

# Can Mental Health Services Prevent Mass Homicide?

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# Acknowledgments

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# Haiku

Ignorance is bliss?

Nope. It is just ignorant.

Only bliss is bliss.

- Joel Dvoskin

# Simple Truths

- There are 300,000,000 guns in the US
- There will always be a lot of guns
- There is no inherent conflict between the second Amendment and reducing gun violence (Heller)
- We can't predict mass shooters
- More stigma will not help

# Perspectives on Gun Violence

- Mass homicides versus individual homicides
- Mass shootings account for <1% of gun deaths
- Prohibitions against gun-related research are an abomination, but...
- ...Research must be even-handed and respectful of privacy rights
- Public policy and willful ignorance
- National Violent Death Reporting System must be expanded nationwide

# The Real Dangers of Gun Violence

- Handguns or Long Guns?
- Homicide or Suicide?
  - Suicides account for 61% of US gun fatalities (approx. 19,000 versus 11,000 in 2010)
  - 8 of 10 suicide attempts by firearm succeed
- “The Mentally Ill” or People in Crisis?
- Mental illness versus Intoxication?

# Mass Homicide

(Report by Mother Jones)

- Since 1982, there have been at least 62 mass shootings across the country in 30 states from Massachusetts to Hawaii.
- Twenty-five of these mass shootings have occurred since 2006.
- Seven of them took place in 2012.
- Of the 143 guns possessed by the killers, more than three quarters were obtained legally.

# 29 “Random” Massacres

as of March 2013

- 15 committed suicide
- 3 killed by police
- 5 were convicted
- 2 defendants were found unfit to proceed
- 2 cases pending

# Mental Illness and Violence

- “You’ d have to be ‘crazy’ to do something like that, right?”
- So, obviously.....

But not so fast.

# The Truth about Violence and Mental Illness (Swanson et al)

- An impressive body of scientific research shows incontrovertibly that the vast majority of people with mental illnesses never act violently.
- Only a very small proportion of violence is attributable to people with mental illnesses.

# What Does the Data Say?

- If mental illness were completely eliminated as a violence risk factor, the population prevalence of violent acts toward others would go down by...wait for it...

4 %

# Why a National MI Database Won't Work (Sanger-Katz)

- Psychiatric professionals are not good at identifying people who will go on to commit acts of violence.
- Many perpetrators of mass shootings had no contact with the mental-health system.
- Treatment for mental illness is not always effective in preventing violent acts.
- Among people with schizophrenia, a disease with the highest rates of violent behavior, only one person in 140,000 will kill a stranger.

# The Truth about Violence and Mental Illness (Swanson et al)

- Assembling a national database on people who seek treatment would violate their confidentiality and stigmatize their conditions...
- ...thereby discouraging them from seeking treatment in the first place.

# Identifying Risk

- It appears risk for violence in psychotic illnesses is highest early in the course of illness, frequently before people are identified as mentally ill and receive treatment.” - Paul Appelbaum, MD

# A Brief Aside: My Tirade against the Media

- Saturation publicity of mass homicide creates a market for mass murder. (Park Dietz, Marilyn Manson)
- An easy, predictable way to become famous, intriguing, fascinating, and to matter.
- “Consider me.”

"From Jesse James to Charles Manson, the media since their inception, have turned criminals into folk heroes. They just created two new ones when they plastered those dipshits Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' pictures on the front of every newspaper. Don't be surprised if every kid who gets pushed around has two new idols."

- MARILYN MANSON

# Mass Murder Sells!

- “Watch OUR coverage of the Newtown Massacre at eleven!” (or why I hope there really is a Saint Peter.)
- Rampant, uninformed speculation sells advertising...
- ...and encourages the next killer.



**TRAGEDY**  
at Sandy  
Hook

# On Vividness

- Vividness sells air time, and makes mediocre journalists rich and famous
- Perlin: The vividness heuristic
- People overgeneralize from vivid events

# Is Change Possible?

- Example: Baseball streakers
- Example: Vienna suicides
  - (Etzersdorfer and Gernot)
  - Change in media practices reduced subway suicides by 80%
- Example: The names of rape victims
- If they all do it, it won't cost them any money.

# Why Can't We Just Profile the High Risk People?

- Common Traits
  - Anger/Rage
  - Depression/ Despair
  - Social Awkwardness
  - Social Disconnectedness
  - Feelings of Profound Insignificance

(i.e., the millions of people who comprise the target demographic of cable news)

# Profiles are Stupid

- All of these are non-specific indicators.
- Millions of people have these characteristics.
- Almost none will commit a massacre.
- Most are unknown to MH services.
- Profiles and stereotypes are blinders that impair our ability to accurately assess risk.

# Identifying “The Mentally Ill”

- Prevalence rates of MI as high as 25%
- I assume they mean, “People who are worse off than me.”
- Do they mean psychotic disorders?
- Would most of these killers have been on any such list?

# Is There Nothing to be Done?

- Just because a task is difficult is no excuse to stop trying.
- It is impossible to predict who will commit acts of mass homicide, but....
- ...it is easy to identify people who are in crisis.

# A Different Way to Understand Mass Homicide

- Every single one of these people has decided to end his or her life as they know it:
  - Suicide
  - Suicide by cop
  - Capital punishment
  - A lifetime in prison or hospital

# Suicide

- So far, we have been very poor at predicting and preventing mass homicide.
- Suicidality appears to be an essential component of mass homicide.
- We know how to prevent suicide... we just don't do it.

# The Ten Commonalities of Suicide

(Schneidman 1985)

- 1. The common purpose is to seek a solution.**
2. The common goal is the cessation of consciousness.
3. The common stimulus is intolerable psychological pain.
4. The common stressor is frustrated psychological needs.
5. The common emotion is hopelessness/helplessness.

# The Ten Commonalities of Suicide

(Schneidman 1985, cont.)

- 6. The common cognitive state is ambivalence.**
7. The common perceptual state is constriction.
8. The common action is egression.
9. The common interpersonal act is communication of intention.
10. The common consistency is in lifelong coping patterns.

# The Decimation of Public Mental Health in the US

- During the past 12 years, the public mental health system has been decimated by budget cuts.
- Drastic reductions in timely and competent response to crisis
- MH and police collaboration

# Results

- Even though we know how to prevent suicide...
- ...suicide rates in the US have not dropped...
- ...except in jails.

# So Why Treat People in Emotional Crisis?

- People who feel sad, angry, disconnected, and insignificant probably won't kill a bunch of strangers.
- But they might commit suicide, or become addicted, or end up in jail.
- It's impossible to identify mass murderers in advance.....**but**

# What We Can Do

...it's easy to identify people in crisis.

- You help people in despair because they need help.
- If you do it often enough, you'll prevent tragedies...
- ...but you'll never know it.

# One Absolutely Correct Response to Sandy Hook

- Restore the ability of the public mental health and public safety systems to respond to crises in a competent and timely manner.
- When help is easily obtained and user-friendly, perhaps the next would-be assassin will decide that there is another, better way to end their psychological pain.
- We will have prevented a tragedy...*but we will never know it.*

# One Way To Help

- Allow law enforcement and family members to petition a court to authorize seizure of firearms and issue a temporary prohibition on the purchase and possession of firearms based on a specific, substantiated threat of physical harm to self or others.

# Closing Haiku

Helping people cope  
Will prevent lethal violence  
We just won't know it

- Joel Dvoskin