

## Reflection on our Response to Mass Shootings

I am a friend and relative to those with mental illness and family members impacted by mental illness. The recent response of some policy makers to blame gun violence on mental illness is heartbreaking, and quite frankly, misguided. This language and thinking harms our brothers and sisters who have a mental illnesses. It stigmatizes them and makes them more reluctant to identify and seek treatment.

Hate crimes should not be confused with mental illness. This only further stigmatizes those with mental illness and further perpetuates the myth that mental illness leads to violence. It is too simplistic to label the gun violence problem as mental illness. In their 2016 review, forensic psychiatrist James L Knoll IV, MD and George D. Annas, MD, MPH, of SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse New York cite research that only a minority of mass shootings have been perpetrated by individuals with recognized mental disorders. In Knoll's response to the recent crimes, he asks: Do we solve the matter by labeling it 'mental illness' and calling for greater scrutiny of 'troubled' individuals?" He continued. "I believe we solve nothing, and even risk making matters worse. This mindset makes us vulnerable to creating new, but misguided, laws. It furthers the medieval notion of equating mental illness with 'evil' or criminal behavior.

The vast majority of people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence, rather than perpetrators.

For many suffering from mental illness the stigma and shame created prevents them from engaging meaningfully in their community – including their faith community. As Catholics, we are called to reach out and embrace all of our brothers and sisters suffering from illnesses. *The Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of California on Caring for those who Suffer Mental Illness* reminds us that Christ calls us to attend to those who suffer from mental illness and provide hope and healing. One way to do this is through the language we use and speaking up when we hear language that is hurtful and uninformed. Another way is by prayerfully accompanying those with mental health problems. We are also called to advocate for policies which are based on proven successes and not those which further perpetuate stigma. In Connecticut we have the Catholic Campaign for Human Development funded group *Keep the Promise* (KTP). KTP's mission is to involve and empower all voices in Connecticut to influence public policy with the goal of expanding opportunities for full community integration. More information on KTP can be found on their website: <http://www.ctkeepthepromise.org/>

As Catholics, we have a responsibility to work together for a more just world where life and human dignity is protected and basic responsibilities are met. That means working for a safer society. It means working to improve mental health care. Let's do this in an informed and educated manner.

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