

## Are Mass Shooters a Social Kind?

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed fifteen people at their high school in Columbine, Colorado. National media dubbed the event a “school shooting.” The term grimly expanded over the next several years to include similar events at army bases, movie theaters, churches, and nightclubs. Today, we commonly use the categories “mass shooter” and “mass shooting” to organize and classify information about gun violence. I will argue that neither category is an effective tool for reducing gun violence and use empirical data to show how these categories perpetuate a moral panic that harms already vulnerable demographics. I conclude that we should instead favor a narrower description of individuals and events, (e.g., “X shot Y people at Z”) because we can talk about all of the relevant cases without contributing the undue harms.

I will begin with two orienting remarks. Social categories are useful because they help us quickly classify and organize information. We create social categories by grouping individuals or objects together according to a descriptive and normative standard. The descriptive component identifies current members of the category, simultaneously giving us a way to predictively pick out future members. Descriptions can change over time in response to technological advancements or political pressure. Ian Hacking (1999) details how these developments can make the description more or less accurate and so evaluate how well a descriptive component identifies current or future members of a social category.

The normative component of a social category explains why the identifying description matters. We can distinguish between normatively “thick” and “thin” social categories (Haslanger 2012). Thick social categories, like gender, race, or class, have a tremendous impact on our lives, whether we want them to or not. Thick social categories play a major role in the kinds of jobs (if any) we can have, the housing we have access to, or which political rights and resources we are

entitled to. By contrast, thin social categories do not carry much normative weight. Even if we wanted to plan our lives around being a Leo, a Belieber, or a library card holder, there are practical limits to doing so because thin social categories do not connect to many significant institutions, opportunities, or rites of passage in our society. Since social categories can change over time, they can become thicker or thinner, so it's helpful to conceptualize them on a spectrum of importance.

I spend Section One arguing that the descriptive component of the mass shooter social category fails to reliably identify which individuals are mass shooters and so is not useful. I extend this argument in Section Two to show that the descriptive component of the mass shooting social category fails to reliably differentiate mass shootings from other kinds of gun violence and so fails to usefully classify gun violence. In Section Three, I turn to the normative effects of using mass shooters and mass shootings as thick social categories: the more we enact laws and policies to protect ourselves from a social monster "out there," the more we perpetuate a moral panic. This moral panic entrenches detrimental policies in schools that disproportionately affect children of color and exacerbates stigma around mental illness. I conclude that we can still talk about these individuals and events with a narrower description "X shot Y people at Z."

Using this narrower description will not magically make us safer but changing how we think and talk about what is happening gives us an opportunity to reflect on what we are trying to do and how we plan to realistically accomplish it. This opportunity to take a step back and reassess what we are doing matters because our initial reactions to the shootings were spontaneous and based in grief, anger, or fear. These responses framed how we understood the problem and set the tone for future ways to resolve it. We have inherited this framework without fully appreciating what it has committed us to. Using this narrower description trims back some of the theoretical commitments we made in adopting this early framework by reconsidering how we approach it.

## 1. Mass Shooters and Predictive Profiles

I start with a methodological point. This methodological precision detects a practical flaw in how we describe mass shooters. Plausible revisions to this description either identify too many people or lose their predictive accuracy. This flaw is practical because the less accurate the description is, the less useful it is at identifying or predicting who is a mass shooter.

Let me clarify what I will be asking. Sally Haslanger (2012) distinguishes between three kinds of questions: conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative. Conceptual questions try to figure out what our concept of something is. Conceptual inquiries usually start off with a paradigm case of what we are trying to figure out, and then proceed to hard or borderline cases that refine our starting concept or introduce a useful conceptual distinction. When we ask a descriptive question, we assume that our concept is fixed and then see what the concept names in the world. Sometimes, descriptive projects yield surprising results, prompting us to return to our definition and ask conceptual questions or rethink initial theoretical commitments. So, even though these kinds of questions are after different answers, they can still draw on each other.

Ameliorative questions, however, try to figure out why we are asking a question in the first place. Clearly stating what problem we are trying to solve is not just about argumentative rigor, it also gives us an opportunity to explain why answering that question matters or makes a difference in the discussion. Haslanger (2016) elaborates that figuring out what the purpose of our question is also lets us take a step back to critique the theoretical tools that we are using to make progress (conceptual) or to review the cases that we are naming as important (descriptive). We may find out that we have lost sight of our initial goal or that we have to revise our project altogether because events have changed, so the question or endeavor is no longer apt. We could continue answering an old question in the same way, but an ameliorative question asks if there is a point to doing so.

Sometimes, an ameliorative conclusion is negative, identifying a problem or breakdown in our current practices, and means that our current approach to the problem is unhelpful or that our theoretical resources are not doing the work we need them to. Other times, amelioration is positive, suggesting a better alternative to what we are doing (Haslanger 2019). Above all, ameliorative accounts try to make things better by showing what we can practically do differently. In that spirit, while my argument will drift into conceptual or descriptive territory, it is always with an overarching ameliorative aim in mind.

So, why should we talk about mass shooters? One reason is that if we can correctly identify the descriptive component in the mass shooter social category, then we might be able to reverse engineer a predictive profile. A predictive profile would let us identify the kind of people who are at higher risk for perpetrating a mass shooting and so improve our intervention strategies to prevent tragedy.

This goal is not new. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists started asking if mass shooters were conceptually distinct from other kinds of mass murderers (e.g., serial killers, family annihilators). The working conceptual hypothesis was that mass shooters were a distinct kind of mass murderer: they relied on firearms, did not restrict their crimes to domiciles, did not target victims based on a particular profile, nor did cooling-off periods space out their killings. Once this conceptual distinction was in place, several descriptive accounts followed characterizing mass shooters in terms of intended victims (Dietz 1986; Holmes and Holmes 1994) or motivation (Levin and Fox 1996). While they denied these accounts were descriptively accurate, Thomas Petee, Kathy Padgett, and Thomas York noted that national media had popularized these characterizations so that “the public perception of these offenders is generally that of a disgruntled, White male, 30-40 years of age, who usually commits suicide at

the conclusion of the homicidal episode” (1997, 318-19). Identifying and emphasizing these characteristics not only promoted the idea that mass shooters were a particular kind of person, but it also made the case that they were preceded by a particular kind of person.<sup>1</sup>

As the “violent middle-aged loner” profile percolated, reporters began drawing attention to shootings at rural and suburban schools. This newfound concern about gun violence in schools implicitly highlighted two background premises about what was newsworthy: (1) gun violence in urban schools was not new and so not really news because they were associated with gang activity or racialized assumptions about violence; (2) suburban and rural schools were presumed to be safe, hence gun violence there was tragic and shocking, which made it news (Ferguson 2003). This tragic shock was prominent in news stories about the shootings at Pearl High School (1997), Heath High School (1997), Westside School (1998), Parker Middle School Dance (1998), and Thurston High School (1998).

