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On gun violence, mass killings shouldn't be the focus

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When it comes to crime reporting, experienced journalists look for trends that may help the public understand which neighborhoods are more dangerous than others, and why; which people are more likely to turn to crime than others, and why; how effectively law enforcement does its job — and why or why not.

Covering guns, gun control and gun violence has evolved into a regular beat for reporters, as evidenced by efforts to sharpen the crime reporter's skill — a knee-jerk response to the public's growing concern about Sandy Hook, the Aurora theater shootings and other mass shootings.

Ironically, mass shootings grab headlines but cause a tiny fraction of gun-related deaths in this country.

"We cannot base (legislative) policy on these events," says Garen Wintemute, an emergency medicine physician and professor at the University of California (Davis) School of Medicine. "Mass shootings are not the problem."

In May 2015, 30 journalists and journalism educators gathered in Phoenix for a two-day workshop titled "Covering Guns," which featured medical experts, public health workers, pro- and anti- gun control advocates, police chiefs and public policy authorities from across the nation.

Hosted by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, which is based in New York at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, organizers touted the workshop as an event to "enhance the practical ability of journalists to report on guns and gun violence knowledgeably, ethically and effectively."

Speakers debated gun laws as well as the social and economic impacts of gun violence. Two years ago, The Poynter Institute held similar workshops. As a former reporter who teaches journalism, I have attended these gatherings to find out how the news media expect to improve gun coverage. The answer is still a moving target.

At a time when the crime rate in America has plunged to record lows in most cities, the focus on gun violence may seem out of sync with current trends. On the contrary, say crime experts, the need to data-mine government records and to better inform the public about gun-buying laws and their loopholes has never been greater.

Above all, law enforcement officials and legal experts say, Americans are ill informed on this subject, thanks in large part to the news media.

Lawrence Rosenthal, a law professor at Chapman University in Los Angeles, blames journalists for failing to devote in-depth coverage of guns in high crime communities, and for ignoring the impact of right-to-carry laws in states like Florida.

"Guns are invisible in reporting," Rosenthal says.

Even though shootings leading to injury and death occur with almost routine frequency every day in the U.S., the fact remains that it is mass shootings (often defined as a shooting with at least four victims in one location) that tend to provoke outrage nationwide, despite the fact that they kill or injure far fewer victims.

For example, the worst mass shooting in the U.S. occurred in 2007 at Virginia Tech when a shooter killed 32 students and teachers. That tragedy is dwarfed in terms of numbers by the annual number of shooting deaths nationwide. In 2010, there were 31,672 firearm deaths, including 11,078 homicides, 19,302 suicides, and 606 unintentional killings, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

The average citizen tends to react with outrage to mass shootings in disproportionate intensity compared to the routine gun violence that occurs daily in communities across the country. Unless a family member or friend is a shooting victim in a convenient store robbery or drug deal, we usually pay attention to mass shootings with much greater concern than we do to those far more prevalent gun crimes involving victims of robbery or gang warfare.

Research indicates that media coverage of mass shootings plays an integral role in provoking public reactions of outrage. Indeed, reporting stories about gun violence follow a pattern that reflects predictable outcomes: Mass shootings receive relentless coverage to the point of sensationalizing the crime and, in the eyes of victims and families, making the shooter heroic. And yet routine shootings receive far less coverage in big cities where gun violence is as common as traffic jams.

Suicides due to guns far outweigh all other shooting deaths by a nearly 2-1 margin, yet self-inflicted killings rarely make news, so the public remains oblivious to their magnitude on the spectrum of gun fatalities.

David Kopel, a Denver lawyer and policy analyst for the Cato Institute, contends that the news media's weak coverage of gun violence reflects a polarized America. "Gun rights are not just the NRA," Kopel says. "And gun control is not just the Brady Campaign."