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## From “The Loss of the Innocents” to “Crisis Actors”: Media Portrayal of Rampage School Shootings From 1998-2021

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From “The Loss of the Innocents” to “Crisis Actors”:  
Media Portrayal of Rampage School Shootings From 1998-2021

By  
Justice E. Greene

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
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From “The Loss of the Innocents” to “Crisis Actors”: Media Portrayal of Rampage School Shootings From 1998-2021

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The United States has been plagued by mass shootings since 1966, with an increase beginning in the 1980s (The Violence Project 2022). Gun violence is a uniquely American issue that lawmakers seem to do little about. Whenever a mass shooting occurs, conversations often center around two things: guns and the Second Amendment, which protects citizens' constitutional right to bear arms, and the shooter's individual psychology. While both the political and media narrative around mass shootings debates a solution about guns that may prevent future shootings with no real result, victims struggle to heal after a massacre they believed could never happen in their community. Likewise, with a focus on the killer and what could have possibly driven him to commit such a heinous act, reporters seem to ignore the negative impact their coverage can have on both victims and viewers. Media sources choose how the tragedy is narrated and shape how the public will view the problem. Is it guns? Mental health? Bullying? How media frames them influences how the rest of us understand this uniquely American phenomenon. This powerful shaping force is the subject of this study.

The first recorded mass shooting according to The Violence Project (2022) was in Austin, Texas in 1966. A 25-year-old man killed 15 people and injured another 13 at the University of Texas at Austin. The Congressional Research Service (2015:np) defines a mass shooting as:

a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms, within one event, and in one or more locations in close proximity. Similarly, a "mass public shooting" is defined to mean a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms, within one event, in at least one or more public locations, such as a workplace, school, restaurant, house of worship, neighborhood, or other public setting.

Different media sources will report different amounts of mass shootings based on what they consider to be the definition of a mass shooting. Since there is not a consistent definition, different sources can report differently on what they consider to be a mass shooting. According to the Gun Violence Archive (2022), which is an “independent research and data collection organization,” the threshold for an event to be a “mass shooting” is when four or more victims are shot or killed, not including the shooter. Unlike the Congressional Research Service that specifies that four or more victims are murdered, the Gun Violence Archive also includes those who were injured but survived the shooting. In 2019, the Gun Violence Archive (n.d.) reported 417 mass shootings. This is drastically different from the eight that were reported by The Violence Project (2022), which follows the Congressional Research Service definition. For the remainder of this introduction, the definition established by the Congressional Research Service will be used because it is consistent with that used for The Violence Project’s Mass Shooter Database (2022). Additionally, in accordance with the No Notoriety Campaign (N.d.), which aims to “reduce rampage acts of mass violence due to media-inspired fame”, I will not use shooters’ names, but will refer to the shootings by their location. I describe this in more detail later.

Between August 1966 and May 2022, there have been 182 mass shootings that fit this definition of four or more killed (The Violence Project 2022). The majority have taken place in workplaces by employees, many of whom had recently been fired and were resentful. The deadliest year for mass shootings was 2017, resulting in 106 fatalities and 962 injuries (The Violence Project 2022). That year, a man used an arsenal of guns to shoot music festival attendees out of his Las Vegas hotel window, killing 58 and injuring 887. This has been the deadliest mass shooting to date.

Gender and reported sexuality are one of the only commonalities among perpetrators of mass shootings. Overwhelmingly, perpetrators are heterosexual men. Out of the 181 shooters that The Violence Project (2022) looked at, only four were female and only two of those females acted alone. Female perpetrators were involved in workplace, government building/place of civic importance, and retail shootings. The average age of mass shooters is 34. The youngest perpetrator was 11 (school shooting) and the oldest was 70 (retail) (The Violence Project 2022). All but seven shooters were reported to be heterosexual.

According to The Violence Project (2022), there have been 1,267 victims of mass shootings. 198 are victims of shootings specifically at either a K-12 school or college/university. The average age for a victim of a mass shooting is 36. Fifty-eight percent of victims of all mass shootings were male and a majority of victims of mass shootings are white (The Violence Project 2022). It was also found that many victims (55%) were not known to the perpetrator prior to the shooting, making many of them random and not targeted acts of violence.

Although school shootings only account for 16% of all mass shootings, it is important to research school shootings, specifically, because they are on average deadlier than other mass shootings—there is an average of nine deaths per school shooting compared to an average of seven deaths per all mass shootings (The Violence Project 2022). Mass shootings are slightly more likely to have more living victims than school shootings, the average amount of living victims for a mass shooting being 11 compared to 10 for school shootings (Mass Shooting Database 2022). It is more likely for victims to not know the perpetrator of a mass shooting. However, there was no distinction on whether victims of a school shooting were likely to know or not know the perpetrator.



Using The Violence Project's (2022) database, I separated school specific shootings from shootings that happened elsewhere. With this separation, there were 23 school shootings and 158 mass shootings that were not in an educational setting. Data comparisons uncovered differences in the profiles and responses to perpetrators of mass shootings overall, and mass shootings in schools specifically. Below, I will distinguish the data by using the term "school shooting" to refer to shootings that happened at either a K-12 school or college/university and "mass shooting" to encompass all shootings that happened outside of an educational setting.

While both victims of mass shootings (48%) and school shootings (67%) were most likely to be white, Latinx victims (15%) were the largest ethnic/racial percentage among victims, while Asian victims (11%) were found more often in school shootings (The Violence Project 2022). When it comes to perpetrators, 65% of school shooters and 51% of mass shooters were white. For perpetrators that were not white, Black perpetrators (23%) were more prevalent in mass shootings, whereas Asian perpetrators (17%) were more prevalent in school shootings. Prior to the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, there were no Latinx school shooting perpetrators. The average age of a victim of a school shooting is 23, which is significantly lower than the average age of 38 for victims of mass shootings (The Violence Project 2022). This is expected, since many of the shootings happen in K-12 settings, where majority of students are under the age of 18. 60% of mass shooting victims are male, but in school shootings, victims are more likely to be female (52%).

A common narrative around school shooters is that their motive is revenge against a woman or women in general (Silva et al. 2021). The Isla Vista perpetrator, for example, was motivated by his hatred of women and the fact that women have never been attracted to him (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017). This pattern is consistent with research showing a connection

to male shooters' domestic violence (Silva et al. 2021). This could account for the slightly higher rates of female to male victims in school shootings, although the difference is not significant.

Victims of school shootings are more likely to know their perpetrator than other mass shootings due to the location of the massacre and the likelihood that the shooter is a schoolmate. In fact, 87% of perpetrators of school shooting are considered to be "insiders," which The Violence Project (2022) defines as someone who had an "existing relationship with the shooting(s) site." Compared to only 37% of mass shooters who are considered "insiders," this is significant. School shootings and mass shootings are also likely to happen in different areas. Over half (55%) of mass shootings happened in urban areas, whereas 74% of school shootings happen in either rural or suburban areas (The Violence Project 2022).

A majority of school shooting perpetrators had less than a high school education (48%) (The Violence Project 2022). This is easily explained by the fact that 43% of school shooting perpetrators were under the age of 18 at the time of the attack. Mass shooting perpetrators were more likely to have some college or trade school education at the time of the massacre (27%). It is important to note that 31% of mass shooting perpetrators' education level is unknown (The Violence Project 2022).

Unsurprisingly, perpetrators of mass shootings are more likely to have a criminal record compared to school shooters. Sixty percent of mass shooters have a criminal record, compared to only 39% of school shooters (The Violence Project 2022). This is probably due to the age of school shooters, who are typically much younger than mass shooters and have not had the same time to commit and be charged with criminal activity. According to The Violence Project (2022), the average age of a school shooter is twenty-two, compared to thirty-five for mass shootings.

The Violence Project (2022) found that when it comes to mass and school shooting perpetrators, they are more likely to be single and show signs of crisis prior to the shooting. Nearly all (91%) school shooters and 78% of mass shooters have shown signs of crisis, which is defined as “current circumstances overwhelming coping mechanisms causing a marked change in behavior from baseline” (The Violence Project 2022). This is an important finding in the research around perpetrators of mass shootings, including school shootings, because this commonality opens the door to conversations about individualized solutions to those who are showing signs of crisis in communities, whether or not they would commit a heinous act.

School shooters are significantly more likely to plan their attacks compared to mass shooters. While only 20% of mass shooters planned their attacks, 83% of school shooters did (The Violence Project 2022). Research also found that 74% of school shooting perpetrators engaged in leakage prior to the shooting. Leakage is defined as “communication to a third party of an intent to do harm,” either through physical conversations, handwritten letters, or electronic communications (The Violence Project 2022). This means that a majority of shooters had told someone about their plans prior to the attack. Unlike school shootings, only 40% of mass shooting perpetrators communicated plans of the attack prior to the shooting.

According to The Violence Project (2022), school shooting perpetrators were also more likely to show a “notable or obsessive interest in firearms” prior to the attack compared to mass shooting perpetrators. Seventy percent of school shooting perpetrators showed interest, whereas only 27% of mass shooting perpetrators were reported as showing an interest in firearms. According to a November 2018 PowerPoint presentation by Detective Chris Lyons at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission Meeting which was uploaded by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the perpetrator of the February 2018

shooting uploaded multiple photographs of weapons to Instagram, including a photograph of multiple guns captioned “arsenal,” prior to the shooting.

Mass shooting perpetrators are more likely to be apprehended after the massacre (41%), while school shooting perpetrators are more likely to kill themselves prior to being found (52%) (The Violence Project 2022). For those that are apprehended, 31% of mass shooting perpetrators received the death penalty and 29% received a sentence of life without parole. Interestingly, only 22% of school shooting perpetrators were sentenced to life without parole or juvenile detention. It is important to note that 33% of school shooting perpetrators still have a pending trial. While the database has not been updated yet, the perpetrator of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida was recommended life without parole by a jury in October 2022 (Death Penalty Information Center 2022).

This thesis will specifically focus on mass school shootings—shootings that have happened at either a K-12 or college/university campus. While this type of mass shooting does not encompass the majority of mass shootings (20%, according to The Violence Project [2022]), I believe it is still extremely important to discuss. According to a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center, 57% of teenagers said they were either very worried or somewhat worried “about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school.” While it is important to note that this survey happened a few months after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida that killed 17 and injured 17 others, it does not change the fact that students are afraid to attend school. With ongoing lockdown drills and consistent media coverage of gun violence on school campuses, students are burdened with the fear of violence on top of the academic requirements and social aspects that are necessary for growth during their time in school. This fear can be affected by the way these shootings are portrayed to audiences. To examine a small slice of the media coverage of school

shootings, this thesis will examine how the *New York Times* reports school shootings over a span of 23 years.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

When it comes to rampage school shootings, the immediate and long-term negative on the targeted community are undeniable. Newman and Fox (2009:1287-1288) define a rampage school shooting as a shooting in which:

the location of the incident is a “public stage” either on the school property or at a school-related function; the shooters must be current or former students of the school; there must be multiple victims or, at the very least, multiple targets; and although some victims may be targeted specifically because they have wronged the shooter, there are typically others who are chosen only for their symbolic significance or are shot at random.

This definition differs from the earlier mentioned mass shooting definition by the Congressional Research Service with the number of deceased victims and location of the shooting. For this literature review, I focus on Newman and Fox’s definition of a rampage school shooting as it more accurately represents rampage school shootings as a whole. I will further narrow this definition for my sample, which will be discussed in more detail later on.

Arguments have been made that media representation of mass shootings creates a moral panic, trying to enforce the idea that these events happen more often than they do (Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford 2015; Silva and Capellan 2019). While the argument that mass shootings are statistically rare is strong, it does not change the fact that there are communities that have gone through the pain and suffering and will continue to in the future. It is important to discuss media coverage as it relates to rampage school shootings regardless of the number of incidents because of the growing victim count as these tragedies continue to occur year after year.

Media coverage can impact the way that viewers regard an issue based on what they decide is newsworthy. Newsworthiness is defined as “the criteria by which news producers

choose which of all known events are to be presented to the public as news events” (Surette 1998:60). A plethora of events happen each day, so it is the media source’s responsibility to decide what should be shared to the public. This includes rampage school shootings—which shootings are likely to be shown and are all likely to receive the same screen time?

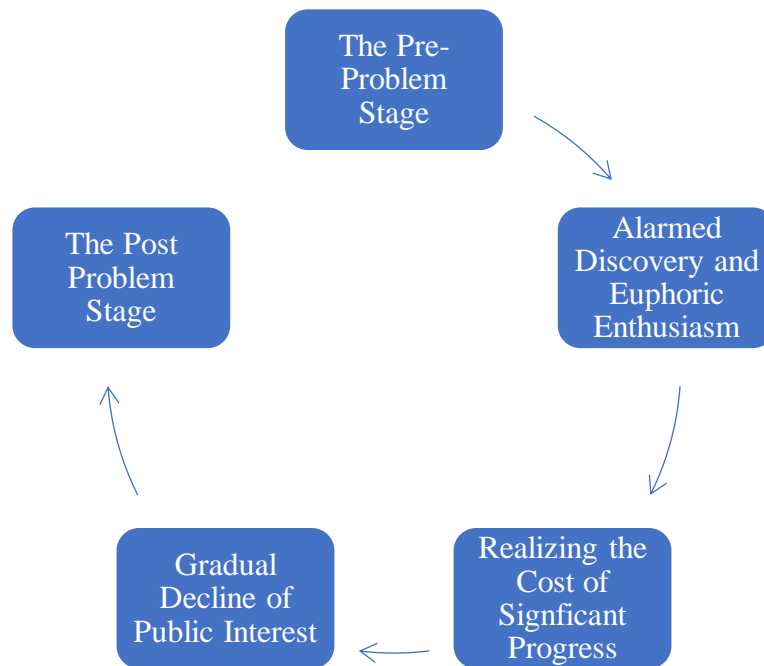
### **Issue-Attention Cycle**

Downs (1972) uses the term “issue-attention cycle” to describe issues that gain quick attention by the media before losing momentum, which can impact any potential systematic or societal change. Down’s “issue-attention cycle” is beneficial in understanding the pattern that many social problems that are reported by media sources fall into and can be seen in Figure 1 (1972). This cycle has five stages: (1) the pre-problem stage, (2) alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, (3) realizing the cost of significant progress, (4) gradual decline of intense public interest, and 5) the post-problem stage. All social problems begin in the pre-problem stage, which is when the majority of the general public is not aware of the issue. The problem already exists, and experts are aware of it, but it has not gained awareness from media sources.