Another important feature to note about this kind of reporting is that it was mostly after the fact, when the danger was over. Benjamin Frymer explains that real-time national news coverage of the shooting at Columbine “situated [Americans] as spectators” to the violence as it was happening instead of learning about it the next day (2009 1392). Subsequent primetime specials, newspaper headlines, and magazine covers sustained national attention by following up on new safety policies, shooter biographies, local vigils, and national impact (Chy and McCombs 2004). This extended coverage ensured that Columbine became a byword for school violence, and was easily recognizable when parents, teachers, and politicians raised concerns about school safety (Schildkraut and Muschert 2019a). One reason, then, that the shooting at Columbine looms in

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<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault’s (1999) thorough analysis and critique of this approach.

American collective memory is because of how we experienced it: real-time and unedited media coverage conceptually transformed Columbine from a place into an event.

Although Americans were transfixed by the violence and location, they were also disturbed by the shooters. As news footage aired, people began to fearfully wonder what made their schools different from Columbine and what made the students in their schools different from Harris and Klebold. The unnerving implication reveals a third racialized background premise about expected violence in schools: White teenagers were not expected to be violent and so there had to be a further reason why these two were aberrant (Leavy and Maloney 2009).<sup>2</sup> Shifting public attention to teenagers as new paradigmatic cases ushered in other predictive profiles. Warnings about teenagers who were goths, bullied, wore trench coats, listened to violent music, or played violent video games displaced prior concerns about loner middle-aged counterparts by listing new kinds of people to beware.<sup>3</sup> Columbine, then, further changed our concept of mass shooter because it perturbingly showed that new kinds of people could be one.

Efforts to solidify these predictive profiles largely came to a halt in 2002. The United States Department of Education and the United States Secret Service jointly released a landmark report that concluded no such predictive profile existed for school shooters. While the report did note that there were commonalities among the shooters, (e.g., perceived persecution), it explicitly stated that these traits were not sufficient to explain why someone decided to shoot people because the traits that were common among school shooters were also common among other teenagers who did not harm or kill anyone (Vossekuil et al. 2002). So, these commonalities could not constitute

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<sup>2</sup> News reports covering Columbine frequently emphasized shock that Harris and Klebold came from “good White middle-upper class families” while stories about the Red Lake Indian Reservation School, for example, focused on Jeff Weise’s “troubled past,” embedding his biography in the poverty and violence on reservations, misconstruing these factors as “typical” of Native America families.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent historical overview, see Lawrence (2001), Consalvo (2003), Ferguson, Coulson, and Barnett (2011).

a descriptive component because they described many other individuals outside of the category. Since these traits did not reliably identify current members of the category, they also could not accurately tell us if someone would be a future member of the category.

Although recent scholarship has extended this profile skepticism from school shooters to mass shooters in general, there is a persistent trend to name common characteristics among mass shooters. Flanked by immediate disavowal that these common characteristics are universal or predictive profiles, there is nevertheless an explicit insistence that they describe something important about mass shooters: that they are young White men with mental illness and access to firearms (Newman 2004, Mingus and Zopf 2010, Kellner 2012, Kluger 2014, Duwe 2017, Follman 2019). I want to describe this trend and then say why the description fails on ameliorative grounds in addition to being conceptually or descriptively flawed.

In Table 1, I've listed some events that are commonly recognized as mass shootings. Depressingly, this list is incomplete. In the short window of doing revisions for this paper (March-May, 2022), there were two high profile mass shootings: one at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York where ten people were killed and three were wounded, and another at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, killing twenty-one people, including nineteen children.<sup>4</sup> Although the list is not exhaustive, compiling this information helps explain why someone might think the set of common characteristics is helpful.

***Table 1: Commonly Recognized Mass Shootings***

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<sup>4</sup> As I explain below, I compiled this list based on the commonly accepted metric of at least four deaths in a public venue by firearms. That metric would not count the other shooting at the church in Laguna Woods, California where one person died and five were injured, but such a classification does not reduce its tragedy.

<i>Shooting</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Shooter(s)</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Number Killed</i>	<i>Number Wounded</i>
Cleveland Elementary School	1989	Patrick Purdy	32	Elementary School	6	32
Westside School	1998	Mitchell Johnson; Andrew Golden	13; 11	Middle School	5	10
Columbine	1999	Eric Harris; Dylan Klebold	18; 17	High School	15	24
Red Lake Indian Reservation	2005	Jeff Weise	16	Home; High School	10	5
Goleta Postal Facility	2006	Jennifer Marco	44	Santa Barbara Processing Center	8	0
Virginia Tech	2007	Seung-Hui Cho	23	University	33	17
Fort Hood	2009	Nidal Hasan	39	Military Base	14	33
Political Rally	2011	Jared Loughner	22	Grocery Store Parking Lot	6	15
Aurora (Dark Knight)	2012	James Holmes	25	Movie Theater	12	70
Sandy Hook	2012	Adam Lanza	20	Elementary School	28	2
Fort Hood	2014	Ivan Lopez	34	Military Base	4	14
Isla Vista	2014	Elliot Rodger	22	UCSB Campus and Nearby Area	7*	14 <sup>+</sup>
Charleston Church	2015	Dylann Roof	21	Church	9	1
San Bernardino	2015	Syed Farook; Tashfeen Malik	28; 29	Urban Setting	14	24
Pulse Nightclub	2016	Omar Mateen	29	Nightclub	49	53
Las Vegas	2017	Stephen Paddock	64	Hotel/Concert	59	851 <sup>†</sup>
Parkland	2018	Nikolas Cruz	19	High School	17	17
Tree of Life	2018	Robert Bowers	46	Synagogue	11	7
Atlanta Spas	2021	Robert Long	21	Massage parlors (3)	8	1
Santa Clara VTA	2021	Samuel Cassidy	57	Railyard	10	-

