"Labeling the issue as only a mental health issue does disservice to the millions of Americans suffering in silence and isolation, who never have a violent thought."

What should we be talking about in the wake of yet another mass shooting in the U.S.? While it is a complicated and emotional issue with many sides, we must be careful in the words we choose when talking about gun violence and mental health.

Mental Health America’s CEO Paul Gionfriddo, states, “We can all agree that we need to keep weapons, including assault weapons, out of the hands of people who have thoughts of violence, whether or not they have mental illness. This should be the goal of public policy initiatives today and in the future.”

Since the shooting in Parkland, FL on February 14, we have heard the Broward County Mayor state that the shooter had shown signs of mental illness. President Donald Trump said he would help the nation deal with the issue of mental health, despite a 2019 budget proposal slashing funds to Medicaid, which accounted for a quarter of 2014’s mental health spending nationwide, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. House Speaker Paul Ryan also tied the issue to “mentally ill individuals slipping through the cracks and getting guns.” (MSN.com, Connecting Mental Illness and Mass Shooting Misses the Point, Experts Say).

Gionfriddo goes on to say, “Common sense is that background checks are appropriate for someone who wishes to purchase a gun. If someone has a history of violence, that person should not have access to weapons. The debate about weapons and violence is about that, and it cannot continue to be deflected toward a debate about mental health.”

Dr. Jonathan Metzl, Director of the Center for Medicine, Health and Society at Vanderbilt University said that these mass shootings highlight Americans’ desire to reaffirm a stigmatization of the mentally ill as “ticking time bombs” to avoid more difficult conversations about gun violence. Everytown for Gun Safety reports that 34 percent of mass shootings between January 2009 and December 2016 were committed by those considered to be “prohibited possessors.” In other words, “these were people who were unable to purchase a gun because of their age, criminal convictions, history of addiction, domestic abuse conviction or a person who has been admitted to a mental institution.” The American Psychiatric Association reports that less than one percent of firearm homicides are committed by persons diagnosed with a mental illness.
As the latest gun debate unfolds, it should be broader than just about mental health, although more resources and supports would be more than welcome. The conversation we are currently having, however, increases the stigma related to mental illness and deters people from seeking assistance. Mental health professionals say the administration and policymakers are ignoring the real issue—easy access to guns, including high-powered assault weapons used in many of the most recent mass shootings.

According to American Medical Association President David Barbe, “We are not talking about Second Amendment rights or restricting your ability to own a firearm. We are talking about a public health crisis that our Congress has failed to address. This must end.” He notes that better access to mental health care, including for those prone to violence, is important, but the blame for gun violence cannot be solely placed on mental illness. The vast majority of mentally ill people are not violent. “When you control for substance abuse, a factor that exacerbates violence in all populations, only about 4.3% of people with a ‘severe’ mental illness are likely to commit any sort of violence, according to a University of Chicago study. The violence rate among those with a "non-severe" mental illness is about equal to that of the "normal" population.” (Reason.com/blog/2018)

So, to get back to my question, “What should we be talking about in the wake of another mass shooting?” Let’s have an open and honest discussion about gun control and gun violence. Labeling the issue as only a mental health issue does disservice to the millions of Americans suffering in silence and isolation, who never have a violent thought. It also will keep those who are afraid to address their mental health challenges due to stigma in the shadows, unwilling to seek help.

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