

**A Review of**  
***Mass Murder in the United States: A History***

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Book: *Mass Murder in the United States: A History*

Author: Grant Duwe

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*Mass Murder* takes the reader on an informative journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> century by exploring 909 cases of mass murder that occurred in the United States between 1900 and 1999. The book encapsulates a study conducted by its author, Grant Duwe, which centers largely on explaining the inaccuracies of the past; specifically, it examines the news media misrepresentation of mass murder and how these have shaped public perceptions pertaining to this phenomenon. Duwe's study relies on secondary data analyses based upon two data sources: FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports and newspaper accounts. The newspaper accounts were especially informative since they included more detailed descriptions of the incidents including location and outcome of the case. Most importantly, findings generally indicate that, although qualitatively different, there were two mass murder waves during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, contrary to popular belief, the mid-1960s did not mark the beginning of an unprecedented mass murder wave; rather, the U.S. experienced an earlier wave of mass murder that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s in the U.S.

The book opens with a discussion of notable cases of mass murder that occurred in 1966 and concludes by explaining the perspective of the book. Duwe begins the first chapter with an operational definition of mass murder as distinguished from spree and serial murder. For the purposes of his study, mass murder includes incidents that occur within a 24-hour period and that involve a minimum of four victims. Further, according to Duwe, mass murder is a rare offense, and its prevalence is comparable to that of serial murder. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of trends in mass murder. Duwe uses charts to illustrate trends and characteristics of mass murders that occurred in the United States over the period 1900-1999. Based on a review of these trends and characteristics, several typologies of the offenders are discussed. This chapter is extremely informative, especially to the student interested in mass murder trends over a substantial period of time. More specifically, in addition to providing descriptive statistics pertaining to offender, victim, and incident characteristics, Duwe includes a discussion of prior research and incorporates suggestions and explanations of findings.

Using the case study method, the next three chapters of this book (Chapters two through four) provide an excellent examination of trends in mass murder over three periods of time: 1900-1939; 1940-1965; and, 1966-1999. In chapter two, we learn that mass murders committed in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were related to economic conditions related to the depression and war. Many of the incidents of mass murder during this time were characterized

by bombings, race riots, labor union strikes, familicides (often related to divorce and poverty), and felonies (specifically, robberies).

The period of 1940-1965 was characterized by lower crime rates in general, including lower rates of mass murder. Duwe borrows from strain and social control theories to explain the trough in mass murder rates during this period. In the context of strain theories, Duwe suggests the increased prosperity and attainability of the “American Dream” at that time may be related to a lower incidence of mass killings. Furthermore, increased employment and educational opportunities and a rise in conformity and respect for authority during that period implicate social control theory—specifically, in relation to the development and preservation of social bonds. Duwe also points out the absence of the strong illicit drug trade at this time. Of the cases of mass murder reviewed in this chapter, some of the common characteristics include war veterans as offenders, children killing parents, and, given the battle for civil rights and desegregation during this period in America, murders related to racial tension.

Based on his analyses, Duwe characterizes the period of 1966 to 1999 as the second wave of mass murder. This period is marked as a turbulent time in American history; a period specifically characterized by racism and extreme poverty and heightened social activism. The earlier part of this “era” belonged to the Warren Court and its major controversial decisions that emphasized the rights of individuals. According to the data, there was an increase in drug-related mass killings, which was part of a larger trend of mass killings that was increasing—felony-related killings. Gang-related killings are also discussed. During the 1990s, the U.S. also witnessed an increase in the number of high-profile workplace-related mass public shootings. With the exception of the school shootings in the 1990s, public shootings are rare among offenders under the age of 18. According to Duwe, youthful offenders are more typically involved in progeny familicides or felony-related massacres.