\* 4 by gunshot, 3 by stabbing

+ 7 by gunshot, 7 by car

† 422 by gunfire

There is a lot of information here, so I want to take a moment and flag the diversity among these examples. This diversity puts pressure on the set of common characteristics. Some shooters are not White (e.g., Weise, Cho, Mateen); some are not men (e.g., Malik, Marco)<sup>5</sup>; some shooters acted alone (e.g., Laughner, Holmes), others in pairs (e.g., Johnson and Golden, Harris and Klebold); some left detailed manifestos or gave explicit reasons for targeting groups (e.g., Rodger, Roof, Bowers, Long), while others left no explanation, leaving behavioral analysts to guess (e.g.,

<sup>5</sup> I included individuals that meet commonly accepted definitions of mass shootings (renamed “mass killings”): having killed more than four people with firearms in a public venue (Schildkraut and Elsass 2016). A more permissive definition would include Brenda Spencer (1979: 2 dead, 9 nine injured), Heather Smith (1985; 3 dead, 0 injured), or Amy Bishop (2010; 3 dead, 3 injured).



Marco, Paddock); some chose military “hard targets” (e.g., Hasan, Lopez), while others opted for “soft” public or multi-place venues (e.g., Cruz, Farook); some were very young (e.g., Johnson and Golden), while others were much older (e.g., Paddock, Cassidy).

In order to account for the diversity in the above dataset, I suggest that we use Ron Mallon’s (2016) cluster theory of social kinds because it is theoretically flexible. The basic idea behind a cluster theory is that there is a set of traits that define membership in a category or kind.<sup>6</sup> No one trait is necessary or sufficient for being a member of the kind, but the category is unified by a causal mechanism that groups or clusters these traits together. So, the more of these traits that we see in a particular individual, the more likely we are to see a member of that kind. It does not matter, then, that not every mass shooter is a young White man with mental illness and access to firearms because the cluster theory acknowledges that there can be exceptions where all traits are not fully present in every member of the kind. So long as that property cluster reliably describes kind membership, it is theoretically useful.

There are some problems here, however.<sup>7</sup> First, the cluster theory says that not every mass shooter has to have every trait. But a central tenet of a cluster theory is that if someone has every trait, then they are a member of that social category. Naming mass shooters as young White men with mental illness and access to firearms makes the descriptive component too broad because any young White man with mental illness and access to firearms should then count as a mass shooter. Since this descriptive component identifies too many people, namely all of the young White men

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<sup>6</sup> Mallon bases his view on R. Boyd’s (1991) theory of natural kinds as homeostatic property clusters. Boyd defines natural kinds (e.g., gold, water, mammals) as a set of characteristics. These characteristics cluster together because the presence of one trait causally favors the presence of others within the set, but the signature idea behind a cluster theory is that every trait does not have to be present in every instance of the kind. Being warm blooded and giving live birth are each properties of being a mammal, but we fully acknowledge that duckbilled platypuses and echidnas lay eggs and naked mole rates spend most of their time underground to sustain body heat and are all still mammals.

<sup>7</sup> These problems do not indict Mallon’s theory or cluster theories in general. I take these flaws to show that mass shooters are not a social kind and so there is no fault if Mallon’s theory of social ontology cannot account for something that is not part of social ontology.

with mental illness and access to firearms, but who have never shot or thought about shooting anyone, it fails to accurately identify current members of the social category.

Recall, however, that the reason we were interested in describing mass shooters was so that we could reverse engineer a predictive profile. So, maybe the cluster of traits is predictive, not naming the shooters themselves, but naming the kind of people who are at an elevated risk for perpetrating a mass shooting. Reformulating the cluster theory in predictive terms still accounts for potential shooters who do not have every trait because traits do not have to uniformly cluster across the kind. But this revision fails for the same reason: if the cluster of traits, young White men with mental illness and access to firearms, are predictive precursors for future mass shooters, then we should tailor our intervention strategies to monitor any young White man with mental illness and access to firearms. Reiterating the findings from the Department of Education and Secret Service's 2002 report, there are many young White men with mental illness and access to firearms who do not pose a risk to anyone. So, in terms of accurately predicting who is likely to become a mass shooter, this descriptive component fails by naming too many people.

Another possible revision might be to change one of the cluster traits. Instead of "having access to firearms," we could revise the cluster to describe young White men with mental illness and who open fire on others. This revision avoids the over-inclusion problem because it changes the conceptual parameters of the category to describe all and only the people who actually shoot others. While this revision looks like it preserves the set of common characteristics, there are two reasons that it won't work. First, introducing the trait "opens fires on others" shifts the explanatory weight away from all of the other traits: if what makes someone a mass shooter is them doing the shooting, then these other traits cease to explain anything.

Suppose, however, that we sacrifice the set of common characteristics and alter the cluster theory to one jointly necessary and sufficient condition: a mass shooter is someone who opens fire on others in a public venue. This revision preserves conceptual and descriptive accuracy because it describes all and only the people who are mass shooters, but there is a second, negative ameliorative reason that it fails. If the rationale for talking about mass shooters as a social category was to derive a predictive profile and prevent tragedy, then waiting until the shooter is opening fire does not give us time to intervene. Since the goal of preventing tragedy was the whole reason we wanted to talk about mass shooters as a social category in the first place, and the revision means that we cannot practically use the social category to predict who is at an elevated risk of becoming a mass shooter, then we have a negative ameliorative reason to discontinue using it as a theoretical tool because it is not accomplishing the goal we cited for justifying its use.

So far, we have been asking “Who is a mass shooter?” or “Who is likely to become a mass shooter?”. Instead, I suggest that we take a step back and consider some other ameliorative questions:

- What do we gain by classifying these individuals as mass shooters?
- Why will talking about these individuals as mass shooters, instead of talking about them as individuals, further our goal of reducing gun violence?

Until we can answer these ameliorative questions, we should use a narrower description: “X shot Y people at Z.” We have a positive ameliorative reason to use this formulaic description because it still applies to every case that we want to talk about, but it is not vulnerable to the theoretical problems I identified.

