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Church Shootings: Differences in Offender and Incident Characteristics Compared to

Other Mass Shooting Incidents in the U.S.

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Church Shootings: Differences in Offender and Incident Characteristics Compared to

Other Mass Shooting Incidents in the U.S.

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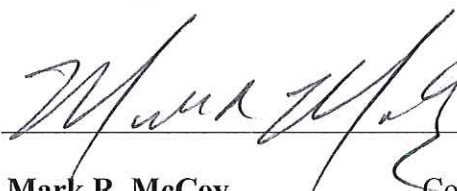By _____

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Introduction

Since the beginning of time, mankind has been known to kill. Murder is in U.S. headlines so frequently that it hardly gets a second look. This overwhelmingly common crime can bring people to feelings of fear and helplessness. It is easy to feel like nothing can be done about the act of murder. This is especially true in cases of senseless mass murder, where large groups of innocent people are targeted. These incidents sometimes occur for no apparent reason at all, and sometimes in places we consider sanctuaries from violence. In these situations, the public looks to law enforcement for protection, answers, and the ultimate prevention of such an incident. Although it may not be possible to prevent every attack, the ability to identify common offender risk factors may result in some instances and actions to be prevented.

The majority of mass murder incidents involve a firearm as the murder weapon of choice. Specifically looking into mass shooting incidents, recent research has shown what seems to be an increase in these firearm offenses over the years. According to researchers at Mother Jones, "since 1982 there have been at least 69 mass shootings across the country …Thirty-two of these mass shootings have occurred since 2006. Seven of them took place in 2012, and another five occurred in 2013" (Follman, et. al, 2014). Mother Jones is a non-profit news organization specializing in investigative, political, and social justice reporting.

Six of the deadliest mass shootings have occurred since 2007. This includes incidents such as the Aurora, Colorado movie theatre shooting with 12 dead and 70 injured, and the Virginia Tech Massacre with 32 dead and 17 wounded. Consistent with the Mother Jones research, there have only been three years since 1982 during which the United States did not experience a mass shooting (Costantini, 2012). This data does not even include the most recent mass shootings such as the June 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting in

groups of four or more. The ability to look at each category individually helps to explain why the offender chose that specific target and what their motives were behind killing those specific people.

In April of 2007, Seung-Hui Cho opened fire at Virginia Tech University, killing 32 people. This as an example of a mass shooting incident that occurred in a school and it is important to examine this incident as well as other school shootings. This incident is uniquely classified as the deadliest shooting rampage in U.S. history with 32 people killed, more than any other mass shooting incident so far. The 23 year-old offender was a senior English Major at the university. He used a pistol he purchased online systematically murder occupants of a residence hall and an engineering building on campus before turning the gun on himself. It is reported that Cho made suicidal remarks to his roommates and was once evaluated at a mental health facility prior to the shooting. He sent a package containing videos, photographs, and writings to NBC News between shootings as well. Cho was known as a loner, and had been previously accused of stalking females. He was bullied by wealthier members of his church, and attacked Christianity in his materials to NBC. Looking at this case, it seems that Cho chose Virginia Tech as a target because people there bullied him as well and he grew to see everyone there as an enemy.

A well-known example of a church shooting incident is the Wedgewood Baptist Church shooting in September of 1999. The offender was Larry Gene Ashbrook. Ashbrook opened fire at the church during a service killing 7 people and wounding 7 others before killing himself. Ashbrook had a history of psychological issues and was reportedly a paranoid schizophrenic according to his brother (Johnson, 1999). However, the death of his father just prior to the incident is thought to have triggered his rampage. This is only one of very few church shooting cases that are heavily publicized and discussed amongst researchers.

occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These

events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an

ongoing incident" (FBI, 2005). The most popular weapon of choice among offenders is a

firearm. This may be due to a firearms ability to yield a powerful force and a quick result.

Firearms also allow the offender to maintain a safe distance from their targets and threats during

the attack. Although there is an abundance of material on mass shooting incidences available,

there is an inadequate amount of information on church shootings specifically. The majority of

research focuses on schools and other public places. Other public places can include locations

such as malls, movie theatres, workplaces, etc. With nearly 150 mass shooting incidents in the

United States since 1965, too often these cases are grouped into one general category. This can

lead to several shortfalls when law enforcement is analyzing offender risk factors. Analysts could

be looking at too narrow of a characteristic pool which in turn could make them miss key

elements in the investigation. Literature on the topic of mass shootings today is useful, however

church shootings are rarely looked at independently from other kinds of mass shootings. It seems

to leave the biggest questions of all unanswered. Why did the offender choose this specific

target? What were his or her motives behind committing such an unthinkable act against these

innocent people? Were there telltale indicators that would identify this person as a risk?

