

Position Statement on Firearm Access, Acts of Violence and the Relationship to Mental Illness and Mental Health Services

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2014

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"Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees...These are...position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects..." – *APA Operations Manual*.

The American Psychiatric Association recognizes the critical public health need for action to promote safe communities and reduce morbidity and mortality due to firearm-related violence. Specifically, the APA supports the following principles and positions:

1. Many deaths and injuries from gun violence can be prevented through national and state legislative and regulatory measures. Recognizing that the vast majority of gun violence is not attributable to mental illness, the APA views the broader problem of firearm-related injury as a public health issue and supports interventions that reduce the risk of such harm. Actions to minimize firearm injuries and violence should include:
 - a. Requiring background checks and waiting periods on all gun sales or transactions;
 - b. Requiring safe storage of all firearms in the home, office or other places of daily assembly;
 - c. Regulating the characteristics of firearms to promote safe use for lawful purposes and to reduce the likelihood that they can be fired by anyone other than the owner without the owner's consent;
 - d. Banning possession of firearms on the grounds of colleges, hospitals, and similar institutions by anyone other than law enforcement and security personnel; and
 - e. Assuring that physicians and other health care professionals are free to make clinically appropriate inquiries of patients and others about possession of and access to firearms and take necessary steps to reduce the risk of loss of life by suicide, homicide, and accidental injury.
2. Research and training on the causes of firearm violence and its effective control, including risk assessment and management, should be a national priority.
 - a. Administrative, regulatory and/or legislative barriers to federal support for violence research, including research on firearms violence and deaths, should be removed.
 - b. Given the difficulty in accurately identifying those persons likely to commit acts of violence, federal resources should be directed toward the development and testing of methods that assist in the identification of individuals at heightened risk of committing violence against themselves or others with firearms.
 - c. The federal government should develop and fund a national database of firearm injuries. This database should include information about all homicides, suicides, and unintentional deaths and injuries, categorized by specific weapon type, as well as information about the individuals involved (absent personal identifiers), geographic location, circumstances, point of purchase, date and other policy-relevant information.
 - d. Funding for research on firearm injuries and deaths should draw on a broad range of public and private resources and support, such as the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation.
 - e. All physicians and other health professionals should continue to be trained to assess and respond to those individuals who may be at heightened risk for violence or suicide. Such training should include education about speaking with patients about firearm access and safety. Appropriate federal, state, and local resources should be allocated for training of these professionals. Resources should be increased for safety education programs related to responsible use and storage of firearms.
3. Reasonable restrictions on gun access are appropriate, but such restrictions should not be based solely on a diagnosis of mental disorder. Diagnostic categories vary widely in the kinds of symptoms, impairments, and disabilities found in affected individuals. Even within a given diagnosis, there is considerable heterogeneity of symptoms and impairments. Only a small proportion of individuals with a mental disorder pose a risk of harm to themselves or others. The APA supports banning access to guns for persons whose conduct indicates that they present a heightened risk of violence to themselves or others, whether or not they have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.

4. Given that the right to purchase or possess firearms is restricted for specific categories of individuals who are disqualified under federal or state law, the criteria for disqualification should be carefully defined, and should provide for equal protection of the rights of those disqualified. There should be a fair and reasonable process for restoration of firearm rights for those disqualified on such grounds.

When restrictions are based on federal law, disqualifying events related to mental illness, such as civil commitment or a finding of legal incompetence, are reported to the federal background check database (National Instant Criminal Background Check System, NICS). Some states have expanded the scope of disqualifying events to be reported to NICS to include non-adjudicated events, such as temporary hospital detentions.

- a. Non-adjudicated events should not serve as sufficient grounds for a disqualification from gun ownership and should not be reported to the NICS system. The adjudicatory process provides important protections that ensure the accuracy of determinations (such as dangerousness-based civil commitment), including the right to representation and the right to call and cross-examine witnesses.
 - b. Rational policy with regard to implementation of such restrictions calls for the duration of the restriction to be based on individualized assessment rather than a categorical classification of mental illness or a history of a mental health-related adjudication.
 - c. Although the restrictions on access to firearms recommended in items 1 and 2 above would decrease the risk of suicide and violence in the population, extending restrictions to individuals who voluntarily seek mental health care and incorporating their names and mental health histories into a national registry is inadvisable because it could dissuade persons from seeking care and further stigmatize persons with mental disorder.
 - d. A person whose right to purchase or possess firearms has been suspended on grounds related to mental disorder should have a fair opportunity to have his or her rights restored in a process that properly balances the person's rights with the need to protect public safety and the person's own well-being. Accordingly, the process for restoring an individual's right to purchase or possess a firearm following a disqualification relating to mental disorder should be based on adequate clinical assessment, with decision-making responsibility ultimately resting with an administrative authority or court.
5. Improved identification and access to care for persons with mental disorders may reduce the risk of suicide and violence involving firearms for persons with tendencies toward those behaviors. However, because of the small percentage of violence overall attributable to mental disorders (estimated at 3-5% in the U.S., excluding substance use disorders), it will have only a limited impact on overall rates of violence.
 - a. Early identification and treatment of mental disorders, including school-based screening, should be prioritized in national and local agendas, along with other efforts to augment prevention strategies, reduce the stigma of seeking or obtaining mental health treatment, and diminish the consequences of untreated mental disorders.
 - b. For those people with mental illness who may pose an increased risk of harm to themselves or other people, barriers to accessing appropriate treatment should be removed. Access to care and associated resources to enhance community follow up, which includes care and resources to address mental disorders, including substance use disorders, should be maximized to ensure that patients who may need to transition between service providers or settings, e.g., from an inpatient setting to community-based treatment, continue to obtain treatment and are not lost to care.
 - c. Because privacy in mental health treatment is essential to encourage persons in need of treatment to seek care, laws designed to limit firearm possession that mandate reporting to law enforcement officials by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals of all patients who raise concerns about danger to themselves or others are likely to be counterproductive and should not be adopted. In contrast to long-standing rules allowing mental health professionals flexibility in acting to protect identifiable potential victims of patient violence, these statutes intrude into the clinical relationship and are unlikely to be effective in reducing rates of violence.
 - d. The President of the United States should consolidate and coordinate current interests in improving mental health care in this country by appointing a Presidential Commission to develop a vision for an integrated system of mental health care for the 21st century.