Importantly, while my ameliorative approach pushes us away from predictive profiles, it is still compatible with psychological insights that evaluate threat assessment. In many instances

leading up to the shootings, perpetrators publicized their plans on social media, through emails, or by telling friends or coworkers their intentions. Retrospectively assessing this “leakage” is easy because we know what the information was predating, but it is not easy to discern transient threats (i.e., blowing off steam, carelessly worded comments) from substantive threats (i.e., intending genuine harm) at the time that they are made (Meloy and O’Toole 2011). Nor is every substantive threat a direct statement with identifying signage: ambiguous comments can veil threats or mislead people into thinking nothing of it or that it is only a transient threat. While being able to predict violent behavior is exceptionally difficult (Haden 2017, Simons and Meloy 2017), there is a compelling case for including threat assessment in safety protocols, such as anonymous reporting hotlines, email systems, or apps (Madfis 2014, Schildkraut and Muschert 2019a).

For the purposes of our discussion, however, the effectiveness of threat assessment depends on facts about the individual, not about the category mass shooter. Peter Langman (2010, 2017) demonstrates that psychological traits (e.g., psychopathic narcissism, psychotic schizophrenia)<sup>8</sup> or events (viz. trauma) contextualize threat assessment, but a key premise in his typology is learning how an individual experiences these conditions or events in their own unique way. Langman advises against using his work to draw quick conclusions about individuals that are based on pre-judged associations of violence and mental illness. Instead, Langman directs our attention to escalating behavior: ideation manifesting as hit lists, diagramming the intended area, collecting weapons, attempted recruiting, or leaking preparations.

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<sup>8</sup> Langman assiduously distances himself from the ordinary (mis)use of these clinical classifications. Clinically speaking, someone with psychopathic narcissism has a pronounced sense of superiority, is skilled in impression management, and lacks empathy for others and so is either unbothered by or delights in inflicting pain on their “inferiors” or animals. These symptoms conjunctively dispose, but do not destine, someone with psychopathic narcissism to violently, even lethally, lash out when individuals do not treat them according to their self-image or when events do not “confirm” their self-importance. Someone with psychotic schizophrenia experiences delusions or hallucinations, but is unable to recognize them as such. This inability to distinguish the delusion or hallucination from reality means that someone who is experiencing them is responding to what they believe is reality and so are acting on the “inner logic” of the delusion or hallucination.

Emphasizing escalating behavior further extends the argument towards individuals and away from a category-based explanation. If, in the nearest possible world where no mass shootings had happened and someone leaked their plans to kill others in their office, school, or the mall, then we would still have just as strong a reason to intervene. My point is that being able to accurately assess if this particular person's actions or comments are substantive threats depends on facts about them as an individual—their psychology, their circumstances, and the context of what they said or did. Two people could say or do the exact same thing and end up with different threat assessments. The more we appeal to an individual's unique background and characteristics to determine if they will act on the threat, the less we are using features that would define the social category mass shooter as a general way to classify multiple and otherwise disparate people. In sum, if we can use threat assessment to accomplish intervention goals by focusing on the individual (positive amelioration), then we have an even stronger reason to distance ourselves from using the social category mass shooter because it does not play an explanatory role in predicting violence (negative amelioration).

The reason we wanted to talk about mass shooters as a social category was so that we could reverse engineer a predictive profile to improve intervention strategies. I have shown in this section that categorizing individuals as mass shooters fails because doing so either classifies too many people or fails to be predictive. While we can tinker with the conceptual or descriptive components of the mass shooter category, our ultimate goal was to improve intervention strategies and so reduce the number of mass shootings. A more promising approach, then, might be to focus on what it means for something to be a mass shooting and then evaluate which laws or policies reduce the number of them. This new approach could then bypass the theoretical problems I identified in this section because it deflates “mass shooter” to someone who perpetrates a mass shooting. I explore

this approach in the next section and identify some problems with it. I acknowledge that future and further revisions might justify either category, but I make the case in Section Three that we have another, distinct negative ameliorative reason to not salvage these categories. I argue that using the social categories mass shooter and mass shooting perpetuate a moral panic to “do something,” which has resulted in poorly thought-out policies that primarily harm already vulnerable demographics. I reiterate that we have a positive ameliorative reason to use the narrower description I have been advocating because it lets us talk about intervention strategies without contributing to these undue moral harms.

## **2. Mass Shootings: Conceptual, Descriptive, and Ameliorative Challenges**

Distinguishing between different kinds of gun violence matters because it lets us evaluate which laws, policies, or interventions successfully reduce a particular kind of gun violence. For example, we encourage gun owners to lock firearms and ammunition in separate safes or rooms to reduce domestic firearm deaths (e.g., partner violence, accidental discharge, suicide), without also expecting those measures to reduce, say, the number of drive-by shootings. Similarly, requiring police officers to wear body cameras or regulating what kinds of weapons they can carry may reduce instances of police brutality, but not have any meaningful impact on hunting accidents.

Linking categorization with efforts to reduce instances of that category gives us a clear ameliorative rationale to classify mass shootings as a unique category of gun violence. Using a common descriptive component to classify events as mass shootings lets us track them over time and know if they are becoming more or less frequent. We can then use this information to evaluate which policies led to a reduction of mass shootings and which ones did not.

So, what makes mass shootings different from other kinds of gun violence? Working under Columbine’s pall, early answers to this question emphasized location and treated school shootings

as a paradigmatic conceptual starting point (Newman 2004, Tonso 2009, Kalish and Kimmel 2010). As similar shootings happened at other locations, our concept of school shooting gave way to the more general category mass shooting, foreboding that a shooting could happen anywhere.

While mass shooting is currently a common way to classify some instances of gun violence, there is no professional consensus to date on what makes something a mass shooting. Body count, however, is frequently cited as an objective descriptive component for classifying events as mass shootings. Jaelyn Schildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass (2016) observe that government agencies commonly use fatalities as a descriptive component of mass shootings, setting the required number of fatalities at four or more killed in the same event. Schildkraut and Elsass rightly worry about using body count as a defining standard: there are many events that we would intuitively recognize as mass shootings where there are many injuries, but few deaths. In 2012, T.J. Lane shot and killed three students at his high school in Chardon, Ohio, injuring three more in the attack. In 2015, John Houser opened fire in a movie theater in Lafayette, Louisiana, killing two others, injuring nine, and then dying by suicide shortly after. Since four people did not die in either of these events, they, and others like them, do not meet the descriptive component of four fatalities. These cases pose a descriptive dilemma: either we deny that it was a mass shooting or admit the concept needs reworking.

