

MENTAL ILLNESS AND GUNS

Mental illness is not the cause of gun violence

Nearly 1 in 5 American adults live with a mental illness¹

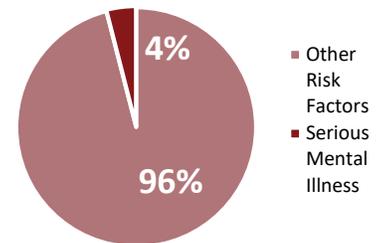
- An estimated 44.6 million American adults live with a mental illness in a given year.
- Approximately 25% of these individuals (11.2 million) live with a serious mental illness.



The majority of individuals with mental illness do not engage in violence against others. Most violence is caused by factors other than mental illness²

- Violence has many interacting causes and mental illness alone is very rarely the cause. Only 4% of interpersonal violence is attributable to serious mental illness alone.³
- Most people with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, are never violent toward others, and are in fact more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.⁴

Attributable risk of violent behavior toward others



There are evidence-based factors that do increase the risk of violence

- Past violent behavior is the best predictor of future violence, regardless of a diagnosis of mental illness.⁵
- Significant risk factors for interpersonal violence include, among others:⁶
 - Male
 - Young age
 - Exposure to violence
 - Alcohol or substance misuse
 - Illegal use of controlled substances
 - Impulsive anger
- There are certain times, in certain settings, when small sub-groups of individuals with serious mental illness are at increased risk of violence, such as the period surrounding involuntary psychiatric hospitalization.⁷

Mental illness can be a risk factor for suicide, but according to recent CDC data, less than half of all suicide decedents were known to have a mental health condition⁸

- Significant risk factors for suicide include, among others:⁹
 - Alcohol or substance misuse
 - Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
 - Relational, social, work, or financial loss
 - Easy access to lethal methods, such as firearms
- Suicide is an important part of gun violence prevention. However, focusing only on mental illness will not be sufficient to prevent these deaths.

Bottom Line:

**Mental illness is a poor indicator of gun violence.
The focus should be on dangerous behavior – not diagnoses.**



THE COALITION TO STOP GUN VIOLENCE

HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH WITHOUT THE STIGMA

PROBLEMATIC	PREFERRED
✗ Mentally ill, mental defective	✓ Person with mental illness
Person-first language is preferred. A diagnosis does not define an individual.	
✗ Dangerously mentally ill	✓ Person with serious (severe) mental illness
The word “dangerous” is stigmatizing, not based on facts, and not a clinical word. No person is dangerous purely because they have a serious mental illness.	
✗ Committed suicide	✓ Died by suicide
“Committed” conflates suicide with being a crime or criminal behavior, a holdover from when many states classified suicide as a felony.	
✗ Successful suicide	✓ Suicide death
“Successful” implies a desired or positive outcome.	
✗ Failed, unsuccessful suicide attempt	✓ Non-fatal suicide attempt
“Failed” has a negative connotation and glamorizes suicide attempts.	

¹ National Institute of Mental Health. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

² Swanson JW, Roberston AG, Frisman LK, Norko MA, Lin HJ, Swartz MS, Cook PJ. (2013). Preventing Gun Violence Involving People with Serious Mental Illness. *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis*, 33-51.

³ Swanson JW. Mental disorder, substance abuse, and community violence: an epidemiological approach. In: Monahan J, Steadman H, editors. *Violence and mental disorder*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1994. pp. 101-136.

⁴ Choe JY, Teplin LA, Abram KM. Perpetration of violence, violent victimization, and severe mental illness: balancing public health concerns. *Psychiatr. Serv.* 2008;59(2):153-64

⁵ Cook PJ, Ludwig J, Braga AA. Criminal Records of Homicide Offenders. *JAMA.* 2005;294(5):598-601.

⁶ Swanson JW, McGinty EE, Fazel S, Mays VM. (2014). Mental illness and reduction of gun violence and suicide: bringing epidemiologic research to policy. *Annals of epidemiology*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Stone DM, Simon TR, Fowler KA, et al. Vital Signs: Trends in State Suicide Rates — United States, 1999–2016 and Circumstances Contributing to Suicide — 27 States, 2015. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2018;67:617–624. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6722a1CDC>

⁹ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention. Suicide: Risk and Protective Factors. Available: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html>