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Gun Violence: Is Mental Illness Really the Issue?

Abstract

As the cases of gun violence are continuously increasing in America, so are the number of assumptions that the incident was caused by a mental illness. Whenever there is a mass shooting, the media is quick to diagnose the shooter with a mental illness, without having the credentials to do so. Previous research has found that stories of mass shootings and incidents of gun violence increase negative attitudes towards people with a serious mental illness (SMI), and an increase in support for gun restrictions for this specific population. This paper uses past research on gun violence beliefs to help answer the question of whether mental illness causes gun violence. It evaluates what the media believes to be causes of gun violence and explores the factors that actually lead to gun violence. Despite what the media portrays, the causes of gun violence are multifactorial. It is not impossible that SMI may contribute, however, it is not a leading cause and there are other factors that more directly influence the prevalence of gun violence.

Gun Violence: Is Mental Illness Really The Issue?

Gun Violence in America

On what was supposed to be a regular school day in 2012, Sandy Hook Elementary School experienced the unimaginable. Adam Lanza, twenty-year-old alumnus of the school, entered the building carrying a semi-automatic rifle and two semi-automatic pistols. He went into classrooms and began gunning down students and employees, leaving twenty innocent first graders and six staff members dead before turning the gun on himself and taking his own life. After the incident, it was found that he also shot and killed his mother and grandmother the same morning of the attack (History.com, 2019). Upon investigating the shooter and the motives behind the incident, attorneys and news coverage reports noted that he had been struggling with significant mental health issues. However, mental health professionals who had worked with him personally confessed never having seen anything that would have predicted this behavior (History.com, 2019). This whole incident and the fact that there is evidence to suggest the shooter's mental health was not a cause for his act, supports the idea that mental illness may not be the cause of gun violence after all, despite what the media portrays.

When referring to incidents of gun violence, it is impossible to ignore the way perpetrators get displayed in the media. Whenever there is a mass shooting or major gun violence incident, the actions of the shooter are almost always explained by a mental illness they supposedly have, even if there is no actual diagnosis to back up the argument. As shown in the Sandy Hook case, Adam Lanza was said to have a mental illness, despite mental health professionals, who personally worked with him, stating otherwise. However, the public continues to

believe this shooting was driven by mental illness. This brings to the light the issue that the media is the one diagnosing these individuals with a mental illness, without having the credentials to do so. If there is going to be an argument that perpetrators have a mental illness, it should be made by certified mental health professionals and not the unqualified media. The fact that this happens in society shows how the idea that mental illness causes gun violence is mostly driven by what the media broadcasts.

Nature or Nurture?

A majority of the news reports and media coverage that exist about this shooting have discussed looking deeper into the life of Adam Lanza in hopes of finding evidence that can explain what led him to this violent behavior. This includes tracing back to the moment he was born, taking a deeper look at how he was raised, major events that occurred, etc., and anything that could provide a possible explanation as to why he did what he did that day. This case is a great example of how the classic debate of nature versus nurture fits into this issue of mental illness and gun violence because it can help provide an explanation for whether it is nature or nurture that drives individuals to commit these violent acts.

In psychology, there are many classic debates which help answer major controversies, such as whether mental illness causes gun violence. Thinking about how mental illness correlates to gun violence in terms of nature versus nurture can help one further analyze this controversy and think about the issue in greater depth. The debate of nature versus nurture looks into whether one's personal characteristics are derived from their innate biological factors or their personal life experiences and environment

which shape them into who they are. Keeping the nature versus nurture debate in the back of one's mind when analyzing whether mental illness is the cause of gun violence can help one determine whether it is biological factors or one's environment that lead people to become perpetrators. Is it really mental illness that causes gun violence, or are there other factors which come into play that explain the motive behind what leads individuals to commit these violent acts? This paper will explore the controversy by evaluating research, primary sources, news coverage, and more to determine whether mental illness plays as great of a role as some may think.