We can resolve the dilemma by lowering the required number of deaths. Federal agencies have taken this approach, reducing the required death toll from four to three (Blair and Schweit 2022), but this revision faces the same problem. In 2001, Charles Williams shot and killed two students at his high school in Santee, California, wounding thirteen others. This kind of event would not count as a mass shooting because only two people died. Further, consider shootings where many were wounded, but no one died. In 2001, T.J. Solomon shot six people at his high

school in Conyers, Georgia, but did not kill anyone. It's not even clear that Solomon intended to kill anyone: eyewitnesses reported that even though he was a practiced shot, he was aiming low during the attack (Cloud 1999). Shortly after he began shooting, Solomon dropped his shotgun and exited the school to the courtyard, where he put a pistol in his mouth and sobbed until an assistant principal came over to disarm and console him.

We might broaden this descriptive component, from fatality to casualty, counting both the dead *and* the wounded. This revision would account for each of the above cases, but it raises an additional problem: the lower we set the causality count, the more likely we are to include other kinds of events that intuitively are not mass shootings: robbery gone bad, gang violence, multiple homicides, riots. Conceptually requiring a set number of casualties, therefore, puts pressure on our ability to distinguish mass shootings from other kinds of gun violence because it runs the risk of counting *too many* events as mass shootings.

Acknowledging these conceptual and descriptive problems, Schildkraut and Elsass develop a provisional account of mass shootings that factors in motivational concerns. Instead of trying to flawlessly describe our intuitive concept of mass shooting, Schildkraut and Elsass admirably aim for maximum clarity within their dataset so that they can turn to the more pressing problem of analyzing trends and evaluating interventions. Schildkraut and Elsass (2016, 56) emphasize the following descriptive components for a mass shooting:

- Multiple victims (injuries *and* fatalities)
- Occurs in a public or populated area
- Victims and locations are randomly or symbolically chosen
- The attack occurs within a 24-hour period
- The motivation for the shooting does not correlate with gang or terrorist activity



These motivational qualifications fend off the over-inclusion problem, but they come with complications. Selecting a victim or location randomly means that it is convenient, the shooter is not settling a score with the victims. When shooters symbolically select victims, they may target victims because the victim's social role (e.g., teacher, boss) meets the shooter's goal (e.g., murdering authority figures in general), and not because the shooter has a personal history with the victim. Shooters may also symbolically select victims based on social group status (e.g., race, gender, religion). Elliot Rodger started at a sorority house not because he felt jilted by the specific women who were there right then, but because he believed that women as a group did not find him attractive and refused to acknowledge his self-proclaimed "alpha-male" status (Manne 2017). The sorority women were chosen because Rodger saw them as symbolic for women as a group.

One problem with using the shooter's motivation as a descriptive component is knowing what their motivation was. If we include a shooter's paranoia or delusions of persecution, then a random or symbolic target may, from the shooter's perspective, be based on personal reasons—real or imagined. If the shooter does not disclose their rationale, offers inconsistent explanations, or dies before they can say why, then we simply cannot conclude on Schildkraut and Elsass' view if the event was a mass shooting because this epistemic condition is partly what makes something a mass shooting.

Schildkraut and Elsass can grant this objection and reiterate their original goal: classification issues matter insofar as they get us to evaluating which interventions make a preventative difference. So, even if they are using a limited dataset, Schildkraut and Elsass are still doing the important work of trying to reduce the number of events they classify as mass shootings. This response prioritizes an ameliorative account of mass shooting because the success of the explanation is linked with the reduction of mass shootings. So, even if some events are

conceptually or descriptively left out, others are included and reducing those makes a practical and positive ameliorative difference.

While there is an ameliorative element here, it misunderstands concerns about accuracy as solely conceptual or descriptive problems. The ameliorative goal of reducing instances of mass shootings depends on our ability to reliably differentiate them from other kinds of gun violence. The issue, then, is not about getting started, but where we *should* get started from, which is an ameliorative issue. Any conceptual framework will let us count cases or track trends within that framework and adjusting the conceptual parameters will correspondingly increase or decrease the number of mass shootings, but not because anything has changed out in the world. So, there is a further negative ameliorative concern about why the other cases Schildkraut and Elsass are leaving out are not taken as part of the starting point.

Conceptual frustrations may tempt us to just accept a mixed dataset as good enough to start on the project of reducing instances of gun violence in general. But this approach won't work because it shifts the goal from reducing mass shootings to reducing gun violence in general. Reducing gun violence in general is a good goal from a practical point of view, but if the whole point of using the social category mass shooting was to measure if interventions were effectively reducing them or not, and we cannot reliably discern if an event is a mass shooting, then we do not have a positive ameliorative reason to justify the social category as a theoretical tool.

I will wrap up with three points. First, while we have inherited the category mass shooting and done our best to make it work, it is not clear that it is as helpful as it promises to be. The following ameliorative questions should give us pause, not about what we are doing, but why we are doing it:

- What does classifying events as mass shootings do for us? What do we gain by using it?
- Can we ask questions about how to make schools/malls/offices/places of worship architecturally safer without categorizing events as mass shootings?
- Do we lose or foreclose any security options if we narrowly describe these events as “X shot Y people at Z” and ask what can we do to prevent a similar event from happening again at Z?

We are free to continue retooling our concept of mass shooting and try to make headway on the preventative issues, but if the narrower phrasing can do the same theoretical work, then it is not clear why categorizing events as mass shootings is an indispensable theoretical tool.

Second, mass shooters and mass shootings are thick social categories that draw on important moral values. We morally value protecting people, especially children, and condemn murder. We engage in intense political debates about what the best social, political, and legal responses are to stop these events. Like many other thick social categories, however, we may not have a clear conceptual definition that describes all and only the cases we want to talk about, but that is not sufficient reason to jettison something that plays a central role in our daily lives. Person is a highly contested thick social category that makes a substantive moral difference in medical ethics, disability studies, and animal welfare discussions (McMahan 2001, Kittay 2005; cf. DeGrazia 1997). There are acrimonious disagreements about the conceptual parameters of person in ordinary conversations, political debates, and even philosophy journals precisely because person is such a thick social category. We recognize that belonging to the person social category matters because it makes a difference in whether someone gets full, partial, or any moral consideration. Further, we recognize that discussions about thick social categories are intensely personal—not

just for us and our loved ones, but for everyone in society (Häyry 2016). Even though it is hard to dispassionately or calmly discuss the conceptual parameters of the thick social category person, it is a valuable theoretical tool in each of those areas (Gunnarsson 2008).

