

Inquiring Minds topic - 1 November 2019

Riv Swartz, Moderator

Gun Violence and Mental Illness

Gun violence in the United States has escalated to such a degree that citizens are experiencing significant anxiety and fear that inhibit ordinary activities associated with basic life in the United States of America. Gun violence severely impacts many social activities including attending religious services, theaters, shopping areas, educational facilities and simply venturing out on the streets of the U.S.A.

After an episode of gun violence, the predictable aftermath usually includes the blame-game from both the Right and Left. The Right pontificates on the assurances provided by the second amendment and the need to address issues of mental health. Meanwhile, the Left argues about the misinterpretation of the 2nd amendment and the involvement of lobbyists representing the NRA. These issues are manifested in politics and garnering winning points for any particular side.

BUT who is concerned about our children participating in school drills to avoid being killed? Who is concerned about a 2 year old child being shot in the face by a drive-by shooter? Who is concerned about researched-based methods that can significantly address the pain, panic, and paralyzing anxieties that our citizenry endures on a daily basis?

Can we move beyond partisan finger pointing and... simply CARE? The American Psychological Association, APA provides data-driven recommendations that go beyond tribal speculations on how to curtail gun violence in the United States. The overriding question is: do our institutions, citizens, and government care enough about the ramifications of gun violence to consider the APA recommendations? What say you and why?

~~~~~

### Questions for discussion:

1. What would it take for the government to address the cultural issues that are systemic to gun violence, i.e., the Wild West mentality, the G-d given right to carry a

weapon; the manliness of guns, extreme hatred, anger, revenge, etc.

2. What would it take for gun enthusiasts to modify their thoughts regarding the need to change our gun laws in light of on-going violence and deaths?
3. Will the desire to blame mental illness for gun violence bring us closer to addressing the issue of gun violence?
4. Would our founding fathers agree that the second amendment should be used to rationalize the extensive proliferation of guns and violence in our society?
5. Would anyone argue that a child's life is worth supporting the tenants of the NRA?

## Statement of APA CEO on Gun Violence and Mental Health

August 5, 2019

*Blaming mental illness for gun violence is simplistic, inaccurate — and prevents us from solving the problem*

**WASHINGTON — Following is the statement of Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD, CEO of the American Psychological Association, in reaction to President Trump's statements today regarding gun violence and mental illness:**

"Blaming mental illness for the gun violence in our country is simplistic and inaccurate and goes against the scientific evidence currently available.

"The United States is a global outlier when it comes to horrific headlines like the ones that consumed us all weekend. Although the United States makes up less than 5% of the world's population, we are home to 31% of all mass shooters globally, according to a CNN analysis. This difference is not explained by the rate of mental illness in the U.S.

"The one stark difference? Access to guns.

"Americans own nearly half of the estimated 650 million civilian-owned guns in the world. Access to this final, fatal tool means more deaths that occur more quickly, whether in a mass shooting or in someone's own home.

"As we psychological scientists have said repeatedly, the overwhelming majority of people with mental illness are not violent. And there is no single personality profile that can reliably predict who will resort to gun violence. Based on the research, we know only that a history of violence is the single best predictor of who will commit future violence. And access to more guns, and deadlier guns, means more lives lost.

“Based on the psychological science, we know some of the steps we need to take. We need to limit civilians’ access to assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. We need to institute universal background checks. And we should institute red flag laws that remove guns from people who are at high risk of committing violent acts.

“And although the president called on the nation to do a ‘better job of identifying and acting on early warning signs,’ that requires research to ensure we are making decisions based on data, not prejudices and fear.

“We agree with the president’s call to strengthen background checks. But this falls woefully short of what is needed. We must take a comprehensive public health approach and provide dedicated federal funding to agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health, to better understand the causes, contributing factors and solutions to gun violence.

“The president clearly said that it is time to stop the hateful rhetoric that is infecting the public discourse. We ask that he use his powerful position to model that behavior. And we ask that the federal government support the research needed to better understand the causes of bigotry and hate, and their association to violence, so that we may devise evidence-based solutions.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