The Media's Impact

Many people have created the belief that mental illness causes gun violence because of what they see in the media. Oftentimes, society labels people with a mental illness as being dangerous just because of how the media frames these individuals. One study wanted to test the effects news media messages have on attitudes towards people with a mental illness and how that also affects support for gun control policies. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups who read different news stories. These stories described a mass shooting done by someone with a mental illness, that same shooting with a proposal for gun restrictions against this population, and the same shooting again with a proposal to ban large-capacity magazines (McGinty et al., 2013). After reading the stories, they answered questions about their attitudes towards people with mental illnesses, support for gun restrictions for these individuals, and support for a ban on large-capacity magazines. A no-exposure control group also participated who did not read any news stories (McGinty et al., 2013). Results found that the story about a mass shooting

did increase negative attitudes towards people with a mental illness, and increased support for gun restrictions for these individuals as well (McGinty et al., 2013). This study was very helpful in showing how the media's framing plays such a major role in the belief that mental illness causes gun violence. This whole study supports the idea that the media is clearly responsible for implementing the belief that most perpetrators have a mental illness, without any evidence to actually back that claim up.

Along with assuming every mass shooter is diagnosed with a mental illness, the media also influences beliefs about gun violence depending on the race of the shooter. The news and media often portray the motives behind gun violence differently based on the shooter's race. Often, White shooters get labeled as mentally ill while Blacks are assumed to be violent by nature. One study further exploring this investigates whether race affects how the media frames the causes of mass violence, how blame is assigned to perpetrators in media coverage of mass violence, and what narratives cause this blaming (Duxbury et al., 2018). The goal is to see whether the causes of gun violence get framed differently for different races. Data were examined from various news documents that covered a number of mass shootings between 2013 and 2015, and was analyzed through a mixed methods approach (Duxbury et al., 2018). Results showed that Whites and Latinos often have their crimes attributed to a mental illness, while Black and Latino men are seen as violent threats to the public (Duxbury et al., 2018). These findings suggest that there are racial differences in how the media assigns blame to mass shooters. Crimes by Black and Latino men are framed to be driven by violence whereas crimes by White and other Latinos are framed to be driven by mental illness. Whites are also commonly seen as sympathetic characters in these incidents,

while Blacks and Latinos are feared (Duxbury et al., 2018). The fact that crimes committed by Whites are viewed more sympathetically shows how the media is able to successfully persuade the public to believe what they want them to about mass shooters and what drives them to commit such violence.

This issue of the media and race ties back into the gun violence phenomenon by suggesting that the media is biased and only portrays what they want society to believe. There is no scientific evidence or research to prove that the motives behind violence are different due to race, showing how much power the media truly holds in shaping societal beliefs. Clearly, the media has been successful at persuading society what they want them to believe about gun violence, since there is an automatic belief that White perpetrators have a mental illness while Black perpetrators are violent by nature. All of this shows how the media makes up their own causes for gun violence without actually looking into the underlying factors that lead to such violence, suggesting that there may be other factors affecting this issue that are simply not being discussed in the media.

Since it is now known how impactful the media can be at shaping society's beliefs about individuals with a mental illness, it is important for individuals to think twice about whether their beliefs are shaped more by news coverage or factual evidence. When people are constantly exposed to something over and over, they are going to believe whatever they are seeing and hearing because that is all they are being exposed to. When the news and media is constantly portraying mental illness as a cause for gun violence, it is likely that individuals will automatically assume the mental illness of any shooter is what caused them to be violent, since they were not introduced to

any other potential causes. Hence, further research must be done to analyze whether mental illness really does cause gun violence.

Access to Firearms

To help answer the big question of whether mental illness causes gun violence, one must first investigate the deeper issues which underlie the phenomenon that make this problem problematic. With this dilemma specifically, it is important to understand that there is no definitive yes or no answer. The underlying issues make this problem too complex to simply argue one way or the other without some analysis. More specifically, having an understanding about how factors such as gun laws and mental health stigma affect the overall phenomenon will allow for a more educated decision regarding mental illness as a cause for the gun violence phenomenon.

