

## Ending Gun Violence

As thousands take to the streets this weekend for the March for Our Lives, Mental Health America of Wisconsin adds its voice to those calling for common sense measures to reduce gun violence. We do so as a mental health advocacy organization in order to address the stigma that arises from inaccurate attribution of gun violence to those with mental illnesses. We do so in support of our effort to reduce suicides. And we do so to reduce the trauma that inevitably follows gun violence and can, itself, lead to serious mental health challenges for survivors.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, fewer than 5% of violent acts can be attributed to people with a serious mental illness. While research suggests that some people with mental illnesses may be at increased risk of being violent, and only during limited points of their illness, other factors such as substance use, binge drinking, a history of child abuse and male gender are stronger predictors for serious violence. People diagnosed with schizophrenia actually have victimization rates 65-130% higher than those of the general public. Singling out people with mental illnesses fails to address root causes of violence and does nothing but prevent an estimated 56% of adults and 80% of children with mental health issues from seeking the help they deserve.

The relationship between gun violence and mental illness is only significant when it comes to suicide. And in Wisconsin 75% of gun deaths are suicides. The same measures that those who are marching are calling for to end gun violence are also associated with lower suicide rates: universal background checks and waiting periods for handgun purchases. Public health studies have found that states with these laws have suicide rates 25% lower than states without these laws. Lethal violence protection orders, or red flag laws, have also shown efficacy in reducing suicide.

MHA wants to call attention to the important needs of those who have experienced the trauma of gun violence, including the vicarious trauma of watching and listening to ongoing news of mass shootings. We have posted coping tips and other information sheets on our website:

<http://www.mhawisconsin.org/whats-new.aspx>

Finally, while MHA supports increased funding and attention to mental health services, since such services have historically been underfunded, the weak relationship between gun violence and mental illness noted above suggests this will not be the solution to interpersonal violence. We believe school safety—an important focus of tomorrow's marches—is supported by programs that address school climate, such as bullying prevention, trauma informed approaches, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, and restorative justice. Programs that connect students to their schools, communities and each other support good mental health and positive development.

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