

MENTAL HEALTH POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

MASS MURDER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

By

Michael B. Friedman, LMSW

Adjunct Associate Professor

Columbia University School of Social Work

Abstract: Whenever there is a highly publicized mass murder in the United States, a debate ensues between those who support tough gun control measures and those who support the right of individuals to own guns, including automatic weapons. Those who defend gun rights generally argue, without evidence, that mass killings are a mental health problem, and they call for improvements to a "broken" mental health system. Gun control advocates argue, with considerable research support, that mass murder is not due to untreated mental illness. Many, of course, also advocate for improvements to the mental health system, but not as a way to reduce mass murder. This lecture provides an overview of the arguments on each side of this issue and of the research findings regarding the relationship between mental illness and mass murder. My view, as I have stated in several articles over the years, is that mass murder is not a mental health problem. Perpetrators of mass murder are very rarely people with serious mental illness. They are far more likely to be victims of violence. Most mass murders are not acts of "lunacy"; they are far more likely to be acts of terrorism, racism, criminal activity, or domestic violence. Acts of violence by people with mental illness that result in death are far more likely to be suicide than homicide. Unfortunately, some mental health advocates use the public's fear of violence by people with mental illness as a major rationale for investing in improved mental health services. This reinforces stigma and is ultimately damaging to efforts to win community acceptance of people with mental illness.

Whenever there is a highly publicized mass murder in the United States, a debate ensues between those who support tough gun control measures and those who support the right of individuals to own guns, including automatic weapons. Those who defend gun rights generally claim, without evidence, that mass killings are a mental health problem, and they call for improvements to a "broken" mental health system.¹ Gun control advocates argue, with considerable research support, that mass murder is not due to untreated mental illness.² Many, of course, also advocate for improvements to the mental health system, but because of vast unmet needs of people with mental illness and not as a futile measure to substantially reduce mass murder.

My view, as I have stated in several articles over the years, is that mass murder is not a mental health problem.^{3,4,5,6,7,8,9} Perpetrators of mass murder are very rarely people with serious mental illness. They are far more likely to be victims of violence. Most mass murders are not acts of “lunacy”; they are far more likely to be acts of terrorism, racism, criminal activity, or domestic violence. Acts of violence by people with mental illness that result in death are far more likely to be suicide than homicide.

Unfortunately, some mental health advocates use the public’s fear of violence by people with mental illness as a major rationale for investing in improved mental health services. This reinforces stigma and is ultimately damaging to efforts to win community acceptance of people with mental illness.

This lecture provides an overview of the arguments on each side of this issue and of the research findings regarding the relationship between mental illness and mass murder as well as a statement of my view that mental health is largely irrelevant to the problem of mass murder.

Does Gun Control Violate The Principle of Liberty?

The American democracy was founded on the basis of principles that are in tension if not in outright conflict. One fundamental principle is that there is a right to liberty that government has a responsibility to protect. Another is that governments have a responsibility to limit liberty in order (1) to protect individuals from each other and to some extent from themselves and (2) to contribute to the well-being of individuals, their families, and communities.

Balancing protection of liberty with protection from harm and promotion of well-being is a constant challenge of policy making. There are “hazards of liberty” that must be tolerated to preserve democracy. Which risks are beyond the purview of government and which should be subjected to governmental control? This question is at the heart of much policy making, and there are, of course, significantly different views about it.

To oversimplify, conservatives lean in the direction of preserving individual liberty, particularly with regard to economic matters. But conservatives also tend towards preservation of tradition and limiting liberty along religious lines, particularly with regard to sexual behavior, marriage, and the family.

Liberals tilt in the direction of limiting liberty in order to protect people from various risks to human life and to promote well-being. They also are

inclined to move beyond tradition and to allow people liberty regarding their personal relationships.

Although opponents of gun control base their position on the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which states that there is a right to bear arms, what is fundamental to their view is the belief that government has very limited authority to restrict the liberty of individuals to own guns. It has the authority, indeed the responsibility, to criminalize the use of guns for certain purposes, such as committing robberies or killing other people. But so long as people use guns in ways that do not hurt others, they argue, government has very limited authority to interfere. Guns, they argue, are not the cause of murder; the “evil” and/or “mentally ill” people who use them are responsible.

