



STATEMENT OF CHRISTINE MICHAELS

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

**ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS (NAMI) KEYSTONE
PENNSYLVANIA**

**REGARDING PA SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE HEARING ON
“MENTAL HEALTH AND GUN VIOLENCE”**

SEPTEMBER 24, 2019

9:00 A.M.

ROOM 1, NORTH OFFICE BUILDING

Chairperson Baker and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify at this important hearing on Mental Health and Gun Violence. My name is Christine Michaels and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the state organization for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania.

NAMI is the largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives of the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. There are 31 affiliates in Pennsylvania with over 1,000 members engaging in support, education and advocacy on mental health issues. Our members are primarily people who live with mental illness, families, mental health professionals and advocates.

Headlines shape the public's perception. With the Texas and Ohio shootings, the mass shooters were referred to as "mentally ill monsters". Another headline was "mental illness and hatred pulls the trigger" in mass shootings. Shamus (2019, August). Perceptions become distorted and events that represent small percentages become exaggerated inflated truths in the public's mind.

In March 2019, Elizabeth Van Brocklin wrote, "roughly half the American public believes that mental health problems are chiefly to blame for shootings." Last week a NAMI mother, hurt and angry, read to me from an online article after the Texas and Ohio shootings that now "83% of Americans believe mental illness is the cause of mass gun violence in our country."

Blaming mass violence on mental illness does tremendous harm to the 44 million mentally ill adults in the United States who in any given year suffer from a mental illness and the 10 million adults who have a serious mental illness such as major depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Among other things, deceptively linking mental illness and violence perpetuates the stigma associated with mental illness. The Research Lab; the Fundamentals. (2018, April).

Factually, the contribution of mental illness to overall violence in the U.S. is very small, only 4%. The contribution of mental illness to overall gun violence in the U.S. is even smaller, 2%.

Generally a diagnosis of serious mental illness does not increase the risk of violence. Most people with mental illness will never become violent and most gun violence is not caused by mental illness. Unfairly blaming mental illness or individuals who are living with a mental illness for mass shootings is stigmatizing to those receiving treatment and those who need to seek treatment. One in five American adults experience a mental illness but only 43% of them accessed care in the last year.

The misperception created in the media increases stigma and discrimination. Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders – especially severe disorders such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care. People with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment. Reinhard, J.S. (2014).

People with mental illness are more likely to be the victims of violence not the perpetrators of violence. People diagnosed with schizophrenia have victimization rates 65% to 130% higher than those of the general public. (Metzl, J.M., MacLeish, K.T. (2015)

When we irresponsibly conclude that mental illness is the cause of mass shootings, we fail to consider the actual causes. The Research Lab; the Fundamentals (2018, April). Arthur Evans, the CEO of the American Psychological Association, the largest professional and scientific organization of psychologists in the United States said it's important for people to understand that there is a fairly weak link between mental illness and mass shootings. "The biggest predictor of who is going to commit these crimes is violence, a history of past violence," said Evans. Shamus K.J. (2019, August).

Risk factors for violence include:

- A history of violence; the strongest predictor
- A history of physical or sexual abuse, particularly in childhood

- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Alcohol abuse is a major predictor of gun crime. Van Brocklin, E. (2019, March).
- Domestic violence; particularly with a firearm
- Delusions and Paranoia, sometimes characteristics of psychosis. People experiencing first episodes of psychosis may particularly be at risk. However, it should be noted that most people experiencing these symptoms will not act violently toward others.
- Hostility can signify mental illness but may also be just a personality trait.
- Past suicide attempts. In 2016, suicides were the 10th leading cause of death for all Americans and the 11th leading cause of death in Pennsylvania. It is the 2nd leading cause of death for ages 15-34 and 4th for ages 35-54. On average, one person dies by suicide every four hours in the state. In Pennsylvania, 60.7% of firearm deaths in 2017 were ruled as suicides.

Research on the relationship between mental illness and violence shows that there are certain factors that may increase the risk of violence among a small number of individuals with mental illness. We recognize that acts of violence by people with mental illness are usually the result of lack of mental health services and a previously cited risk factor. Also there may have been some negative life experiences: school failure; job loss; divorce; or law enforcement encounters.

A comprehensive mental health system should include:

- Early intervention and screening
- Appropriate treatment and support
- Integrated treatment when there is co-occurring substance abuse
- Family education and support
- Crisis education:

When gun violence occurs it has a tremendous impact on our community. The trauma permeates every corner of our community including families and friends of victims, survivors,

parents, children, first responders, law enforcement – the mental health of our whole community is shaken. The trauma of gun violence, whether it is a mass shooting or a local homicide or suicide, increases the need for mental health services. No part of the community is left untouched. Going forward, it is vital to recognize that the vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent.

Currently a common sense approach to ending gun violence allows for the removal of guns from people who may pose a risk of violence to themselves or others. Extreme Risk Protection Orders (EPPO) or “Red Flag” laws are authorized at the state level. These laws provide for case by case determinations of potential dangerousness to self or others and include due process protections to ensure that civil rights are protected. Most importantly, they are not focused on mental illness but rather the assessment of potential dangerousness to self or others. NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania supports PA HB1075.

References

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