For example, an offender may target a church with which he or she has no affiliation. Just

because he targeted that specific church does not mean he has hatred towards that specific

religion. He or she may have just seen it as a soft target due to its open doors and minimal

security. However, some offenders are connected to their targets in some way, such as the

disgruntled employees who target their place of work, or a student who targets their own school.

In some cases, a motive may never be clear due to the offender being killed or committing

Purpose & Significance of Study

This thesis involved the collection and analysis of behavioral characteristics of church shooting offenders in order to better identify and understand potential patterns and warning signs based on their target selection choices and motives. The study compared the findings to similar studies on school shootings, public place shootings, and general mass shooting incident research. This thesis examined church shooting cases in the United States over the last fifty years (1965-2015). The purpose of the study is to determine if there are identifiable behavioral characteristics among church shooters and their actions that could either correlate to the characteristics of other mass shooting incidents. The primary focus of this study is to increase knowledge by examining church shooting incidents independently in order to possibly develop a unique set of risk factors.

This study is significant because the in-depth information it provided will help law enforcement better understand church shooting offenders, and thereby better prepare for these events, protect the community after the fact, and hopefully decrease the number of incidents from occurring due to a better understanding of offender characteristics. Key characteristics included mental illness, major life tragedy, history of violent behavior, and much more. Overall, this study provided a better understanding of what kinds of risk factors to look for in possibly identifying potential church shooting offenders.

Limitations of Study

This is a comparative study of mass shooting offender characteristics, specifically looking at church shooting offenders. Church shootings are not a common occurrence; though there is a large number of mass shooting incidents in U.S. history, this study focuses on church shooting incidents that have occurred within the past 50 years (since 1965), thus the size of the

- **Psychotic Mass Murderer:** an offender who is out of touch with reality and may possibly hear voices or see visions commanding him or her to kill innocent strangers (Holmes & Holmes, 2001).

- **Church:** a body or organization of religious believers (Church, 2015).

Review of Literature

Mass Murder

A multitude of research has been conducted over the years on the topic of murder. In the past, murder was an all-encompassing term for several different types of killings. As time passed and knowledge was gathered, experts began defining murder in more specific terms in regards to characteristics of the crime. More specifically, crimes of multicide (mass murder) were separated into 3 unique groups: mass murder, spree murder, and serial murder. Professor Emeritus of Justice Administration at the University of Louisville, Ronald Holmes and his brother, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Central Florida, Stephen Holmes defined mass murder and spree murder in their book *Mass Murder in the United States* (Holmes & Holmes, 2001):

1. Mass Murder: the killing of three or more people at one time and in one location

2. Spree Murder: the killing of three or more people usually within a 30-day period and typically during the course of another felony (such as robbery).

Additionally, serial murder was defined in the 1992 Crime Classification Manual as "three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period in between homicides" (Douglass et.al., 1992).

for these offenders to have expressed zero of these notable characteristics. Adding onto characteristics, George B. Palermo at the Medical College of Wisconsin found 12 commonalities that mass murderers typically share. These offenders are: 1) mostly white males with an age range wider than that of the serial killer. 2) Impulsive in their killing and unconcerned about being captured or killed during their offense. 3) They usually commit their crimes in public places, except for those who kill members of their families. 4) The killer does not concern himself with leaving evidence against himself, evidence which may lead to his arrest. 5) Occasionally the mass murder follows brief periods of obsessive ruminations and undefined preparation for a possible destructive act, which may give the impression that the crime is premeditated. 6) The killer is well acquainted with and usually possesses an arsenal of guns – handguns, rifles, and/or semi-automatic weapons. 7) The killer has at times displayed moody, antagonistic, rebellious, frustrated, violent behavior, and has occasionally been under the care of mental health personnel. 8) Their notes, when present, and their statements, when given, bespeak their deep frustration with perceived wrongs by employers, authority figures and/or the social system at large. 9) The offense of a mass murderer is usually locally limited and usually non-repetitive. 10) Alcohol use or the use of illicit drugs may be present in the life history of a mass murderer. 11) The mass murderer is generally considered by the public to be mentally ill, or at least to be an individual with a shaky inner self, unable to withstand environmental stresses and prone to explosive behavior. 12) Finally, the mass murder often ends in suicide. (Palermo, 1997).

