Mental Illness and Gun Violence: A Risk-Based Approach

Beth McGinty, PhD, MS
Center for Mental Health and Addiction Policy
Center for Gun Policy and Research
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Ongoing national dialogue on mental illness and gun violence
To reduce gun violence in the US, should we focus on mental illness, guns, or both? What about other risk factors?

Dangerous People or Dangerous Weapons
Access to Firearms for Persons With Mental Illness

Lawrence O. Gostin, JD
Katherine L. Record, JD, MA

One of us can know with any certainty what might have stopped these shots from being fired, or what thoughts lurked in the inner recesses of a violent man’s mind," said President Barack Obama while trying to console the nation in the wake of the January 2011 attempted assassination of Rep Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona. The shooting at a civic gathering left 6 bystanders dead, renewing the politically divisive debate about the appropriate response to violence: ban dangerous weapons or prohibit dangerous individuals from possessing firearms?

rate and categorical restrictions are rife with loopholes and inefficiencies.

The Gun Control Act of 1968 restricts “prohibited persons” from purchasing firearms, including individuals addicted to controlled substances, those involuntarily committed to a mental institution or adjudicated as incompetent or dangerous, or those who receive a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity. In theory, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) contains the definitive list of individuals to whom licensed dealers cannot sell firearms. In practice, however, many prohibited persons are never entered into the NICS’s database.

Reasoning that the NICS breaches federalism, the Supreme Court ruled in 1997 that Congress could not compel states to report prohibited persons who attempt to pur-
What is the relationship between mental illness and gun violence?

What other factors increase risk of gun violence?
Epidemiology of Mental Illness in the US:

• 1 in 4 US adults experiences a mental illness in a given year. Common conditions include depression and anxiety.

• 1 in 17 adults lives with serious mental illness, which includes conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

• The majority (about 60%) of US adults with mental illness do not receive treatment in a given year.
Epidemiology of Gun Violence in the US:

- 32,743 firearm deaths in the US in 2014
- 21,334 suicide (65%)
- 10,945 homicide (33%)
- Other (2%)
Serious mental illness, on its own, contributes very little to overall violence towards others (a bigger risk factor for suicide)

Attributable Risk of Minor or Serious Violent Behavior Towards Others:

96% of violence occurs due to reasons other than serious mental illness alone

Slide credit: Dr. Jeffrey Swanson
There are certain times, in certain settings, when those with a serious mental illness are at increased risk of interpersonal violence.

Percent violent within 6 – 12 months

- General population without mental illness: 2%
- Outpatients in treatment: 8%
- Emergency departments: 23%
- Involuntarily committed inpatients: 36%
- First-episode psychosis patients: 37%

In contrast to mental illness and interpersonal violence, the proportion of suicide attributable to mental illness is very high: 47-74%.

The majority of all firearm fatalities in the US are suicides:
- 32,743 firearm deaths in the US in 2014
- 21,334 suicide (65%)

Half of deaths from suicide involve guns:
- 42,773 suicide deaths in 2014
- 21,334 suicide deaths involving guns (50%)
So if mental illness is the root cause of only 4% of interpersonal gun violence in the US, what causes the other 96%?

• History of violent behavior (domestic violence, other interpersonal violence)
• Alcohol misuse
• Anger
• History of abuse or trauma
• Association with delinquent peer groups in adolescence
• Involvement in gangs/illegal drug markets
• Poverty
• Age (Young)
• Sex (Male)
Pulling it all together:

- Mental illness causes only a small proportion (4%) of all interpersonal violence in the US.
- A much larger proportion of suicides are attributable to mental illness (47-74%).
- Risk of violent behavior toward self and others fluctuates over time and circumstance.
- More than mental illness on its own, history of violent behavior, alcohol misuse, and other factors place individuals at high risk of interpersonal violence.

What does this all mean for firearm policy?
Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy Guiding Principle

Restricting firearm access on the basis of certain dangerous behaviors is supported by the evidence; restricting access on the basis of mental illness diagnoses is not.
States should enact new prohibitions on individuals’ ability to purchase and possess a firearm that reflect evidence-based risk of dangerousness.

Temporary firearm prohibitions should be based on:

- Violent misdemeanor convictions
- Temporary domestic violence restraining orders
- Multiple DUI/DWI convictions
- Multiple misdemeanor drug crime convictions
Violent misdemeanors

• Research evidence conclusively shows that individuals convicted of violence misdemeanors are at heightened risk of committing future violent crime (Wintemute 2001, Cook 2005, Vittes 2013).

• California’s law prohibiting firearm ownership among violent misdemeanants resulted in 29% reduction in arrests for new gun & other violent crimes (Wintemute 2001).
Domestic Violence Restraining Order Respondents

• Most victims of intimate partner homicide are killed with a gun (Fox, 2007)

• Temporary phase of DVRO is particularly high-risk time (Campbell, 2003)

• Cities in states with laws prohibiting DVRO respondents from having guns had 25% fewer intimate partner homicides (Zeoli, 2010)
Alcohol and Drugs

• Both alcohol and drug abuse are consistently associated with risk of violence (Friedman 1999).

• People who drive under the influence are at increased risk of being arrested multiple times (Lucker, 1991).

• Involvement in illegal drug markets is consistently associated with heightened risk of violence (Goldstein 1990).
Violent misdemeanors, domestic violence offenses, DWI/DUIs, & misdemeanor convictions involving controlled substances: these risk-based criteria for future firearm violence are all based on criminal convictions.

What about individuals who become dangerous for the first time, and do not meet any of these criteria?

GUN VIOLENCE RESTRAINING ORDER (GVRO)
Beth McGinty
bmcginty@jhu.edu
References


