

**AGENDA ITEM: Gun Violence & Mental Illness – Separating Fact From Fiction**

**ENCLOSURES:** *Wrong Target: Mental Health In the Gun Safety Debate* - The Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 4/17/13  
*The Gift Horse of Mental Health Funding* – Kenneth J. Dudek, Huffington Post; 5/2/2013  
*The Relationship between the Availability of Psychiatric Hospital Beds, Murders Involving Firearms, and Incarceration Rates* - Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 1/15/13

**OTHER MATERIAL RELATED TO ITEM:**

*The Geography of Gun Deaths* - Richard Florida, The Atlantic, 2011  
*Gun Deaths Shaped by Race in America* – Dan Keating, The Washington Post, 3/22/13  
*In Gun Debate, a Misguided Focus on Mental Illness*, Richard A. Friedman, MD

**ISSUE:**

*“Discussing mental health funding in the context of gun violence legislation erroneously transforms a public health issue into a public safety issue. Once again, people with serious mental illness get the blame.”* Kenneth J. Dudek

In this latest round of unprecedented violence and loss of life in public places, the debate and rhetoric on gun control has centered on mental illness. While the public has demanded tougher restrictions on access to guns, particularly automatic weapons, the lobbyists for gun manufacturers and owners have responded that the fault lies not with unfettered access, but with insufficient screening for the mentally ill. Yet, in the same breath, the lobbyists argue that increased screening will only punish “legitimate” gun owners and not screen out the mentally ill, who are already legally prohibited from obtaining weapons.

Their unifying statement is that increased access to mental health services is really needed, creating a tacit agreement that it is, in fact, mentally ill populations at the root of the problem of gun violence. Major mental health program funding is proposed and passed, but *“The financial benefit the mental health community may receive is more than offset by its cost, i.e., reinforcing the connection between violence and mental illness in the public perception.”*(Dudek, attached).

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law argues that violence cannot be predicted, but that risk factors for serious violence tend to be consistent – *“having less than a high school education, history of violence, juvenile detention, perception of hidden threats from others, and being divorced or separated in the past year. Given these facts, it is disturbing that we continue to pretend that people with psychiatric disabilities are the primary concern”*(*Wrong Focus...* attached). They also challenge the statements of Treatment Advocacy Coalition and others that the cause of increased violence is due to the loss of psychiatric hospital

beds by demonstrating, state by state, that the number of beds has no correlation to violence or imprisonment. The study concluded that “*Low per capita numbers of public psychiatric hospital beds in states were not associated with higher rates of murder by firearms, and states with relatively greater numbers of beds were not associated with lower firearm murder rates.*” (*The Relationship....* attached).

So, what is true? Are the major perpetrators of gun violence mentally ill? Is gun control even effective at ending violence? What are the facts? Here are a few:

- Suicides exceed homicide by nearly two to one – most often males between 16 and 35.
- The majority of suicides by gun are by white people, mostly men
- Of the approximately 55,000 violent deaths in the US annually, 38,000 are through suicide and guns are used, on average, 50% of the time.
- States with the most lenient gun laws have the highest suicide rates (Wyoming has the highest suicide rate, and guns are used 75% of the time).
- Substance Use Disorder is a stronger indicator for potential gun violence than mental illness. When shootings involve mentally ill people, illegal substances are often a factor.
- People living with mental illness are more often the victims of violence, not the perpetrators.
- If violence occurs, it is usually somebody they know and personal, not a public setting with strangers, and it usually occurs as a defensive response to a perceived threat, not a random act.