In the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage, the public becomes aware of the issue. A big aspect of this phase is not only awareness, but that the public believes that the problem is solvable. Downs notes that “this outlook is rooted in the great American tradition of optimistically viewing most obstacles to social progress as *external* to the structure of society itself... solved *without any fundamental reordering of society itself*” (1972:39; emphasis in original). In this view, if a society, especially its political figures, works hard enough, the problem can be solved. At this point, media sources discuss the multiple ways that a problem can be solved, none of which include a reworking of society. Common solutions regarding mass

shootings include gun control, mental healthcare, and a discussion around violent videogames, for example.

Figure 1: The Issue-Attention Cycle, Adapted from Downs 1972



The next phase, realizing the cost of significant progress, focuses on the realizations of the difficulty of solving the problem. The idea that the problem can be solved is met with the understanding of the costs that come with it. At this point, the general population also realizes that the problem itself “results from arrangements that are providing significant benefit to someone—often to millions” (Downs 1972:40). In the case of mass shootings, many think the solutions is tighter gun restrictions. The public would have to decide if such progress is worth the cost, not only financial, but in terms of tensions created given the ideological ties in the U.S. between guns and individual rights and freedoms. The public has to decide if progress is worth the cost.



During the gradual decline of public interest phase, people experience three reactions to the cost of social progress: discouraged, threatened, or bored. Some people who may want to make a change may feel discouraged by the effort it may take to solve the problem. It can feel discouraging to go against not only large gun lobbies, but American gun culture. Others feel threatened, feeling as if their rights are being taken away. This is evident in the arguments surrounding gun control that appear after not only mass shootings, but any publicized gun deaths. People may experience boredom, potentially from hearing about the problem too much. Downs argues that most people feel a combination of these three emotions (1972). And when people are discouraged, threatened, or bored, progress is difficult to make.

The final stage of the issue-attention cycle is the post-problem stage. At this point, media coverage is focused on a new issue entering the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage. More people are aware of the problem than in the pre-problem stage, but it is not the focus of media reporting and the public's attention. Even when an issue enters this stage, it may continue to receive sporadic attention, when something important happens in relation to the problem. For example, when a perpetrator of a mass shooting is going through a trial, media coverage will increase. Issues in this stage are also more likely to receive greater public attention than those who are in the pre-problem stage because people have already become aware of the issue (Downs 1972).

### **Three Conditions of Public Attention**

Rampage school shootings fit into the three conditions that Downs (1972) describes as being necessary for an event to capture public attention. The first condition is that the event is not something experienced by the general masses (Downs 1972). These rampage shootings are not experienced by most United States citizens. According to a study by Zimmerman et. al

(2019), there have been 1,316 rampage school shootings in the United States between 1970 and 2019. While this may seem like a plethora of schools to experience a traumatic rampage school shooting, it is a small percentage of the 137,432 educational institutions in the United States as of 2018 (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.) That leaves plenty of schools and individuals who have not experienced a rampage school shooting, making a rampage school shooting something that is not experienced by the masses.

The second condition is that the event is “generated by social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a majority ... of the population” (Downs 1972:41). According to a 2020 Gallup poll, 32% of survey participants owned a gun and 44% lived in a household that had a gun (Saad 2020). Gun ownership is not only a privilege, but a right protected by our Constitutional Second Amendment. Many Americans see gun ownership as a benefit that other countries do not provide. Conversations of gun rights arise when gun violence occurs, affecting large numbers of Americans. When mass shootings occur, gun sales increase with the topic of gun control. After both the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut and the Inland Regional Center shooting in San Bernadino, California, California saw a significant rise in handgun sales (Studdert et al. 2017). The threat to a right that many people believe they benefit from creates discourse, which is seen in consistent coverage of gun rights and gun control after mass shootings.

The third condition that Downs (1972) discusses is that events must be exciting. Shootings that are more well-known all have “exciting” factors that others might not. Columbine High School was one of the first shootings to gain media attention because of the age of the perpetrators, location, and victim count. Sandy Hook Elementary School’s victims were younger than any other rampage school shooting. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University’s

victim count was higher than any other rampage school shooting. The students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School made news with protests against gun violence. The alleged killer at Oxford High School's parents gained media attention after being arrested for involuntary manslaughter in relation to their son's actions. Each of these shootings provided something to media coverage that had not been seen before. This is what Downs suggests as exciting "because news is 'consumed' by much of the American public... largely as a form of entertainment" (1972:42).

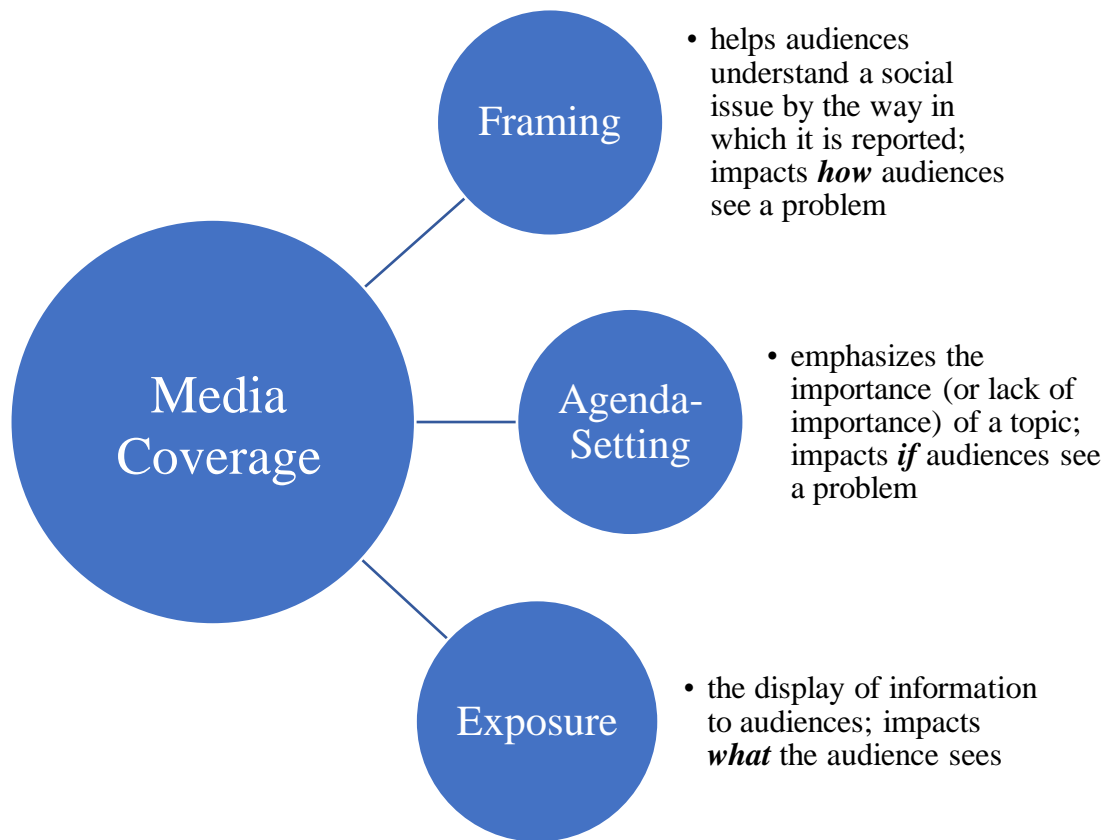
It is important to acknowledge, as Silva and Capellan (2019) point out, the symbiotic relationship between mass shootings and media coverage. With media conglomerates' need of crime to gain viewership, and the "public stage" element of a mass shooting, these two forces rely on one another to succeed (Silva and Capellan 2019). While being public is a necessity of rampage school shootings, perpetrators have also utilized media coverage to their benefit. The Virginia Tech shooter sent photographs, writings, and video to NBC News, which they continuously showed (American Psychological Association 2007). The American Psychological Association (2017) sent out a news release urging news outlets to stop showing the disturbing images because not only were they traumatic to the victims but could also cause copycat incidents to occur. Leaving behind a token, such as manifestos or photographs, is not unusual for perpetrators (The Violence Project 2022). If media organizations share these tokens as part of their coverage, they help to keep the event "exciting" in these terms.

### **Aspects of Media Coverage**

Three terms that are important to understand when it comes to media coverage are agenda-setting, framing, and exposure. All of these are different ways that impact how audiences understand coverage. Figure 2 gives a brief overview of these three terms. Agenda-setting is

defined as “the ways in which those who work within the media decide what is important enough to be reported and what is ignored” (Jewkes 2015:293). Agenda-setting is the idea that emphasis on certain topics has a direct correlation to whether audiences view the topic as important (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Since journalists are attempting to forecast what they think audiences find important, audiences do not have much say in this matter. When I discuss agenda-setting in this thesis, I examine whether or not mass media’s emphasis on rampage school shootings impacts how important an audience views the shooting.

Figure 2: Aspects of Media Coverage



Along with agenda-setting, framing is important in understanding media coverage. Frame analysis originates from Goffman’s (1974) original articulation but, for the purposes of this research, Scheufele and Tewksbury’s (2007) application in the context of news reporting will be

presented. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007:11) define framing as “the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences.” An important aspect of framing for journalists is helping audiences understand difficult issues. Schildkraut and Muschert (2014) emphasize that news media use different frames throughout the span of an event.

It is important to acknowledge the difference between agenda-setting and framing. While agenda-setting emphasizes the importance (or lack of importance) of a topic, framing impacts how the audience understands a topic. If two different media sources use different frames to discuss a topic, audiences might have different viewpoints on the same topic. This thesis will examine how agenda-setting impacts coverage over a twenty-three-year period examining nine different shootings through one source, the *New York Times*.

Another important term when it comes to media coverage is exposure. Exposure is what journalists choose for the audience to see. In terms of school shootings, this could include images of the scene, the perpetrator, and victims, for example. Exposure to media coverage of school shootings can have both an immediate and lasting impact, especially to those who have been victims to similar tragedies.

### **Agenda-Setting**

Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith (2017) found in a newspaper analysis of 90 mass shootings that 21 shootings received no coverage. Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith (2017) suggest that events that had a larger number of victims, a higher level of violence, and whether the shooter was living plays a substantial role in the amount of coverage an event received. Shootings that happened shortly after another shooting were less likely to receive as much, if any, coverage compared to the one already making headlines (Schildkraut et al. 2017). Their

research may help to understand why the shootings such as the ones at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas are more prevalent in media today than those with fewer deaths such as the ones that happened in Marysville, Washington and Jonesboro, Arkansas.

While residents in places that receive less media coverage have the potential to feel as if their experience are less valid than those who receive continuous press, research shows that those who do receive nonstop attention feel that it makes the healing much more difficult. From interviews with victims of the Sandy Hook murders, Cacciatore and Kurker (2020) found that families felt intruded upon by the attention they received from journalists. Interviewees discussed how newsmakers “were parked outside their homes for weeks, some sitting in trees to obtain photographs” (Cacciatore and Kurker 2020:5). This sort of experience was a constant reminder of the trauma the family was trying to work through at the time of the incident. The participants in this study also found that the “public consumption of their private tragedies” led to more suffering (Cacciatore and Kurker 2020:6). Though they understood the coverage was due to the shocking nature of the crime committed, it did not change that they felt as though their stories were a way for people to feel like they were “in the know” (Cacciatore and Kurker 2020:6).

While victims, survivors, and their families are the ones often negatively affected by media coverage, they are usually not discussed as often as perpetrators. After analyzing U.S. newspaper coverage of the Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook Elementary, and Umpqua Community College shootings, Dahmen (2018) found that perpetrators were sixteen times more likely to receive photographic coverage. These photos were often larger, whereas photographs of victims and communities were either small or mugshot size (Dahmen 2018). Photographs of the Sandy

Hook Elementary School perpetrator were not as prominent as perpetrators of other shootings, which Dahmen (2018) hypothesizes could be because the perpetrator was not a current student like in the other shootings analyzed, or because the age of the victims was so much younger than others.

Park et al. (2012) examined the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech shootings and found that not only was race discussed in media coverage the first few days after the shooting, but it was also discussed long after news coverage had decreased. The agenda that was being set in the articles analyzed by Park et al. (2012) was how the perpetrators racial identity was relevant during the shooting. When discussing the future of rampage school shootings and corrective measures, Park et al. (2012) found that the race of the perpetrator was rarely discussed, inferring that race had been used during Virginia Tech reporting as a distraction rather than an important factor. It is important to acknowledge the ways that agenda-setting takes form during news reports and how effective (or ineffective) it can be at deciding what is important and newsworthy.

