

Owen Hatch

Dr. Stout

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The Fatality Effect: How U.S. House of Representatives Respond to Mass Shootings

Mass shootings in the United States have become an extremely controversial issue, dividing opinion on how we keep one another safe in classrooms, movie theatres, churches, and other public venues. Advocates on both sides of the issue have been vocal voicing their opinion, from stricter gun laws and a national database, to arming elementary school teachers in hopes of providing greater protection for their students. Whichever side of the spectrum you fall on, it is clear to see the topic of mass shootings has entered the national conversation and is here to stay until real progress has been made.

For our purposes in researching mass shootings, we decided to focus on U.S. House of Representatives members responses on the social media platform Twitter. We chose this specifically as it has become one of the easiest and most available communication platforms for Representatives. With a low character limit providing for concise releases and it's free and easy design, many Representatives have started focusing heavily on increasing their Twitter popularity in hopes of spreading their message. As with other issues, Representatives have taken to Twitter to share their views in response to mass shootings. While doing the research, it became abundantly clear how much Twitter has taken off in terms of the sheer volume of tweets. This provided for greater insight into our research question and society as a whole.

Originally, our research question intended to see if there was correlation between the race of the mass shooter and the specific language used in tweets. However, after looking at the data there was no statistical significance. Also, we did research on the number of tweets stemming

from a mass shooting and the correlation between the age of the shooter, mental health status of the shooter, the firearms used in the atrocity, and the number of fatalities in the shooting. To research these hypothesis', we collected over 800,000 tweets from House members spanning the time frame from 2011-2018. After collecting the mass number of tweets, we ran an algorithm to filter the tweets that only had to do with mass shootings. After applying the filter, the number was cut down to around 4,500. In our study, the classification for mass shooting required there be at least 3+ fatalities as this is the standard for the FBI. We then connected each individual tweet to a particular mass shooting. Stanford and Mother Jones each compiled extensive databases on mass shootings throughout the United States which we were able to compare our tweets to. Going through by hand, we were able to excise any outlying tweets and also create a data set to run the information through.

To test for correlation, we ran our data through a computer program called Stata. Stata looks for statistical significance between data sets. In our case, we used the number of tweets about a mass shooting as the dependent variable, the variable that is likely to change. For our independent variables, we used the age and mental health status of the shooter, the number of firearms used, as well as the number of fatalities. We also included controls in our study, such as when the shooting happened, statistical outliers such as the mass shootings with the highest number of casualties, as well as others. To ensure it wasn't a partisan issue, we ran all our results against both Democratic and Republican members of the House.

After running the data through Stata, the results came back as expected. There was strong statistical significance between an increase in fatalities and an increase in tweets about the mass shooting. In fact, for each added fatality, the number of tweets about the mass shooting was multiplied by four. Correlation between an increase in fatalities and an increase in tweets about

the mass shooting was found across party lines, both Democrats and Republicans found the issue more salient as the number of fatalities increased. Looking at the graph, it is easy to tell that there is statistical significance that grows even stronger as the number of fatalities increase.

Interestingly enough, correlation was also found between the age of the shooter and an increase in tweets about the shooting, but only for Republican Representatives. For one reason or another, Republican Representatives were much more likely to tweet about a mass shooting if the shooter was younger in age.

While it is not surprising the number of tweets about a mass shooting would rise when the number of fatalities did, it is nonetheless meaningful looking at the broader picture. As expected, large mass shootings get covered heavily, however, the fewer amount of fatalities the less coverage the atrocity gets. This can have real implications for communities. A smaller mass shooting could adversely affect a community but not receive the coverage it deserves, while a larger mass shooting could draw reactions from the entire country and marginalize victims of smaller mass shootings who believe their pain and suffering is not being recognized. Another important factor to consider is whether or not Representatives are backing up their talk with actions. Anyone can tweet out condolences and prayers following a mass shooting; however, it is only important if they follow up their talk with constructive actions to make it harder for an evil act to happen again. Checking the efficacy of our politicians is a necessary part of our democracy and one that should be at the front of people's minds during an election cycle.