Third, the arguments I have been advancing are not irrefutable. Tomorrow, we may figure out the missing link necessary for a successful predictive profile or perfectly articulate our concept of what a mass shooting is. My arguments are based on what I took to be the strongest positive ameliorative reasons for talking about mass shooters and mass shootings as social categories, but they are not the only rationales. Other ameliorative explanations may be more successful and may tempt someone to try and reformulate the social categories mass shooter and mass shooting to protect them from the conceptual and descriptive objections I have raised here.

While we can continue classifying individuals as mass shooters and certain kinds of gun violence as mass shootings, I spend the next section developing a new negative ameliorative reason to dissuade us from doing so. Mass shooters and mass shootings are thick social categories because they implicate other thick social categories that play a central role in our daily lives: protecting people, children living and dying, being able to go out in public without fear of being killed, and condemning murder. These conceptual connections also have an emotional dimension, provoking fear, anger, or grief and compel an urgent sense that we “do something.” Similar to the discussions about the conceptual parameters of person, this urgency means that we cannot easily discuss the shootings and losses dispassionately for very long because the topics themselves are so charged.

I make the case in the next section that this urgency comes with a moral cost. Continuing to describe individuals as mass shooters and events as mass shootings creates a moral panic because we are framing the problem in terms of protecting ourselves from a social monster “out there.” This heightened reaction makes us less likely to remove hastily adopted security measures

and exacerbate stigmas around mental illness by associating it with violent outbursts. Since “X shot Y people at Z” talks about all of the cases we want to, and does not lead to these immoral externalities, we have a positive ameliorative reason to use it instead.

### **3. Moral Panics and Moral Externalities**

Like every other major news outlet, *Time* ran a cover story about Columbine. The cover’s layout has thumbnail pictures of each victim along the border; a larger picture of each shooter is prominently off-center. In red and white lettering, the title asks: “The Monsters Next Door: What Made Them Do It?” The monster rhetoric was commonly used to testify to the evil, but it came with a surreptitious moral cost. As we describe mass shooters as monsters “out there” or insinuate that certain kinds of people are poised to become one, we convince ourselves to believe that any and all measures are needed to defend ourselves from them (Foucault 1997). Describing the threat in terms of mass shootings may change the monster’s form by focusing on events rather than individuals, but it inferentially casts the same shadow because the events are committed by the individuals and so are just as ominous a justification. Unmistakably, the shooters did evil, but one consequence of this moral panic is a moralizing shield for hastily designed policies. Discontinuing the categories mass shooter and mass shooting will not magically make the events stop, but it will un-anchor frequently cited “justifications” for such policies.

Moral panics are a generalized feeling of worry, dread, and urgency in society. Although individuals may feel anxious or unsafe, Stanley Cohen (1987) clarifies that moral panics provoke unease because they give the sense that society itself is under attack. Extensive media coverage focuses our attention on an event. As press coverage increases and headlines sensationalize the story, we are primed to notice the same kind of story everywhere. We then come to believe that the single occurrence was really the first of its kind.

But it's not just that we, as a society, believe that certain events are starting to happen: they must shock, disturb, or raise the alarm. Elaborating on Cohen's work, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009) point out that this concern must be widespread and predate media efforts that magnify it into a moral panic. Media, elites, and interest groups can articulate ill-defined public anxieties or concentrate a latent fear into a commonly recognized theme or personage, but "it is almost inconceivable that such concerns could be generated in an indifferent public as a result of a media campaign of the efforts of social movement activists about a supposed threat that, in the absence of such stimuli, they would otherwise ignore" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 69).<sup>9</sup> For example, early reports of the "crack baby epidemic" traded on pre-existing fears of "bad Black mothers," drug use, and child abuse (Collins 2000). Media reports about crack use during pregnancy sensationalized subsequent premature births and unified these prior racialized concerns about Black women and babies into a prospective worry that "crack babies" would never adjust to school or work, making them lifelong dependents on society. The moral panic came and went, but the epidemic never materialized: crack use during pregnancy did cause premature births, but the tell-tale symptoms that started the moral panic showed up in other premature births. Researchers later retracted or heavily qualified their findings; longitudinal studies found no evidence of the social dependency thesis (Washington 2006, Roberts 2017). Moral panics, then, overreport or exaggerate danger, making it appear larger, more serious, or widespread than it really is.

Cohen observed two subsequent reactions to moral panics. First, we identify a folk devil, an individual or group that embodies the threat. As individual agents, folk devils may hurt other individuals, but their real danger is threatening the moral values that hold a community together.

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<sup>9</sup> Since social categories can become thicker or thinner over time, what was once a moral panic may not even raise eyebrows today. Concerns over couples living together before marriage, for example, may have signaled the end of social stability in the 1950s, but it's hard to imagine any awareness campaign about it taking off today.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda explain that if Halloween sadists poison candy or put razor blades in treats, then they harm individual trick-or-treaters while damaging communal norms of trusting strangers and discouraging a common tradition. The second reaction is how we typically respond to folk devils. Even if such events and individuals are statistically rare, their mere specter is enough for people to worry about because what matters for a moral panic is what people believe about the folk devils, not what the folk devils do outside of urban legends or sensationalized press. If we believe that folk devils threaten our personal safety and our cohesion as a society, then there is an understandable demand to man “the moral barricades” (Cohen 1987, 9). Community leaders give speeches and politicians compete to out-do each other for who takes the threat most seriously, passing laws to neutralize the current folk devils and ensure that “they” will never menace “us” again.

