

Gun Violence and Mental Health Illness

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Could deaths by gun violence be reduced by improving mental health?

A quote from John K. Iglehart's journal, *Health Affairs* states, "Mental illness with mass shootings specifically increased from 9 percent of people with mental illness between 1994 and 2004 to 22 percent between 2005 and 2014." Although that is not the majority of shootings, if the U.S. gave mental illness the attention it needs, that twenty-two percent could be lowered, as well as the number of lives lost.

Every day, approximately ninety six Americans are killed with guns and hundreds more are shot and injured. As of April 17, 2018, *Gun Violence Archives* recorded 4,140 deaths and 7,298 injuries just this year. Statistics in the U.S. show that the major cause of gun deaths are $\frac{2}{3}$ suicide and one-third are homicides. Three-quarters of nonfatal gun injuries are caused by assaults. In an average month, fifty American women are shot to death by an intimate partner, and nearly 1,600 children and teens die by gun homicide every year. Comparing the U.S. to other industrialized countries, this is outrageous. Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than people in other developed countries. Approximately three million American children witness gun violence every year. The U.S. gun suicide rate is eight times that of other high-income countries, and the gun homicide rate is twenty five times that of other high-income countries. Women in the U.S. are sixteen times more likely to be killed with a gun than women in other high-income countries. These numbers are continuing to increase every single year, and someone needs to do something about it now. It is not possible to end gun violence, but it is possible to decrease it dramatically. (2019)

Looking at other countries' gun laws, the U.S. would benefit from adopting some of them. In Australia, the National Agreement on Firearms prohibited automatic and semiautomatic

assault rifles, required licensing and registration, required a mandatory firearm safety course, and created a temporary gun buyback program that took away 650,000 assault weapons. Creating these laws reduced Australia's gun deaths dramatically. In Israel, there is an assault-weapons ban and a requirement to register ownership with the government. To become licensed, you must be an Israeli citizen or a permanent resident, twenty-one-years-old, speak some Hebrew, as well as show genuine cause to carry a firearm, such as self-defense or hunting. (Masters 2016)

These laws are all reasonable and very well thought through and do not completely ban firearms. It is important to implement federal policies to help reduce gun violence because making it a federal law would make policies more consistent across the country vs policies being different in every state. Experts who support gun control estimate passing an assault weapons ban could prevent 170 mass shooting deaths a year in the US, passing a universal background check law could prevent 1,100 gun homicides each year, and raising the age limit for buying firearms could prevent 1,600 homicides and suicides. These are all policies that could help reduce the number of gun deaths and injuries in the U.S. Policymakers are reluctant to make these policies because it is not just the guns, it is also mental illness and we should focus on that. If someone wants a gun badly, they will get it, and a lot of people will be very angry if they do get a gun. Yes, a lot of gun violence is due to mental illness, but if there were stricter gun laws, people with mental illness could not use guns for violence. Of course, it would still be possible, but making more laws would make it much harder for some, which could lead to people possibly changing their minds because they don't want to go through the hard work of being able to get a gun.

As I have been researching this subject, the one question that I keep coming back to is, why do people not get the mental help they need? Is it because they cannot afford it? Perhaps

they are not aware of their illness? Is it as simple as one being afraid and ashamed? According to Ph.D. David Susman's article on "Reasons why people don't get the mental help they need," it is due to these eight reasons: fear and shame, lack of insight, limited awareness, feelings of inadequacy, distrust, hopelessness, unavailability, and practical barriers. (Susman 2017)

A big improvement that could lessen the effects of mental illness is making treatment more available for people to get the help they need, by insurance companies covering more of the cost, by reducing hospital costs, and by providing free mental health clinics. This would help the 46% of homeless adults and others who have mental illness get the help they need. Another big help would be making people more aware of how dangerous this illness can be if not treated. Most importantly is not having society think that mental illness is something you can just blow off and that it is okay to ask for help. There are so many people who think they are alone in having mental illness but that is completely wrong. According to the most recent studies, approximately one in five people in the U.S., which would be 43.8 million, or 18.5% of people, suffer from mental illness. ("NAMI" 2019)

Someone who is mentally ill may be unable to make logical decisions due to their illness making them unable to see reality as they would without their illness, which then would cloud their judgment on using a gun in the wrong way. However, if someone truly wants to kill someone, not having a gun will not stop the individual from doing so. If a gun is not accessible, a person who is intending on causing harm has the ability to access other weapons that are available to them. Creating stricter gun laws will decrease the amount of gun violence but then would, unfortunately, increase the amount of violence with other weapons.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy for the Presbyterian Mission Church states that the church can do to help create gun laws. The church can take responsibility to build

public awareness of gun violence and the epidemic of preventable gun-related deaths.

Congregations can address the temptation of gun suicide and murder-suicide among both old and young people. Local congregations can lead or join in ecumenical gatherings for public prayer at sites where gun violence has occurred and support, or assist with appropriate law enforcement guidance. Councils of the church can seek to partner with other faith institutions to create and sustain a national, activist faith-based social movement to save thousands of lives yearly. These are just a few of the many ideas that the committee suggests. Now, this may encourage people who have beliefs about God but not necessarily to those who have no interest in God. These ideas could spread throughout the world and change many lives by possibly having people turn to God. (Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy "Mission & Ministry" 2011)

Bruce Shapiro, a Nation contributing editor, states that the United States needs to reevaluate on how we are treating patients with mental disorders. When a person is discharged from a mental hospital, they are often let back into the environment in which caused them to either cause or attempt harm. This is a sign of a lack of knowledge the hospital has thought that the person would not be tempted, persuaded, or wanting to fall back into the path of turning to violence and harm. I strongly believe and know for a fact that having some type of debriefing after being discharged, could help to keep someone from going back to their previous thoughts of harm, whether that be a type of support group they continue to attend after being discharged, and or possibly regular checkups with a doctor or counselor.

The reason I feel so strongly about this being a necessity is because I myself suffer from mental illness and have been for the past eight years. I have been to a mental hospital twice in my life due to trying to commit suicide, and it changed my life completely. When I was diagnosed, I was very young. and I did not quite understand my illness, but as I have gotten older

I have gotten to understand it better and have been able to accept my illness with the help of seeing a counselor weekly, and having the attitude that it is something I have to accept and that no matter how hard I may try to get rid of it, God has made me this way, and I need to do my absolute best to accept that this is something I will live with forever. Accepting something like mental illness is not an easy thing to do, I will admit, but the more willing we are to accept the way we are, the better our lives will be, and we will be able to be much happier.

In conclusion, gun violence is a significant problem in the United States. One way to reduce the problem, is to reduce the amount of gun violence deaths when mental illness is a factor. There are several ways the U.S. can do so, they just need to give it a try.

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