Grant Duwe at the Minnesota Department of Corrections is a criminologist as well as a researcher of mass murder. Duwe has also noticed that there are similarities among mass murderers, some of which overlap Palermo's. He specifically notes five: "1) killer blames others for his problems, 2) he is much more likely to have a mental illness, particularly paranoid

group of people who followed his direction and he instructed the members to kill people who were unknown to the killers themselves.

2. **Family Annihilator:** killer murders those he knows: family members, relatives, common-law relatives, and so on. This killer operates from an intrinsic motivation, and his anticipated gain is expressive or psychological. John List is an example. He killed his wife, one daughter, and two sons.

3. **Disgruntled Employee:** typically returns to a former place of employment and kills those who are "responsible" for his problems. Often, this type of killer has severe emotional and psychiatric problems and is on medication for these mental and physical conditions. Unfortunately he often kills innocent bystanders, sometimes those who have worked side by side with him. Joseph Wesbecker is an example. He returned to the plant where he had been granted mental disability and opened fire.

4. **Ideological mass murder:** kills those whom he knows, usually members of his own group or cult himself. Heaven's gate is an example. In the Heaven's Gate example, their leader ordered the deaths because it was their belief that there was a spaceship behind the Hale-Bopp comet, that had been sent to transport them to a better land.

5. **Set-and-Run mass killer:** this type of murderer is usually away from the scene of the crime by the time the victims are killed. This type of killer arranges for some type of explosive or other device to be set and then separates himself from the site. With a set-and-run killer, the victims are strangers. Timothy McVeigh of the Oklahoma City Bombing is an example.

6. **Disgruntled Citizen:** similar to disgruntled employee. However, victims are innocent bystanders who share no space or relationship with the killer. They just happen to be

States, but what is unique is that it's so easy for people in the U.S. to get access to weapons"

(Roth, 2009).

Mass Shootings

Focusing on mass shootings, statistics highlight the influence of firearms on murder.

There effects are seen in federal numbers: "According to FBI's crime reports, between 2007 and

2011 the U.S. experienced an annual average of 13,700 homicides, with guns responsible for

67.8% of those. That's an average of 9,289 people shot dead by a gun, or 744 a month, 178 a

week, 25 a day, or a little more than one per hour" (Shermer, 2013). Also, " According to James

Allen Fox, Northeastern State University Professor of Criminology, Law, and Public Policy,

between 1980 and 2010 there was an average of 20 mass murders per year (defined by the FBI as

a number of murders [four or more] occurring during the same incident), with an average annual

death toll of about 100, or 5 per shooting. This averages out to one mass murder every 2.6

weeks" (Shermer, 2013). A graph which illustrates this statistic is as shown:

Figure 1. Mass Shootings in the United States, 1980-2010, tracking incidents, offenders, and victims. In any given year the number of each bounces around wildly, but the overall averages come out to around 20 mass murders and 100 victims per annum.

Page 24 (Shermer, 2013)
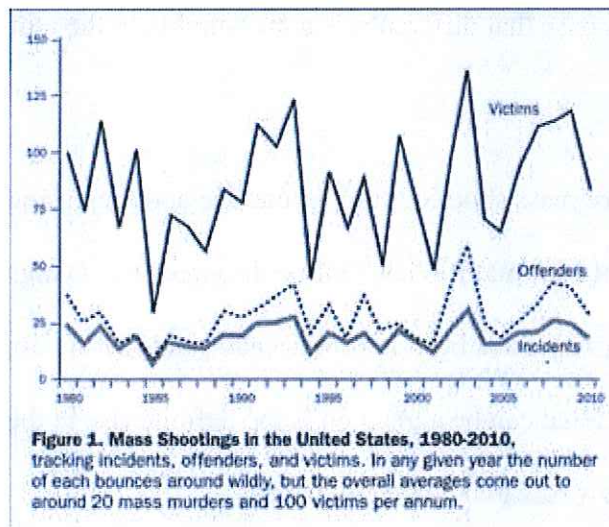
Targets & Motives

When looking at target selection, the research primarily focused on church shootings. However in order to understand church shootings, we must examine all kinds of mass shooting incidents as a whole. Along with churches, this included examining targets such as schools & other general public places. First looking into church shootings, a common reason for this target selection is due to the fact that churches themselves are soft targets. Most churches keep an open door policy so as to not turn anyone away from that particular faith, "one of the benevolent acts of church is the practice of opening up the church for people to come into the church and receive welfare assistance" (Bournes, 2004). Although church shootings are rare, "they can make inviting targets for shooters particularly disturbed individuals who are looking for a highly visible target to settle a grudge or make a political statement" (Markoe, 2013). In some cases, the target selection can be completely random. In a discussion about Larry Ashbrook, shooter at Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, "local authorities are saying that he apparently selected his target for his attack at random" (Randall, 1999). There are several cases where the offender was targeting that church for a specific reason. For example, in the case of Jim David Adkisson, he fired a shotgun at members of the congregation at Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville, Tennessee and was apparently motivated by the desire to kill liberals and democrats (MacDonald, 2009). Adkisson killed two and wounded six. Matthew Jim Murray attacked and started shooting at Colorado Youth With a Mission and New Life Church, and he was said to have "hated Christians" (Peters, 2008).