Gun laws and policies are the major determiner in who has access to guns. This becomes a deeper issue for the mental illness and gun violence debate when the question of who should be allowed to purchase guns is raised by society. As shown in the media study, who has access to guns is often largely determined by mental illness. In the United States, shootings and other gun violence incidents widely discussed drive the idea that the mentally ill are dangerous, which prevents these individuals from access to guns. The National Rifle Association insists, "guns don't kill people, people kill people," which is contingent with the belief that it is not the guns themselves that are dangerous, but the people who have access to them that are (Lawrence et al., 2011). As a result, legislators have tried to put policies in place to prohibit such individuals from obtaining guns. For example, the Gun Control Act of 1968 restricts prohibited persons from

purchasing firearms, including those addicted to substances, involuntarily committed to a mental institution, those adjudicated as dangerous, and anyone who is not guilty because of insanity (Lawrence et al., 2011). This act restricts anyone diagnosed with a mental illness from purchasing a gun on the basis that they are dangerous. To ensure these prohibited individuals do not get access, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System has a definitive list of people whom licensed dealers are not allowed to sell their firearms to (Lawrence et al., 2011). However, doing this targets those with a mental illness and prevents them from purchasing firearms, which reinforces the narrative that people with a mental illness are dangerous.

These gun laws and restrictions to certain persons support the myth that mental illness does cause gun violence, as it prohibits those with a mental illness from gun access. However, research has proven that reducing access to firearms is successful at reducing mass shootings, suggesting that there needs to be a reduction in gun access for all individuals, and not solely individuals with a mental illness. Reducing access for just those struggling would lead to greater stigma in society by reinforcing the belief that the mentally ill are dangerous.

When looking at both mental illness and gun violence rates in other countries compared to the United States, it can be found that other countries have the same rates of mental illness as the U.S., yet have significantly lower rates of gun violence. An example of this is Australia. According to one source examining statistical data about mental illness in Australia and the U.S., data confirms that both these nations have similar rates of mental illness, including those not associated with violent behavior (Evans et al., 2016). However, their gun violence rates differ, predicting that mental illness may not

be a cause of gun violence, despite what the media portrays. In April of 1996, a gunman in Australia killed twenty people in ninety seconds with the first twenty-nine bullets shot, leaving thirty-five people dead and eighteen seriously wounded (Chapman & Alpers, 2013). Within only the next two weeks following this incident, Australia enacted a comprehensive suite of firearm law reforms, and as a result, no mass shootings have occurred since (Chapman & Alpers, 2013). Clearly, the reduction in access to semiautomatic weapons led to the cessation of mass shootings. Unknowingly, this ban also decreased Australia's number of total gun deaths, not just mass shootings. According to the source, unintentional shootings and suicides were responsible for roughly eighty percent of gun deaths, yet the ban on these weapons accelerated the decrease in total rates of gun deaths for Australia (Chapman & Alpers, 2013). Therefore, a reduction in access to guns and a ban on certain weapons was clearly effective in reducing the rate of overall gun violence in Australia. This knowledge can help inform the gun violence debate in the United States by beginning the discussion that it might not be mental illness that is causing gun violence, since access to guns is more of a driving factor.

Mental Health Stigma

Mental health stigma is another one of the major underlying factors contributing to the mental illness and gun violence phenomenon. In society, a great stigma exists about individuals with a mental illness, partially because of the media and partially because of society's preexisting beliefs about these individuals. Regardless, this stigma turns those struggling away from seeking help due to embarrassment or fear about being labeled or judged a certain way. To obtain a better understanding of how influential stigma is at reducing treatment

seeking, one source explains how it interferes with seeking mental health care. According to the source, there are many ways public stigma harms those struggling. For example, such discrimination robs people of important life opportunities. This can include finding a good job or housing, criminalizing the mentally ill, or reducing healthcare in the form of not giving them the same insurance benefits as people without a mental illness (Corrigan, 2004). All of these factors give blatant examples of how people with a mental illness are obviously discriminated against in society. Based on this, it follows that those struggling will turn away from seeking treatment since no one would willingly want to be subjected to such prejudice.

