

Public Support for Gun Violence Prevention

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Horrific reports of mass shootings are becoming part of the weekly news, and are leaving our nation terrorized. Settings previously considered safe, such as schools, churches, medical centers and shopping centers are now associated with fear. Parents are fearful of sending their children to school with reminders of unthinkable attacks such as in Nashville, TN on March 27. Gun violence compromises our freedom to participate peacefully in events, both routine and celebratory, and the United States struggles to find answers to prevent these events. Following every mass shooting there are calls to “fix” the mental health problems in the country.

Associating mass shootings with mental illness diverts attention from the actual source of the problem: rampant and out of control access to guns and gun violence. Mental illness serves as an easy target, and clearly has been the target of fear, bias, and misunderstanding throughout history. Yet, associating mental illness with violence further stigmatizes and scapegoats people with mental health problems and doesn't address the real problem. In addition, blaming gun violence on mental illness is also inaccurate. While mental health problems are common across the world, no other country is facing the level of gun violence as the US. According to CNN (2023), there have been 16 shootings this year of children in grades K-12. Gun violence now surpasses car accidents as the No. 1 killer of children and adolescents. Although the United States makes up less than 5% of the world's population, it is home to 31% of all mass shooters globally. This difference is not explained by the rate of mental illness in the U.S.

The overwhelming majority of people with mental illness are not violent, and research has shown the only single characteristic that reliably predicts who will resort to gun violence is past history of violence (NAMI, 2022). We welcome efforts to improve our country's mental health services, and recognize that there should be improved access and parity for mental health services. But, this is only

part of the solution. An analysis of crime in select U.S. cities suggests that high-capacity magazine firearms and assault weapons are involved in a high percentage (20 to 40 percent) of violent gun crimes (Koper et al., 2018). Assault weapons and high-capacity magazines are used disproportionately in mass public shootings and killings of law enforcement officers compared with murders overall (RAND, 2023). Assault rifles and other weapons of war have no place in civilian society. The problem of gun violence in the U.S. will never be solved by focusing on mental health problems, but will be mitigated with sensible gun policies.

The vast majority of Americans support policies that will remove guns from potential perpetrators and save lives, for example 81% are in favor of expanded background checks (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2021), and 78.9% support gun-violence restraining orders (Barry et al., 2018). Recent evidence indicates that bans on the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines will reduce mass shootings, and as of January 1, 2021, seven states and the District of Columbia ban assault weapons (Rand, 2023).

We recommend that policymakers pursue measures designed to prevent access to firearms among people at risk of shooting others. Efforts such as the March 14, 2023 Executive Order by President Biden that calls for stronger firearm background checks, enhanced 'red flag' laws, safe firearm storage, and support for provisions contained in the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act can begin to address this. In the meantime, nurses speak for containment laws to stop gun violence.

International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

In thankful collaboration with the ISPN Policy Committee

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