



# Violence and Mental Illness

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

We Americans pride ourselves on being independent and dedicated to our legal right to our own opinion. Many of us zealously hold on to our opinions, even when scientific data indicates that these opinions are inaccurate.

I believe that we are now facing that very situation with regard to mental illness and violence.

Research shows us that the incidence of violence committed by individuals who have a mental illness is about 4%, and that individuals with a mental illness commit about 2% of gun crimes in the U.S. When you take into account that about 5% of our population have a serious and persistent mental illness, it might actually look like mental illness reduces the likelihood of violence.

That's true, unless you happen to be in that population, since research also shows that individuals with severe and persistent mental illness are much more likely to be the victims of violence than people in the general population. The National Crime Victimization Survey followed over 900 individuals who had chronic and severe mental illness and found that they experience violence at a rate more than 11 times higher than the general population.

The fact remains that 96% of all violent crimes are committed by individuals who do not have a mental illness. So, why do we tend to look at mental illness as a primary factor in violence?

There are numerous studies that help to explain why so many of us think this way. A study that measured beliefs over a 46 year period from 1950 to 1996 found that "the proportion of Americans who describe mental illness in terms consistent with violent or dangerous behavior nearly doubled." This study also found that the vast majority of Americans believe that persons with mental illness pose a threat of violence toward others or themselves.

Why would so many Americans share such a common misconception? One reason might be what we see and hear on television. The federal government mental health research branch (SAMSHA) reported on a study funded by the Screen Actors' Guild which found that 60% of TV characters who were portrayed as having a mental illness were also portrayed as being involved in crime or violence. The study concluded that "characters in prime time television portrayed as having a mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups."

So TV programming promotes a negative image of mental illness.

SAMSHA also summarizes studies that show that most news stories on mental illness highlight the negative characteristics, with few positive stories that highlight recovery, or accomplishments of individuals with mental illness. On top of this, most media present individuals with mental illness in stereotypes, emphasizing behaviors and characteristics that are more atypical than typical, but make for more dramatic story-telling.

On the other hand, there are some findings suggesting that mental illness may be linked to mass killings. This is true of John Holmes, the shooter at the movie theater in Aurora, CO, and of Seung-Hui Cho who went on the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech. These are tragic events, and unfortunately even with the best mental health system and the best law enforcement system, they may still occur.

Other recent mass killings include the rampage by the ex-cop in California, Christopher Dorner, who attacked members of the police department and their families, and also the brothers Tsarnaev who set off bombs at the Boston Marathon and fought officers in gun battles. None of these three had a history of mental illness. Nor did the two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who went on a shooting spree at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado back in 1999.

Research does indicate that as many as half of our mass killings are committed by individuals with serious mental illness. But multiple homicides committed by individuals with mental illness account for about 80 deaths per year, which compares to the 13,000 to 14,000 gun homicides committed every year. This means that 80 lives have been lost, which feels intolerable and incomprehensible. But from a public-policy point of view, does it make sense to highlight mental illness as a primary cause of violence when mental illness appears to account for such a small percentage of gun violence?

While mental illness and violence do overlap, the overlap is small. Violence is a much bigger topic than mental illness. Focusing on mental illness can divert our attention from the broader issue of violence itself. By drawing attention to the 2% of individuals with mental illness who commit violent crimes with a gun, and then insisting that laws be passed to control these individuals, we lose sight of effective ways to deal with the lion's share of violent crimes that are committed.

But the truth remains that many Americans are fearful of people who have a mental illness. Too many of us incorrectly view individuals with serious mental illness to be dangerous, even though research says otherwise.

Think for a moment what this belief does to those who suffer mental illness. Most are friendly and caring individuals, completely non-violent toward others. Yet to know that others live in fear of them is quite a burden to bear.

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