Clearly, this discrimination furthers stigma rather than reduces it. In the source, Corrigan mentions multiple studies that have been conducted which tested the effects of stigma on care seeking. Each study found that adolescents who endorsed societal stigma were in fact less likely to obtain care when needed, proving how great the effects of stigma are (Corrigan, 2004). Endorsing these negative attitudes about mental illness does inhibit personal service utilization for those at risk of a psychiatric disorder (Corrigan, 2004). These findings are consistent with the idea that mental health stigma does in fact turn people away from seeking treatment. However, when people who are struggling do not get treatment, they often bottle up their emotions which can lead to the internalization of these negative beliefs about oneself.

In their source, Corrigan also describes self stigma and how that is harmful to individuals as well. Constantly being surrounded by prejudice and discrimination from others about one's struggles causes people to internalize and

thus believe these myths about themselves. Research has shown that those with a mental illness who do internalize this prejudice believe they are less valuable than others because of their disorder (Corrigan, 2004). This self prejudice tends to lead to a negative self-esteem, which in turn causes one to feel shameful about their disorder. According to the source, there is a significant relationship between shame and avoiding treatment. They either have shame in themselves or have family shame if they believe family members would have a negative reaction to their diagnosis (Corrigan, 2004). Based on previous research, mental health stigma clearly has a negative impact on those struggling by reducing their likelihood of seeking treatment. Society creating a stigma targeting this certain group of people has proven to cause detrimental effects on an individual, as it forces them to create their own ways of coping which may include gun violence.

The issue of stigma has been amplified with the gun violence epidemic. When stigma prevents individuals from seeking treatment, they are forced to use their own coping mechanisms, which often takes the form of bottling their emotions. However, this is detrimental because it leads individuals to use the resources they have to cope, and sometimes those resources may be guns, if that is what they have in the home, or if it is all they know because there is constant exposure to it in the media, etc. If these individuals choose to resort to gun violence, it is often done so in the form of firearm suicide, which is typically ignored in the media due to a heavy focus on mass shootings. However, the issue should not be pushed aside as it is the driving factor in so many of these fatalities.

When talking about mental illness in relation to gun violence, death by firearm suicide cannot be ignored. Suicide has grown to become just as much of a problem as homicide and mass shootings are, if not more. According to one source, this suicide crisis is a result of poorly implemented gun laws and a failing mental health care system. It also states that mental illness is often the reason why people want to end their lives, but not why they do not survive. Access to firearms is the reason they do not survive (Swanson, 2018). This is such a powerful statement as it claims that guns are what to blame for all these deaths and gun violence incidents, rather than mental illness. This ties back into the gun access issue, as it agrees that reducing gun access, especially for those with a mental illness, can have a major impact on preventing these major incidents and fatalities. This whole idea of firearm suicides and the fact that so many lives are being taken because these individuals have access to guns supports the argument that mental illness is not the cause of gun violence.

Past Experiences

So far, this paper has discussed the role of the media on influencing beliefs that mental illness causes gun violence, the fact that access to guns can have a major impact on reducing gun violence, and the role of mental health stigma in reinforcing this belief. All of these things have hinted at the possibilities that there may be other factors which cause gun violence that are just not known to the public. Therefore, it is important to look into further research that discusses the real causes of gun violence which are not discussed in the media. The issue of gun violence is very complex, and the causes are multifactorial, meaning there is no one singular issue driving the prevalence of gun violence.