Adding to the idea of soft targets, many churches simply do not have the proper safety planning to begin with. In a study of church vulnerability to violence, 51 questionnaires were received back from Methodist and Baptist churches in 7 cities across the United States. Results

They expose the vulnerable underbelly of ordinary life and tell us that malevolence can be brewing in places where we least expect it, that our fail-safe methods (parental involvement in children's lives, close-knit neighborhoods) do not identify nascent pathologies as well as we thought" (Newman et al., 2004). Emotions such as these typically cause communities to take a stand and lobby for higher security, while the answer could lie in prevention rather than post incident countermeasures.

The case of Michael Carneal is a prime example of a situation where prevention by warning sign recognition could have possibly made all the difference. Carneal stole guns from his father and a neighbor and opened fire on a Monday morning prayer group at his school, Heath High School, in West Paducah, Kentucky on December 1, 1997. Newman et al. provides an overview of Carneal's background and events leading up to the shooting. A summary is as follows:

To the outside, the Carneal family was a perfectly happy family. They were very involved and got along well. Michael had a girlfriend before, friends, overnight stays at friend's houses. Michael was not happy though. He had a high performing sister (Kelly) and he was insecure, socially immature, and awkward. Michael decided early on that he was probably never going to be as successful as his sister. So he kind of started going on a diversion path. He was once quoted saying "Well, I'm not going to be able to compete with her, so I'm not going to. I'm just going to become different." Strange fears began to dwell in him, anxieties he could not shake. Michael's behavior at home began to reflect some of these pressures, although the family did not know how to interpret what they saw. He was afraid of sleeping alone in his room, fearing strangers or monsters hiding under the bed or climbing through the windows. He started smuggling weapons – mainly kitchen knives—into his room and hiding them under the mattress,

the school as the target had more to do with his desire for attention than the school itself. The attack wasn't on any particular schoolmates either; ultimately he was looking for respect and intimidation from those around him.

When general public places are targeted (not including churches or schools), the reasons can vary greatly. However, economists John Lott and William Landes "found that a common theme of mass shootings is that they occur in places where guns are banned and killers know everyone will be unarmed, such as shopping malls and schools" making it less likely that other citizens will return fire" (Fund, 2012). In the case of the Aurora movie theatre shooting, this finding rings true. Shooter James Eagan Holmes "had a choice of seven movie theatres that were showing the Batman movie he was obsessed with. All were within a 20-minute drive of his home. The Cinemark Theatre the killer ultimately chose wasn't the closest, but it was the only one that posted signs saying it banned concealed handguns carried by law-abiding individuals" (Fund, 2012). These types of signs give perpetrators an advantage during an attack. This goes back on what Fox (2012) said regarding how mass murderers carefully plan their attacks. Lott also noted "a couple hundred people were in the Cinemark Theatre when the killer arrived. There is an extremely high probability that one or more of them would have had a legal concealed handgun with him if they had not been banned" (Fund, 2012). This shows that the last thing on a shooters mind is the law and the ramifications that come along with breaking it.

The selection of the target itself and the motives behind that choice are two different things. For example, a church shooter may choose its target based on lack of security, but may be motivated by his or her mental illness or recent set back in life. It takes a significant type of stressor to cause one to murder a large number of people. The question is what kind of stressor could lead to such an act? Holmes and Holmes (1992) believe that the partial answer lies in the