As a theoretical tool, moral panics illuminate how we respond to shootings at schools, movie theaters, malls, and places of worship. Live media coverage of Columbine framed the event as a large-scale social problem: the sheer volume of news stories after the shooting ensured that it was a top story of the decade, second only to Bill Clinton’s impeachment. While no other shooting has received as much media attention as Columbine, reporting usually starts with live coverage, followed by days or weeks of front-page stories with sensationalizing headlines: “increasing,” “yet another,” or “an epidemic” (Schildkraut, Elsass, and Meredith 2018). Since mass shooters and mass shootings are thick social categories, this kind of media reporting amplifies preexisting worries and concerns about individual safety and community cohesion by broadcasting the possible danger to a larger audience.

As we saw in Section Two, there are conceptual disagreements about what makes something a mass shooting. Although there is no professional consensus, there is a consensus that

media overreport and give the impression that mass shootings (on each mainline account) are more common than they in fact are (Schildkraut and Muschert 2019b). Social media participation and consumption exacerbates the perception that mass shootings are common (Elsass, Schildkraut, and Safford 2014). Saying that there is a moral panic about these shootings does not mean that they are not serious, merit attention, or traumatize people. Noticing the moral panic surrounding these events only draws attention to the fact that we are not responding to what they are, but what we (falsely) believe them to be.

One reason the moral panic happened was because the stories themselves are shocking and disturbing. A second reason that the moral panic grew was because lurid reporting inflamed public sentiment. Saturating audiences with images of people fleeing for their lives or communal mourning in the aftermath focused attention on the violence and implicated other moral values conceptually connected to the thick social categories that were becoming common knowledge. While reporting norms have shifted away from providing the unedited raw footage, this change in practice is a third reason the moral panic has persisted because journalists overtly connect coverage to other hot-button political issues (viz. gun control, mental illness) that have a contentious and polarized history. As we saw in Section One, this evocative coverage revealed our propensity to find a folk devil to explain the carnage: The Trench Coat Mafia, goths, misfits, bullied teens, and people with mental illness each took turns in the rogue's gallery. Following Goode and Ben-Yehuda, we also branded activities as auxiliary moral panics: violent video games, violent movies and television, or violent music. Notice that these folk devils and moral panics were aimed at things mainstream society already disapproved of. The shootings, therefore, were fervent (if incorrect) assurance that the earlier mistrust was warranted.



Since most of the early media coverage focused on shootings at schools, there was an understandable demand that we “do something” to make them safe. A “never again” mentality expanded security infrastructure that was already in place. Metal detectors, security cameras, and zero-tolerance policies were introduced during President Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs and later expanded under President Bill Clinton’s Gun Free School Act. Glenn Muschert and Anthony Peguero (2010) document that the “Columbine Effect” added a moralizing shield to these measures by shifting the rationale away from drug- and gang-free schools to general school safety. This conceptual shift factors into why these security measures proliferated in schools across the country and why they expanded their scope. If every school is concerned about safety, then these security measures are not ornamental add-ons (though many are theater), because they are integrated into the educational mission, resulting in what Annete Fuentes (2013) calls a “lockdown high” mentality, where children are treated less as students and more as suspects.

One reason this integration is troubling is because it is not clear that many of these security measures make schools safer. Another reason is that many of these policies have damaging spill-over effects. Start with zero-tolerance policies, which establish a mandatory and predetermined punishment, usually suspension or expulsion, for unacceptable behavior in school. Objective rules prohibiting students from bringing guns and drugs to school were designed to deter behaviors that lead to violence. Messages about getting tough on school discipline came to embarrassing effect when national media covered stories about students being suspended or expelled for bringing Midol and Tylenol to school or for using a paperclip to shoot people with rubber bands (Howell 2009). The moral panic about school shooters in the later 1990s eclipsed these *causes célèbres* because the “Columbine Effect” cast an ominous light on any school misbehavior. Operating under the premise that nipping minor behavioral problems in the bud would have made a difference

preventing the tragedies, zero-tolerance policies expanded their scope to punishing tardiness, class absence, and disrespect (Peguero et al., 2011; Triplett, Allen, and Lewis 2014).

This disciplinary expansion magnified problems. First, by predetermining punishments for minor offenses, educators lost the ability to tailor effective discipline to a student's particular situation. Second, these concerns left determining a violation to a teacher's discretion, where gray areas abound:

- Is a student explaining or backtalking?
- Is acting out just being a kid or insubordination?
- Is walking from the bathroom into class a few seconds after the bell tardiness?
- Is it student banter or bullying?

Together, these two problems point to a third: teachers would sometimes ignore violations to avoid harshly punishing a student, but by doing so teachers undercut the rationale for zero-tolerance policies—that no offense was tolerated and so every offense should be punished (Skiba and Knesting 2001).

Race reveals a fourth and especially troubling problem with zero-tolerance policies: they tend to primarily punish students of color. Early research from the Department of Education noted racial differences in suspension and expulsion rates. In 2003, 20% of Black students, 11% of American Indian/Alaska Native students, 10% of Hispanic students, 9% of White students, and 6% of Asian/Pacific Islander students had been suspended; 5% of Black students had been expelled, compared with 1% for all other categories (KewalRamani et al. 2007, 86). A later, 2015 study confirmed the following suspension or expulsion rates for students in the 2013 cohort: 36% of Black students, 21% of Hispanic students, 14% of White students, and 6% of Asian and Pacific Islander students (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, and Ouderkerk 2016, 10).

These racial disparities in suspension and expulsion rates compound as time goes on, creating a fifth, long-term problem with zero-tolerance policies contributing to the school to prison pipeline. Suspension academically disadvantages students because they are not in class learning the material. If suspensions compound, then students are more likely to fall behind in class and less likely to advance to the next grade. Retention rates often coincide with behavioral issues because students feel out of place with their cohort, which makes them vulnerable to being labeled a “problem student” (Howell 2009). As chances for academic success decrease, the risk of dropout increases. Without a high school diploma, employment opportunities in the legal economy are significantly reduced and the chances of being sucked into the criminal justice system increase. Angela Davis (2003) therefore rightly concludes that schools are the most important alternative to prison. These problems are harder to bear knowing that numerous studies show zero-tolerance policies not doing what they promise: reducing violence at schools (Howell, 2009, Muschert and Peguero 2010).

