



*Michigan Association of Community Mental Health Boards is now  
Community Mental Health Association of Michigan.*

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FRIDAY FACTS

TO: CMH and PIHP Executive Directors  
Chairpersons and Delegates  
Provider Alliance Members  
Executive Board Members

FROM: Robert Sheehan, Chief Executive Officer  
Alan Bolter, Associate Director

RE: **Special Edition: gun violence and mental health**

- Connecting mental illness and mass shooting misses the point, experts say (Phil McCausland, NBC News)
- Mass Shootings and Mental Illness (James L. Knoll IV, M.D.; George D. Annas, M.D., M.P.H.; American Psychiatric Association)
- How to reduce shootings (Nicholas Kristof; New York Times)
- How to Reduce Mass Shooting Deaths? Experts Rank Gun Laws (Margot Sanger-Katz; Quoc Trung Bui, New York Times)
- Need to boldly face the causes of gun violence rather than scapegoating those with mental illness (Robert Sheehan, Community Mental Health Association of Michigan)

With last week's school shooting in Parkland, Florida, communities across the country, policy makers, high school students, families, members of the law enforcement and mental health communities are expressing their grief, often accompanied by outrage, and their commitment to addressing the causes of gun violence in this country.

In an effort to foster a fact and research based approach to addressing gun violence, this association is publishing this Special Edition of the Friday Facts. This edition compiles some of the best thinking on this issue,

Note, that this Association is not advocating any specific approach to reducing gun violence. Our hope is that some of the myths that drive this debate can be replaced with facts and that the information and views contained in this special edition will support clear-headed thinking and concrete action to halt gun violence in America.

**Connecting mental illness and mass shooting misses the point, experts say (Phil McCausland, NBC News)**

Below are excerpts from a recent NBC News article on the views of a range of experts on gun violence and mental health:

In the wake of the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, where a gunman killed 17 students and staff, the Trump administration and many Republicans have said that the best way to end the seemingly constant stream of mass shootings is by combating mental illness.

And while some think it a reasonable idea, mental health and mass shooting experts aren't so sure. Dr. James Alan Fox, a criminologist with Northeastern University and author of "Extreme Killing: Understanding Serial and Mass Murder," said it's dangerous to assume that the mentally ill tend to commit these shootings.

"There's not really a correlation," said Fox, who maintains a database on mass shootings. "We like to think that these people are different from the rest of us. We want a simple explanation and if we just say they're mentally ill, case closed. Because of how fearful dangerous and deadly their actions are, we really want to distance ourselves from it and relegate it to illness."

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Experts say that the public has to be careful with how it thinks about gun violence and mental illness, otherwise it could stigmatize those who suffer from mental health issues.

And considering that suicide by firearm killed 313,641 people between 1999 and 2015, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention, it appears much more likely that the mentally ill will hurt themselves than others.

Dr. Jonathan Metzler, director of the Center for Medicine, Health and Society at Vanderbilt University, said that these mass shootings highlight Americans' desire to reaffirm a stigmatization of the mentally ill as "ticking time bombs" to avoid more difficult conversations about gun violence.

"Mass shootings are horrific and terrifying," he said. "But if we really want to stop gun violence in this country, everyday gun violence is predictable and could be stopped. Ending everyday gun violence would help end mass shootings as well."

According to a 2016 report published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (**that report is cited with its link below**), just ensuring weapons don't enter the hands of the mentally ill isn't enough to prevent mass shootings from occurring regularly. Instead, the report suggests that public health and education campaigns are needed to teach people how to report concerning behavior to authorities and how to learn coping skills for anger and conflict resolution.

The report also proposes that policies and laws be focused on dangerous behavior that shows risk for committing gun violence, rather than a blanket category for the mentally ill, and recommends that institutions and communities develop threat assessment teams that can evaluate reports of potential danger.

As Fox asserts, the belief that the mentally ill are more likely to take part in a mass shooting appears to be a misleading. There were 198,760 homicides committed by a firearm in the United States between 1999 and 2015, according to the National Center for Health Statistic. Despite the high number, the APA report from 2016 says that fewer than 1 percent of firearm homicides are committed by a person diagnosed with a mental illness.

The full article can be found at:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/connecting-mental-illness-gun-violence-misses-point-experts-say-n821696>

### **Mass Shootings and Mental Illness (James L. Knoll IV, M.D.; George D. Annas, M.D., M.P.H.; American Psychiatric Association)**

Below are excerpts from a study, conducted and published by the American Psychiatric Association, on gun violence and mental health:

#### Common Misperceptions

- Mass shootings by people with serious mental illness represent the most significant relationship between gun violence and mental illness.
- People with serious mental illness should be considered dangerous.
- Gun laws focusing on people with mental illness or with a psychiatric diagnosis can effectively prevent mass shootings.
- Gun laws focusing on people with mental illness or a psychiatric diagnosis are reasonable, even if they add to the stigma already associated with mental illness.

