

Stray Bullets and “Mushrooms”: Random Shootings of Bystanders in Four Cities, 1977–1988

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Bystanders killed by bullets not specifically intended for them have long been a very small part of the homicide problem. But the frequency of press accounts of such killings and woundings has apparently increased nationally in recent years. To test this impression, we compiled all shootings of bystanders hit “at random” and reported in the published indexes of the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* for 1977–1988, as well as a key word computer search of stories in the *Boston Globe*. We found a rapid increase in both bystander woundings and killings since 1985 in all four cities. The base rate was quite low, and total bystander deaths appear to comprise less than 1% of all homicides in these cities. Nonetheless, the numbers were large enough to show that most bystanders reported shot in New York and Los Angeles are victims of random shootings into crowds, rather than single stray bullets striking a lone individual “mushroom”. The reverse was true in Boston and Washington, with the effect of much lower rates of bystanders reported shot in those cities.

KEY WORDS: homicide; bystanders; shootings; trends.

1. INTRODUCTION

A “mushroom” is street slang for an innocent bystander who “pops up” in the path of fire, catching a bullet intended for someone else (Hevesi, 1989). The very existence of the term—apparently derived from the mushrooms featured in the *Super Mario Brothers* Nintendo video game—suggests enough frequency of the event to justify quantitative inquiry. How common are such shootings and killings? Have they increased in number in recent

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years? If so, is the increase merely temporary or indicative of wider changes in the nature of stranger violence in urban America?

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BYSTANDER SHOOTINGS

Most homicide studies trace murder to relationships or life-style. Wolfgang (1958, p. 207), for example, found that 65% of 550 homicide victims in Philadelphia were related to or emotionally involved with their murderers. Similarly, Wilbanks (1984, p. 35) found that 67.5% of a sample of Miami murder victims were family members, acquaintances, crime partners, or sex partners of their murderers. In recent years, much homicide has been labeled as "drug related" and, hence, attributable to life-style choices of the victim. Such homicides are assumed to arise out of relationships and transactions the victims entered voluntarily, with full knowledge of the risks of violence as a feature of such decisions.

Bystander murders, in contrast, can strike "totally innocent" victims, people who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Rosenthal, 1988). Such innocence is often symbolized by the extreme youth of the decedents, such as the 4-year-old boy shot in drug-deal crossfire as he played in the courtyard of his Brooklyn housing project (*New York Times*, June 8, 1988, p. B2), the 2-year-old killed in drug dealers' crossfire in his apartment hallway (*New York Times*, December 22, 1984, p. A27), the 4-year-old boy in Los Angeles hit four times in a spray of automatic rifle fire during a "drive-by" shooting in a gang war over cocaine traffic (Reinhold, 1988), and the 3-year-old boy wounded when a drug dealer grabbed him to use as a shield during a gun battle (Kurtz, 1989).

A bystander's innocence can be symbolized by the medical condition of the victims, such as the Dade County man in a wheelchair who was killed in the crossfire of a drug battle (Kurtz, 1989) and the pregnant bystander killed by a stray bullet in a neighbors' dispute (*New York Times*, August 20, 1987, p. B9).

Innocence can also be symbolized by stray bullets from the outside penetrating a home environment, such as the Washington woman killed while standing at her kitchen sink washing dishes (Hevesi, 1989), the Washington man shot while lying in bed (*Washington Post*, January 13, 1989, p. C1), the Bronx woman killed while lying in bed near her sister's baby son when gang members raked the building with 15 bullets (Rosenthal, 1988), the 4-year-old girl wounded by a stray bullet from outside while lying asleep in a Bronx apartment (*New York Times*, October 31, 1985, p. B2), and the Washington man shot talking to a neighbor on a front porch when one man started shooting wildly at four others fleeing him a block away (Goldberg, 1989).