Proponents of gun control argue that the 2nd Amendment does not give an unlimited right to own guns and has been misinterpreted by the Supreme Court. In addition, they argue that guns cause 10s of thousands of deaths each year—homicides, suicides, and accidents. The risks of easy access to guns, especially to automatic assault weapons are, they argue, intolerably great. They call for “common sense” measures such as background checks, barring ownership of military-style assault weapons, licensing for gun owners and especially for those who carry guns in public, limits on the size of magazines, authority to remove guns from people deemed dangerous (“red flag laws”), etc.

Opponents of gun control generally argue that these so-called “common sense” measures are not common sense at all and that they won’t work.¹⁰ Proponents of gun control offer evidence that they do work—at least to some extent.¹¹

For example, a recent study indicated that gun control measures could reduce gun deaths by 10%.¹² Since there were roughly 45,000 deaths due to firearms in 2020¹³, gun control would have saved 4500 lives in 2020.

Which prompts a seemingly cruel question—is saving 4500 lives enough to justify limiting the rights of millions of American adults? If it were possible to fully outlaw smoking, many of the 500,000 smoking-related deaths per year¹⁴ could be saved; but smoking is permitted, though discouraged. There were an average of 140,000 alcohol-related deaths per year between 2015 and 2019 according to CDC¹⁵, but alcoholic drinks are legal, albeit subject to some controls.

The point of my question is not that there should be no limitations on gun ownership and sales. The point is that saving 4500 lives does not in and of itself justify vast limitations on liberty. For tobacco, alcohol, and other matters, a hard balance has been struck between personal liberty and reducing risks to health and life. That is what will need to be achieved in the battle about gun control.

One additional question from the vantage point of mental health policy. Should people with histories of mental illness be subject to more restrictions regarding the purchase and ownership of guns than people without mental illness. Background checks prior to the sale of a gun always include checking whether the person has had or now has a mental illness. Common sense? Or stigma? It is widely believed that people with mental illness or a history of mental illness are at high risk for violence. But are they? 25% of American adults have a mental disorder in any given year; 50% have a mental disorder during their lifetimes. Are all of these people at substantially greater risk for committing acts of violence than the general population? Does it make sense to restrict the rights of so many people?

Laws about background checks actually focus on the question of whether a person has been adjudicated mentally ill and dangerous.¹⁶ That, of course, narrows the population subject to control; but does a history of serious mental illness and dangerousness mean that a person is dangerous forever? Is there no meaningful recovery? Most laws regarding background checks for mental illness do provide for exceptions based on time lived without severe, mental illness, but the system is built on the presumption that people with histories of severe, mental illness are likely to be dangerous. That's stigma, not science.

Are People With Mental Illness The Primary Perpetrators of Murder?

When a young man who looks a bit weird walks into a school with an automatic weapon and kills students and teachers before turning the gun on himself, it is hard to believe he is anything but a lunatic. And it is possible that he is seriously mentally ill, responding to voices ordering him to shoot the Devil's children and their guardians, for example.

And in that type of mass murder, it is certainly possible that the killer was seriously mentally ill. But the research is clear. Mass murder, defined as an incident in which at least 4 people are killed or injured, is rarely an act of madness. It is far more frequently an act of terrorism, racism, crime, revenge, or domestic violence.

These are the facts:

- People with mental illness rarely commit homicide, and few homicides are committed by people with mental illness. About 5% of homicides are committed by people with psychotic conditions.¹⁷
- People with serious mental illness are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators.¹⁸
- Most of the very few murders committed by people with serious mental illness are of people with whom they have relationships, not of strangers.^{19, 20}
- People with mental illness, even severe mental illness, who commit murders or even mass murders, may not have acted because of their mental illness; they may have other motivation.²¹
- Most mass murders are committed by people who are not seriously mentally ill including:
 - Terrorists
 - Racists
 - Religious bigots
 - People who commit purposeful acts of murder or manslaughter or who commit crimes that result in unintended deaths
 - Perpetrators of domestic violence
 - People seeking revenge
 - And more.²²
- In its *Global Study on Homicide*, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime recognizes multiple motivations for murder and divides homicides into 3 types: socio-political, interpersonal, and criminal. But murder by people with psychosis is so rare that it is included only as a footnote.
- People with mental illness are far more likely to take their own lives than the life of another person.²³ In 2020 the suicide rate in the United States was 13.95 per 100,000 while the homicide rate was 7.46. Over the first 20 years of this century, the suicide rate increased roughly 35%. From 2001 to 2019, the homicide rate decreased by over 20%. But the homicide rate has vastly increased during the pandemic. In 2020 it increased about 28% over 2019, a matter of grave concern. But it remained much lower than the rate of suicide.²⁴

