



## News & Politics

### Mass Shootings vs. Mental Health: Rhetoric, Debate, and Why We Need to Fix it

Think back to the first time you heard about a mass shooting, whether it was through the news, social media, or word of mouth. Was it Columbine High School? Sandy Hook Elementary School? This was the start of what would become an epidemic in the news and in our hometowns, my own included, totaling to 1,960 shootings throughout the United States since 2012.

As we approach the first anniversary of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, FL, it's important to take a step back and review the debate around these shootings. Especially as many newspapers, magazines, television channels, and media will be covering the one year to bring up a continuous battle.

Since the Parkland, FL shooting, there have been 350 mass shootings—almost one each day. As most of these shootings are shown on the news, looking possibly as prevalent as it is, it sends readers into a panic. People all over the United States are searching for an explanation and a way to fix it since, as humans, we try to attribute a cause to an effect—and this is a big one. Naturally, not everyone is in agreement, with diverging ideas of what is bringing

about mass shootings. For the most part, there are two main ideas of what evokes these mass shootings: mental illness and lack of gun control. An alternate approach is to take a stand somewhere between the two. Generally, this correlates to political parties: those who skew liberal feel that gun laws should be increased while those who skew conservative don't feel that guns are the issue but people with mental illnesses. When reading articles written by someone with a liberal or conservative opinion, there tends to be a theme to how it's written.



### **Some background on gun violence and mental illness in the United States:**

When compared to other countries, the U.S.'s gun laws are far less strict than many places in the world, which has led to higher gun violence and increased access to guns. In most states, people are able to purchase one in under an hour, after passing a background check for abuse, criminal record, and mental illness—although it often goes undocumented. Part of these lax gun laws could have something to do with the Second Amendment that gives the right to bear arms.

People who are in favor of owning guns refer back to their Second Amendment right to bear arms as an argument against gun control. This isn't a new battle, though—gun laws have been edited since the 1930s, starting with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a tax on firearms. This continues with the Federal Firearms Act, the Gun Control Act, the Firearm Owner Protection Act, the Brady

Handgun Violence Prevention Act, and the list goes on. Despite these, it is still easy to purchase a gun, even for those who may be mentally ill.

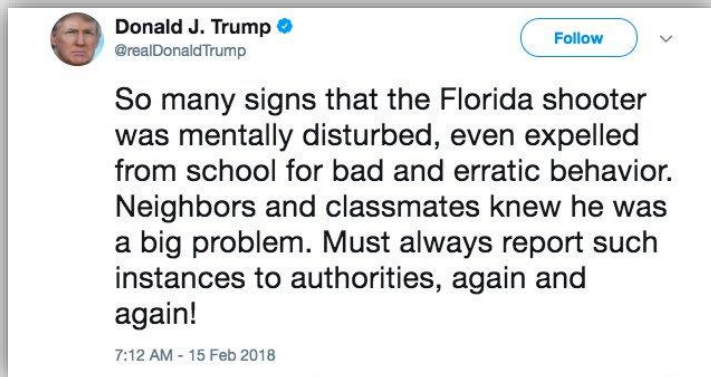
Mental illness, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior. It's more common than some may realize, with about 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. affected by it, ranging from mild to severe and everything in between. Most people with mental health problems do live normal, functioning lives but there is a percentage that is unable to and tends to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. The United States has come a long way in terms of how we portray and treat mental health. In the late 1700s, mental illness was treated with extremely unethical and painful treatments. Some included shocking, bleeding, and cold baths. The DSM-5 continues to update disorders and accept new things as standard, for example, homosexuality. Mental health is now taken seriously and ethically by psychiatrists and psychologists in the United States.

### **Gun Control vs. Mental Illness**

"It's a mental health problem, he was a very sick puppy" was President Donald Trump's response to the Thousand Oaks, California shooter Ian David Long. He similarly said it "isn't a gun's situation, a mental health problem at the highest level" regarding a shooting in Texas. Many Republicans like President Trump believe that to put an end to mass shootings, there needs to control over mental health, not guns. He has publicly announced many times that he will work "to help secure our schools, and tackle the difficult issue of mental health." He doesn't mention guns in any responses to these shootings, ultimately putting

the source on mental health. By the way he speaks on the topic, he wants to convince his listeners that this is truly a mental health problem and that it needs to be fixed. By acting like he is sure of this, it may convince readers and listeners as well.

This is the conservative side in the gun control versus mental health debate, which supports the idea of mental health being a problem and guns being a right. Trump is a firm believer in this side, using many logical fallacies, appealing to the credibility of the Second Amendment, and applying facts



about shooters. This appeal is also known as ethos, meaning it appeals to the ethics of a situation.

