

Joint Statement from Members of the Disability Community and Allies on Gun Violence Prevention Policy and Mental Health Disabilities

The recent mass shootings in our country have necessarily turned the spotlight on proposed policies and solutions at the legislative level. While the undersigned agree that public safety is paramount, the assumption that people with mental health disabilities, including those with perceived mental health disabilities, are inherently dangerous and that targeting them will solve our country's gun violence problem is wrong. Talking points and legislation relying on those assumptions are counterproductive and only serve to further stigmatize people with mental health disabilities and the disability community as a whole.

Despite data to the contrary, the President and some legislators have stated that people with mental health disabilities are the primary perpetrators of gun violence. The President has proposed institutionalizing people with mental health disabilities and is reportedly considering subjecting them to surveillance. Some legislators have similarly suggested that people with mental health disabilities should be the primary target of gun violence prevention efforts. We soundly reject this argument. Studies have repeatedly shown that people with disabilities, including mental health disabilities, are far more likely to be victims of gun violence than perpetrators.¹ In fact, recent studies demonstrate that only 4% of gun violence is connected to mental health disabilities.² Mental health disabilities are not accurate predictors of violence, a fact recognized by the American Psychological Association, among others, and should not be treated as such.³ Legislation that targets people with mental health disabilities will not be effective in reducing gun violence. Falsely blaming people with mental health disabilities for violence will stigmatize these individuals, violate their right to privacy, and will likely dissuade some people from seeking help at all.⁴

¹ Kim, Sarah, "The Dangers of the Mental Health Narrative when it Comes to Gun Violence," Forbes, https://www.businessinsider.com/report-under-trump-far-right-violence-on-the-rise-in-the-us-2018-11?fbclid=IwAR1RVMzWXJ6tX_pv56HGwh94yL0NjFYN7HzS_2goAVCtPo4WSRPGuWKcDak, August 7, 2019

² Metz, Johnathan M., "Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms," 105(2) Am. J. Pub. Health 240-249 (2015) available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4318286>.

³ American Psychological Association, Statement of APA CEO on Gun Violence and Mental Health, August 5, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/08/gun-violence-mental-health>; American Psychological Association, Resolution on Firearm Violence Research and Prevention (2014) <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/firearms.aspx>.

⁴ American Psychological Association, Resolution on Firearm Violence Research and Prevention (2014) <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/firearms.aspx> ("policy makers have responded to public apprehension about the role of severe mental illness in mass violence towards others in ways that result in policies and practices that further stigmatize persons with serious mental illness and may deter them from engaging in needed psychological or other services").

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All Americans, including people with disabilities, have a civil right⁵ to live in their communities and not be segregated or imprisoned simply because they have a disability. Building more institutions, as the Administration proposes, unjustly threatens the civil rights and freedom of people with mental health disabilities while doing nothing to reduce gun violence in this country. Other proposals aimed at identifying students with disabilities at a young age as potential threats only serve to further isolate and stigmatize students.⁶ This is neither helpful nor effective in increasing safety or reducing gun violence and will ultimately harm those with mental health disabilities as well as the broader disability community.

The simple fact is that other countries around the world have just as many people with mental health disabilities, but they do not experience gun violence at the same magnitude as the United States. The problem is only exacerbated by systemic racism and hatred. Our country is faced with a rise in hate crimes targeting marginalized communities and an increase in racially motivated mass shootings in recent years. Hate and racism are not mental health disabilities, nor should they be treated as such. There are no medical providers, procedures, or medications that exist that can treat a person's hatred. Gun violence is not clinical in nature--it is a societal problem.

It is an act of prejudice to use people with disabilities as scapegoats for the increasing incidences of mass shootings and acts of mass violence in this country. Ultimately this will do nothing to curb the epidemic of gun violence in our nation. We will not accept or support any legislation that sacrifices the civil rights of people with disabilities in exchange for the appearance of action on gun violence. Effective reform can and should be accomplished without compromising the civil rights of people with disabilities. We call upon all of our legislators to condemn this dangerous rhetoric and refute any related legislative proposals that will put the lives and freedoms of Americans with disabilities at risk.

Signed in Solidarity,

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Advocacy Unlimited, Inc.

⁵ ADA.Gov About Olmstead, https://www.ada.gov/olmstead/olmstead_about.htm?fbclid=IwAR1JrtqWzMrb6lqP34-Hgqm_3Clappke2hnPu-W8BF0UhrNymtWENo3LuA

⁶ Barnes, Bethany, Targeted: A Family and the Quest to Stop the Next School Shooter, The Oregonian, https://expo.oregonlive.com/news/erry-2018/06/75f0f464cb3367/targeted_a_family_and_the_ques.html. June 24, 2018

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Alliance for Excellent Education

American Association of People with Disabilities

Association of University Centers on Disabilities

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

Center for Public Representation

Connecticut Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance

Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Disability Rights Connecticut

Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF)

Gift of Voice

Hon. Tony Coelho, Author of the Americans with Disabilities Act

Keep the Promise

Little Lobbyists

Mental Health America

National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities

National Association of County Behavioral Health & Disability Directors

National Association of School Psychologists

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National Center for Learning Disabilities

National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery

National Council on Independent Living

National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

National Disability Rights Network

National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services

Oregon Mental Health Consumer Psychiatric Survivor Coalition

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Pennsylvania Action: Protecting Disability Rights

RespectAbility

TASH

The Alliance for Excellent Education

The Arc of the United States

The Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy and Innovation

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights