



Mental Illness and Violence: Questions & Answers



Is having a mental illness different from mental health problems?

YES. Many people experience mental health problems that don't meet diagnostic criteria for a mental illness.

An estimated 1 in 5 US adults have any mental illness and 1 in 20 have a serious mental illness (SMI) that substantially interferes with their life.

Source: 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health



Is mental illness the cause of most violence?

NO. Research estimates that only 4% of interpersonal violence is attributable to SMI alone.

Most violence is due to other factors, like substance use or a history of violent victimization.

Source: Swanson JW. (1994)



Are people with serious mental illness likely to be violent?

NO. Most individuals with SMI will never be violent towards others.

In fact, they're more likely to be victims of violence than the general population.

Source: Choe JY, Teplin LA, Abram KM. (2008)



Do all mass shooters have a serious mental illness?

NO. Many mass shooters have mental health problems but most don't have a diagnosed SMI at the time of the shooting, and they often don't meet criteria for involuntary psychiatric commitment.

More often, mass violence stems from anger, misogyny, racism and affiliation with extremist groups.

Source: Skeem J, Mulvey E. (2019)



Does having a mental illness increase the risk of suicide?

YES. People with SMI are 10 times as likely to die by suicide as the general population.

But less than half of suicide decedents have a diagnosed mental illness. Financial stress, substance use, medical illness and relationship problems also increase risk.

Sources: Chesney E et al. (2014) and Stone DM et al. (2018)



The Takeaway

Mental illness alone is a poor predictor of gun violence and suicide.

Increasing employment and educational opportunities, social connectedness and access to health care can help address the root causes of these problems.