Alternative Views

Although I think the facts are clear, there are alternative views worth noting. For example, in 2018 the National Council for Mental Well-Being's Medical Directors Institute conducted an "expert" review of homicides between 2001 and 2016.^{25,26} The study concluded that 1/3 of mass murders are committed by people with serious mental illness—a far higher number than the usual estimate of 5%. A powerful and disturbing finding. However, on closer look, the study defined mass murder in a way that did not include terrorism or crime. The report states: "The violence in these cases is not a means to an end — the gunmen do not pursue criminal profit or kill in the name of terrorist ideologies, for example." That's quite an exclusion. Basically, it is saying that mass murder with no apparent motive is often the act of a person with severe mental illness. That low? It's no surprise, it seems to me, that apparently senseless acts are frequently committed by psychotic people. But it is critical to be clear that most mass murders are not without understandable motives, most often political, racist, religious, or criminal.

Most mass killing, of course, is in war. That is not the sort of mass killing that is of concern in this context. But I frankly think that there should be more exploration of the relationship between the willingness of some people to commit mass killings in a war with the willingness to do so outside of war. Our nation cultivates killers so that they can effectively engage in military battle. It is interesting that there is evidence that a third of mass murders are committed by veterans—i.e., by people who have been trained to get past the usual, visceral taboo on killing other people.^{27,28}

Another view of the relationship between mental illness and mass murder is that any act of murder is "sick". Research about the link between mental illness and mass murder uses formal definitions of mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychopathy,* etc. Those who argue that all killers are "sick" believe that the formal system of psychiatric diagnosis simply doesn't capture all forms of mental defect. They tend to see people who commit heinous acts not as evil or immoral, but as mentally ill. They tend to reject harsh judgment in response to harmful acts and to reject punishment as an appropriate response.

* I find it a little surprising that research about the link between psychopathy and mass murder indicates that psychopaths may be serial killers but are unlikely to be mass murderers even though they lack empathy and don't experience anxiety, guilt, or remorse. Apparently, they tend to be more self-protective than people who commit mass murders.

This raises a very complex questions about the relationship between abnormal behavior and mental illness. It also raises a thorny philosophical question about the relationship between morality and mental illness. My personal view is that mental illness and morality are separate conceptual domains and that both are important to human life. People who commit immoral acts are immoral and generally should be subject to blame and punishment for their actions. Some of them are also mentally ill and deserve care and compassion, but mental illness is not always exculpatory or even explanatory. I am of the opinion for example that Hitler, the greatest mass murderer in history, was not sick; he was evil. Of course, he could have been both, but if so, the mental illness would not explain or excuse his evil behavior.

Mental Health Advocates Should Be Careful

At the risk of repetition, recent prominent mass murders, particularly those in schools have revitalized the belief that mass murder is a mental health problem, and this perception has once again become politically powerful.²⁹ It has already fueled calls for more forced treatment and hospitalization of people with serious mental illness. And the perception that mental illness rather than the existence of guns is the cause of mass murder has made its way into federal gun control legislation. The much ballyhooed gun safety law³⁰ that was enacted in June of this year includes, at the insistence of Republicans, new funding for the expansion of mental health services.

