Preventing Gun Violence

Psychology is instrumental in furthering our understanding of gun violence as well as supporting evidence-based programs and policies that can reduce the occurrence and impact of firearm-related violence in the United States. Gun violence takes different forms, including but not limited to suicide, intimate partner violence, unintentional deaths and injuries, violent criminal activity, violent acts during periods of intense emotional distress, and acts committed while under the influence of alcohol or drugs or experiencing symptoms of psychosis. Guns are the most commonly used weapon in both homicides and suicides. Framing the conversation about gun violence solely in the context of mental illness goes against current scientific evidence.

Our nation is facing a gun violence epidemic.
- In 2017, gun deaths reached a 40-year high, with nearly 40,000 deaths (CDC, 2019*).
- In the United States, about 12 people are killed with guns for every 100,000 US residents.
- The majority of gun fatalities in the U.S. are deaths by suicide (61%). Moreover, guns are used in just over half of the deaths by suicide in the U.S. (51%).

Mass shootings are the exception, not the norm.
A large majority of adults in the United States experience stress associated with mass shootings, and a third of U.S. adults say that fear of mass shootings stops them from going to certain places and events (APA, 2019).

While over 36,383 Americans are killed each year with guns (CDC, 2019), mass fatality incidents account for less than 1% of all gun-related deaths in the U.S. (Wintemute, 2017).

According to a report released by the FBI and the Secret Service in 2010, campus attacks are most often motivated by an intimate relationship (34%) and are rarely related to psychosis (8%) (Drysdale, D., Modzeleski, W., and Simons, A., 2010).

Mental illness by itself is not a predictor of firearm violence towards others.
Persons with mental illness account for a very small portion of gun violence (Steadman, Monahan, Pinals, Vesselinov, & Robbins, 2015) (Baumann & Teasdale, 2018).

Where there is gun violence, persons with serious mental illness are significantly more likely to be the victims of violence than to perpetrate it (Insel, 2011) (Baumann & Teasdale, 2018).

Individuals who have a serious mental illness and who do go on to commit gun violence typically often do so at the time of their first episode of psychosis—before they are likely to encounter a mental health professional or have a preexisting record of mental health concerns (Swanson, 2012).
APA Recommendations

**Work to reduce stigma of mental illness.** Stigma against people with mental health concerns not only prevents people from seeking treatment, it has also been shown to affect treatment adherence (Kamaradova, 2016). **Enact public education campaigns** and strongly discourage the use of inaccurate and harmful rhetoric that blames America’s gun violence problem solely on mental illness.

**Increase funding for gun violence prevention research at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to gather more evidence about the causes of gun violence.**

**Fund safe storage research opportunities and train mental health professionals on safe storage options.**

**Expands background checks to all gun sales.** APA urges Congress to pass bipartisan background checks to close loopholes in federal law and which will require a background check on every gun sale or transfer with carefully defined exceptions for gifts to family members, hunting, target shooting, and self-defense.

**Federally Fund Extreme Risk Protection Order Laws.** APA urges federal efforts to support states in the implementation of extreme risk protection laws. These laws, which have been shown to help prevent suicides (Kivisto, A., & Phalen, P., 2018), should focus on identifying specific high-risk behaviors instead of solely concentrating on an individual’s mental health diagnoses or behavioral history. These laws also can work to refer the respondents to services, supports and treatments.

**Provide funding and training for behavioral threat assessment programs.** Although there is no single way to predict or prevent gun violence, there have been promising results using behavioral threat assessment. This approach involves identifying those who have demonstrated some risk factors or intentions towards violence and intervening to reduce the risk of that individual (APA, 2013). Training school personnel in this method would likely prevent future targeted violence before it occurs.

**Increase collaboration across law enforcement, mental health professionals, schools, and communities.** Effective prevention and intervention rely on communities for healthy development of families and education, mental health professionals for direct services and preventative mental health counseling, and the criminal-legal system for appropriate intervention and resolution in crises.

References