## Evidence-Based Facts

- Mass shootings by people with serious mental illness represent less than 1% of all yearly gun-related homicides. In contrast, deaths by suicide using firearms account for the majority of yearly gun-related deaths.
- The overall contribution of people with serious mental illness to violent crimes is only about 3%. When these crimes are examined in detail, an even smaller percentage of them are found to involve firearms.
- Laws intended to reduce gun violence that focus on a population representing less than 3% of all gun violence will be extremely low yield, ineffective, and wasteful of scarce resources. Perpetrators of mass shootings are unlikely to have a history of involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. Thus, databases intended to restrict access to guns and established by guns laws that broadly target people with mental illness will not capture this group of individuals.
- Gun restriction laws focusing on people with mental illness perpetuate the myth that mental illness leads to violence, as well as the misperception that gun violence and mental illness are strongly linked. Stigma represents a major barrier to access and treatment of mental illness, which in turn increases the public burden

The full report can be found at:

<https://psychiatryonline.org/psychiatryonline.org/doi/pdf/10.5555/appi.books.9781615371099>

### **How to reduce shootings (Nicholas Kristof; New York Times)**

Below are excerpts from a recent New York Times editorial (printed originally in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Texas) that provides a rich source of facts related to gun violence and a comparison of the impact of public policy initiatives to combat it.:

Inevitably, predictably, fatefully, another mass shooting breaks our hearts. This time, it was a school shooting in Florida on Wednesday that left at least 17 dead at the hands of 19-year-old gunman and his AR-15 semiautomatic rifle.

But what is perhaps most heartbreaking of all is that they shouldn't be shocking. People all over the world become furious and try to harm others, but only in the United States do we suffer such mass shootings so regularly; only in the United States do we lose one person every 15 minutes to gun violence.

So let's not just mourn the dead, let's not just lower flags and make somber speeches. Let's also learn lessons from these tragedies, so that there can be fewer of them. In particular, I suggest that we try a new approach to reducing gun violence — a public health strategy

The full editorial can be found at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/06/opinion/how-to-reduce-shootings.html>

### **How to Reduce Mass Shooting Deaths? Experts Rank Gun Laws ( Margot Sanger-Katz; Quoctrung Bui, New York Times)**

Below are excerpts from a recent New York Times editorial (printed originally in the fall of 2017) that provides a rich source of facts related to gun violence and a comparison of the impact of public policy initiatives to combat it.:

Whenever a mass shooting shocks America, people ask if tighter gun-control measures could have prevented the slaughter.

Gun violence researchers say that no law can eliminate the risk of mass shootings, which are unpredictable and represent a small minority of gun homicides over all. But there are a handful of policies that could reduce

the likelihood of such events, or reduce the number of people killed when such shootings do occur. And several of them have strong public support.

These are findings from surveys we conducted a year ago about the recurring problem of gun violence in the United States. We asked dozens of researchers in criminology, law and public health to assess a range of policies often proposed to prevent gun deaths. We also conducted a national poll to measure public support for the same set of measures.

The full article can be found at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/05/upshot/how-to-reduce-mass-shooting-deaths-experts-say-these-gun-laws-could-help.html?smid=fb-share>

### **Need to boldly face the causes of gun violence rather than scapegoating those with mental illness (Robert Sheehan, Community Mental Health Association of Michigan)**

Below is a recent editorial issued by this association in response to the mass shooting in Parkland Florida.

The recent mass shooting in Florida is a tragedy, especially when preceded by the shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas, only a few months ago. The continual, devastating tragedies call us to examine and take action on the real causes of gun violence in America, as these tragedies continue to arise. Together, we must bravely discuss the real actions needed to dramatically reduce gun-related violence in our country.

To be clear, my call for such a clear-eyed examination is not an argument for or against gun control. That is a different topic for a different day. In the wake of the Florida school shooting, I am calling, as are many others in the mental health and public safety arenas across the country, that we stop derailing this difficult but sorely needed examination by scapegoating, in the wake of tragic mass shootings, those with mental illness, while doing nothing to address this nation's gun violence nor its mental health needs.

Attempts to connect every violent act to mental illness represent an inaccurate and simplistic analysis to a complex problem. Study after study has shown that *persons with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators*. A comprehensive study of gun violence in America found that only 4% of American gun deaths are related to mental illness. The bulk of these are suicides and do not involved violence to others.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, if mental illness were truly the cause of gun violence, then other developed countries with comparable mental health spending, and mental health practitioners per capita would have similar levels of gun violence. None of them do.

While there are 33 gun deaths in the U.S. per year, per million people, there were only 5 per year, per million in Canada and 0.7 per million in Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, while repeatedly calling, after nearly every mass shooting, for the examination of a person's mental stability as part of gun purchase, Congress passed and President Donald Trump recently signed a bill eliminating rules, which would limit gun access for those with mental illness. While these prohibitions are controversial, given the delicate balance between civil liberties and public safety, eliminating this rule instead of refining it was a missed opportunity and sadly ironic.

Equally ironic is the contrast of the call, in the wake of a mass shooting, for improved access, by all Americans, to mental health services, while those sounding that call are also working to cut Medicaid and Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA)-supported health insurance which are among the chief tools for ensuring such access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment.

I mourn the victims of this senseless violence in Florida, as we have mourned for the victims so many high-profile killings, and those that do not make the press, over the past several years. I grieve for the families who have lost loved ones.

I, along with many across the country, want to ignite a conversation. A conversation around the real causes of gun violence and around the need to stop scapegoating those working so hard to live with and recover from mental illness.

Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Swanson, J. W., McGinty, E. E., Fazel, S., & Mays, V. M. (2015). Mental illness and reduction of gun violence and suicide: bringing epidemiologic research to policy. *Annals of epidemiology*, 25(5), 366-376.

<sup>2</sup>Zimring, F. E., & Hawkins, G. (1999). *Crime is not the problem: Lethal violence in America*. Oxford University Press.