

Media coverage of mass shootings contributes to negative attitudes towards mental illness

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News stories about mass shootings involving a shooter with mental illness heighten readers' negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness, according to a new report by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The researchers also examined how such news stories impact support for policies to reduce gun violence. Compared to study respondents who did not read a story about a mass shooting, reading a news article describing a mass shooting raised readers' support for both gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, and for a ban on large-capacity ammunition magazines. The results, are published in the April issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and have important implications for advocates and policy makers who promote gun safety policy.

"The aftermath of mass shootings is often viewed as a window of opportunity to garner support for policies to reduce gun violence, and this study finds public support for such policies increases after reading news stories about a mass shooting," said lead study author Emma (Beth) E. McGinty, MS, a PhD candidate with the Johns Hopkins Center for [Gun Policy](#) and Research, part of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "However, we also found that the public's negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness are exacerbated by news media accounts of mass shootings involving a shooter with mental illness."

Research shows most persons with serious mental illness are not violent, and the relationship between serious mental illness and gun violence is complex and influenced by factors such as substance use. The [stigmatization](#) of people with mental illness may lead to a reluctance to seek treatment or raise other barriers to care.

McGinty and colleagues used a national online sample of 1,797 adults in the U.S., and randomly assigned respondents to four groups: a control group which did not read any news story, a group which read a news story describing a mass shooting by a person with a serious mental illness, a group which read a news story describing the same mass shooting that also described a proposal for gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, and a group which read a story describing the same mass shooting that also described a proposal to ban large-capacity magazines. Key findings included:

- News stories describing a mass shooting perpetrated by a person with mental illness heightened [negative attitudes](#) toward persons with serious mental illness, as well as raised support for gun restriction for persons with mental illness and policies to ban large-capacity magazine. Among study respondents that read a news story describing a mass shooting, 79% supported gun policy measures with restrictions for the mentally ill, compared to 71% in the control group. Fifty-four percent of respondents who read a news story of a mass shooting thought persons with serious mental illness were likely to be dangerous, compared to 40% in the control group.
- Including information about proposed gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness or a ban on large-capacity magazines in a [news story](#) did not affect attitudes towards the mentally ill compared with the story describing a shooting that didn't mention a policy response.

"While our study confirms news stories on mass shootings involving a shooter with mental illness contribute to negative perceptions of mental illness, our study results indicate that discussions of gun policies designed to keep firearms from individuals who have a serious mental illness do not lead to greater stigma," said study author Daniel Webster, ScD, MPH, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. "As states across the U.S. consider restrictions on gun access among those with serious mental illness, future research should examine whether such policies deter people with mental illness from seeking treatment."

A public opinion survey conducted earlier this year by the same researchers found a large degree of ambivalence among Americans on the topic of mental illness and guns: Almost half of respondents believed that people with serious mental illness are more dangerous than members of the general population, but less than a third believed that locating a group residence for people with mental illness in a residential neighborhood would endanger area residents. Two-thirds (61%) of respondents supported increased government spending on mental health care as a strategy for reducing [gun violence](#).

Colleen Barry, PhD, MPP, an associate professor with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, is also an author of [Effects of News Media Messages About Mass Shootings on Attitudes Towards Persons with Serious Mental Illness](#) and [Public Support for Gun Control Policies](#).

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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