### **Framing**

The main goal journalists hope to accomplish with frame changing is continued viewership from their audience because of the fresh, new stories they continue to show (Schildkraut and Muschert 2014). After all, journalists are in the business of selling newspapers and airtime, so they must continue to offer something “new” to remain viable. Immediately after reporting of a shooting, the focus is more likely to be on the individuals and the community, yet as time progresses focus shifts onto the effects of society as a whole (Muschert and Carr 2006). Instead of focusing on the specifics of the tragedy, media focuses on the long-term adverse effects that the tragedy can have on a nation. Nevertheless, a community in mourning is still the

center of conversation and the journalists' framing of the conversation can have a negative impact on the collective consciousness.

Park et. al (2012) noted how race and ethnicity impacted how news sources reported rampage school shootings. Their analysis of the Virginia Tech shooting, where the perpetrator was a Korean immigrant, found that his race was discussed more often than during reporting of the Columbine High School shooting, where both shooters were white. Mentions of race and ethnicity were within the first paragraph, making it a distinguishing factor. Not only did news articles discuss race and ethnicity more, but some also attempted to create an "us" versus "them" narrative, whether it be related to Korean Americans, South Koreans, or the perpetrator's family (Park et. al 2012). It is important to acknowledge if, and if so, how identities such as race, ethnicity, or gender impact both the frequency and nature of reporting.

Framing impacts how a news story is portrayed, potentially impacting how the audience will view the story. Jashinsky et al. (2017) found that conversation around gun violence was impacted by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that killed 27, a majority being under the age of 10. The age of the victims probably had an impact on how often this story was reported and the narrative around it. Individuals were more often blamed for gun violence in news reports prior to Sandy Hook, whereas after the blame shifted to lawmakers and the executive government (Jashinsky et al. 2017). There were calls to hold government officials responsible for the deaths of these children, which was not as common in reporting prior to Sandy Hook Elementary School. The way that blame was framed impacted how people perceived ways to reduce gun violence.

Plenty of coverage of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting has been intertwined with the name Alex Jones. Alex Jones, host and creator of *infowars.com*, says that "the threat to



our liberties is a very real and present danger” and his role is to be “a unique voice that sifts through the information and exposes the underlying intentions” (Infowars 2022). Since 2012, he has used his “unique voice” to create a conspiracy that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was fake and manufactured by the United States Government (Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2019). He dismissed deceased victims as “child actors,” leading to harassment of families of victims by both Alex Jones himself and those who follow him. In 2022, Alex Jones was found guilty of defamation and ordered to pay the victims of the families of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting \$965 million. He admitted that the shooting was real, but the purpose of the verdict was to “scare us away from questioning Uvalde and what really happened there, or Parkland or any other event” (Hsu 2022:N.p.).

The framing of the shooting as a conspiracy has had detrimental effects not only on the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School but has also put into question the legitimacy of shootings since 2012. After the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, students were labeled with the term “crisis actor”–“insinuating they are benefiting monetarily from the performance of tragedy” (Conti 2018:440). The framing of these shootings as fake impacts the way that viewers interpret these events. According to a poll of 1,500 Americans conducted by The Economist/YouGov, 33% of Americans either agreed with or were not sure whether the statement “mass shootings have been faked by groups trying to promote stricter gun control laws” was true (Orth and Frankovic 2022).

## **Exposure**

Once journalists have begun to cover a story as tragic as a rampage school shooting, it may never disappear from the minds of many. Years after these tragedies occur, they are still discussed. Gunn and Beard (2009:199) introduce the idea of an “apocalyptic sublime” as a

“never ending crisis.” For example, Littleton, Colorado will always be known as the place of the Columbine shooting, despite the time that has passed since the massacre. In 2019, media began covering the ten-year anniversary of the Columbine shooting, re-opening wounds of a community that may never be able to fully heal. These are stories that newsmakers know will attract attention, creating revenue for themselves. The goal of newsmakers is to create a sense of emergency and they do this through a rush of information (Gunn and Beard 2009). With a focus on the quantity of information being released to audiences, media portrayal spends less time focusing on the accuracy of the details.

From that first breaking news coverage to yearly anniversary stories, research shows that media can play a negative part in the healing of the victims of rampage shootings (Fallahi, et al. 2009, Haravuori, et al. 2011). Exposure to media after a traumatic event can be harmful to victims. Fallahi, et al. (2009:132) found that after the Virginia Tech shooting, “students exposed to three or more hours of news coverage exhibited significantly more negative mental health symptoms than students watching news programs for less than three hours.” The same was found with young children, whether they were directly involved in the event or not. As illustrated in the Haravuori et al. study (2001), media showcasing images of minors can also create trauma for both those watching and the victims themselves. In the midst of tragedy, reporters interviewing minors without permission from parents can end up causing more harm in the healing process for those involved (Haravuori, et al. 2011). Victims are not in a healthy or rational mindset to accurately describe events or even understand the questions being asked by reporters while the event is initially occurring.

## **Media Responsibility**

Media outlets have the opportunity to help these grieving communities with a trauma-informed approach. According to Kay et al. (2010), reporters are hardly ever professionally trained on how to empathetically handle victim's trauma. Many reporters' first experience with a traumatic event in their journalism career is when they are given a story. Dworznik and Garvey (2019) researched 41 accredited journalism schools and found that only one offered a class specifically on how to interact with victims of trauma. Without formal training, reporters are unaware of the lasting effects their reporting can have on a community. Kay et al. (2010) found that members of a community felt disconnected, angry, and constantly retraumatized for years after the massacre. If reported with a trauma-informed approach, these feelings of anger and disconnect can become validated and ultimately lead to a continued healing process by both the individual and community as a whole. With a focus on frame changing and continued viewership, journalists are forced to focus on the content of the story rather than those grieving, even if that is not their intention.

Dahmen et al. (2018) found that while journalists reported ethical concerns in the way mass shootings are conveyed, there is overall satisfaction with the coverage. These reporters found it important to discuss both victims and perpetrators. Discussion on naming shooters in media coverage has become a point of contention. While some, like the participants in the study believe it is important to name the perpetrators, others find it more harmful (Dahmen et al. 2018). Some organizations were created to both inform and influence others to avoid giving shooters notoriety and the potential for copycats. The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training center (ALERRT) at Texas State University created their "Don't Name Them" program with this exact premise. Another example is parents of Aurora theater shooting

victim Alex Teves who have created the campaign No Notoriety, urging media not to post photographs or names of shooters by “calling for responsible media coverage for the sake of public safety” (No Notoriety, N.d.). Concerns about contagion or naming perpetrators were more likely among journalists who directly covered a shooting, such as being on the scene at the time (Dahmen et al. 2018).

Literature regarding media coverage, agenda-setting, framing, and media responsibility inform the approach I take in this analysis. While examining rampage school shootings over a 23-year period, some questions that will be asked are: How has reporting on rampage school shootings shifted over time? What does reporting look like over the course of a year? What makes some school shootings more likely to be discussed a year later while others fade quickly away from coverage?

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND DATA**

For the purpose of this research, I will be combining Newman and Fox's definition of rampage school shootings with the Congressional Research Service's definition. For this thesis, a rampage school shooting will be defined as a shooting on school property; by shooter(s) who were current or former students; where there were at least four deaths, not including the shooter(s), and the victims were either chosen for their symbolic significance or at random.

It is important to identify why some rampage school shootings were not chosen, as that will further illustrate the definition of rampage school shooting that I use. For example, the University of California, Santa Barbara shooting in Isla Vista, California was unique in how the perpetrator's blatant intentions, which were written in his 137-page manifesto. Misogyny was his main motive, quoting that his intentions were to "punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex" (Rodger 2014:132). This shooting does not fit into the definition, because the perpetrator was considered to be an "outsider," meaning he was not a current or former student of the school in which he committed his massacre. Only 13% of perpetrators of rampage school shootings are "outsiders," which creates a different relationship to the victims (The Violence Project 2022). Those who are current and former students of the school in which they commit their crime have some sort of relationship to that school that motivates them to commit the crime, whereas that is not the case for perpetrators of school shootings that have no connection to the school.

Another shooting that experienced a large amount of news coverage due to the police response as well as the young ages of the victims was the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas. This shooting gained a plethora of coverage because 73 minutes passed between when the first officer showed up to the scene and when they finally breached the building despite

having 376 officers on the scene (Texas House of Representatives 2022). Within those 73 minutes, the perpetrator murdered 20 in the school, not including his grandmother who he had killed at her house prior. Since this shooting happened May 24, 2022, this shooting will not have passed one full year until after this thesis has been defended which means I will not be able to analyze a year's worth of news reports.

The nine shootings that will be discussed are Westside Middle School, Columbine High School, Red Lake Senior High School, Virginia Tech, Oikos University, Sandy Hook Elementary School, Umpqua Community College, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, and Oxford High School (see Table One). From 1998 to 2021, these shootings will cover a span of 23 years of news reporting. Each of these shootings were chosen for a specific attribute. Date, location, demographic information on shooters, and information on victims was taken from The Violence Project's Mass Shooter Database (2022). To avoid giving perpetrators infamy, massacres will be distinguished by the school's name instead of perpetrators' names. The only time perpetrator names will be brought up is if it is directly relevant to the findings and reporting of data.

### **Sample**

Table 1 (Appendix I) shows general information regarding the nine shootings that were selected for this thesis. I used purposive sampling because I felt it was necessary to include some of the most well-known rampage school shootings to compare with some that are not as well known. After choosing shootings that I believe are necessary to examine when covering media portrayals, such as Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, I selected other schools based on year of occurrence to fill in gaps for a more fluid understanding of portrayal over time as well as aspects that are

sensational compared to other shootings. Below is an explanation of why each shooting was chosen and their significance to the study. Nine shootings were chosen to have an overall representation of reporting over 23 years, covering many different years throughout this time period. Age and race of perpetrators as well as age of victims were considered when selecting this sample.

*Westside Middle School.* On March 24, 1998, two current students in Jonesboro, Arkansas killed five and injured ten more at Westside Middle School. These shooters were 11- and 13-year-old white males who were apprehended. I have chosen this incident because it will help display how shootings were portrayed in media coverage prior to Columbine High School. This was also unique because the perpetrators were so young and in 1998, juveniles 13 and under could not be charged as adults. The two perpetrators were thus held in juvenile detention until they were 21 and then released without a criminal record.

*Columbine High School.* On April 20, 1999, two current students in Columbine, Colorado killed 13 and injured 23. The perpetrators at Columbine High School were 17- and 18-year-old white males who killed themselves prior to apprehension. This created the foundation for reporting mass shootings. While shootings had happened prior to Columbine (in Jonesboro, for example), the number of victims for a seemingly random shooting created an outpouring of media coverage. Images of students rushing out of the school crying covered the news, leaving Americans questioning how something like this could ever happen. Columbine is chosen because of the impact it had on media.

*Red Lake Senior High School.* On March 21, 2005, one current student killed five and injured five at Red Lake Senior High School in Red Lake, Minnesota. The perpetrator was a 16-year-old Native American male who killed himself prior to apprehension. Prior to coming to the

school, the perpetrator shot and killed his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend. This massacre is selected because the perpetrator was a Native American male, whereas the prior ones were perpetrated by white males. This was also unique because the perpetrator killed two others before coming onto campus.

*Virginia Polytechnic and State University.* On April 16, 2007, one current student killed 32 and injured 26 at Virginia Tech. The perpetrator was a 23-year-old Asian male who killed himself prior to apprehension. I have chosen to include this event in my sample because it is the deadliest rampage school shooting in American history (Mass Shooter Database 2021). Not only was the victim count incredibly high, but race might have impacted how media reported the shooting.

*Oikos University.* On April 2, 2012, one former student killed seven and wounded three at Oikos University in Oakland, California. The perpetrator was a 43-year-old Asian male who was apprehended. He was charged with life without parole and died in prison. This shooting is chosen for this study because of the significance of the perpetrator's age. He is at least 20 years older than the rest of the perpetrators in the study. Being a former student instead of a current student might impact reporting as well.

*Sandy Hook Elementary School.* On December 14, 2012, one former student killed 27 and injured one at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. The perpetrator was a 20-year-old white male who killed himself prior to apprehension. While he did kill his mother prior to entering the school, the majority of victims were under the age of 10, which I believe will impact the way newsmakers covers the news. The victims of Sandy Hook are the youngest of the victims of the other chosen shootings.



*Umpqua Community College.* On October 1, 2015, one current student killed nine and injured seven at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. The perpetrator was a 26-year-old Black<sup>1</sup> male who died from a gunshot wound that was either from a police shootout or self-inflicted. I chose this shooting because I believe that it is lesser known than some of the other shootings I have chosen, and I want to see if the perpetrator's racial identity impacts reporting.

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.* On February 14, 2018, one former student killed 17 and injured 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The perpetrator was a 19-year-old white male who was apprehended and charged with life without parole. This was unique from shootings previously listed because with media reporting of the actual shooting came media reporting of victims protesting gun violence. Both positive and negative responses to the victims rose in media along with the term "crisis actors," a term which accompanied conspiracy theories that the shooting never happened.

*Oxford High School.* On November 30, 2021, one current student killed four and injured seven at Oxford High School in Oxford, Michigan. The perpetrator was a 15-year-old white male who was apprehended and is currently waiting for trial. Reporting around this shooting is interesting because both the perpetrator and his parents are being charged in relation to the shooting. I am curious to see how his parental involvement impacts how media reports the shooting and who they focus on.

## **Method**

For this thesis, I have chosen to do a historical content analysis. This is the best method for this research because it allowed me to analyze media coverage to gain clarity about media

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<sup>1</sup> Other articles report that the perpetrator was biracial, however The Violence Project (2022) Mass Shooter Database identifies him as Black.

reporting over a long period of time. Content analysis will allow me to look at qualitative sources and extract quantitative data from it. I will be focusing on which themes are most prevalent and how those themes are discussed in news articles. Since victims of mass shootings are a vulnerable population, content analysis allows for the population to remain protected while still gaining knowledge on the topic. Without direct interaction with the victims, this study will provide little, if any, harm to the community.

