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Bazelon Center Issues New Review: Mental Illness is the Wrong Focus in Gun Safety Debate

Washington, DC, Aug. 23, 2019—The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law today issued a [review](#) of studies examining the relationship, or lack thereof, between psychiatric disabilities and gun violence. Our review demonstrates that people with psychiatric disabilities are not an appropriate focus for gun violence prevention efforts.

The evidence shows that people with psychiatric disabilities are responsible for a miniscule portion of all violence—between 3% and 5%. In fact, people with psychiatric disabilities are far more likely to be the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of violence. A history of a mental health diagnosis or treatment is not a predictor of gun violence. To the extent that risk factors for violence can be predicted, factors such as a history of domestic violence or other violent crime are far better predictors than a mental health diagnosis. “It is time to stop reflexively blaming people with psychiatric disabilities for gun violence,” said Jennifer Mathis, the Center’s Director of Policy and Legal Advocacy. “Doing so promotes unfounded fear and prejudice and does not offer a meaningful solution to gun violence.”

Earlier this month, the Bazelon Center issued a [statement](#) following the shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio condemning the efforts of some to blame those shootings—and gun violence generally—on people with mental illness. Immediately after those shootings, President Trump stated that “mental illness . . . pulled the trigger,” conflating the hatred, bigotry and racism that appeared to motivate the shooting in Texas with mental illness. In the days since then, President Trump has continued to blame gun violence on people with mental health disabilities and called for the rebuilding of institutions to take people with psychiatric disabilities “off the streets.” For nearly fifty years, the Bazelon Center has advocated for mental health service systems to stop needless institutionalization and expand community-based services. Rebuilding institutions will neither improve mental health systems nor stop gun violence.

The Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law (www.bazelon.org) is a national non-profit legal advocacy organization that advances equal opportunity for people with mental disabilities in all aspects of life.

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