



Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

DBSA STATEMENT ON GUN VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance acknowledges the heaviness many people around the country are feeling in the wake of the recent mass shootings at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX and in Tulsa, OK which, sadly, follow on the heels of shooting incidents in Buffalo, NY, Dallas, and Los Angeles.

In the aftermath of acts of gun violence, questions often arise about whether the assailant had a history of one or more mental health conditions. [For example, after two mass shootings in a single weekend in Texas in August 2019, then-President Donald Trump stated, “Mental illness and hatred pulls the trigger” \(Abutaleb and Wan, 2019\). In 2018, more than 50 percent of Americans believed that people with schizophrenia and alcohol use disorders posed a danger to others, and 30 percent believed that people with depression posed such a threat \(Pescosolido, Manago, and Monahan, 2019\).](#)

In their responses to heightened community concerns over the threat of mass shootings, numerous public officials in recent years have pointed to “mental illness” as a simplified explanation for these terrifying acts of violence. The “deranged shooter” narrative resonates with a persistent (if largely false) belief among majorities of adults in the United States.

DBSA’s mission is to provide hope, help, support, and education to individuals living with mood disorders. In our role as the leading peer-focused advocacy organization for people living with depression and bipolar we believe it is critical the public and policymakers stop responding to gun violence and mass shootings with statements that mental health conditions are the underlying cause. The claim is false and discriminatory. Hearing the predictable characterizations of the perpetrators framed as mental health issues is a scapegoating tactic and does a disservice to those we are here to serve.

Studying the relationship between mental illness and suicide or firearm violence (both self-directed and interpersonal) is challenging because mental illness is often undiagnosed and undetected by the health care system. Furthermore, postmortem (for suicide) or post-event (for violent crime) diagnoses may be biased.

[Like other vulnerable populations, persons diagnosed with mental health conditions are statistically more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime. They represent between 25% and 58% of those shot and killed by police officers each year, and there is an apparent interaction between race and mental illness when citizens are shot by law enforcement officers. A recent study found that when police shot and killed people in the line of duty, their explanatory reports applied the label of “mental illness” more than twice as often to white individuals as to Black individuals \(32% vs. 15%\).](#)

Studies show symptoms of mental illness by themselves rarely cause violent behavior and thus cannot reliably predict it. In fact, according to the [Mental Health America Fact Sheet on Gun Deaths, Violence, and Mental Health](#), 95-97 percent of homicidal gun violence is not carried out by individuals with mental health conditions. To say otherwise is misleading and wrongfully points a finger at tens of millions of people who have experienced or are living with mental health conditions.

Previous violence is the only evidence-based predictor of future violence. Having a history of violence, youth justice-involvement, physical interpersonal abuse, and parental justice-involvement are the key predictors of future violence.

DBSA believes our policymakers must begin to address the root causes of violence. We endorse the recommendations put forward by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing in its [August 2019 report](#). Included among those recommendations are the following:

- Pass legislation to increase the availability of threat assessment training at the local, state, tribal and national levels.
- Enact state red flag or extreme-risk protection orders that allow the temporary removal of guns from individuals who are known to pose a high risk of harming others or themselves in the near future.
- Fully implement the existing federal background check requirement for firearms purchases.