When thinking about what leads someone to gun violence, it is helpful to look back into one's past to evaluate if any early experiences or behavior increased their violent or aggressive tendencies. Prior exposure to guns or gun violence can pose as a significant predictor of future gun use or access. One source indicates that childhood domestic violence and community violence are both associated with increased gun risk, including gun ownership, violent crime arrest, gun arrests, etc. (Sanchez et al., 2020). This makes sense, because if someone is constantly exposed to violence growing up, that is all they have ever seen and known, so it is logical to assume they will mimic the behaviors they grew up knowing and seeing. This ties back into the nature versus nurture debate by indicating nurture may have a significant impact on gun violence.

School and childhood experiences also have a major impact. Sanchez states that being a victim of bullying increases chances of having access to a loaded gun without adult permission later in life (Sanchez et al., 2020). When children are victims of bullying, they are constantly being put down and feeling bad about themselves, making them feel like an outcast. If left ignored or not dealt with, these feelings of rejection and loneliness often evolve into fantasies of violence, which increases the risk for firearm violence incidents (Sanchez et al., 2020). Individuals who were bullied often wish to impose violence on others later in life as a way to compensate for what happened to them. They wish others could experience the pain they did, so they use violence as a way to "get back at" their bullies. Regardless, these experiences of being bullied or growing up in the midst of violence are major factors that cause gun violence.

Substance Abuse

It is also useful to investigate internal factors and one's physiological state when evaluating what leads someone to gun violence, especially in terms of substance abuse. A history of substance abuse is often linked with violent behavior and gun violence tendencies. There are several studies which show positive relationships between substance abuse and crime, gun ownership, and violent death. These studies have produced many findings. According to the source, substance abuse is a strong predictor of domestic abuse, and it is associated with violent death, including homicide and suicide. Additionally, users of alcohol and illicit drugs are more likely to commit suicide, and finally, those living with substance users were at greater risk of being victims of homicide (Banks et al., 2017). Great substance abuse has significant and detrimental effects on the brain, so it makes sense that it increases the risk of gun violence because it can cause people to engage in abnormal behaviors that they would not engage in otherwise. The author backs this argument up by stating how the immediate consequences of substance abuse are impaired judgment, impulsivity, and agitation, which are all factors that increase the risk of any violent behavior (Banks et al., 2017). Due to these symptoms, it makes sense that being intoxicated or testing positive for various substances increases the risk that one will engage in violent behavior. This is yet another example debunking the myth that mental illness causes gun violence, as there is research proving how many other factors increase gun violence, such as substance abuse.

Socioeconomic Disadvantage

The issue of childhood socioeconomic disadvantage is not talked about nearly enough but is a factor that

increases the likelihood of engaging in adolescent gun violence later on. To prove this theory, a study was conducted that gave a multi-informant screening to first grade boys that assessed a number of antisocial acts like fighting, stealing, substance abuse, etc. Boys at risk of delinquent behavior and those who committed antisocial acts were interviewed annually until they reached twenty years old. At time one in the study, about 61% of the boys' families were on public assistance and 62% lived in broken families (Beardslee et al., 2019). The goal was to better understand the process leading young boys from disadvantaged families and poor neighborhoods to later engage in gun violence. Results found that throughout the study, conduct problems increased and sixty-three men engaged in gun violence (Beardslee et al., 2019). These results show a clear association between socioeconomic disadvantage and engagement in gun violence. Boys exposed to higher disadvantages tended to affiliate more so with delinquent peers during elementary school, increasing their conduct problems throughout their childhood (Beardslee et al., 2019). This progression supports the assumption that their violent tendencies will continue to increase, ultimately leading to gun violence in adolescence. Children have the tendency to mimic the actions of their peers, so it is understandable that being around others engaging in these behaviors will influence one's own behaviors and decisions later in life, such as gun carrying and firearm violence. Based on these findings, the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage and childhood delinquency is linked with adolescent gun violence, another major factor of gun violence not discussed in the media.

Based on all this evidence, the conclusion can be made that the causes of gun violence are multifactorial and more often than not do not include mental illness.

