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The Gun Violence Debate Unfairly Stigmatizes Those With Mental Illness

Mental illness is not a predictor of violence against others

(Dixon, IL)

There has been a lot of misinformation and fear spread over the past years when it comes to an alleged connection between mental illness and gun violence. A very distorted picture has emerged from the aftermath of tragic events like the one in Highland Park this past summer. Mental illness is often named as a primary or contributing reason for the cause of gun violence when there is little to no evidence whatsoever to show this. Often there is a rush to judgement before many of the facts are even known. By focusing exclusively on mental illness, we are missing all the aspects of violence and determinants of violence that have nothing at all to do with mental illness.

“In fact, the opposite is true,” says Patrick Phelan, Sinnissippi Centers’ President/CEO. “Individuals with a mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence and less likely to commit a violent act than the general population.” This is well established by peer reviewed research. The stigma and resulting discrimination surrounding this issue remains. “We need to do better in reducing, not increasing, stigma for those with mental illness,” adds Phelan.

“The **shocking statistic that should get all of our attention is that a full sixty percent of gun-related deaths in America are suicides**,” says Phelan. “This means that **mental illness is not a predictor of violence towards others**, however, **it is a predictor of suicide**. It also shows that while we have done a lot to address mental illness in the U.S. we have farther to go.”

What about gun deaths that aren’t suicide? Are they related to mental illness? In general, no. 37% of gun deaths are murders. These two statistics account for almost all gun-related deaths in the United States, 97%. While it might be hard to argue that mental illness plays absolutely no role in tragic events like Highland Park, that type of gun violence represents an incredibly small number of events. Mass shooting has a specific and much broader definition than the public uses. The way the general public tends to define them are mass casualty events at schools, in malls or stores, churches, and the like. In these tragic events, there are a large number of other contributing factors, and arguably the least among them is mental illness.

While acts of mass violence like Highland Park account for only a small percentage of firearm deaths, it’s their devastating effects that drive an inordinate amount of news coverage and discussion. This fact is why the picture about mental illness and violence is so distorted and misleading.

According to a study by Columbia University, serious mental illness—specifically psychosis—is not a key factor in most mass shootings or other types of mass murder.

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Approximately 5% of all mass shootings may have some severe mental illness component. To put that in proper perspective, mass shootings or mass murders are defined differently according to different government agencies, but generally it's when three or four people are injured or killed. Lumped into these mass events are gang violence, and other violent events that have nothing to do with mental illness.

The most relevant and reliable predictor of future violence is past violence. According to Mental Health in America, they point out, "Having a history of violence, youth justice-involvement, physical interpersonal abuse, and parental justice-involvement are the key predictors of future violence. Dispositional factors that are predictors of violence are younger age, male sex, and lower income. Contextual factors include major life changes such as divorce, unemployment, or victimization. Expressions of hate, rage and threatening behavior are not mental illnesses but are predictors of violence."

In terms of mass shootings, instead of focusing in the wrong area, on mental illness, and stigmatizing people with a mental illness, we should focus on the causes of violence, and design and try to implement effective mitigation strategies. Doing that we can get a lot farther down the road of preventing future tragedies.

"When it comes to the larger issue of gun-related deaths, where suicide represents a significant percentage of those deaths, we clearly need to focus on providing more resources for mental health treatment and suicide prevention," says Phelan. "One in five Americans has a diagnosable mental illness in any given year and nearly half of Americans experience a mental illness at some point in their lives according to Mental Health America. While more resources have been devoted to this national health crisis during the pandemic, more needs to be done. The general public can become involved in becoming more aware of mental illness and take classes like Mental Health First aid to assist individuals in a mental health crisis," adds Phelan.

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