

# **THE MARYLAND PSYCHIATRIST**

**fall 2019 Volume: 43 No: 2**

## **Do Not Use Mass Murder As The Reason To Improve The Mental Health System**

By

Michael B. Friedman

Whenever there is a highly publicized mass murder in the United States, there are calls to fix America's "broken" mental health system. How should mental health professionals respond?

It is tempting to take advantage of the attention given to mental health after such tragic events and to ask for increased funding and other policy changes to improve America's inadequate mental health system.

But using mass murders as an opportunity to advocate for a better mental health system gives the false impression that mental illness is a major contributor to violence and that a better system will result in a significant reduction of these terrible events.

Yes, the mental health system is inadequate. And yes, mental health is mostly a matter of political indifference. But taking advantage of false and stigmatizing beliefs about people with mental illness in order to draw attention to the importance of mental health perpetuates the myth that people with mental illness are violent, and it spreads baseless fears.

The truth is that:

- 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.<sup>1</sup>
- People with serious mental illness are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators.<sup>2</sup>
- Most mass murders are committed by people who are not seriously mentally ill\* including:

---

\* Some argue that any act of murder is "sick". This raises a very complex question about the relationship between abnormal behavior and mental illness. Given the current system of psychiatric diagnosis, however, mental illnesses do not include all forms of abnormal behavior. Whether they should is a topic for another time.

- Terrorists
  - 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.<sup>\*\*3</sup>
- People with mental illness are far more likely to take their own lives than the life of another person.<sup>4</sup> This is becoming an increasingly serious problem. The rate of suicide has increased 22% since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is now more than double the rate of homicide, which has declined 10%.<sup>5</sup>

Would a better mental health system reduce homicide? Maybe a little. No one really knows.

But there are more important reasons to improve the mental health system<sup>6</sup>, especially its failure to serve 60% of Americans with diagnosable mental disorders, its failure to provide easy access to treatment and community supports, and its failure to provide even “minimally adequate care” more than 1/3 of the time.<sup>7</sup>

More and better mental health and substance abuse services probably won't affect the rate of mass murder significantly, but they can reduce the suffering of people with mental and/or substance use disorders and perhaps reduce the incidence of suicide and drug overdoses—goals eminently worth pursuing.

So, when politicians who oppose gun control argue that it is not guns but madmen who commit mass murder, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals should strongly counter their false claims with the truth about the near irrelevance of mental illness to murder. And we should advocate persistently for critical changes that have little to do with violence towards others.

---

\*\* 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.

## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Taylor, PJ and Kalebic, N. (2018). "Psychosis and Homicide" in *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*. May 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Teplin, LA et al (2005). "Crime Victimization in Adults With Severe Mental Illness: Comparison With The National Crime Victimization Survey" in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, August 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> UN Office of Drugs and Crime (2014). [\*The Global Study on Homicide\*](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Friedman, MB and Nestadt, PS. (2015). "Violence and Mental Illness: Suicide, Not Homicide, Is The Major Problem" in *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> US Centers for Disease Control, WISQARS. This is a comparison of the first 5 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the most recent 5 years in the CDC data base (2013-2017).
- <sup>6</sup> Friedman, MB. (2015). "Improving American Mental Health Policy" in *Behavioral Health News*, Spring 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Wang, Ps, et al (2005). "Twelve-Month Use of Mental Health Services in the United States: Results From The National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R)" in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, June 2005.

(Michael B. Friedman, MSW, has been a mental health policy advocate for over 40 years. He is the founder of the Center for Mental Health Policy and Advocacy of the Mental Health Association of NYC and co-founder of several advocacy coalitions including The Geriatric Mental Health Alliance of New York and The Veterans Mental Health Coalition of New York City. He also taught at Columbia University until his recent move to Baltimore to be closer to his grandchildren, who are smarter and cuter than anyone else's grandchildren.)