I have chosen to focus on news reports from the *New York Times*. Prior research on rampage school shootings in media have largely examined *New York Times* articles (Muschert and Carr 2006; Silva and Cappelán 2018) or newspaper photographs (Dahmen 2018). This research will be unique in that it is covering a larger historical sample, including recent shootings, to make greater comparisons over time. I am able to obtain *New York Times* articles for all dates from the ProQuest *New York Times* database available through the Minnesota State University, Mankato library databases. Searches for “school name,” “school shooting,” and “city, state” were performed for each of the dates I have chosen and any article that appears were saved into the corresponding folder on my laptop computer. Since these are public articles, there is no need for secure holding. Both editorials and articles were saved and identified by their type. The articles provided from the database typically do not include photographs, unless they are photocopies of the original article, so photographs will not be analyzed in this research.

I have chosen to look at different dates (Table 2 in Appendix I) throughout the reporting process to see if and/or how reporting has shifted over time. For each shooting, I looked at initial reporting that occurred the day of the tragedy. According to The Violence Project (2022), all of the shootings took place either morning or mid-day, 7:15 AM was the earliest and 3:40 PM was the latest. Since the timing of these shootings was not late at night, the majority of shootings will

have the initial breaking news stories on the day of the shooting. The only ones that might not have day-of reports are the shootings that occurred between 1998-2005, because technology was different, and reporting was not as fast as it currently is. I also looked at media coverage over the span of a news cycle: day of, one day after, three days after, one week, two weeks, one month, six months, and one year after the shooting. Specific dates were unique depending on which case I looked at, but they all follow this pattern of dates. All dates have been recorded on an Excel spreadsheet.

### **Coding**

To make sense of the dataset I created, I began a coding process that involved taking the articles saved and highlighting themes that were present in each article. I then tallied how often themes were present in a spreadsheet. Initial themes I looked for are discussions involving demographics of the perpetrator (including age, race, sex), language used to describe both perpetrators and victims, who and what is being blamed for the shooting and how that blame shifts over time from individual to institutional. During the analysis, I used grounded theory, which means categories used for coding are flexible and additional categories emerged inductively (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As I expected, some shootings did not have coverage during some/many of these dates. One of the goals of this research was to help understand why this is the case.

Since one of the goals of the research was to understand how often certain themes are present in media coverage of rampage school shootings, codes included the frequency that a category is discussed in each source. Initial coding was completed by organizing themes in each article that is relevant to the shooting. Themes, which are shown in Table 2, include perpetrator, victims, guns, politics, demographics, scene descriptions, preparedness prior to the shooting,

solutions/preventions, responses, mentions of other shootings, school safety/response to the shooting, potential motive/hindsight, media coverage, statistics on shootings, and race. I also coded for how often they mention perpetrators’ names and how often the idea that this could not happen in their community is brought up. While searching for themes, I also utilized memo writing to help connect and organize while working on my research. Memo writing is a useful strategy at this stage of analysis because it allows me to make connections between themes while also organizing thoughts while analyzing articles. Memo writing is thus necessary pre-work of developing analyses. Table 2 shows the initial themes that emerged from the coding process.

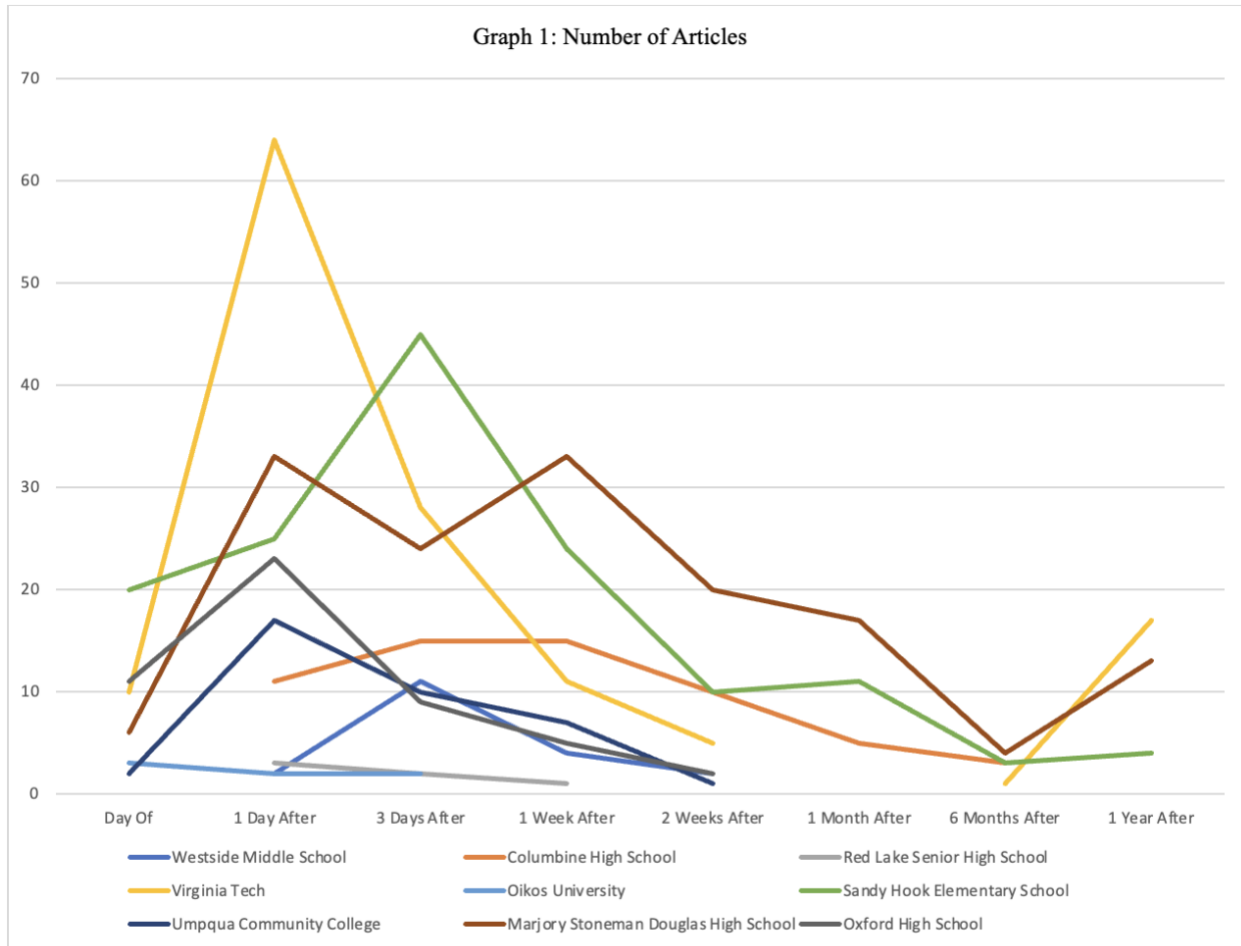
Perpetrator	Solutions/Preventions	“Not in my community”
Victims	School Response	Perpetrators’ Names
Guns	Potential Motive/Hindsight	Public Responses
Politics	Media Coverage	Statistics
Demographics	Race	Scene Descriptions
Preparedness Prior to Shooting		

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

When searching for articles from the sample of nine rampage school shootings, 1,032 articles populated under the search terms all the dates each shooting. I saved every article that populated into an Excel spreadsheet. From there, I opened and read every article. If an article did not discuss the shooting at all, I made note in the spreadsheet that it was not relevant to the shooting. I also made note of any articles that were copies, which was common in articles that were posted as a newspaper clipping as well as an online version. Out of those 1,032 articles, 180 were copies of articles, 246 held no relevance to the shooting, leaving 606 articles to evaluate. When searching for articles, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had the most articles (150), Red Lake Senior High School had the least (6). Unsurprisingly, Sandy Hook Elementary School (142) and Virginia Tech (136) had larger amounts of articles. Relevant article amounts can be found in Graph 1 and Table 3 (in Appendix I). Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the top three most common themes found both by shooting and by date.

<b>Table 5: Top Theme By Shooting</b>			
	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Theme</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Theme</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Theme</b>
<b>Westside Middle School</b>	Perpetrators	Guns	Public Responses
<b>Columbine High School</b>	Perpetrators	Guns/Public Responses	Victims
<b>Red Lake Senior High School</b>	Perpetrator	Victims	Public Responses
<b>Virginia Tech</b>	Victims	Public Responses	Media

Using the relevant articles that populated in the *New York Times* under the search terms, I will be analyzing how the articles and themes relate to Down’s “Issue-Attention Cycle” (1972), whether the “exciting” factors of each shooting ended up being the most common theme present in the articles, and how race and culture help to explain newsworthiness.



### **The Issue-Attention Cycle**

The issue-attention cycle (Downs 1972) was clearly present in the data I examined. Below I will show how coverage of each of the shootings followed this cycle. While none of the shootings in the sample were in the “Pre-Problem Stage” at the time of the attack, reporting did follow the other stages of the cycle: 2) “Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm,” 3) “Realizing the Cost of Significant Progress,” 4) “Gradual Decline of Public Interest,” and 5) “The Post Problem Stage” (Downs 1972).

<b>Table 6: Top Theme By Date</b>			
	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Theme</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Theme</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Theme</b>
<b>Day Of</b>	Scene Description	Public Responses	Perpetrator
<b>One Day After</b>	Perpetrator	Scene Description	Victims
<b>Three Days After</b>	Perpetrator	Public Responses	Guns
<b>One Week After</b>	Guns	Perpetrator	Public Responses
<b>Two Weeks After</b>	Guns	Victims	Perpetrator
<b>One Month After</b>	Guns	Politics	Victims
<b>Six Months After</b>	Guns	Media/Public Responses	Solutions
<b>One Year After</b>	Guns/Public Responses	Victims	Politics

### **“The Pre-Problem Stage”**

The pre-problem stage would be the stage before a “highly undesirable social condition exists but has not yet captured much public attention” (Downs 1972:39). This does not mean that the problem is nonexistent, it just has not gained mainstream public attention up to this point. By 1998, rampage school shootings have already moved past the pre-problem stage. With the first shooting happening in 1966, five others had the opportunity to gain media attention before the first shooting in this sample, the 1998 shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Aside from school shootings, mass shootings in general were not a new phenomenon. Prior to the shooting at Westside Middle School in 1998, the United States had experienced 66 mass shootings. For the purpose of this thesis, I will assume that all rampage school shootings included in this sample have passed this stage already.

## **“Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm” Stage**

According to the “issue-attention cycle” (Downs 1972), events that receive consistent news coverage tend to follow a pattern. This is evident in the number of articles for each shooting. The majority of relevant articles happen at the beginning of the news cycle, which is labeled the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm” stage (Downs 1972:39). The research finds that this stage happens within the day after, three days after, and one week after the rampage school shooting. There were 52 relevant articles published the day of the shooting, 180 posted the day after, and 146 relevant articles posted three days after the rampage school shooting. In comparison, the *New York Times* publishes around 150 articles a day (Bahr 2022) which shows how prevalent some of the coverage of shootings is. At this point, the biggest questions are, what happened? What did the scene look like? Who could have done this?

During the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm” stage, the public is made aware of “the evils” of a particular problem. This is where the newsworthiness of a rampage school shooting comes into play. If a shooting is not suffered by most people, is generated by social arrangements that benefit most people, and is exciting, then it is going to enter this stage. This is potentially why some shootings receive less coverage than others. If a rampage school shooting has elements similar to ones we have seen in the past, it is unlikely to be considered exciting to the general public. For example, Oikos University happened a few years after Virginia Tech. This means that the thought of a Korean perpetrator was not new, as it was discussed often in the articles about Virginia Tech. The shooting happened in Oakland, California, an urban city that was considered violent. There was not a large number of victims, as there was at Virginia Tech. Compared to other shootings that entered this phase of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, this one did not meet the three elements likely to go through the cycle.



At the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm” point in the cycle, people are trying to understand what happened and how we can stop it. There are calls to American political leaders, expecting them to find a solution to a problem that can be fixed. This explains why so many of the rampage school shootings in the sample show that responses are one of the top themes present. As Downs (1972:39) points out, “this outlook is rooted in the great American tradition of optimistically viewing most obstacles to social progress as external to the structure of society itself.” We begin to see themes of gun control, mental health solutions, parental counseling, and even traffic control. The problem is not society, it is these individual factors that are solvable. Of course, there would need to be a consensus on what the “problem” is in order to see social progress. At this stage in the sample, four common themes stood out: the scene description, the perpetrator(s), the victims, and the school’s preparedness.

### *The Scene Description*

The day after the shooting, articles discuss what they know—the scene description. Journalists are focusing on describing what is happening, whether it is from first-hand accounts from those in the building or with cell phone coverage. The main goal of this is to help readers understand what victim’s experienced without actually being there. This was the most common theme in reporting for both Westside Middle School and Columbine High School. Media coverage of the earlier shootings seemed to focus more on explaining the events of the day, whereas later shootings (Sandy Hook, Marjory Stoneman Douglas) tended to have more opinion pieces sent in by readers. Language is sensationally descriptive, such as “even sidewalks were stained with blood” (*New York Times* 2007), “three hours of horror and chaos” (*New York Times* 2007), and “attacked, which wreaked devastation on this campus” (*New York Times* 2007). This

language, which is meant to elicit emotional responses from the viewers, can be considered “exciting” factors that others probably have not experienced (Downs 1972).