Warning Signs

With the right knowledge of what to look for in mass murderers predictive behavior, the public could possibly reduce the number of future mass murders. MacDonald (2009) advised to look for indicators "such as a stranger who appears nervous, avoids eye contact and cuts casual conversation short." When being interviewed after a mass murder incident, people will "make such statements as the killer had been seeing a mental health professional, had been on medication, or had been threatening fellow employees. In other words, the killer was displaying certain signs that should have made him or her detectable had society used appropriate expertise and resources to do so" (Holmes, 1992). Had these unusual characteristics been taken seriously, the outcome of such event could have been drastically different. In some cases, the perpetrator gives a clear warning to certain people prior to the incident, such as Michael Carneal did. As noted in Fessenden (2000), out of the 100 cases by The Times, 63 cases involved people who made threats of violence before the event, including 54 who threatened specific violence to specific people. In the case of Dion Terres, 33-year-old white male who fired shots in a McDonalds restaurant in Kenosha, Wisconsin, left a video testimony behind after his suicide at the shooting scene. In the video, Terres discusses his "frustrating relationships with his parents and relatives, his ambivalence towards them, and the thoughts he had, throughout the years, of exterminating him" (Palermo, 1997). Though these are more specifically what drove his emotions to the ultimate high, these angry characteristics came out in his personality and interactions with others as well. "People who knew Dion Terres described him variously as a disturbed man, a loner, a ritualistic marijuana user prone to rage, as depressed and highly sensitive to rejection, and fearful of burglars, or, on the contrary, as nice, polite – a 'wonderful'

this research focused on potential patterns in areas such as criminal history, prior

stressors/trauma, any type of connection to the church, warning signs, etc. A qualitative study

was necessary for this research in order to gain understanding of the human perspective as well

as their motivations and actions. Using a qualitative method with this research afforded us the

opportunity to further understand why these offenders act out in this way and on what criteria

they consider in choosing their target. This research is crucial to the field of law enforcement

because there is such a lack of research available on church shootings specifically. Too often, all

mass shooting incidents are lumped together for research purposes. It is important to look at

targets individually in order to fully understand the attacks, which is why this research chose to

focus on churches explicitly.

Sample/Participants

This research focused on mass shooting offenders who chose a church or place of

religious affiliation as their target. These case studies helped give a better understanding of both

the common and diverse behavioral characteristics exhibited by church shooting offenders. The

participants were not selected at random due to the limited number of incidents and research, and

due to the qualitative nature of the study. The sample consisted of eighteen offenders in the

United States who committed a church shooting in the last 50 years. Even if the death toll in

some incidents may not have met the typical criteria (3 or more), they were still included in the

study. This is due to the researcher believing the incidents had more to do with offender intent

rather than the resulting number of fatalities. The offenders were male with the exception of one

female offender. These cases were chosen because they met the standards set by the researcher.

The inclusion standards included men or women who committed a shooting inside of a church or

any place of religious affiliation within the last 50 years (1965-2015). The purpose of this study

Data Analysis

The data was collected and evaluated in order to discover any similarities or consistencies among church shooting incidents as well as the offenders who perpetrated them. A number of different characteristics were examined such as: living situation, connection to the target, motive, warning signs, employment status, and criminal history among several other factors. A total of twenty four factors were examined in each case. The intent was to examine the incidents from several angles in order to better understand the attacks. Data gathered during research was coded and analyzed using a statistical program known as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). According to Windsor University, the SPSS program is a "comprehensive system for analyzing data. SPSS can take data from almost any type of file and use them to generate tabulated reports, charts, and plots of distributions and trends, descriptive statistics, and complex statistical analysis" (2015).

Results

Case Overviews

The offenders chosen in this study were compared to see if there were any similarities or consistencies among them or the incidents they perpetuated. Such similarities could serve as explanation as to why these crimes were committed, as well as what kind of characteristics may be present in future potential offenders. By analyzing these offenders and their crimes, we gained better understanding of the common characteristics seen in church shooting cases. By way of example, six of the eighteen incidents are described below. These six were believed to be representative of all spectrums of the data. They are each unique and give a well-rounded overview of the various types of offenders and the horrific crimes they perpetrated.

Adkisson constantly struggled to keep a job, working at many different businesses over the years. Sooner or later, he always ended up getting laid off. In his suicide note he blamed the liberals and Democrats for his inability to keep work. Though he never had any confirmed diagnosis of mental illness he told authorities that he was "crazy" depressed. Adkisson's attorneys considered an insanity defense, but then opted not to. Adkisson was sentenced to life in prison in February of 2009.

