

Gun Control and Mental Illness

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Short Communication

In order for it to be defensible to discriminate against persons with mental disorders in gun control legislation, two things would have to be true:

1. Mentally ill people would have to commit gun murders at a substantially higher rate than the general population.

2. There would have to be evidence that restriction of access to guns and/or treatment reduces the rate of gun violence in the mentally ill.

Neither of these requirements has ever been demonstrated to be true, therefore there are no legitimate grounds for restricting the civil rights of the mentally ill concerning guns. The existing evidence [1-3] indicates that: gun violence is at most only slightly increased in the seriously mentally ill; most, if not all, of this increase is due to comorbid substance abuse, not psychosis; and the percentage of total violent crime committed by the severely mentally ill is very small.

There would be a set of additional problems with any gun control programs that discriminated against persons with mental disorders:

1. It makes no sense to talk globally about the "mentally ill" in discussions of gun control. Mental disorders include adjustment disorders, bulimia, social phobia and sexual masochism. It would be absurd to discriminate against people who meet criteria for any of these disorders. Therefore a restricted list of DSM-5 disorders would have to be included in any gun legislation concerning the mentally ill.

2. Let's assume that schizophrenia was included in any gun control for the mentally ill, and then let's make the following assumptions: 1% of the population develops schizophrenia; most gun violence is perpetrated by males between 15 and 64; the population of the United States is 320 million; there are 160 million males in the US; there are 120 million males between 15 and 64. This means that there are 1.2 million males between 15 and 64 in the US who have or will develop schizophrenia. Let's assume that 10 of these individuals will become mass killers. This means that fewer than one out of 100,000 people in the target population will commit mass murder. In order for legislation restricting the gun rights of people with schizophrenia to have any effect on the rates of mass murder, it would be necessary to either: a) identify the one out of 100,000 individuals in advance, which is impossible, or b) restrict the rights of all individuals with schizophrenia.

3. If there were gun restrictions of any kind, whether they involved screening, training, or ownership of guns, only people with diagnosed

mental disorders would be affected. This means that people with diagnosed mental disorders would be discriminated against compared to people with undiagnosed mental disorders. This would be discriminatory and punitive towards people who sought treatment. Remedying this disparity would require conducting psychiatric evaluations of the entire citizenry.

4. Gun restrictions for people with mental disorders would increase the stigma of mental illness, but there would be no increase in safety for the general population, because of points 1-3 above, and because such a small percentage of violent crime is committed by the seriously mentally ill [1-3].

5. If it is politically acceptable to target the mentally ill for gun restrictions, then it should be acceptable to target other groups, however it is not. Why are the civil rights of the rest of society more deserving of protection than the civil rights of the mentally ill?

6. Gun control legislation for the mentally ill would generate liability for psychiatrists, who in fact have no demonstrated ability to predict or prevent gun violence. There would be liability both for failing to prevent gun violence and for improper discrimination against mentally ill non-offenders.

In my opinion, gun control programs for the mentally ill would impose a discriminatory burden on the mentally ill for no benefit to the general population. Mass murders by individuals with serious mental illness account for under 1% of the 12,000 gun murders in the United States per year. Political action to restrict the civil liberties of the mentally ill concerning guns [4] cannot possibly result in a statistically significant reduction in gun murders. The mentally ill may be an easy target for discrimination and restricting their rights may provide an illusion that something is being done to protect the public, but this is an illusion, not a fact.

References

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