

The Harm in Varying Definitions of Mass Shootings

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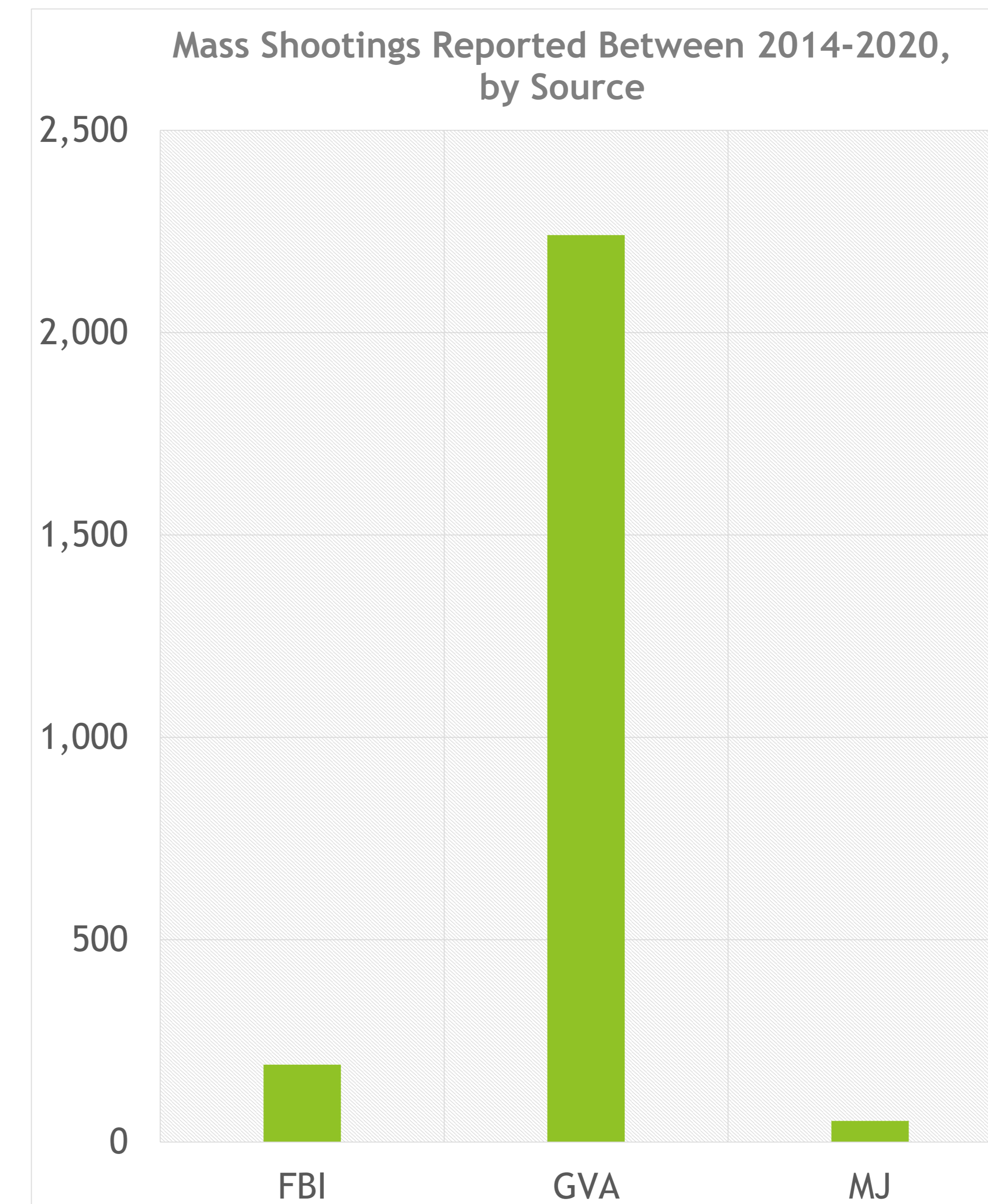
INTRODUCTION

- ❖ High-profile mass shootings garner significant media and scholarly attention.
- ❖ Although a definition for mass murder was directed through the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012, no federal or legal definition has been established for mass shootings (Booty et al., 2019).
- ❖ Discrepancies in criteria amongst databases are often derived from the number of victims criteria, with various databases requiring a minimum of zero to four fatalities, as well as location and duration of the attack (Booty et al., 2019).
- ❖ Ambiguity in the definition of a mass shooting creates several problems for public safety, databases, and researchers.
- ❖ First, discrepancies in definitions only serve to generate confusion and anxiety amongst the general public.
- ❖ Reporting sources, such as news outlets, may exaggerate or underemphasize the frequency and lethality of mass shootings (Booty et al., 2019).
- ❖ Secondly, conflicting definitions affect databases that track the frequency of mass shootings.
- ❖ Mass shooting databases typically track victim count, perpetrator characteristics, and frequency, producing wildly different annual numbers (Booty et al., 2019).
- ❖ Such databases include the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), Mother Jones, and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Active Shooter Report.

INTRODUCTION cont.

- ❖ The GVA reported 2,241 mass shootings between 2014-2020 (“Past summary ledgers”, 2021).
- ❖ The FBI reported 191 mass shootings in the same time period— 2,050 less than the GVA reported (“Active shooter resources”, n.d.).
- ❖ Moreover, Mother Jones tracked a mere 52 mass shootings from 2014-2020 (“US mass shootings...”, 2021).
- ❖ Furthermore, a recent study captured that such databases missed between 30-40% of mass shootings (Duwe, 2020).
- ❖ Combined, such significant discrepancies present an inaccurate prevalence of mass shootings.
- ❖ The impact of this also bleeds over into research.
- ❖ Researchers, who rely on databases and federal definitions, are severely limited in studying mass shooter behavior and the scope of this phenomenon.
- ❖ With data overly or inadequately reflecting mass shooting frequency, studies are consequently flawed and biased.
- ❖ Data accuracy is increasingly important as the United States government recently repealed the Dickey Amendment, now authorizing federal funds to support firearm research led by the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Melillo, 2019; Rostron, 2018).
- ❖ Researchers must rely on personal judgement regarding which statistics and databases to incorporate, rather than a technical definition (Booty et al., 2019).

PREVALENCE



DEFINITION

The federal government should adopt the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) definition of a mass shooter as:

“an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area [whose] attacks must have (a) involved a firearm, (b) appeared to have struck random strangers or bystanders and not only specific targets, and (c) not occurred solely in domestic settings or have been primarily gang-related, drive-by shootings, hostage taking incidents, or robberies” (Lankford, 2020).

DISCUSSION

- ❖ DHS’s definition differentiates mass shootings from terrorism, domestic violence, and gang-related shootings. Furthermore, the omission of a casualty criteria offers flexibility in incorporating mass shootings with the intention of a high casualty count that were thwarted.

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