Should mental health advocates celebrate much needed service growth or rue giving credibility to the false link between mass murder and mental illness? According to Victoria Knight of Kaiser Health News, "While mental health advocates are happy that Congress is authorizing new funds for their cause, they also express concern that it would continue to perpetuate the idea that people with mental health disorders are largely responsible for gun violence, although research shows that's not the case."³¹

As an often frustrated mental health advocate, I fully understand the temptation to use the public's fear of violence by people with mental illness to arouse the political will to invest in much needed mental and substance use services. But I think in the long run it's dangerous to do so. It perpetuates beliefs that make people reluctant to give jobs to people with mental illness, to rent housing to them, to have programs for them in their neighborhoods, to include them in mainstream educational, social, and recreational opportunities, even to welcome them into houses of worship, which are so important to many people in the process of recovery. Closing these opportunities may do more harm to people with mental illness than even the shortage of treatment services. In any event, I would not want to

trade community acceptance for small, financial investments in behavioral health services. Arguable? For sure.

¹ [NRA-ILA | NRA Statement on Senate's June 12th Bipartisan Agreement \(nraila.org\)](https://www.nraila.org)

² [Is There a Link Between Mental Health and Mass Shootings? | Columbia University Department of Psychiatry \(columbiapsychiatry.org\)](https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org)

³ [Stigma As A Political Weapon.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁴ [MH System Not The Cause of Mass Murder MPT PF.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁵ [Mass murder is not a mental health matter.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁶ [Violence and Mental Illness PF.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁷ [Violence and Mental Illness PF.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁸ [Arizona Shootings.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

⁹ [Murder and MH Advocacy.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](https://www.michaelbfriedman.com)

¹⁰ [NRA encourages 'real solutions' to 'stop violence' after senators reach bipartisan gun framework agreement | Fox News](https://www.foxnews.com)

¹¹ [The Science Is Clear: Gun Control Saves Lives - Scientific American](https://www.scientificamerican.com)

¹² [Three types of laws could reduce gun deaths by more than 10% | Science | AAAS](https://www.aaas.org)

¹³ [CDC Fatal Injury Reports](https://www.cdc.gov) August 2022.

¹⁴ [Fast Facts | Fact Sheets | Smoking & Tobacco Use | CDC](https://www.cdc.gov)

¹⁵ [Alcohol-Related Disease Impact - Home Page \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov)

¹⁶ [Mental Health Reporting | Giffords](https://www.giffords.org)

¹⁷ Taylor, PJ and Kalebic, N. (2018). "[Psychosis and Homicide](https://www.psychiatryonline.org)" in *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*. May 2018.

¹⁸ Teplin, LA et al (2005). "[Crime Victimization in Adults With Severe Mental Illness](https://www.psychiatryonline.org): Comparison With The National Crime Victimization Survey" in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, August 2005.

¹⁹ [Homicide of Strangers by People with a Psychotic Illness | Schizophrenia Bulletin | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](https://www.oup.com)

²⁰ [Psychosis and the Risk of Stranger Homicides | Schizophrenia Bulletin Open | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](https://www.oup.com)

²¹ [Mental Illness and Violence: The Myth Behind Stranger Murders | Crime Traveller](https://www.crime-traveller.com)

-
- ²² UN Office of Drugs and Crime (2014). [The Global Study on Homicide](#).
- ²³ Friedman, MB and Nestadt, PS. (2015). [“Violence and Mental Illness: Suicide, Not Homicide, Is The Major Problem”](#) in *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2015.
- ²⁴ [WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports \(cdc.gov\)](#)
- ²⁵ [One-Third of Mass Shootings Committed by People With Mental Illness, Study Says | The Pew Charitable Trusts \(pewtrusts.org\)](#)
- ²⁶ National Council Medical Director Institute (2018). [Mass-Violence-in-America_8-6-19.pdf \(thenationalcouncil.org\)](#)
- ²⁷ [At Least 36% of Mass Shooters have been Trained by the U.S. Military \(citywatchla.com\)](#)
- ²⁸ [Understanding Mass Killings – SAPIENS](#)
- ²⁹ [Stigma As A Political Weapon.pdf \(michaelbfriedman.com\)](#)
- ³⁰ [Text - H.R.7910 - 117th Congress \(2021-2022\): Protecting Our Kids Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)
- ³¹ Knight, V. (2022). [“Gun Safety ‘Wrapped in a Mental Health Bill’: A Look at Health Provisions in the New Gun Law”](#) in *Kaiser Health News*, July 7,2022.