## **Also please consider:**

### **Don't Blame Mental Illness for Mass Shootings**

Wednesday Sep 18, 2019

In a misguided attempt to curb mass shootings, [the administration wants to study whether monitoring people with mental illnesses\(www.washingtonpost.com\)](http://www.washingtonpost.com) could help predict violence. The proposal, which likely would violate the Fourth Amendment, focuses on using technology such as phones and smartwatches to detect whether people with mental illnesses are about to turn violent.

This approach is consistent with the narrative that quickly emerges after every mass shooting in the United States: "Maybe he was mentally ill."

Then Republicans call for mental health reform.

Democrats quickly agree that we need mental health reform (independent of mass shootings) while calling for gun reform.

And then nothing happens.

Again.

Through Sept. 17, [there have been 301 mass shootings in the United States\(www.gunviolencearchive.org\)](http://www.gunviolencearchive.org) this year. That's more than one a day.

The week after 31 people were killed in mass shootings in Ohio and Texas last month, the president

proclaimed, "[Mental illness and hatred pull the trigger, not the gun.](https://abcnews.go.com)"([abcnews.go.com](https://abcnews.go.com))

As family physicians, we are no strangers to mental health care. In fact, my most common diagnoses (after "health maintenance") are anxiety and depression. Every day, I see patients who are struggling with sleep, appetite, concentration and energy. These are hallmarks of mental health issues. Committing a mass shooting is not.

That's why it's important for family physicians to combat the persistent myth that mental illness is a leading factor in mass shootings. This is unsupported by evidence.

[Study\(psychiatryonline.org\)](https://psychiatryonline.org) after [study\(www.sciencedirect.com\)](https://www.sciencedirect.com) has demonstrated that people with mental health issues commit only a miniscule percentage of mass shootings and account for less than 1% of annual gun homicides. According to a study based on Swedish data published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, [only 3%-5% of violent crimes are perpetrated by someone with a mental illness.](https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org) ([ajp.psychiatryonline.org](https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org)) In fact, [people with serious mental illnesses are more likely to be the victims of violence.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) And the vast majority of gun deaths in America are from suicide, meaning those with mental illness are far more likely to harm themselves than others.

Blaming mental illness only serves to further stigmatize patients who have mental health issues as inherently dangerous. And it deflects attention from a real predictor of mass shootings: easy access to guns.

By blaming mental illness or video games (which, it should be noted, are also [not proven influencers in mass shootings\(www.vox.com\)](https://www.vox.com)), politicians beholden to gun lobby groups avoid a discussion about gun reform.

The administration's idea to try to predict mass shootings through monitoring those with mental illnesses oversimplifies the complexities of human behavior. [Ninety-seven percent of mass shooters are male.](https://www.statista.com) ([www.statista.com](https://www.statista.com)) The overwhelming [majority are white.](https://www.statista.com)([www.statista.com](https://www.statista.com)) Beyond that, mass shooters share weaker links. They have beliefs [ranging from misogyny\(www.researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net) to white supremacy. Some are seeking revenge. Many have [a history of domestic violence.\(www.vox.com\)](https://www.vox.com)

All this, but a glaring statistic remains: [Americans are 10 times more likely to die from gunfire\(www.businessinsider.com\)](https://www.businessinsider.com) than are citizens of other high-income countries with similar rates of mental health issues.

Pursuing specific solutions to gun violence is also difficult. The 1996 Dickey Amendment has hindered research about gun violence at the CDC, leading to a paucity of evidence-based data. But here's what we do know: We need to stop scapegoating mental illness every time someone commits mass murder.

Patients with mental health issues are as diverse as those without. Stripping away rights from people with conditions ranging from depression to ADHD to bipolar disorder to anxiety to substance abuse is tantamount to outright discrimination.

As I started writing this, I realized I wouldn't be able to say anything that has not already been said because legions of doctors and other health professionals have also spoken out about the mental health-mass shootings myth. But I'm adding my voice to the mix because [this country has a growing problem with gun violence,\(www.pewresearch.org\)](https://www.pewresearch.org) and we have to stop being too afraid to address it.

*Natasha Bhuyan, M.D., is a board-certified family physician in Phoenix.*