

New Bazelon Center Analysis on Psychiatric Hospital Bed Availability and Firearm Homicides

Washington -- January 16, 2013 -- Over the past several years, homicides involving the use of firearms — notably, mass murders that generate significant media attention — have raised questions about the adequacy of mental health services in this country. Some have argued that the disability rights movement, deinstitutionalization, and the closure of state hospital beds have significantly contributed to many of the tragic gun-related murders across the country. Such arguments tend to overlook the impact of the nation's failure to fund the comprehensive community mental health systems that were intended to replace outmoded state institutions. Nevertheless, arguments to expand the availability of psychiatric hospital beds have ready appeal, particularly in the wake of tragic mass homicides; increasing the number of psychiatric hospital beds appears to be a straightforward response.

A new analysis conducted by the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law examines the relationships between states' rates of murder by firearms, incarceration, and the availability of psychiatric hospital beds. If expanding the number of psychiatric beds is a meaningful remedy to firearm related murders in this country, one would expect a clear association between these factors, showing that states with fewer psychiatric hospital beds have higher rates of firearm-related homicides or incarceration.

The Bazelon Center's analysis found, however, that correlations among these factors are strikingly low. The analysis suggests that, to the extent that unaddressed needs of people with serious mental illness contribute to the nation's homicide rate, the public policy answers lie not in increasing the number of psychiatric hospital beds, but elsewhere.