

*Helping Us Live Mentally Healthier Lives Since 1933*

**"While we must have a conversation about mental health, it should be a conversation based in facts, one that dispels myths, combats stigma, and promotes prevention, and recovery from, traumatic events."**

### **Mental Health America Policy Statement on Violence: Community Health Response**



### **Mental Health Matters: A Monthly Blog Post from the Director**

### **Facts Matter: Research Shows that Mental Illness is Not the Driver of Gun Violence in the U.S.**

Why is it that after every mass shooting in America, politicians and others equate mental illness with gun violence? Rather than call for stricter gun laws, President Trump placed blame on mental illness for the two shootings that occurred over the weekend in Texas and Ohio. "Mental illness and hatred pulls the trigger, not the guns," said Trump. He went on to call the perpetrators of these crimes as "a wicked man" and "another twisted monster."

For those who would like to simplistically assign the growing acts of gun violence in our country to mental illness, the facts are **most people with serious mental illness are never violent, and 95 to 97 percent of gun violence is not caused by a mental illness**. In fact, persons living with a mental illness are more likely to be victims of a violent crime rather than the perpetrator. And while it is always the right time to talk about improvements to the mental health system, we must also talk about access to firearms as part of the problem.

"Until we begin to have our political leaders speaking more accurately to these issues, it's up to us to put the facts out there," said Arthur Evans, chief executive officer of the American Psychological Association. (*Experts: Mental illness not main driver of mass shootings*, Carla K. Johnson, AP News) Evans states that he agrees "red flag laws", also known as extreme risk protection orders, are a step in the right direction. But Evans and others said terms like 'monsters' add to stigma that keeps people from getting treatment.

Mental Health America, of which MHA of Central Carolinas is an affiliate, does not take a position on policy measures such as gun control, but "the fact that so many people now identify serious gun violence as proof of mental illness, without any further justification, and the media's over-reporting of

every possible link, has made the public and media reaction to gun violence the most significant current source of stigma against people with mental illness.” (Mental Health America’s *Position Statement on Violence: Community Mental Health Response*)

Mental Health America goes on to state that gun violence and the reaction to it threaten our national health and well-being, stigmatize people recovering from mental illnesses, and re-traumatize individuals, families and communities that have been victims of gun violence. Additionally, guns play a disproportionately large role in suicides—an issue of great concern to mental health advocates.

**Again, the truth is that less than 3 to 5 percent of crimes in the United States involved people with mental illness.** Researchers Jonathan Meltz and Kenneth McLeish of Vanderbilt University also found that the percentages of crimes that involve guns are lower than the national average for persons not diagnosed with mental illness.” (*Business Insider*, Grace Panetta, August 6, 2019) In addition to the Meltz and McLeish study, James Knoll and George D. Annas wrote, “mass shootings by people with serious mental illness represent less than 1% of all yearly gun-related homicides,” while “deaths by suicide using firearms account for the majority of yearly gun-related deaths.” (*Gun Violence and Mental Illness*, Knoll and Annas)

While we must have a conversation about mental health, it should be a conversation based in facts, one that “dispels myths, combats stigma, and promotes prevention, and recovery from, traumatic events.” (Mental Health America)

I believe that during these difficult times we should have a call to action. Local, state and federal policymakers should support the efforts of MHA and other mental health advocates to raise awareness about mental health, improve access to services and supports, including a prevention focus, to foster mental wellness and recovery in our communities.

#### **Mental Health America recommends that policymakers consider three proposals:**

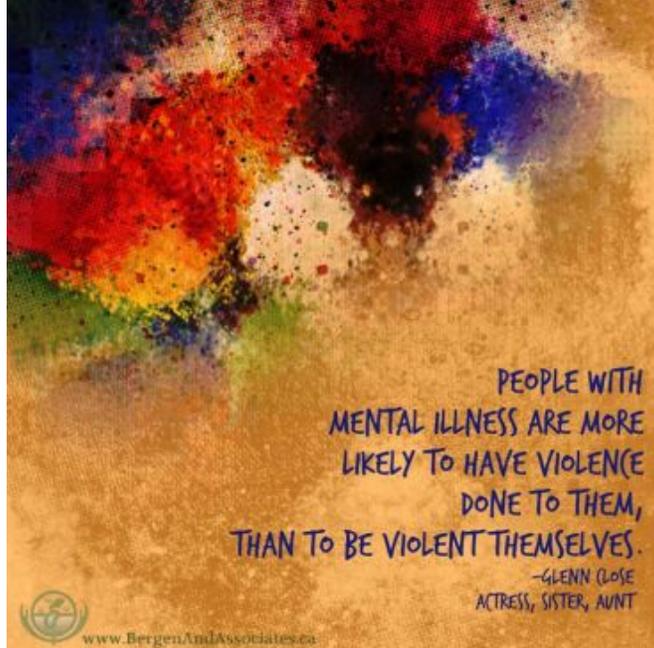
- **Provide training to gun shop employees to assist them in identifying persons whose sole intent in purchasing a weapon is to die by suicide. At least two-thirds of gun-related deaths are suicides. MHA of Central Carolinas is ready to provide training to Cabarrus and Mecklenburg County gun shop employees.**
- **Create a mechanism to allow persons with mental health conditions and violent ideation to voluntarily and temporarily surrender their right to purchase a firearm until such ideation is resolved. These proposals are based on research suggesting that almost half of persons identified as having a mental health condition would willingly do so.**
- **Enact “Gun Violence Restraining Order Legislation.” These laws avoid stigmatizing persons with mental illnesses because they are not focused on mental illness but on the risk of gun violence.**

When we use words like “monster”, “crazy”, “dangerous”, “violent”, to describe those with a mental illness, we increase the likelihood that people who have a mental health concern will not seek help due to fear of being stigmatized and labeled. **The words we use matter; the laws we enact matter; the resources we allocate to mental health matters.**

**Let’s look at the facts and have a healthy discussion about mental health, gun violence and how we can find common ground to stop these horrible acts from happening, while at the same time helping those who need our help.**

Join MHA of Central Carolinas at an upcoming Coffee & Conversation to have an open and nonjudgmental dialogue about mental health. Take a Mental Health First Aid course with MHA to learn more about various mental health diagnoses and how to help someone who may be in crisis. Sign up for a free 90-minute QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) Suicide Prevention class. We will eliminate the stigma and discrimination around mental health through education and awareness.

[Register here to take action.](#)



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Mental Health America of Central Carolinas promotes mental wellness through advocacy, prevention and education in Mecklenburg and Cabarrus Counties.



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