But zero-tolerance policies are only part of the problem. Other security measures, such as metal detectors and security cameras, were installed as visible proof to communities that educators were taking school safety seriously. In addition to promoting the lockdown high mentality, these security measures have not been very effective (Muschert and Peguero 2010, Schildkraut and Elsass 2016). The biggest strike against metal detectors is that they were in place at Red Lake High School, where Andrew Weise shot and killed the operator on his way into the school. Another problem is practical implementation. Given the installation and maintenance cost (one to three staff), most schools can only afford metal detectors at one or two entrances, which bottlenecks students at the start of the day. Bottlenecks increase density and so maximize the potential number of casualties during an attack. Metal detectors do not stop shooters who would wait outside during

dismissal. Security cameras may document what happened, but they do not effectively deter minor misbehavior, let alone a shooter. Less flashy, direct teacher presence in hallways did discourage student misbehavior (Wilcox, Augustine, and Clayton 2006).

Since these policies are enacted in the name of protecting children and stopping another shooting, there is little political space to dispassionately assess them. Questioning their efficacy is easily branded as not caring about student safety. Given this vulnerability to accusation, there is little incentive to run for political office, let alone the PTA, on a platform to scale back security measures. If anything, the moral panic about mass shootings is an incentive to ratchet up security measures “justified” by making school safer.

I will start closing this section by developing a different dimension in the moral panic about mass shooters and mass shootings. Media narratives about mass shooters tend to divide along racial lines. If a shooter is Arab or Middle Eastern, then the story fixates on terrorism, flattening other biographical reasons or motives (DeFoster 2017, Meyer 2019). If a shooter is East Asian, then media narratives accentuate an angry, misfit foreigner, an immigrant who could only speak broken English and couldn't make friends or hold a job (Chaung 2012). These narratives draw attention to race or religion as an explanatory feature for what happens and so does not assign blame to the shooter as an individual, but as an individual member of a group, which morally implicates other group members. When reports described Nidal Hassan as a Palestinian Muslim, instead of an American with Palestinian ancestry who happened to be Muslim, Muslims and Arabs alike feared reprisal based on collectivized blame (Mingus and Zopf 2010). A similar sense of collective responsibility emerged in response to media reports foregrounding Seung-Hui Cho's Korean ancestry, instead of describing him as a permanent resident who had spent most of his life in the United States. Korean-American communities in the United States and Korean government

officials, including Ambassador Lee Tae-Shik and President Roh Moo-Hyun, issued public apologies for Cho, citing the shared ethnic connection, implying collective and anticipatory blame (Yi 2017).

When a shooter is White, however, the explanatory discussion shifts away from racial stereotypes and instead focuses on a separate reason for the shooting, namely mental illness. This shift demonstrates a “third-person effect,” where we believe that other people are more likely to be influenced by media than we are (Davison 1983). The third-person effect structures moral panics because it connects media saturation about morally charged stories with widespread public action.<sup>10</sup> So, when I learn about an event through mass media, I believe that others also learned about it and that they are more taken by the story than I am. If I believe that other people take the story more seriously than I do, then I am more likely to publicly react to what I believe the expected level of concern is (even if everyone in fact is affected the same). Albert Gunther elaborates that even if we doubt the news story’s accuracy (e.g., that there are shootings, but they are not occurring at epidemic levels), we are still likely to believe that others do believe the story because “people assume that what mass media are saying today must be what the public will be thinking tomorrow” (1998, 487). In the above cases of stereotypes, it is not that members of the shooter’s social group believe the stereotypes about themselves, but rather that they believe the moral panic widely broadcasts the stereotype to others who will believe it.

The third-person effect also points to increased stigma around mental illness as a spillover effect from the moral panic. Jonathan Metzl and Kenneth MacLeish (2015) explain that in the early 1900s, we conceived of schizophrenia as a harmless condition—something affecting dissatisfied

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<sup>10</sup> Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) also discuss “failed” moral panics, where media or elites tried to get the public angry at or afraid of individuals or issues, but did not succeed because the intended social category was too thin in that social context.

White housewives or effete poets who went barefoot in the park. Metzl and MacLeish document how racial anxieties in the 1960s conceptually transformed schizophrenia, incorporating aggression and paranoia into diagnostic criteria. Subsequent movies and television shows with characters who had mental illness, especially schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder, portrayed them as dangerous or erratic, fostering the belief that people with mental illness were appropriate objects of fear (Pirkis et al. 2006). These background beliefs stereotyped people with mental illness as dangerous and paved the way for pernicious platitudes (e.g., “Only a psycho could do that,” “He must have been crazy”) and armchair diagnosis by reporters or the public.

If news stories focus on mental illness as a causal explanation for why someone shot other people, then the third-person effect explains why people who see that story are less likely to tell coworkers, friends, or family about their mental illness. Hoffner et al. (2015) found that this worry was sensitive to specific mental illnesses: while there is an increasing acceptance for depression and anxiety, there is still stigma around other conditions that laypeople believe are more severe (viz. schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder). This asymmetry partially rests on the mistaken belief that “more severe” mental illnesses make someone violent or a danger waiting to happen. As this stigma becomes more prevalent and people are less likely to share their own experiences with mental illness, then there are fewer narratives counteracting the misperception that people with mental illness are dangerous. Adding insult to injury, Metzl and MacLeish explain that this misperception inverts statistics that show people with mental illness are far more likely to be the victim of a violent crime rather than the perpetrator of it.

When we use mass shooters and mass shootings to classify individuals and events, we are invoking thick social categories. This use urges us to protect central moral values because we are including the threats in our current framework. As folk devils and moral panics occupy conceptual

room in the discussion, they leave less philosophical space to evaluate what we are doing and why we are doing it. With less room to philosophically maneuver, we have less opportunity to undo the harmful spillover effects from policies that are implemented in the name of protecting those values. Instead, we should start using the narrower description I have been advocating, “X shot Y people at Z” because it describes all of the cases we need to without contributing to the moral panic that smothers sober evaluation of security measures.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I am not saying that these events and individuals will disappear if we stop talking about them. Instead, I argued that treating mass shooters as a particular kind of person for a predictive profile is not useful. I extended this argument by showing that distinguishing mass shootings from other kinds of gun violence is not straightforward and so not an immediately useful way to categorize gun violence. I concluded by showing that using these categories contributes to a moral panic that entrenches poorly thought-out policies from a “never again” mentality and exacerbates stigmas around mental illness. If we can talk about all of these cases with a narrower description that does not contribute to the moral panic, then we have an ameliorative reason to do so because it will increase accuracy and decrease the moral costs of our current approach.

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