In the article “TERROR IN LITTLETON: THE SCENE; In a Violent Instant, Routine Gives Way to Panic” (emphasis in original), sensationalized descriptions of the experiences inside the classroom are the subject (*New York Times* 1999). Phrases such as “Bullets zipped through the walls of a science classroom” (*New York Times* 1999), “shots ricocheted off lockers” (*New York Times* 1999), and “trapped in a school under siege” (*New York Times* 1999) were used in an attempt to elicit responses from the audience. This sort of language is not as prevalent in descriptions the articles provide of the Westside Middle School shooting. The article “5 Are Killed at School; Boys, 11 and 13, Are Held” mainly uses quotes from those who were present at the time of the shooting to explain the events of the day (*New York Times* 1998). Those who were interviewed were as young as 11-years-old. There are some descriptions, such as “dazed students” (*New York Times* 1998) and “12- and 13-year-olds dived for cover” (*New York Times* 1998), which are sensational in nature but not to the extent that is seen in the reporting of Columbine High School.

### *The Perpetrator*

Another main topic of discussion is the perpetrator. Articles cover who they were, where they came from, and how they could have wanted to “destroy the school” (*New York Times* 1999). Articles about Red Lake Senior High School, Virginia Tech, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School discuss how the perpetrators were “troubled” (*New York Times* 2005, *New York Times* 2007) and showed “every red flag” (*New York Times* 2018). For articles three days after the shooting, one week, and two weeks after the shooting, the perpetrator is the main theme present.

The day after the shooting, Westside Middle School, Columbine High School, Red Lake Senior High School, Oikos University, and Oxford High School's article titles tended to focus on the perpetrators. Oxford High School articles tend to focus on the charges of the perpetrator, such as "Suspect in Michigan School Shooting Faces Murder and Terrorism Charges" (Conlin et al. 2021). In the other shootings where the perpetrators were apprehended (Westside Middle School, Oikos University, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School), charges were not mentioned in article titles on the day after the shooting. This could be because the terrorism charge that the Oxford High School perpetrator is facing is unique and not seen in the other two shootings. Westside Middle School is unique in the fact that the perpetrators are the only ones to go to juvenile detention, according to The Violence Project (2022), so it is interesting to see that was not mentioned as quickly in the news cycle as the charges for the Oxford High School perpetrator.

Articles during this timeframe spent ample time for each shooting describing the perpetrator, their history, and what could have potentially led them to commit such an awful act. The common theme for articles on both Oikos University and Oxford High School was discussion of the perpetrator. Oikos University only had two articles published from the *New York Times* the day after the attack: one focusing on the scene description, and the other focusing on the history of the perpetrator. Unlike many rampage school shootings, the perpetrator of this shooting was apprehended and able to provide a motive. This is covered, along with other factors that officials believe may have led to the shooting.

A majority of the articles surrounding the Oxford High School perpetrator discuss the charges that are being brought upon the shooter and how the premeditation of the attack fits the charges. Focusing on the charges of the perpetrator this early on is not seen in Westside Middle

School, Oikos University, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, all of which saw the perpetrators apprehended. This may explain why Oxford High School has an unusually high article count for a relatively low number of victims. The articles discuss the perpetrator all provide the same information and using the same quotes about the charges and the evidence found.

### *The Victims*

As more information about the shooting is released, media coverage begins focusing on victims. By this point, many of the victims' identities have been released and journalists discuss what they know about the victims. For instance, each victim of the Virginia Tech massacre received their own article where others could leave remembrances. While plenty of articles of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting discussed the age of the victims, describing them as "our poor little babies" (*New York Times* 2012), they also focused on how the perpetrator's mother was a victim. This is also seen in the articles about the Red Lake Senior High School killings, where the perpetrator's grandfather and his partner were the first two victims. One of the articles, "Shooting Rampage by Student Leaves 10 Dead on Reservation" (*New York Times* 2005), briefly mentions the other eight victims before focusing on the domestic murders and everything the grandfather had done for the community. The focus of the Red Lake articles tends to be on a specific victim. This might be because the victim held a prominent role in the community or because the victim was a family member of the perpetrator. According to The Violence Project, out of the 10 rampage school shootings that had happened prior to 2005, only two had killings at another location prior to the shooting at the school (2022). Since this was a rare action of a perpetrator, it could explain the focus on one victim in the articles. Since 2005,

there have been four more shootings where there was a murder at another location prior to the shooting at the school, one of which being Virginia Tech (The Violence Project 2022).

Unlike Red Lake Senior High School, the articles about Virginia Tech focused on every victim. There was an individual thoughts and memories page for each of the 32 victims of the shooting where the public could go and leave memories of each person. This was something unique to the Virginia Tech shooting. A majority of the other shootings had articles about victims, however Virginia Tech was the only shooting to get individual memorials for each victim. Sandy Hook Elementary school's article titles were more likely to also be about victims, though victims were discussed collectively. This is not surprising, considering the age of the victims. Prior research (Dahmen 2018) shows that the age of the victims positively impacts the amount of coverage of both the victims and the shooting itself.

### *School's Preparedness*

Another theme that increased over the span of reporting was school's preparedness prior to the shooting. This could include discussions on safety drills, metal detectors, school resource officers/police on campus, and other safety measures in place. These safety measures were mentioned slightly in reporting of both Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook Elementary School, but the real rise is with Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Oxford High School. In the article "3 Students Are Killed in Michigan School Shooting," a student is quoted saying, "The school made sure that we knew where to go, who to call and how to act" (Atkinson, Smith, and Boudette 2021:2). This was found in articles surrounding later shootings, at which point schools were trained on safety regarding school shootings. These safety measures were less common earlier in the sample, so these mentions are not common in any of the shootings prior to Virginia Tech.

### **“Realizing the Cost of Significant Progress” Stage**

After the first week, when themes switch from focusing on what happened, the articles enter the “realizing the cost of significant progress phase” (Downs 1972:39). There were 100 relevant articles posted for one week after the shooting and 50 posted for two weeks after. At this point, themes start to surround the question of how this could happen. At this point, nothing is off the table. News articles mention parents, television, videogames, racism, access to guns, bullying, and even traffic jams as potential problems. Yet, there is no concrete consensus for a solution to the problem.

At the “realizing the cost of significant progress” phase, people start to realize the cost associated with solving the problem. These are the obstacles, such as guns and mental health, not the social condition in which society allows these shootings to continue to occur. By this point, most of the other potential solutions have died down. Most mentions of school safety revolve around arming teachers or armed police officers. Downs (1972) argues that two public realizations occur at this stage. The first is “prevention of one group from enjoying something that others want to keep for themselves” (Downs 1972:40). In the context of rampage school shootings, this would be the gun argument. While gun rights are protected under the Second Amendment, many Americans believe that their free use of them is a guarantee. Any gun control measure that limits one’s ability to possess or carry a weapon is seen as a threat to their constitutional rights. None of the sample shootings provide articles that are strictly on one side of the gun control debate. Often expressed in letters to the editor, the articles grapple with both sides. At this point, those against gun control measures are feeling protective of their right to bear arms, while those in favor of gun control are beginning to understand the difficulty of passing any laws that would enact meaningful change.

The other public realization Downs (1972:40) mentions is “either deliberate or unconscious exploitation of one group in society by another.” This would include the stigmatization of those with mental health issues. Many who oppose gun control discuss the importance of mental healthcare to stop perpetrators in the future. While this argument can be eloquently explained, it does hold a notion that those who are mentally ill could be capable of this massacre. As of 2021, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention notes that “more than 50% will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime.” While many perpetrators of rampage school shootings show signs of mental illness, not all do (The Violence Project 2022). In fact, most school shootings are not committed in a random fit of outrage or depression. They are planned days, weeks, or even months in advance.

#### **“Gradual Decline of Public Interest” Stage**

One month after the shooting, news coverage has entered the “gradual decline of public interest” stage (Downs 1972:40). At this point, there is a decrease in the number of relevant articles published. There were 33 relevant articles published one month after the shooting. The most common theme around these articles is what is not being done. At this point, articles have become commonly political, blaming either conservative or liberal leaders for their lack of action. Commonly, this lack of action is surrounded by the argument of gun control. Both sides of the argument are presented, commonly in letters to the editor, with a focus on tearing the other side down more so than defending their side.

By the “gradual decline of public interest stage,” there tend to be fewer articles about the shootings. This is potentially because other issues have gained popular media attention. For example, the world was in a global pandemic when the shooting at Oxford High School occurred. Despite this being one of the first mass shootings to happen since the pandemic started

in 2020, the threat of a global pandemic outweighed reporting on the school shooting. Almost six months after the shooting at Oxford High School, 21 people were killed inside a classroom in Uvalde, Texas. This shooting made headlines, not only because all but two victims were between the ages of nine and eleven, but because it was the deadliest school shooting to happen at an elementary school. These “exciting” factors, as Downs (1972) would refer to them, made reporting of this shooting outshine news coverage of Oxford High School. Even though the issue entering the second stage was also a school shooting, the conditions were different enough to separate the two massacres.

At this point, articles are focusing largely on gun control and political responses to the shootings. Articles from six months after the shooting at Columbine High School focus on the use of the massacre in Littleton as a campaign strategy for the upcoming 2000 election. An interview from Sociologist Theda Skocpol noted, “candidates want to talk about families, schools, the media and the coarsening of public life” (New York Times 1999:2). Traffic jams were even brought into discussion here, with presidential candidate Al Gore saying that traffic jams kept parents from watching their child’s behavior. George W. Bush, who ended up winning the 2000 presidential election, placed the blame on individuals, not the government.

Nearly two decades later, one month after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, students protested with a national walk-out to protest gun violence. The majority of articles during this date focused on the walk-out, whether students were old enough to protest, and then-President Trump’s response to gun violence—saying guns were not the issue. Articles from one month after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School are also centered around gun control, publicizing the debate and political responses to gun control. At this point, there was also an article about what to do with the physical building in



which the shooting occurred. The article, which discussed what past schools had done after a mass shooting, helped to show that despite these larger discussions of potential solutions to a larger problem, communities were still struggling with the repercussions of the massacre. Having to decide whether to renovate the school or send students back into building where their classmates had been killed were mentioned issues that both Columbine High School and Virginia Tech had to face (Rivera 2013).

### **“The Post Problem Stage”**

Six months to one year is when the news cycle has entered “the post problem stage” (Downs 1972:41). At this point, news coverage has moved on to the next big issue. While there are still articles during this time, the majority of them simply a reminder of what happened. There were 11 relevant articles published six months after and 34 published one year after the rampage school shootings. News coverage of the year after the shooting typically includes reminders of what happened, remembrances of the victims, and updates on how the community is continuing to heal. At this point, we know what happened, how it could happen, and potentially how we could fix it, but attention has moved on to something more “exciting,” sometimes another shooting (Downs 1972:41). Some rampage school shootings, such as Westside Middle School, Columbine High School, and Red Lake Senior High School, are extinct from news coverage at this point. Even though these shootings have changed communities, and even the nation, they are not of journalists’ top interest at this point. Other shootings, like Virginia Tech, cover the anniversary, but many of the pieces are opinions from across the nation. These opinion pieces show that neither the country nor the news source has forgotten about what happened, but do not obtain the same coverage as they did when the story was still in the “alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm” stage.

The only shooting that did not follow this downward trend was Oxford High School. While articles decreased from 23 the day after the shooting to seven articles one month after, there was a spike to 25 articles published six months after the shooting. This was not due to an increase of publishing of articles related to Oxford High School, but because of the rampage school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas on May 24, 2022. When searching the term “school shooting” in the *New York Times* on May 30, 2022 (six months after the Oxford High School massacre), articles were still populating from the fallout of the elementary school shooting. Since these articles were not relevant to Oxford High School, they were not coded.

In the post-problem stage, public concern has moved on to other issues that are in stage two of the issue-attention cycle. While the timeframe in the issue-attention cycle is not set, many of the rampage school shootings in this sample reached this stage by the one-year date. The only shootings that had coverage a year after the shooting were Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I would still argue that these three shootings have entered the post-problem stage at this point, because problems “may sporadically recapture public interest” (Downs 1972:41). Both Virginia Tech and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School held memorials for those who had been murdered on this date, which recaptured public interest. The majority of articles released one year after the massacre at Virginia Tech were opinion pieces on how school shootings could be prevented, with the majority that discuss gun control and the “lie-in” that was planned on campus to protest gun violence (New York Times 2007). The articles from a year after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School discuss the school’s “day of service and love” to not only remember the victims, but to offer support for those in the community (New York Times 2019).

Articles also mentioned a documentary that some of the students created as well as some comments on gun control.

The community of Newtown, Connecticut, where the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre happened, did not hold a memorial. In fact, news coverage reported that the community made it clear that “we are not holding a public anniversary ceremony, please stay away” (Wilson 2013:1). The fact that they were not holding a ceremony was worth mentioning to readers, because it was distinct from other shootings in the sample. Unlike the other two shootings mentioned, the articles surrounding Sandy Hook Elementary school are less focused on the community and more focused on the gun control debate. While gun control is mentioned in the articles about Virginia Tech and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, it is not the main focus. The articles for all three shootings do spend time remembering the victims, though it is not the main theme for either Virginia Tech or Sandy Hook Elementary School.

It is important to note that the majority of the sample did not have any articles published by the *New York Times* one year after the shooting. Even shootings that had gained a lot of media coverage on previous dates, like Columbine High School, were silent at this point. Despite lack of coverage, it does not mean these shootings have been forgotten. Shootings like Westside Middle School, Columbine High School, and Red Lake Senior High School are mentioned throughout articles of shootings that happened years later, the impact still remaining. The only shootings that are not mentioned in other articles throughout the time period studied are Oikos University and Umpqua Community College, as neither shootings had ‘exciting’ factors compared to the others in the sample.