In the middle of chapter four Duwe’s discussion centered on the rise in mass public shootings, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. Although mere speculation, Duwe suggested that this rise might be attributed to significant social and cultural developments during this period including a declining marriage rate, an increasing divorce rate, an increase in the number of illegitimate children and single-parent households, and an increasing amount of social isolation experienced by the adult population. He also speculates that the rise in homicide and crime rates overall beginning in the 1960s may have been related to the growth of alienated, unattached, and under or unemployed young males. To shed some empirical light on these speculations, Duwe introduced a study that he and colleagues conducted on the impact that right-to-carry concealed firearms laws (RTC laws) that were passed in the 1960s had on mass public shootings. Besides the variable of interest, RTC laws, Duwe and colleagues also examined a number of control variables related to demographics, unemployment, social mobility and isolation, prison populations, and legal executions. The findings indicated that RTC laws did not have a significant impact on the incidence of mass public shootings. There were, however, significant positive relationships found between mass public shootings and several control variables including prison population, income, and age.

The only limitation of chapters two through four pertains to the organization of cases. Although Duwe presents each section in light of relevant period-specific social contexts, there is

a minor disjunction between content and method of case presentation. Consequently, this may appear slightly disorganized to a very discerning reader.

Chapter five is dedicated to the news media and the inaccuracies that resulted from using it as a primary data source in research on mass murders, especially throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Given a tendency for news media to report only the most newsworthy events, specifically in relation to violent crimes, the public becomes misinformed by sensationalized stories that are largely atypical. Furthermore, fear of crime increases because of the media attention on random acts of violence. To illustrate the influence of news media on the social construction of mass murder, Duwe examined media accounts from the *New York Times*, other paper news sources, and network television news. The findings of this content analysis revealed that the following characteristics have the most influence on whether an incident is newsworthy: average death toll; the presence of strangers as victims; the presence of guns (assault weapons); whether it occurred in a public place; and, the overall tragic nature, even if not representative of mass murders.

Duwe utilized the contextual constructionist approach in chapter six to explain the extent of how mass murder emerged as a crime problem. Through a discussion of triggering events, media attention, and moral panics, he insightfully demonstrates how the claimsmaking process, including the values and interests of claimsmakers, influences policies pertaining to mass murder. To illustrate his point, Duwe outlines the influential relationship between media and politics with a discussion of gun control in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More specifically, although rarely the weapon of choice in mass murders, gun control proponents used the incidence of high-profile mass public shootings to secure a ban on assault weapons. Additionally, Duwe refers to the influence of news media and the newsworthiness of a number of high profile cases to explain why juvenile mass killings are viewed as a more recent crime problem, even though juvenile-perpetrated familicides and felony-related massacres have been occurring long before 1997. According to Duwe, it is the number of innocent victims and the public nature of more recent school shootings that has catapulted mass murder to its current status as a modern phenomenon.

In the final chapter, Duwe recapitulates the highlights of this study and suggests other avenues for future research. Suggestions include examinations of mass murder in the U.S. prior to 1900, and an exploration of its occurrence in other countries besides the U.S. He also suggests that future studies might explore the etiology of mass murder and factors that affect it.

The primary strength of this study is in its well-rounded approach to the phenomenon of mass murder. More specifically, Duwe not only delivers an excellent historical analysis of mass murder in the United States, but also provides an informative study of the relationship between news media and the social construction of crime. Despite some confusion related to the organization of case studies, Duwe did an excellent job with these chapters by bringing such intriguing stories to the forefront. The depth of information provided in the first five chapters is successfully summarized in chapter six where Duwe provides meaningful connections through his discussion of the media and claimsmaking process.

Duwe's writing style is sophisticated yet accessible. Furthermore, the information contained in each chapter is engaging in practical, educational, and leisure-based contexts.

Given such qualities, this book should appeal to a fairly wide audience including researchers, academics, students, criminal justice and social-service practitioners, and some members of the general public. With the exception of organizational difficulties in chapters two through four, it is an interesting and intellectual read. Individuals interested in future research pertaining to mass murder will especially appreciate the section on data and methods utilized in this study, which can be found in the appendix.