It is not impossible for mental illness to play a role. However, it is very rare; and if it is a cause, it is typically not the main one. It is likely that there are even some factors not listed in this section which lead to gun violence as well. Overall, there is great research and studies proving how these factors such as past experiences, substance abuse, and socioeconomic disadvantages lead to gun violence, while no sufficient evidence exists to back up the claim that mental illness causes gun violence. It is simply the media enforcing that idea because of what they want the public to believe. Further research and studies would need to be done before claiming that mental illness is a cause of gun violence. The media reinforcing their biased beliefs is worsening the issue, since no actions are actively being taken to put an end to this national crisis.

A Gun Violence Epidemic

Any phenomenon that involves the killing of thousands of innocent lives is socially significant. Gun violence has been a prevalent issue throughout the world for decades, and it seems as though the incidents are worsening with every attack. Throughout the country, families lose their loved ones, children go to school every day in fear of being the next target of an attack, innocent grocery shoppers are losing their lives, etc. As time has passed, improved security has been implemented in schools, airports, stores, etc. as a precaution in case they are the next gun violence target. The fact that gun violence has impacted everyone in some way, at some point, proves how this phenomenon is socially significant across the world.

As gun violence has significantly increased in the United States over the past couple of decades, more and more people have been affected to the point where this phenomenon has become a public health

crisis. In 2021, New York governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency on gun violence due to how significant this issue has become. According to Cuomo, there were more deaths due to gun violence over the fourth of July weekend in 2021 than there were deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic (FoxNews, 2021). This statistic is eye-opening because there were an unimaginable number of deaths from COVID-19 alone, so the fact that there have been more gun violence deaths than COVID-19 deaths is astounding. One FoxNews clip also explains how the rate of shootings is not decreasing, meaning more lives are continuously being taken and the reason for each shooting varies. One NYPD commissioner argues that the majority of individuals who get arrested for gun violence end up back on the streets (FoxNews, 2021). The fact that this problem is not getting resolved and the rates of gun violence incidents continue to skyrocket prove how socially significant this issue is in society. Nothing miniscule gets labeled as a public health crisis, so a governor issuing a state of emergency on this problem shows how much of an impact this epidemic has on society.

Implications For Future Research

Since this epidemic of gun violence is certainly not improving, society needs to create implications for future research that will put an end to this gun violence crisis. Various efforts could be made to reduce these fatalities. As learned in this paper, gun violence is greatly associated with access to firearms, indicating that stricter gun laws could be effective in reducing these incidents. The gun laws of other countries have proven that more restrictive gun laws leads to less firearm-related fatalities. There are some places in which further restricting gun access has not been successful, so if that were the case in the U.S., there are other

steps that could be made. For example, criminal background checks could be required at time of gun purchase, in whichever places individuals obtain their guns. This would be required for everyone, regardless of a mental illness diagnosis, since having a mental illness does not mean someone is going to commit a violent act. Requiring this for everyone would also lead to less discrimination and stigma since those with a mental illness would not be the only population affected by this change. The second amendment in the U.S. gives an individual the right to bear arms, and many people would be upset if this right was taken away from them, so doing these checks would allow individuals to still keep their right while preventing criminals or other dangerous people from accessing guns when they shouldn't. Overall, there are many strategies that could be implemented that would reduce the likelihood of more gun violence deaths from occurring.

Mental illness is a serious concept that should not be taken lightly. Having a diagnosis is not easy by any means, and society creating false assumptions and myths about those diagnoses make the lives of these affected individuals that much more difficult. The media is a driving force in the belief that mental illness causes gun violence because it portrays what it wants society to believe. What the media fails to do, however, is examine the deep history, life experiences, background, etc. of these shooters and perpetrators to see if any other factors have more of an influence on gun violence rather than mental illness. If society truly wants to reduce incidents of gun violence, they must investigate these deeper issues and provide treatment to individuals in the areas they need. Assuming that mental illness causes gun violence has only increased stigma and produced negative outcomes for those struggling, so changing the narrative about mental illness causing gun violence is the only way to actually reduce this violence in society.

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