## **Newsworthiness**

To understand why a rampage school shooting was newsworthy or not, it is important to take an approach to understand how both agenda-setting and Down's (1972) specific characteristics of events that enter the issue-attention cycle impact the portrayal of shootings. Agenda-setting helps to decide what the audience views as important. Therefore, the more a shooting is discussed, the more important audiences tend to view it. In a similar fashion, the themes that are most prevalent in the media portrayal are therefore going to be what is most important to the audience. Each rampage school shooting was chosen in this sample for some significant aspect. When looking at each individual shooting with an agenda-setting lens, that 'exciting' aspect should be the central theme of the articles analyzed.

### **Westside Middle School – Perpetrator**

The rampage school shooting at Westside Middle School was chosen because of the age of the perpetrators. With the perpetrators only being eleven and thirteen years old, I suspected that much of the attention of media coverage would focus on the perpetrators, not only because the youngest was 11 but because 11 is the youngest of any mass shooter at that time and still to date. Analysis found that the main theme found was the perpetrators. It was the top theme both three days after the shooting and two weeks after the shooting. Guns and public responses were the other two most common themes. This shooting came seventh in terms of relevant articles present and had a total of 19 over the span of the eight days analyzed. The majority of articles were posted three days after and no articles were posted the day of, one month, six months, or one year after the massacre.

Three days after the shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, articles focused on two discussions when it came to the perpetrators: what they are doing in jail and how should they be discussed by

newsmakers. In an article titled “In Arkansas Jail, One Boy Cries and the Other Studies the Bible,” journalists are attempting to explain their reactions as well as their lives in the community (*New York Times* 1998). The article describes the life of one of the perpetrators within the church as well as him wishing “he could take it back” (*New York Times* 1998:3). Articles also cover the concern over what is going to happen to them in jail. At their age in 1998, they were not eligible to be sentenced as adults. Within the juvenile court, it was understood at the time that it was likely they would be held until their eighteenth birthdays. Another key discussion is how to talk about juvenile perpetrators in media coverage. While journalists up to this point generally withheld the names of juvenile perpetrators accused of crimes, this shooting created a new precedent (*New York Times* 1998). The names of both perpetrators were released the day after the shooting, saying it was because “exploring the suspects’ backgrounds was an important part of the understanding the story” (*New York Times* 1998:1). This is a different narrative than what is discussed today, where journalists are encouraged to take an approach to discuss victims instead of perpetrators.

Two weeks after the shooting occurred, information came out that one of the perpetrators had been sexually assaulted prior to the shooting. This explanation was used in court to explain the behavior and actions that he had taken the day five innocent lives were lost (*New York Times* 1998). The article continues to discuss what is likely to happen to them because of their age, a narrative followed from earlier articles.

### **Columbine High School – Perpetrator**

Columbine High School was chosen for this sample because of the well-known narrative around the perpetrators. The way that people viewed students who seemed to be outcasts or dressed different than the norm were not seen as fitting the mold of a school shooter. Articles of

future shootings referenced Columbine High School, comparing or contrasting the massacres. Despite not being the first, Columbine set a precedent for how we react to school shootings and is important in understanding the portrayal of school shootings in their entirety. However, compared to other school shootings in this sample, Columbine High School had a surprisingly low number of relevant articles, only 59. This could be because of the time in history of the shooting. Shootings that had large numbers of relevant articles happened after 2007, which could speak to the advancements in electronic news. In a study done in 1999, only 26 percent of Americans had households with internet access (Crutsinger 2000). In 2012, the year that the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School occurred and received the most relevant articles, 75 percent of Americans had household access to internet (U.S. Census 2014). Articles for Columbine High School that were published via a physical paper may be missing from this sample if they were not uploaded to the *New York Times* database.

The top theme present in the Columbine High School *New York Times* articles was about the perpetrators. This was also the most common theme in articles three days and one week after the shooting. Other common themes were gun control, responses from the public, and victims. There were no articles published the day of or one year after, according to the database. The majority of articles occurred three days and one week after the massacre. A lot of the coverage surrounding the perpetrators was about the perpetrators' friend group. Identified as the "trench-coat mafia," this group stood out to others at school because of their makeup, hatred toward other groups within the school, and the trench coats they wore daily (*New York Times* 1999). Articles also focused on the fact that the perpetrators were "outcasts," explaining why bullying may have been a potential motive. As more information was released three days after the shooting, articles began to focus on the perpetrators specifically. In a 1999 article titled "TERROR IN

LITTLETON: THE SUSPECTS; Sketch of Killers: Contradictions and Confusions” (emphasis in original), audiences were told what the perpetrators did in their spare time, their jobs, past troubles, academic histories, and connections with Nazism (which is also a common theme in the shooting at Red Lake Senior High School).

One week after the shooting, articles focused on two topics: one of the perpetrator’s diaries and their parents. In a diary that police discussed with the public, one of the perpetrators discussed a very thorough plan, which included shooting at nearby houses and even hijacking a jet and crashing it (*New York Times* 1999). Articles also begin to discuss the possibility of charging the parents in connection to the crime. This is an idea that was not present again until Oxford High School in 2021, where the parents have been charged in connection with the crime. Despite people calling for the parents to be arrested for “aiding and abetting,” the articles discuss that it would be difficult to charge the parents of perpetrators (*New York Times* 1999).

After one week, articles are less likely to focus on the perpetrators. Two articles from two weeks after the shooting discuss the arrest of the person who provided the guns to the perpetrators. Besides those, articles two weeks, one month, and six months after the massacre focus on the broader issues of guns and political reactions. During the presidential campaign in 1999, many politicians used Columbine High School as a talking point, which is the most present theme one month after the shooting.

### **Red Lake Senior High School – Perpetrator**

Red Lake Senior High School was chosen for this sample because it is both a lesser-known shooting and the perpetrator is not white, unlike the past two shootings in the sample. I wanted to see whether his race impacted media reporting. Despite having only six articles, the least of all shootings in the sample, this shooting revealed a lot about media reporting in Native

American communities. The most common theme was the perpetrator, as expected, with victims and public responses as additional themes. There were only articles for the day after, three days after, and one week after the shooting.

An important topic was whether the perpetrator was involved with Nazism. Information came out at this point about the perpetrator's messages on a neo-Nazi web forum. While this information was released, the community did not want to be associated with the thoughts, even saying "you have to be white to be a Nazi, don't you" (*New York Times* 2005:2). When articles discuss the perpetrators of Columbine High School's interest in Hitler, it was used as an explanation for their actions, whereas it could not have been for the perpetrator of Red Lake Senior High School because there was no way he could have been a Nazi in the eyes of community members. Articles also explained the perpetrator's life prior to the massacre to explain a potential motivation. Readers found out about abuse he had experienced, losing both his parents, and his disdain for having to move to Red Lake after living elsewhere most of his life. It is also mentioned that he wore makeup and trench coats every day, which was similar to the perpetrators of Columbine High School (*New York Times* 2005). While the articles do not mention whether or not the perpetrator had a fascination with Columbine High School, the similarities are hard to ignore.

While the articles do spend some time to discuss the victims, a majority of the conversation around victims is about the perpetrator's grandfather, who he killed along with his grandfather's partner prior to the shooting at the school. The article mentions the important part that his grandfather played in the community as a respected reservation police officer (*New York Times* 2005). Only one other victim was mentioned by name. Others were identified as



“students,” “security guard,” and “dead teacher” (*New York Times* 2005). The articles surrounding Red Lake Senior High School were the only ones that did not name all the victims.

### **Virginia Tech – Victims**

For this sample, Virginia Tech was chosen because it is the deadliest school shooting to date. Therefore, the victim count is the ‘exciting’ factor that other shootings in this sample, and in general, do not have. As expected, victims are the most prominent theme in the articles examined. Other common themes are public responses and conversations on media coverage. Though it is not the most common, another prominent theme on the day of reporting is school response. Articles were published every day except for one month after the shooting. The most articles were published the day after the shooting (64) and the decreases over the rest of the dates before a spike one year after the shooting.

More than any other shooting in this sample, articles posted about Virginia Tech spent ample time to discuss the victims, especially over the perpetrator. The day after the shooting, the *New York Times* published individual articles for each of the 32 victims, giving the public a place to write memories and come together to mourn each of the victims. Along with those individual articles, multiple articles were published with biographies and accomplishments of the victims. These articles were called, “Profiles of Some of the Virginia Tech Victims,” and were constantly updated throughout the day as more information came through (*New York Times* 2007). While the majority of articles three days after the shooting discuss the perpetrator, more focus on the victims occurs again one week after and continues two weeks and one year after. One week after the shooting, articles cover students’ return to campus for the first time since the massacre and how students were responding to the return. While these were coded as responses from the public, it is important to note that the students who attended the school at the time of the

massacre were victims, too. One year after the shooting, articles focused on how the school handled the trauma of the shooting for the last year, as well as remembrance of the victims.

This is the first shooting in the sample where media has been one of the top themes present in the articles. Media contains media coverage as well as media sources that people consume. Three days after the shooting, multiple articles discuss the manifesto that the perpetrator had sent to NBC News as well as reactions to NBC broadcasting it. The manifesto, which contained a DVD and 23 pages with text and photographs, was sent to NBC, who broadcasted some pieces afterwards (*New York Times* 2007). NBC defended its decision to broadcast pieces, saying it was “as close as we will ever come to being inside the mind of a killer” (*New York Times* 2007:2). One week after the shooting, articles looked at how the general public gets their information on the shooting, finding that Wikipedia is the most common source. In an article titled, “Wikipedia Serves as Essential Internet News Source on the Virginia Tech Shootings,” it discusses how people flocked to Wikipedia to get information and there were issues with so many people trying to add information to the page, regardless of whether it was factual or not. This was an issue less common in prior shootings because technology was continuing to advance, and people were getting an increasing amount of their information through electronic means.

The day of the massacre, school response was the second most popular theme, following scene descriptions. This is because the public felt that the school did not accurately respond in a way that would have protected students. According to articles published the day of the shooting, the shooting took place in two locations that happened over two and a half hours apart from one another (*New York Times* 2007). In the time between the two shootings, the school did not send out any alerts about the first shooting. While some believed that sending out alerts may have

saved the lives of the 30 that were killed in the classroom later on, the school said that they had not sent out alerts because they had believed it was an isolated incident. This is the first shooting in the sample that had a real discussion about the response from the school. As a result, articles reporting on some of the shootings in the sample after this one discuss what schools did right or wrong in response to the shooting. This may be, in part, because of the backlash Virginia Tech received, since it was not a prevalent conversation in articles prior to this shooting.

### **Oikos University – Perpetrator**

Oikos University was chosen for this sample because of the age of the perpetrator and because it is not a well-known shooting compared to some of the others in the sample. A few reasons for it receiving less news coverage could be that it occurred in an urban area that is more violent than some of the other shooting locations, or because the school is a smaller private Korean Christian university. Unfortunately, the articles analyzed did not give any clue on why this shooting is not deemed as relevant as others, so those are merely suggestions. The perpetrator is the oldest in the sample, 43 at the time of the shooting, and one of the oldest perpetrators of any mass shooting. This shooting had the second lowest number of articles in the sample (seven) and only had coverage the day of, one day after, and three days after. There were no relevant articles after three days. The top theme present in the articles was the perpetrator, though age was rarely mentioned. I also thought that, since this happened at a Korean Christian University, race would be a common theme in the articles, however it was rarely mentioned.

The main discussion surrounding the perpetrator of the Oikos University massacre was who he was. Articles discuss his “troubling history,” which included financial problems, did not have a steady home, had problems with classmates, and dropped out prior to the attack (*New York Times* 2012). Unlike prior shootings in the sample, the perpetrator had given a motive to

police about why he had committed the attack—looking for an administrator. Despite this being something that is not found in the other articles (all the perpetrators had killed themselves prior to being caught except for Westside Middle School), it is not a large focus in the articles. While the most common theme is the perpetrator, the small number of articles makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions.

### **Sandy Hook Elementary School – Victims**

Sandy Hook Elementary School was chosen for this sample because of not only the number of victims but their age. The majority of victims were in first grade, ranging from six to eight years old. In this sample, these are the youngest victims. This was also the introduction of the term ‘crisis actors’ in reference to school shootings, made popular by Alex Jones. Despite this being an issue that eventually led to a lawsuit against Jones (Williamson 2022), the term was not found in any articles in the sample. This massacre was the second most covered in the sample, populating 142 relevant articles. The most articles were published three days after the shooting and there is a steady decline over the rest of the dates. This is also the first shooting in the sample that has articles published for every date in the sample. Despite the belief that victims would be the main focus since it is the most “exciting” factor, gun control was the theme most prevalent overall. It was also the top theme three days, one week, two weeks, one month and six months after the shooting. The other themes that were most common were responses from the public and then the victims. There is no date in the sample in which victims are the most common theme among the articles.

Guns being the most common theme makes sense, though it is not the most obvious thought. In the articles surrounding the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, people want to find a solution so this does not happen to anyone else’s “poor little babies” (Applebome and

Wilson 2012). On track with the rest of the sample, the first two days of the shooting are not focusing on guns specifically, but on what happened. The main theme both the day of and day after the shooting is responses. People are sending in opinion pieces about what happened, articles are released to discuss how to (and how not to) talk with students about the shooting, and politicians are offering their thoughts and prayers to the community. Unlike prior shootings in this sample, articles start to focus on gun control very early on in the news cycle. While many of the articles about gun control are letters sent in by the public, there are a few articles reporting what is going on in the political sphere surrounding gun control. For example, the article “Some Unlikely Democrats Join in Push for New Gun Laws” looks at some political figures who were openly opposing gun control measures up until the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School (*New York Times* 2012). Other articles look at the public’s opinion on gun control. The article “Poll Conducted After Shooting Shows More Support for Stricter Gun Laws” states that there was a 23% increase in support for gun control since the shooting in Aurora, Colorado at a movie theater (*New York Times* 2012). This increase in support could be impacted by the age of the victims. Despite this not being the first school shooting with young victims, it is one of the most well-known.

