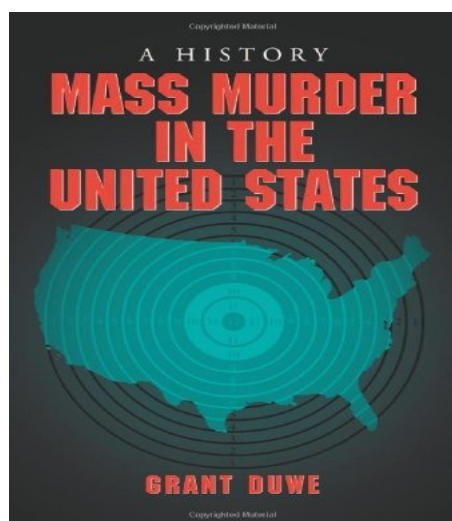


## *Mass Murder in the United States: A History*



Not New, Not Getting Worse, By Michael Brady, MA, CPP

A review of *Mass Murder in the United States: A History*, by Grant Duwe, Ph.D.

When faced with dramatic and horrible crimes we naturally seek ways to make sense of the senseless. Such is the case with mass murder, such as we've seen committed in a movie theater in Colorado and a Sikh gurdwara in Wisconsin. Where shall we turn? There seem to be very few experts on mass murder. Perhaps that's because - despite the 24 hour news media's urgent pronouncements to the contrary - it's

rare. Author, Grant Duwe, Ph.D., Director of Research at the Minnesota Department of Corrections, is one of the experts on this highly specialized and frequently misunderstood topic. He's written on the issue for years and has been widely quoted in the aftermath of the mass murder at the Batman premier in Aurora, Colorado.

Duwe's 2007 book, *Mass Murder in the United States: A History*, is a fine piece of scholarship that draws upon his detailed examination of 909 mass murders committed in the USA during the 20th century. He makes a compelling case that mass murder is not new, that the rate of mass murder is not on the rise, and that the severity of each incident is not, on average, increasing.

Duwe tells us that mass murder scenarios break down into three broad categories: criminal massacres of competitors, public mass murders, and family annihilations. Involvement in gangs or illegal drug distribution seems to be about the only segment to which conventional theories of criminality might be applied. With regard to the other two types, the fact that there are only ~20 incidents a year in a country of 311 million people, suggests even most psychological theories won't have much to offer by way of detection or prevention. Forensic analysis may help us categorize the offender after the fact, but only the slimmest fraction of "crazy" people ever act out in this horrible way either.

*Mass Murder in the United States* draws upon 909 mass murder events in the U.S. in the 20th century. Duwe selected cases in which four people were killed in an event lasting less than 24 hours. He detected two surges in the data. The first, in the 1920-30s, were largely divided between gangland crimes - the

“The Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre” being a notorious example – and family annihilations perpetrated by distraught Depression-era fathers with a sadly misapplied sense of obligation to their families. The second wave started in the mid-1960s, peaked in the 1990s, and is now in decline. The wave of mass murder our generation has lived through is evenly divided between criminal massacres, public mass murder – in public, in schools and at work, and again, family annihilations. Grimly interesting is the fact that bombing and arson have accounted for a higher proportion of deaths than most realize.

Duwe's discussion of moral panics and the role the news media play in the social construction of concern on this and other issues is very helpful to those of us interested in understanding why hysteria frequently drives public discourse. As we attempt to engage in productive discussions about frightening events we must lead with facts rather than fear. If you would have an opinion on this topic you owe it to yourself, your clients, and your community to read this book.

*Mass Murder in the United States: A History*, by Grant Duwe  
Paperback, 213 pages  
ISBN-13: 9780786431502  
Publisher: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers  
Publication date: 6/28/2007