The National Rifle Association posts a plethora of articles with similar concepts to Trump's, arguing against

increased gun control. They need to convince their readers of ethics because their business relies on it. By convincing readers that gun control is wrong and against a citizen's rights, they are convincing the reader of an unfair situation. They state that it will take away rights of law abiding, gun owning citizens and will not help with mass shootings. Although they make this claim, the NRA doesn't seem to back it up with much besides pathos, meaning appealing to an emotion. By telling the reader that this law is going to hurt people who are minding their own business, they are attempting to provoke a reaction. The NRA talks about universal gun laws being ineffective, referring to it as a trap. At the

bottom of their website, you see a red "donate" button and a "take action" button with a blurb about opposing universal gun laws. This is also a form of persuasion, since the buttons pop out to you, saying that gun control laws need to be stopped.

Articles are written by the conservative party often have similar persuasion and arguments. They often discuss the evidence that half of the mass shooters have mental illnesses, saying it needs to be fixed. While this may be true, they don't mention gun control, and on the contrary, they say that universal gun laws take away from rightful gun owners. In the NRA's article titled "Congress to Take Up Gun Control Next Week," they persuade readers by taking on a victim like a role and using words and quotations marks that doubt credibility. They also call things out as lies. Here is an example:



"so-called "universal" background checks claim that this legislation is the "most important" thing that can be done to stop dangerous people from obtaining firearms. This is a lie. There is no evidence that expanded background checks are useful for this purpose." (NRA)

The National Review similarly responds to gun laws saying, "For all the talk of 'moderate' and 'common-sense' reforms, plausible regulatory approaches to preventing such acts of mass violence are few and far between, the prohibition of most small arms and the seizure of millions of firearms already in private hands might be a lot of things, but it is not 'moderate' or 'common sense.' It would be

a radical step, and one that almost certainly would be found to be unconstitutional." (The Editors, National Review)

On the other hand, the more liberal opinion on how to stop mass shootings is not to blame mental illness but to increase gun control. There is evidence showing how many guns are in the U.S. and how simple it is to purchase a gun. Articles are straightforward, clearly stating that blaming mental illness is wrong and amplifying how many guns are in the United States compared to other countries. Many writers title their article with a very blunt message, for example, an opinion piece in The Washington Post is titled "The NRA wants us to talk about mental health over guns. Here's why it's wrong.". News sources like Mother Jones often use the victims and families, their quotes, photos, interviews, etc., as examples and evidence of why we need gun control. For example, the figure to the right is a clip of Susan, the mother of a victim from the Thousand Oaks, CA shooting. She is speaking about not wanting prayers but change. Also, the caption on the left figure appeals to emotions as well with their caption, "This is the real, raw, brutal effect of gun violence. Not a statistic, not a political campaign, but a parent losing their child." (Greg Hogben) By including clips of victims and their loved ones, it appeals to an emotional side, or pathos. These innocent people suffer from shootings. Others use hard proof, or ethos, like psychiatrist Noam Shpancer



Ph.D., to say it's not mental health, as he writes in his Psychology Today article, "Improved Mental Health Care Won't Prevent Mass Shootings". His article is well-organized to go through each reason mental health is not the problem in mass shootings. Part of his pathos is his knowledge and profession within mental health. He quotes near the middle:

"Mass shooters tend to see the problem as residing in others, not in themselves. Thus, they are unlikely to trust a therapist who insists on self-reflection and unlikely to confess to their true plans and fantasies. Mass shootings are not spontaneous spasms of rage or lunacy...For those who plan to carry out mass murder, staying off the mental health system radar, refusing help, and denying illness are bound to be preferred strategies." (Schpancer, Psychology Today)

Though liberal articles often use more facts and emotions in their persuasion, many times they keep quiet or try not to mention mental health problems in gunmen, when 59% of mass shootings are done by

mentally ill people. They can avoid this statistic to focus in on gun control and say mental illness is not a factor.

Besides these two sides, some reporters express that it's both. In an article by the Houston Chronicle, titled "Mass shootings: It's not guns. It's not mental health. It's both. [Editorial]". They go on to explain that we shouldn't pick a right and wrong idea but fix it by saying it could be both. A quote by the editorial states:



"There should be no competition over which problem deserves more attention. They both should be addressed more directly and comprehensively than they have been. Everyone should be tired of politicians offering thoughts, prayers and study commissions after mass shootings, but little else." (Editorial, Houston Chronicle)

Others report without giving an opinion, simply to express what is happening with mass shootings. The LA Times reported that the new Governor of California is implementing gun laws right away while ABC News and Kaiser Health wrote an article providing evidence of a "murky reality" between guns and mental health.

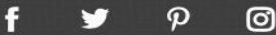
### **What's Your Take?**

So, overall, gun control and mental health is a big debate, something very prevalent in society, and quite scary. The number of shootings that have happened thus far is high. By having an extensive knowledge on this, we can stop the pattern: report, debate, silence. There may not be a right or wrong answer to the debate, but people are continually becoming victims of shootings and there has to be a stop to it. You, young readers, now have the information to choose a side and make a change (but remember the persuasion used).

I have shown both sides of the argument and the murky middle ground. With the energy going into debate and persuasion to join a side, maybe we could find a way to stop these shootings from happening instead.



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