While most articles published three days after the shooting focused on increased gun control, articles posted one week after focused against it. The National Rifle Association (NRA) had taken awhile to respond to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School and once they did, majority of articles covered it. With the NRA’s solution to have a “good guy with a gun in every school,” plenty of opinion pieces were sent in either agreeing or disagreeing with this statement (*New York Times* 2012). This argument between sides continued throughout coverage of other dates, many agreeing with the idea of arming those in classrooms. Despite the multitude

of articles arguing this public issue, none report a substantial change as articles begin to decrease. As articles begin to ease, so does the argument.

This shooting prompted multiple articles about how to talk to students about these shootings. There are resources provided to teachers and parents on how to successfully approach the topic, which is something that has not been found in articles for the other shootings in the sample. This reaction may also be because of the age of the victims. Unlike high school and college students, elementary school students may have a harder time grappling with the concept of death, especially in a place they deem as safe. The impact of this shooting was felt across the United States, parents worrying about the school safety of children they may have not have prior to this. With constant media coverage, they may be more likely to be exposed to information surrounding the violence of children their age and have questions they may not have about older victims. It does bring the question of who is responsible for helping children make sense of these crimes. Should it be discussed as a lesson facilitated by teachers, or should it be left to the parents?

### **Umpqua Community College – Perpetrator**

The shooting at Umpqua Community College was chosen for this sample because the perpetrator was black, which is uncommon for perpetrators of school shootings and is the only one in this sample. I wanted to see if race was central to reporting, so by default the perpetrator was thought to be the most common theme. However, articles showed that the most common theme present was gun control. Other common themes were the perpetrator and the scene description. The shooting at Umpqua Community College received thirty-seven articles, making it the sixth most reported in the sample of nine. The majority of articles happened a day after the

shooting, with a decrease after. No relevant articles were found one month, six months, or one year after the shooting.

Unlike prior shootings, coverage almost immediately turns to gun control. We have seen that throughout the sample, conversations around gun control begin to happen sooner. Not only do the articles talk about political figures calling for gun control, but they also try to depoliticize the topic in articles like “Oregon’s Gun Debate Goes Beyond Liberals vs. Conservatives” (Johnson 2015). However, other articles call out the “political ritual” after mass shootings, saying politicians engage in “lame public rituals in which politicians express grief and then retreat into denial about the scourge” (*New York Times* 2015:1). This political ritual is also mentioned a few times in articles about Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This ritual, despite being worded in a way that is attempting to evoke emotion, is evident in the responses from political figures that have been expressed in every shooting of the sample, though very few articles mention any actual change. That does not mean that change has not occurred, it just has not happened during any of the dates in this sample.

Conversations around gun control also mention the perpetrator who was “described as a man of few words, except on topic of guns” (Healy and Lovett 2015:1). This is something that is not uncommon for perpetrators of mass shootings. A few articles discuss his fascination with guns and the arsenal he had. Despite this knowledge from many, his father did come out to push gun control measures, saying that his son would not have committed the crime if he did not have access to the weapons (Healy and Holson 2015). Articles focus not only on his fascination, but also on other perpetrators and how they obtained their weapons. This looks at the problem from multiple aspects helps to bring the conversation of gun control from an individual issue of this

perpetrator to a larger question of gun culture and the availability and attainability as a social issue.

There is an article that was published the day after the shooting that mentions crisis actors, though it is not referring to this specific shooting. In the article “Oregon Sheriff Shared Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory on Facebook,” it is mentioned that the sheriff that responded to the shooting had shared videos on his Facebook page with the message that the government was staging attacks such as at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 and the attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001, in order to “disarm the public” through gun control legislation (Mackey 2015:1). This brought up worries from the public about the response to the situation and is a narrative that is continued to be pushed after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

### **Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School – Guns**

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School was chosen for this sample because of the impact that students had after the shooting. This was one of the first shootings where students really stood up and said #NeverAgain to gun violence (Witt 2018). Students began protesting, both in their own schools and at the nation’s capital. The students at the school created March For Our Lives in which the mission is “dedicated to promoting civic engagement, education, and direct action by youth to eliminate the epidemic of gun violence” (March For Our Lives 2023). These students also received public backlash from comedians (Criss 2018), political commentators (Concha 2018), Fox News hosts (Ingraham 2018), and politicians (Smith 2021). Not only did people question their validity as victims, but they also were targeted for actions beyond their support for gun control, such as their grades or how they cut their hair.



With so much of what I know about Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School being about March For Our Lives, my assumption was that gun control would be the most common theme among articles. This proved to be true, with victims and public responses being the second and third most common theme. This shooting received the most articles out of the sample with 150 relevant articles. The most articles were published the day after and one week after the shooting. Unlike other shootings in the sample, this did not see a steep decrease in articles over time. While articles did decrease slightly over time, they received at least ten articles on all dates except for the day of the shooting and six months after. Similar to the articles surrounding Umpqua Community College, articles very quickly began to focus on gun control. Gun control was the top theme three days, one week, two weeks and one month after the shooting. One year after the shooting, the articles focused on the victims—paying tribute to those whose lives had been lost.

Very quickly after the shooting occurred, victims and the community began to push the narrative of gun control. Unlike the prior shootings in this sample, it felt like the community had more control over the agenda. Students and parents spent their interviews talking about the need for more gun control measures as early as the day after the shooting. By one week after the shooting, some of the students had already spoken with lawmakers about this issue, including former president Donald Trump. By two weeks after the shooting, large corporations such as Walmart and Dick's Sporting goods were changing the way the minimum age of gun buyers. One month after the shooting, students across the nation planned a school walkout in protest of loose gun control measures. This raised the question of what age people consider too young to protest (Saul and Hartocollis 2018). In times where articles may try to focus on the perpetrator,

students were doing something to take the focus on the specifics of the massacre and to focus on the larger problem at hand.

The term “crisis actor” is only found in articles one week after the shooting. Since this was the date that students met with lawmakers, it makes sense that these claims were discussed to put into question the credibility of the event and therefore argue against gun control measures. Articles discuss those who have participated in spreading this rumor, such as a legislative aide (Astor 2018), Donald J. Trump, Jr., and Rush Limbaugh (Grynbaum 2018). Questions also began in the responsibility of websites, such as YouTube, in allowing this narrative to spread. In an article titled “The Making of a No. 1 YouTube Conspiracy Video After the Parkland Tragedy,” it mentions that a video claiming that one of the students who was part of the March For Our Lives movement was a crisis actor received over 200,000 views and being shared to countless other social media platforms before being taken down (Herman 2018). This was not the first time that videos like this had circulated YouTube; the article mentioning videos after the mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada and Sutherland Springs, Texas which had made the same “crisis actor” claims.

One year after the shooting, articles focused on the community as they attempted to heal. Articles made it clear that it was a constant battle to move on from the massacre and that everyday tasks were difficult for some of the victims. In the article “I Don’t Feel Safe Anywhere,” multiple people talk about the impact that the shooting has had on them and their family. Parents continue to mourn the loss of their children, friends and lovers mourn the loss of those they cared about, and victims describe the post-traumatic stress they continue to experience after being in the building (Mazzei and Edelheit 2019). They also mention good things that have happened—being able to walk again after being shot, meeting Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi in

Washington, D.C., and being given a voice to make changes. However, it is obvious that some “wish [I] never had those opportunities” (Mazzei and Edelheit 2019:2). Making the most out of a bad situation does not erase the trauma that they will experience for the rest of their lives.

### **Oxford High School – Perpetrator**

As the last shooting in the sample, Oxford High School was chosen for two reasons: the perpetrator is being charged with terrorism and his parents are being charged in connection to the crime. This is something that has not been seen in any of the other shootings in the sample and is rare in school shooting cases in general. This new and “exciting” factor makes me believe that the perpetrator was the most common theme present in the articles. As expected, information around the perpetrator was the most common theme present. This includes information about his parents. Other common themes are public responses and the victims. The Oxford High School shooting received fifty articles, making it in the top five shootings that received the most articles, though it is 100 articles less than the shooting with the most articles, Sandy Hook Elementary School. Most articles were published the day after the shooting and there are no relevant articles one month, six months, or one year after the shooting.

From the day after the shooting, most articles focus on the charges of the perpetrator and his parents. With articles from the day after the shooting titled “Michigan Shooting Attack Was ‘Absolutely’ Premeditated, Prosecutor Says” (Conlin and Smith 2021) and “Prosecutors Say They Have a ‘Mountain’ of Evidence the Suspect Planned the Attack” (Smith 2021), there is no doubt that the journalists’ goal is to let people know that the perpetrator did not do this at random—but was very intentional in his plans. These articles also help to explain the terrorism charges, which are the first for this sample. Three days after the shooting, prosecutors have announced that they are charging the parents. Information came out that the parents had been

made aware of behavioral issues of the perpetrator, had purchased the weapon for him, and even told him “you have to learn to not get caught” when a teacher found him looking for ammunition at school (Healy 2021:1). Based on this knowledge, the parents are being charged with Involuntary Manslaughter (Healy and Kovaleski 2021). The idea of charging parents in connection to their child’s crime was something that was brought up in articles about Columbine High School in 1999 but was not seen put into any action until 2021. There are articles both one week and two weeks after the shooting that debate whether parents should be held responsible, which was the same question being asked in 1999.

### **Race and Culture**

Race is a common theme discussed in articles regarding shootings involving perpetrators of color (Red Lake Senior High School, Virginia Tech, and Oikos University). While the race of victims was rarely mentioned, *New York Times* articles made it known when a perpetrator was not white. Whiteness, however, was not mentioned for the perpetrators of the other shootings analyzed. Race was only mentioned in these shootings when racism was a potential motive or as justification for racism to not be a potential motive. In an article from three days after the rampage school shooting at Columbine High School, it was mentioned that the perpetrators were “said to hate minorities, but in Plattsburgh, [perpetrator’s name]’s best friends were black and Asian” (*New York Times* 1999:1). Despite the potential motivation for the shooting being a racist attack, there is an attempt at justifying their behavior.

Part of the reason why the massacre at Red Lake Senior High School did not receive as much media coverage as other shootings is the longstanding issues between mainstream media and Native Americans. Native Americans have not only been the subject of overt racism in media coverage since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century but were also barred from working for media

sources who were creating these stories (Daniels 2006). At the time of the rampage school shooting, news outlets were continuing racist coverage that was not culturally sensitive.

In some of the articles that discuss the Red Lake Senior High School shooting, mention was made of the hostility that is felt by the community toward media coverage. Journalists were told to leave or risk arrest (*New York Times* 2005). “Keeping it private is a way of controlling our rights,” is how one tribal member described the reasoning for keeping mainstream journalists away from the trauma they experienced from the rampage school shooting (*New York Times* 2005:1). Despite having fewer articles compared to other shootings, research shows that the community felt that their story was represented by the mainstream media, including the *New York Times* (Daniels 2006). They also allowed their story to be covered by their own media sources, which gave those who sought information the ability to understand it by the perspective of those with subjugated knowledge.

An article from three days after the shooting at Red Lake Senior High School also mentions how culturally, those on the reservation handle crisis differently. An anthropology professor at the University of Chicago, when interviewed, stated, “the community response is less public and less dramatic than Americans have come to think people should be” (*New York Times* 2005:2). Unlike past rampage school shootings like at Westside Middle School and Columbine High School where journalists were flooded throughout the community, the separation, which was “imposed [on us] by the United States government,” kept their grief private (*New York Times* 2005:1). This speaks not only to the larger issue within the media, but of colonization and alienation from white society (Grande 2007). After a long history of being deprived of resources and cultural knowledge, communities like Red Lake, Minnesota feel “isolated, but not insulated” from the “outside” world (Grande 2007:239).

Three days after the shooting at Virginia Tech by a Korean American perpetrator, articles released discuss how Korean Americans had to “brace for a backlash” (*New York Times* 2007:1). While looking at coverage of rampage school shootings whose perpetrators were white, nowhere was it discussed that white Americans feared backlash due to the white perpetrator. The potential backlash that could be faced after the shooting reminded many of past racist attacks the community had experienced, such as the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, California (*New York Times* 2007). The articles also had quotes from many who expressed shame and felt the need to apologize on behalf of their nation. One resident of Virginia stated, “As a Korean, I apologize. I feel I need to apologize because innocent people were killed by someone from my same nation” (*New York Times* 2007). This reflects how white is seen as the dominant racial identity in the United States, othering those who do not identify as such. From centuries of backlash from white Americans against those who are not white, people from other racial identities may feel the need to apologize in order to avoid that potential backlash. In articles about white perpetrators, there are no apologies from those who are white or fear of backlash.

Articles from one week after the shooting at Virginia Tech discuss the importance of church to the Korean American community and how sermons the past week had been focused on around the community and the perpetrator (*New York Times* 2007). The church had paid tribute to the victims as well as began raising money for the families of the victims, along with Korean advocacy groups. The response from the Korean American community being separated from the response from the white community was something unique to reporting surrounding the Virginia Tech shooting. Plenty of articles discussed how the community as a whole was responding to the shooting, while other articles emphasized the response from the Korean American community.

The racial identity of the Red Lake Senior High School perpetrator was discussed in connection with discussions of his interest in Nazism. In the article “Behind the Why of a Rampage, Loner With a Taste for Nazism,” a resident was quoted as saying, “You have to be white to be a Nazi, don't you?... Believe me, there are no other Nazis here” (*New York Times* 2005). The shooting, which happened on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, attempted to create a conversation around the association between alleged behavior of the perpetrator and how his community interpreted it.