Case 2 – Anthony Bell

May 21, 2006 was a dark day in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Twenty-five year old Anthony Bell walked into The Ministry of Jesus Christ and fired multiple shots, killing five people. All five of those victims were related to him by marriage. The victims included his wife, his wife's grandparents, her great aunt, and her cousin. Though Bell did have a history of domestic violence against his wife, no one would have thought he would lash out in such a violent way. Authorities say Erica Bell obtained a temporary restraining order against Anthony in 2005, but it was dismissed that same year at her request (Man, 2006). They continued to have marital issues and became estranged. According to her uncle, Jeffery Howard, Erica "was getting on with her life and wanted to keep worshipping and following God, and he just wanted to run on the streets" (2006). Erica's mother, Claudia Brown, was a church pastor at The Ministry of Jesus Christ. The church could be described as a small family church with most of its members being related. It occupies a small space in a more commercial area of Baton Rouge, sharing a warehouse space with a guitar shop. The church is marked with a sign saying "A family that prays together, stays together" (2006).Erica had been attending this small family church in order to get her life back on track during her troubled marriage. Anthony's motive for the attack seemed to center around an alleged affair he had been having with his mother in law, Claudia Brown, as well as his

1974).Though he had no confirmed mental illness diagnosis, Chenault's lawyers had him plead

not guilty by reason of insanity. His plan was rejected and he was eventually given a death

sentence which was eventually reduced to life in prison. Chenault suffered a stroke while serving

time in the state prison located in Jackson, Georgia. He died in the hospital on August 19, 1995

at the age of 44.

Case 4 – Shon Miller

Wednesday night bible classes at New St. John Fellowship Baptist Church in Gonzales,

Louisiana were expected to go just as they always had. No one would have imagined that shortly

after services began, chaos would ensue. The March 10, 1999 night ended in blood covered

pews, a total of 4 gunshot fatalities and 4 persons wounded.

The class of approximately 100 people was interrupted suddenly when the door was

kicked in by Shon Miller, a homeless man who burst into the room with a 9mm semi-automatic

pistol and began firing. However, his intentions were not so random. It seemed that he had a

specific group of people in his sights that day. Shon's estranged wife, Carla, attended the church

along with their 2 year old son, Shon Junior. Both were killed that day during Shon's rampage.

According to the New York Times, Miller's son "cried out to him in the instant before the

shooting" (Firestone, 1999). Another church member, Vaniaro Jackson, was sitting next to Carla

and was shot and killed. En-route to the church, Miller also killed his mother-in-law, Mildred

Vessel, outside her home.

After a standoff with law enforcement, Miller was shot and killed by the Ascension

Parish sheriff's officers and the local police department. Officials say Miller's behavior was

fueled by the rough relationship he had with his wife. Shon had been described by family and

to New Life Church 80 miles away. Twelve hours later, Murray lingered in the parking lot of the church and opened fire using a rifle. According to police, when church was letting out around 1pm, "Murray began walking through the parking lot with five guns and nearly 1,000 rounds of ammunition in his backpack. He had more weaponry in his car. Murray ignited two commercial grade smoke devices before he went into the church" (Meyer, 2007). Two sisters were killed in this attack. Murray then shot and killed himself on the scene. Between the two attacks, Murray posted a message on a website dedicated to people against organized religion. The message included hateful statements such as, "You Christians brought this on yourselves...I'm coming for EVERYONE soon and I will be armed to the (expletive deleted) teeth and I WILL shoot and kill" (Meyer, 2007). His statement was very similar to the manifesto left behind from Columbine school shooter, Eric Harris.

Youth With a Mission is a missionary training center that prepares and teaches students to serve the less fortunate all around the world. Not all who enter this program successfully complete it. Matthew Murray was one of those people. He was dismissed from the YWAM training in 2002. The training center stated that this was due to alleged health problems. However, there seemed to be more at issue. The dismissal happened shortly after a strange performance Murray gave at the mission. A fellow missionary trainee, Richard Werner, said that Murray performed 2 very dark rock songs that made fellow workers scared (Colorado, 2007). Werner also reported that Murray would roll around his bed and make noises. According to a CNN report, Werner's account of those incidents is as follows: "He would say, 'Don't worry, I'm just talking to the voices'…'Don't worry, Richard, You're a nice guy. The voices like you'"(Colorado, 2007). Murray had other temporary education attempts besides YWAM. After being homeschooled in a strongly religious Christian household, he "briefly attended Arapahoe

there was nothing in his home that could help investigators determine the motive behind the crime.

Overview of Major Themes

Data retrieved from law enforcement reports, court reports, news articles, and media sources showed frequent similarities throughout the results. There were six similarities/themes that were of interest:

1. Over 66% of offenders were between the ages of 19-45 years old.

2. 61.1% of the offenders were Caucasian.

3. Out of 18 cases, a result of 38.9% had unknown motives.

4. A large majority of the offenses (72.2%) occurred between the years of 2001-2010.

5. The Baptist denomination was marginally the most common religious target among the churches, at 38.9% of the cases. Non-denominational came in a close second at 33.6%

6. Finally, when looking at the subcategories of mass shooters, a majority of 44.4% of the church shooters fell into the 'psychotic mass murderer' category.

