

Editorial

Gun Violence Perpetuates Stigma Regarding Mental Illness

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How could it be that in the United States of America, during this twenty first century that an equal numbers of people are being killed as a result of gun violence as those dying in car accidents? The guns per capita in the US are 1:1-as many guns as there are people. This supersedes that of any other developed nation. With the gun prevalence has come unimaginable violence and tragedy. Mass shootings have become normative; we as a nation have become desensitized. It certainly does not seem civilized to allow such a trend to go largely unaddressed. Doesn't one have to ask oneself when exactly did the potential safety of one's own child become secondary to another's right to bear arms? With all due respect to the founding fathers of our nation, times have changed. Other parts of the Constitution have become outdated and required amendment, so why the second amendment is untouchable? Why is there so much resistance to putting down the arms? The rationale of self-defense cannot be supported by statistics. Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than people in other developed nations. A study published in the American Journal of Medicine concludes that guns are killing us, not protecting us (Grinshteyn, Erin et al., 2010). Staggering numbers of people are killed impulsively or accidentally by the guns found in their own homes. Does a person need an automatic weapon with hundreds of rounds of ammunition for the purpose of recreational deer or bear hunting? I think not. The issue of promoting public safety while maximizing second amendment rights is one that evokes strong feelings, much controversy, and little change.

What we are led to believe is that the perpetrators of such extreme gun violence must certainly be crazy. We are told that to fix the problem, we need to fix the mental health of our population. In reality, Adam Lanza and James Holmes do not reflect the behavior of the vast majority of those that suffer from mental health issues. In fact, the majority of chronically mentally ill persons do not commit violence against others. It is easier to comprehend a world afflicted with deranged violent mentally ill patients running amok than it is to comprehend the complex intertwined financial and political pillars which support the sale and possessions of weapons; the same weapons which are destroying individuals and families. Limiting the accessibility of guns would have the added benefit of reducing suicides and domestic violence.

Unfortunately, the portrayal of mental illness as the root cause of gun violence serves to mislead the American public and to further stigmatize those requiring mental health treatments. What happens in the process is that the real culprits remain inconspicuous; those with large profit margins in the gun industry, those with political clout. To challenge the gun industry is consistent with political suicide. Even those that recognize the need for governmental intervention are frustrated by the stalemate and political volley. President Obama, despite addressing the nation for the 14th time after a mass shooting, has been unable to effect a significant change.

The ANA has taken a strong stance in advocating for tighter gun control. As nurses, and educators we have a collective moral duty to respond and advocate accordingly. Mental health parity is desperately needed, but not because it will reduce gun violence against others or decrease mass shootings. For decades, those in need of mental health treatment have not been able to have adequate access to care because of misguided stigma, and lack of appropriate insurance coverage. Limiting access to automatic weapons and limiting the sale of inordinate quantities of ammunition will reduce the prevalence of gun violence. Expanded background checks and waiting lists for gun ownership should be universally applied. People with violent and/or criminal history should not be allowed to have access to gun purchase. How is it that a person on a terror watch list is legally able to apply for gun ownership and yet someone who has sought medical treatment for mental illness will be excluded? The answer to this question is that we negatively judge people seeking treatment for mental illness, rather than supporting their effort to seek voluntary treatment. The Newtown shooter and the Aurora Colorado movie theater shooter would not have been found on background checks because of they did not have a documented record of having been in treatment. Background checks may not reduce the number of violent acts committed by the undocumented mentally ill, but would serve to reduce the number of guns in the hands of those with a history of violence. The number one predictor of violence is a previous history of violence. This holds true for both people with mental illness and those that are not diagnosed with mental illness. Those that are committed against their will to psychiatric treatment should not be eligible for gun purchase. The often-touted notion that gun control will result in only criminals having guns is also misguided. Penalties need to be stiffer for those carrying guns illegally. The old adage of two wrongs don't make it right applies here. People possessing guns illegally do not warrant the justification of allowing more guns. The understanding of mental illness versus criminality is one that is often blurred and confusing. The issue of guns confounds it even more. The mentally ill population needs treatment, not penalty nor stigma. People evidencing violence need stronger legal intervention and less access to guns regardless of mental health history. As a nation, we need a better trust and reliance on law enforcement for defense and protection rather than fueling the idea that if everyone has a gun

everyone will be safe. More guns do not mean more safety or more self-protection just as mental illness does not mean more violence.

With the coming presidential election, it is time for U.S. citizens to seize the opportunity to exercise their legislative rights to create a safer society. Nurses and healthcare providers can lead through promoting education, public awareness, and advocacy for the

mentally ill. A fundamental role of government is to take the action necessary to protect its people. Expanding background checks and better methods of screening for a history of violence is warranted. Stronger penalties for weapons violations and violence are needed. Purchase of automatic weapons and large caches of ammunition need to be limited to the military and law enforcement.