Race was often mentioned in the Virginia Tech articles. Multiple articles discussed the perpetrator’s green card status and whether or not he should have been allowed to purchase a gun. In the article “32 Shot Dead in Virginia; Worst U.S. Gun Rampage,” a student described the perpetrator as “just a normal looking kid, Asian, but he had on a Boy Scout type outfit,” (Broder et al. 2007). Virginia Tech articles also focused on a violent Korean film that they believe the perpetrator was inspired by (despite no confirmation the perpetrator had ever seen the film) (*New York Times* 2007).

In the article, “Troubled History Emerges for Suspect in Fatal Oakland Attack,” race is mentioned mostly relating to the location of the shooting (*New York Times* 2012). Oikos University, which is a small institution affiliated with the Korean church, has a student body of majority Korean or Korean American students. It is mentioned that the perpetrator is also Korean, and two of the seven victims were Korean American. It is unclear whether the location of the shooting impacted the miniscule number of articles about the shooting, but both Oikos University and Red Lake Senior High School are located in areas with a large population of people of color and have the lowest number of articles from this sample.

Overall, the findings show that school shootings follow the trend that the “Issue-Attention Cycle” (Downs 1972) presents, explaining why there tends to be an influx of media coverage immediately following a shooting followed by a decline in the coming days/weeks, depending on the shooting. While a majority of the sample discussed themes that they were most known for, a few strayed from that expectation. Both Sandy Hook Elementary School and Umpqua Community College primarily focused on gun control, despite that not being what either shooting is most known for. Data also showed the impact that race and culture have on reporting. Not only does race and culture impact how the perpetrator is discussed, but it impacts the amount of coverage a shooting received. This gave a deeper understanding into why some shootings are newsworthy, although the findings do not answer this question in its entirety.



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The goal of this thesis was to understand three aspects of news coverage of rampage school shootings: 1) how media coverage has changed over the span of twenty-three years, 2) how coverage changes over the span of a year for a single shooting, and 3) why some school shootings are considered more newsworthy than others. I believe that the findings answer the first two questions as well as the third to an extent. These findings can be added to the growing field of research understanding school shootings.

This thesis helps to explain how media coverage has changed over the span of twenty-three years. Understanding how technological advances impact the amount of media coverage is important when seeing the number of articles present in some of the later shootings in the sample, such as Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School. A shooting as notable as Columbine High School did not receive nearly as many articles as expected, which could be because of the lack of technology in 1999 compared to today. The data also shows that over the span of twenty-three years, media coverage has become more focused on societal changes early on in reporting. While shootings such as Westside Middle School, Columbine High School, and Virginia Tech focused on individualistic reasons behind their specific shooting, later shootings such as Sandy Hook Elementary School, Umpqua Community College, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School started talking about gun control as early as the day after the shooting. The focus of the later shootings was less about understanding *how* the problem could have happened, but discussing *what* can be done to solve the problem.

When looking at how coverage changes over the span of a year, the findings show what was expected—media coverage begins discussing individual themes (the perpetrator, victims, scene description) and, for the most part, gradually begins to discuss shootings as an institutional

social problem in later coverage. Even shootings that focus on these societal issues earlier on (Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Umpqua Community College) discuss individual aspects of the shootings the first few days, even if it is not the main theme present overall. At first, people want to know what happened and who could do such a thing, whereas the focus shifts to solutions once audiences feel they know all the details. Shootings with little coverage, such as Red Lake Senior High School and Oikos University, did not show this trend simply because there were not enough articles over the span of multiple days to observe it.

One question this thesis hoped to answer was why some shootings receive more coverage than others. While a definitive answer cannot be concluded from the findings, this thesis does attempt to provide a deeper understanding as to why this may be. Since there are so many factors at play, it is difficult to understand exactly why a shooting may receive less coverage than others; however, I argue that the findings related to Red Lake Senior High School can give some insight. The findings open up a broader understanding of the cultural differences between the Red Lake reservation and the locations of the other shootings in this sample. Understanding the historical context between mainstream media sources and Native American populations helps to explain why a shooting such as the one that occurred in 2005 in Red Lake, Minnesota is likely to receive less coverage than the other shootings in this sample.

The findings show the accuracy of the “issue-attention cycle” when it comes to events such as a rampage school shooting (Downs 1972). Since the majority of articles were published one day and three days after the shooting and continued to decrease after, I can confidently say that each of these school shootings follows the stages of the “issue-attention cycle”, even over a span of twenty-three years. Understanding what news coverage looks like gives an insight into

how the general public may view these events. If people are being introduced to more news coverage, they are more likely to find the topic important. Once news coverage decreases, so does public interest. People are still interested in the topic and are working to create changes (Sandy Hook Promise, March For Our Lives, etc.), but it is not the main focus in the public eye. Some questions that arise from this finding are 1) what impact does decreased coverage have on potential policy changes, and 2) do the victims of these school shootings prefer to have consistent coverage giving them a voice or would they prefer for events to lose focus in the public eye? These are questions that could be addressed through future research.

Data also show that the shootings in the sample represent the three conditions that Down (1972) says an event must have in order to gain public attention: the majority of Americans are not suffering from it, it is caused by social arrangements that benefit the majority of society, and it has exciting qualities. School shootings that include these three conditions are more likely to have more articles published about them. Most of the main themes present for each shooting in the sample were expected based on their “exciting” factor, if they had one. The most common theme for Columbine High School was the perpetrators because they created the general profile of what a perpetrator looks like. Virginia Tech’s most common theme was the victims, which was expected since it is the highest victim count of any school shooting. The most common theme for Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School was guns, which was expected as we saw the creation of March For Our Lives, a movement to end gun violence, grow in its aftermath.

One of the most prominent shootings, article wise, did not follow this pattern though. The exciting factor about Sandy Hook Elementary School was the victims, specifically because they were so young. However, the victims were the third most prominent theme when looking at articles surrounding the shooting. The most common theme present when looking at articles

published about Sandy Hook Elementary School was guns. This makes sense when taking a broader look at the shooting, understanding that the solution most easily to gain attention is gun control.

Shootings whose factors were not as “exciting” as some did not receive as much coverage. However, for most of them, the most common theme was the factor that was considered most exciting. The most common theme for Westside Middle School was the perpetrators, which makes sense since to date the 11-year-old perpetrator is the youngest to date. Red Lake Senior High School also focused on the perpetrator, though the main theme was not race as expected. Oxford High School also focused on the perpetrator as the main theme, which was expected because of the criminal charges that both him and his parents are facing.

Umpqua Community College did not follow this theme though. I expected that the perpetrator would be the main theme regarding this shooting, since he is the only perpetrator that is multiracial in this sample. The main theme for this shooting turned out to be gun control. It does make sense if you look at the main themes for the shootings it falls between, Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. These shootings both focused heavily on gun control, so it makes sense that a lesser-known shooting in the middle would also spark up the gun control debate.

### **Contributions and Future Research**

The findings in this thesis help contribute to the growing body of research surrounding school shootings by showing how journalists report on rampage school shootings, how that has differed as they evolve as well as how reporting changes within the first year of a news cycle. While prior studies have looked at media portrayal (Muschert 2019; Muschert and Carr 2016; Park, Holody, and Zhang 2012), this study examines school shootings that have happened after

2007 as well as shootings that are not as well known to the general public. It is important to understand how these shootings are relayed to the public to understand the public's perception of this social problem.

This thesis is the beginning of a larger project that is hoping to branch into many different areas. Potential qualitative studies could center around interviewing journalists to see how (if) they are taught to report on rampage school shootings and the impact that reporting on events such as these have on them. Victims of rampage school shootings would be another qualitative study that would attempt to understand the impact that media reporting plays on their experiences and their healing process. This study could focus on primary victims, those who were at the school during the shooting, as well as secondary victims, those who are impacted simply because they live in the community.

Future research could also examine how different news sources frame media coverage. One of the original goals of this research was to see how left and right leaning news sources reported on the school shootings in this sample, however that was a larger project than initially anticipated. Understanding how different news sources frame these shootings and how themes differ among them would be pertinent in understanding the public's understanding of rampage school shootings. I would also like to expand on the sample included, looking at shootings prior to 1998 and after 2021—especially including the shooting in Uvalde, Texas in 2022.

This thesis could be the beginning of a broader project looking at media coverage of mass shootings in their entirety. Since school shootings make up a small amount of mass shootings and the general motivation is different for school shooters compared to mass shooters, the findings of this research are not generalizable to mass shootings. Looking at how media sources

portray different shootings—movie theaters, concerts, malls, grocery stores, etc.—could give insight into what mass shootings people may view as more important.

While a limitation of this thesis may be that the findings of this research do not solve the problem of school shootings, understanding how media portrays these massacres is important in understanding how the general public understands them. Now seeing how the main solution presented to prevent school shootings over a twenty-three-year span is gun control, maybe this narrative is not helpful in finding the solution. While articles spent so much time with opinion pieces arguing over the pros and cons of gun control, little work is being done to find a solution. While gun legislation has changed slightly over the time span of the sample, there has not been significant progress, so maybe there are solutions elsewhere that need more public focus. However, this thesis does not provide an answer as to what those solutions are or how effective a solution may be.

While this thesis focuses specifically on media portrayal of rampage school shootings, it can be generalized to media portrayal of any large event. Understanding why a topic is deemed important can be related to the coverage that it receives. When it comes to crime, crimes that are broadcasted more frequently are seen as pressing than those that happen more frequently, but are not as “exciting”, as Downs (1972) describes it. As an institution, sociologists can use this research as an example of the impact that coverage has on the general population.

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**APPENDIX I: TABLES**

**Table 1: Sample Data**

<b>Date</b>	<b>School Name</b>	<b>City, State</b>	<b># of Shooter(s)</b>	<b>Age of Shooter(s)</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b># Killed</b>	<b># Injured</b>
March 24, 1998	Westside Middle School	Jonesboro, Arkansas	2	11, 13	Male	White	5	10
April 20, 1999	Columbine High School	Littleton, Colorado	2	17, 18	Male	White	13	23
March 21, 2005	Red Lake Senior High School	Red Lake, Minnesota	1	16	Male	Native American	5	5
April 16, 2007	Virginia Tech	Blacksburg, Virginia	1	23	Male	Asian	32	26
April 12, 2012	Oikos University	Oakland, California	1	43	Male	Asian	7	3
December 14, 2012	Sandy Hook Elementary School	Newtown, Connecticut	1	20	Male	White	27	1
October 1, 2015	Umpqua Community College	Roseburg, Oregon	1	26	Male	Black	9	7
February 14, 2018	Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School	Parkland, Florida	1	19	Male	White	17	17
November 30, 2021	Oxford High School	Oxford, Michigan	1	15	Male	White	4	7

**Table 2: Sample Dates**

	<b>Westside Middle School</b>	<b>Columbine High School</b>	<b>Red Lake Senior High School</b>	<b>Virginia Tech</b>	<b>Oikos University</b>	<b>Sandy Hook Elementary School</b>	<b>Umpqua Community College</b>	<b>Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School</b>	<b>Oxford High School</b>
<b>Day Of</b>	March 24, 1998	April 20, 1999	March 21, 2005	April 16, 2007	April 2, 2012	December 14, 2012	October 1, 2015	February 14, 2018	November 30, 2021
<b>One Day After</b>	March 25, 1998	April 21, 1999	March 22, 2005	April 17, 2007	April 3, 2012	December 15, 2012	October 2, 2015	February 15, 2018	December 1, 2021
<b>Three Days After</b>	March 27, 1998	April 23, 1999	March 24, 2005	April 19, 2007	April 5, 2012	December 17, 2012	October 4, 2015	February 17, 2018	December 3, 2021
<b>One Week After</b>	March 31, 1998	April 27, 1998	March 28, 2005	April 23, 2007	April 9, 2012	December 21, 2012	October 8, 2015	February 21, 2018	December 7, 2021
<b>Two Weeks After</b>	April 7, 1998	May 4, 1999	April 4, 2005	April 30, 2007	April 16, 2012	December 28, 2012	October 15, 2015	February 28, 2018	December 14, 2021
<b>One Month After</b>	April 24, 1998	May 20, 1999	April 21, 2005	May 16, 2007	May 2, 2012	January 14, 2013	November 1, 2015	March 14, 2018	December 30, 2021
<b>Six Months After</b>	September 24, 1998	October 20, 1999	September 21, 2005	October 16, 2007	October 2, 2012	June 14, 2013	April 1, 2016	August 14, 2018	May 30, 2022
<b>One Year Later</b>	March 24, 1998	April 20, 2000	March 21, 2006	April 16, 2008	April 2, 2013	December 14, 2013	October 1, 2016	February 14, 2019	November 30, 2022

**Table 4: Article Numbers By Date**

	<b>Westside Middle School (1998)</b>	<b>Columbine High School (1999)</b>	<b>Red Lake Senior High School (2005)</b>	<b>Virginia Tech (2007)</b>	<b>Oikos University (2012)</b>	<b>Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012)</b>	<b>Umpqua Community College (2015)</b>	<b>Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2017)</b>	<b>Oxford High School (2021)</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Day Of</b>	2	0	2	13	11	26	4	6	25	89
<b>One Day After</b>	6	22	12	71	5	27	21	37	32	233
<b>Three Days After</b>	22	31	13	46	4	50	12	25	24	227
<b>One Week After</b>	8	30	3	25	2	33	13	40	16	170
<b>Two Weeks After</b>	4	19	5	10	3	14	5	23	9	92
<b>One Month After</b>	2	12	2	2	7	14	7	23	8	77
<b>Six Months After</b>	2	6	4	6	6	6	3	5	25	63
<b>One Year After</b>	4	2	4	29	10	8	4	16	?	77
<b>Total</b>	50	122	45	202	48	178	69	175	139	1028