7. Not surprisingly, most (66.7%) of these incidents occurred on Sundays.

These specific results revealed the answers to some of the main questions this thesis posed. The overall data results and following sections go into more detail of all twenty five factors that were coded.

Characteristics of Offenders

Out of the 18 offenders, 17 of them were male and 1 was female. The majority of the offenders were Caucasian (61%) and between the ages of 19-45 years old (66.6%). Ten of the 18
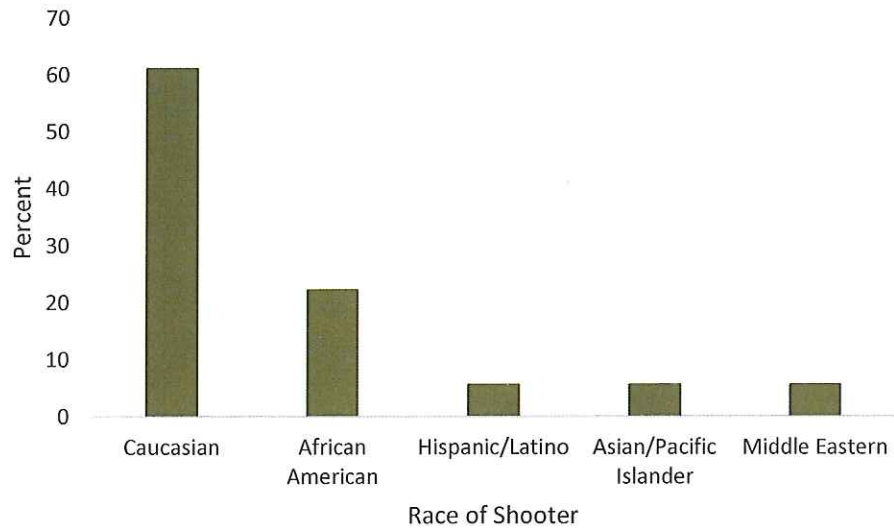
Graph 1 – Offender Race

Table 1 - Offender Age

Offender	Age Bracket				
	19-30	31-45	46-55	56-70	71+
Jim D. Adkisson				x	
Larry Gene Ashbrook			x		
Babarin, Sergei				x	
Bell, Anthony	x				
Chennault, Marcus	x				
Hamilton, Jason		x			
Jeffress, Lloyd Robert					x
King, Alvin Lee			x		
Miller, Shon	x				
Murray, Matthew	x				
Pallipurath, Joseph	x				
Pepaj, Gjon		x			
Radford, Fredrick		x			
Ratzmann, Terry		x			
Saimon, Eiken Elam			x		
Sedlacek, Terry Joe	x				
Troy, Peter		x			
Wilson, Sheila		x			
Total Percentage/Mean:	**33.3%**	**33.3%**	**16.7%**	**11.1%**	**5.6%**

Graph 3 - Offender Subcategory

Characteristics of Incidents

These incidents were more common on Sundays (61.1%) and in the month of March

(27.8%). According to this research, the incidents occurred much more frequently between the

years of 2001-2010. This decade holds 13 out of 18 of the incidents, representing 72.2%. Though

victim selection can be random in cases such as these, the common range of victims (fatal) was

1-3. Twelve of the 18 incidents (66.7%) ended in 1-3 fatalities. Though the common religious

denomination targeted was the Baptist religion (38.9%), the majority of the offenders had no

known connection to their target at all. Baptist churches may have represented the higher

statistic simply because the Baptist religion is the second largest Christian denomination in the

United States, second to Catholicism. The Baptist religion has a member size of over 33 million

people, giving them a high chance of being targeted (Kosmin, 2001). Eight out of the 18

offenders seemed to not have a connection to their target of choice. When looking at

geographical location of the incidents, the shootings tended to concentrate on the Midwestern

For example, regardless if the shooter only killed 3 victims, there could have been numerous

others who were wounded. The offender's intent, in most cases, is to kill as many as possible

before killing themselves or being killed by law enforcement. Therefore, those incidents with

less than four fatalities were still included in the sample pool.

Discussion

Mass shooting research comes in many forms and usually generalizes all kinds of

incidents into one category. More specific mass shooting research looks into specific incidents

from all angles and identifies and analyzes various circumstances. It is not likely that we will

ever be able to identify all potential mass shooting offenders in America and prevent them from

committing these crimes due to their unpredictable and sometimes reclusive nature. However, by

studying these offenders along with all different types of mass shootings, we were able to create

a risk-factor check list for law enforcement to better evaluate and protect their communities. This

study focused in on church shooting incidents independently of other mass shooting incidents in

order to gain a better understanding of what sets them apart. This was undertaken to see if the

profile of a church shooter has unique enough characteristics to be considered separate from the

mass shooter profile as a whole.

