

Gun Control and Mental Illness

The United States has reported substantially massive levels of gun violence compared to other countries. However, despite the popular misconceptions in the wake of gun violence and mass shootings, mental illness is usually a weaker risk factor for violence. Moreover, both proponents and opponents of gun control laws acknowledge that firearms should not get into the wrong hands or 'dangerous' people, including people with mental illness [Ahonen et al., 2019]. Several mass shootings cases that have occurred, for instance, in Colorado, and Tucson, appeared to be serious mental illnesses. Because of such cases, policymakers at the federal and state levels have developed proposals about various policies to help prevent individuals with mental illness from possessing firearms.

Gun control policies that restrict access to guns among individuals with serious mental illness have become more popular among the American public. The majority of Americans support these policies. Gun control policies are essential in reducing gun violence. Serious mental illness does not play a role in most gun violence cases [Philpott-Jones, 2018]. Although, gun control restrictions have negative consequences on persons with mental illness, such as increasing stigmatization, and have a negative impact on treatment seeking among people with mental illness. Increased Stigmatization and Negative Attitudes There is a complex relationship between serious mental illness and violence.

Moreover, there is little information about whether gun control laws and regulations focusing mainly on severe mental illness effectively minimize gun-related violence among this group. Negative attitudes towards individuals living with serious mental illness have become persistent and pervasive in the US because of the assumption that they are dangerous, hence resulting in the negative stereotype. Moreover, many experts assert that gun control laws are essential in reducing gun-related violence in case of severe mental illness. However, there is fear that gun control policies could result in unintended consequences for individuals with serious mental illnesses [Barry et al., 2019]. Thus, strict gun control policies could greatly exacerbate the perception in the public that individuals with mental illness are most likely to be violent. This will create negative attitudes towards persons living with serious mental illness.

Gun control policies that mainly focus on individuals with mental illness are not the most effective way of reducing or stopping gun-related violence. Instead, these policies cause prejudice and fear around individuals with serious mental illness: hence, they might avoid seeking mental health services. Therefore, it is important to dispel the myth that mental illness is the condition that makes one dangerous and likely to perpetrate violence toward other people. Severe mental illness is not a significant factor for or the predictor of violence against others [McGinty et al., 2018]. Instead, most individuals with mental illness rarely engage in violence against others. Most gun violence cases are often caused by factors other than severe mental illness.

Gun Control and Mental Illness Treatment Various authorities and policymakers have continually blamed mental illness in the wake of mass shooting cases and other gun-related crimes in the US. It leads to discrimination against millions of Americans who have mental illness. Having gun control restrictions and using terms like 'the dangerously mentally ill' is misleading, making it difficult for individuals with mental illness to seek medical attention due to fear of being discriminated against [Hirschtritt & Binder, 2018]. Mental illness should not be used to define individuals because nobody chooses whether or not they have mental illness. In addition, because of gun control laws, if healthcare providers can restrict the

rights of patients with guns, individuals living with serious mental illness are less likely to seek treatment.

Moreover, many Americans with mental illness do not get treatment which presents a significant public health problem. Several factors contribute to the lower treatment rates among individuals with serious mental illness. Mental health experts attribute this aspect to discrimination as the potentially significant barrier to seeking treatment. although other factors exist (Skeem & Mulvey. 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that people that often perceive strong negative public attitudes about mental illness always show poor adherence and retention to treatment [Skeem & Mulvey. 2020]. Thus, strict gun control laws could lead to a consistent deterrent to mental health treatment sought by individuals with serious mental illness.

In the US, several gun control and restriction policies about mental illness have been implemented in response to the recent increase in gun-related violence and other crimes. These policies pose a significant challenge by increasing stigmatization and negative attitudes about persons with mental illness and creating substantial impediments to their access to treatment and other vital services essential for recovery.

There is a need for the federal and state governments to develop measures that work towards ensuring that messaging and policy recommendations that do not create stigmatization or discrimination towards persons living with mental illness. Gun control laws should be based on facts. Our focus should be on the dangerous behaviors established so that gun-related crimes such as suicides and homicides can be reduced significantly.