings in America**

By Thomas Gabor

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