Discussion of Research Questions

1. **Are there identifiable behavioral characteristic differences in church shooting**

   offenders compared to those who select other types of targets?

   There were few differences in church shooting offenders. For example, an FBI

   study, Crime in Schools and Colleges, found that the most common age of offenders was

   between 13-15 years old. The FBI study also found that "offenders 18 years of age or

2. **Do mass shooters who select a church as their target share similar characteristics?**

   Offenders shared similar characteristics in a number of ways. They were predominately Caucasian males between the ages of 19-45 years old. The majority of these offenders also showed some sort of warning sign, whether it was openly talking to someone or expressing frustrated/angry behaviors. Nearly half of the offenders (44.4%) had no affiliation or connection to the church they targeted. Another similarity is that their common weapon of choice was a handgun of some kind. They did not have a criminal history for the most part, but could have a history of being involved in domestic violence (27.8%). Though the common motive among offenders is an unknown motive, the second largest group of offenders (27.8%) was motivated by attacking a specific person at the church, which could have also stemmed from domestic violence problems.

3. **Are there identifiable behavioral characteristics among offenders who select a church as a target to compile a list of risk factors/warning signs to assist in identifying potential at-risk persons of interest?**

   There was enough identifiable behavioral characteristics among church shooting offenders to compile a list of risk factors. This list can be used as an investigative tool for law enforcement to use with suspects in order to identify potential offenders (see page #59). Many of the offender characteristics on the check list are similar to factors investigators could also associate with mass shooters in general. This is due to the fact that, in many ways, the portrait of a church shooter is statistically very similar to that of a mass shooter in general based on other relevant studies.

with them. Church shooting incidents are rare incidents in and of themselves, which resulted in a

nominal amount of information available for research purposes.

Recommendations for Future Research

After completing this research, there are some recommendations for those who plan on

researching around this topic as well. First, it would be useful to create a database for church

shooting incidents that others can use as a concrete base to build upon. If researchers were to be

able to have contact with investigators and conduct interviews with them regarding case

information it could give much needed insight into those to the incidents. Interviews with

witnesses and other church members present on the day of the shootings could also produce

additional details to assist future research. Though it may be more difficult, being able to conduct

behavioral interviews of those offenders still living could produce valuable information as well.

The analysis of the risk factor checklist created in this study could also be beneficial to future

research. By determining the checklist's validity and reliability, future researches could ascertain

its value towards law enforcement and investigation. After determining the checklist's value,

future researchers could accommodate or tailor it to be of even better use.

Conclusion

This research examined the characteristics of church shooting offenders and the incidents

themselves. The results found that offenders were statistically white males with no prior criminal

history or confirmed diagnosis of mental illness. Findings about race and sex were consistent

with those already discovered in other mass shooting research. Over half of the offenders showed

some type of warning signs, regardless if it was obvious and direct or just observed by others.

Though the majority of the offenders had an unknown motive, the next highest motive was

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Appendix 1

CHURCH SHOOTER

RISK FACTOR CHECKLIST

There have been several risk factors correlated with mass shooting offenders. This list includes risk factors specifically linked to those offenders who choose a church as their target. It is to be used by investigators as a tool for profiling to determine if a suspect committed a church shooting. This checklist is not meant to replace standard investigative procedures.
If a suspect fits 8 or more of these characteristics, it could indicate that he/she has a high-risk for committing a church shooting.

Check all that apply:

1) ____ Is the suspect Caucasian?

2) ____ Is the suspect male?

3) ____ Is the suspect between the ages of 19-45 years old?

4) ____ Does the suspect have any history of mental illness?

5) ____ Does the suspect have any history of criminal activity?

6) ____ Does the suspect have any history of domestic violence offenses?

7) ____ Has the suspect shown any type of warning signs that show premeditation of violent acts?

8) ____ Has there been an incident in the offender's life that could be an emotional trigger for

   violence?

9) ____ Has the suspect recently lost his/her job?

10) ____ Has the suspect ever attended the church that was attacked?

11) ____ Do any of the suspect's friends or family members attend the church that was attacked?

12) ____ Does the suspect have readable access to firearms?

13) ____ Does the suspect express dislike for any particular religious denominations?

14) ____ Does the suspect have a general negative outlook on life?

15) ____ Does the suspect express any type of erratic or unstable behavior characteristics?