

# Guns, Not Mental Illness

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**WASHINGTON**, December 14, 2014 – The theory that mental illness actually causes violent crime is highly exaggerated.

Example: Last week, a gunman shot and injured three students in Portland, Oregon. From October 24 until those Portland shootings, seven other students had been shot and killed and four others wounded in Washington, Florida and Oklahoma. These are just the student victims.

When young people die it catches more attention. Other people are killed or injured every day by gun violence, but when youngsters are involved, such incidents attract much more media scrutiny.

Currently in the U.S., when someone pulls a trigger, speculation about the shooter's mental health typically follows. It seems obvious to both the press and to many spectators – whoever does such a terrible thing must be, in some sense, mentally ill. We seem to believe that violent behavior is directly connected to mental illness. When the behavior is sensational, as in mass shootings, clearly the shooter must be sick.

In 2013, almost forty-six percent of respondents to a national survey said people with mental illness were more dangerous than other people. More than fifty percent of those polled by Gallup in 2011 and 2013 said that mass shootings are more related to failures in the mental health system than from easy access to guns. This is evidence, however, that the audience is not always right.

Many believe the focus on violence should center more on drug and alcohol abuse, or even on cultural factors in the nation's black community.

A study conducted almost 25 years ago (1991) (and which clearly rings true today) by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) found that alcohol and drug abuse are far more likely to result in violent behavior than mental illness by itself. The study indicates that people with no mental disorder who abused alcohol or drugs were nearly seven times as likely as those without substance abuse to commit violent acts.

Jason L. Riley (July, 2014) wrote in the Washington Times newspaper, “any candid debate... must begin with the fact that blacks are responsible for an astoundingly disproportionate number of crimes, which has been the case for at least the past half a century.”

“If we don’t acknowledge the cultural barriers to black progress,” Riley asks, “how can we address them?”

The facts, simply stated, lead us to conclude that mental illness is only a very small part of the reason for violent crime.

Lead researcher Jillian Peterson, PhD, writing in the American Psychological Association journal “Law and Human Behavior,” asks,

Is there a small group of people with mental illness committing crimes again and again because of their symptoms? We didn’t find that in this study.

When we hear about crimes committed by people with mental illness, they tend to be big headline-making crimes so they get stuck in people’s heads. The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent, not criminal and not dangerous.

A major reason we focus on the mentally ill in connection with reducing violent crime, is that the media and the entertainment industries often portray the mentally ill as violent criminals. According to a 1999 study in “Mental Health American,” 60 percent of characters in prime time television with mental illness were shown to be involved in crime or violence, and news reports overwhelmingly portray the mentally ill as dangerous.

A 2006 report from the Institute of Medicine says that while studies do suggest a link between mental illnesses and violence, the contribution of people with mental illnesses to overall rates of violence is small. Yet the magnitude of the relationship is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general population.

Studies conclude that those categorized as mentally ill commit approximately four percent of violent crimes.

Greg North, in a December 2012 article appearing in thinkprogress.org, writes that “the contribution of mentally ill to overall crime rates is an “extremely low” 3 to 5 percent, a number much lower than that of substance abuse; and studies show the mentally ill are more likely to be the victims of violent crimes.”

The national attention on the mentally ill following mass killings is misplaced. The attention instead should be on getting rid of automatic weapons.

Following the Newtown, Connecticut shooting, Richard A. Friedman, M.D. wrote that while “no official diagnosis has been made public, armchair diagnosticians have been quick to assert that keeping guns from getting into the hands of people with mental illness would help solve the problem of gun homicides.”

Arguing against stricter gun-control measures after Sandy Hook, Representative Mike Rogers, (R-Michigan), said “the more realistic discussion is how do we target people with mental illness who use firearms?”

Robert A. Levy, chairman of the Cato Institute, told the New York Times: To reduce the risk of multi-victim violence, we would be better advised to focus on early detection and treatment of mental illness.” Thank you gentlemen, but your thoughts are misplaced. Preventing those with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other serious mental illnesses from getting guns might reduce, ever so slightly, the risk of mass killings. But that effort, realistically, would have little impact on every-day firearm-related killings.

According to a National Center for Health Statistics 2010 study, there were 120,000 gun related homicides between 2001 and 2010. People with mental illness accounted for “only a few.”

Dr. Friedman: “All the focus on the small number of people with mental illness who are violent serves to make us feel safer by displacing and limiting the threat of violence to a small, well-defined group. But the sad and frightening truth is that the vast majority of homicides are carried out by outwardly normal people in the grip of all too ordinary human aggression to whom we provide nearly unfettered access to deadly force.” Guns have been, remain, and will continue to be the problem.

Automatic weapons pose the greatest danger. While most National Rifle Association members agree banning these weapons is a good thing, the leadership refuses to endorse such a ban, because of the misguided belief that “if we give an inch,” the progression of concessions will never end.

The NRA lobby is a ridiculously strong one. For this reason, laws have changed and there is now the legally-sanctioned belief that we have a “right” to bear arms. Historically, this was not the case. The Second Amendment was enacted to protect us from government oppression.

World renowned attorney and Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz, in his book *Shouting Fire*, observes that the meaning of the Second Amendment’s language will never be resolved to the satisfaction of all sides.

That language reads, “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed...” The NRA regards this language as an all-encompassing broad-based natural right.

Gun control advocates argue that the language, particularly the reference to a “well regulated militia,” limits the right to the possession of weapons for military use. They also argue that the words “well regulated” suggest reasonable regulation of gun ownership, such as licensing, waiting periods, and mandatory gun locks. Dershowitz says that the claim of “private, unregulated gun ownership” as a natural right is difficult to defend, because it is a uniquely American “right,” growing out of our colonial experiences.

Most freedom loving countries have restrictions on gun ownership. Liberty does not require the right to bear arms.

Addressing a common argument that guns are needed for self defense, Dershowitz continues,

The 'right' to self defense is acknowledged in all laws to be limited to specific threats and requires that there be no reasonable alternative. It does not extend to the private possession of guns for use in the possible event of lethal aggression.

It is time – it long has been – to simply recognize and act on the problem of violent crime. The problem is guns, not the mentally ill.

We should help all who need help. This includes those who suffer with mental illnesses. This includes those who use drugs and alcohol. This includes addressing cultural problems in minority communities.

We try to stop access to drugs and alcohol. We know the potential effects. Guns equally cause serious problems.

While reducing gun violence has no simple answer, we should pass laws that significantly limit access to guns, that severely punish the use of guns during crimes, and that flat-out outlaw automatic weapons.