Missed The Mark: Gun Control Is Not The Cure For What Ails The U.S. Mental Health System

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MISSING THE MARK:

GUN CONTROL IS NOT THE CURE FOR WHAT AILS THE U.S. MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

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Recent gun control legislation aimed at removing guns from the hands of the mentally ill in order to reduce violence is misguided. In fact, this only contributes to the mistaken belief that there is a direct link between mental illness and violence. This Article suggests that instead, policymakers should be focusing on modifying existing restrictive mental health laws and increasing the funding needed to provide adequate mental health services in the community. Family members, the community, and the individuals themselves must have access to adequate resources and support systems to increase the individual’s chance of recovery and stability. In light of recent tragedies, a better solution to reducing gun violence includes offering community programs and preventive training in educational and workplace environments to allow for early detection and

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intervention. The current system does not support those in need of treatment and only serves to exacerbate the stigma associated with mental illness.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent mass shootings such as those at a grocery store in Tucson, Arizona,¹ an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut² and the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.,³ have motivated state governments across the

³ On September 16, 2013, thirty-four-year-old Aaron Alexis killed twelve people and wounded eight others in a mass shooting at a military facility at the Washington Navy Yard. Michael D. Shear & Michael S. Schmidt, 12 Shot to Death by Lone Gunman at a Naval
country to draft policies that would more strictly limit the gun rights of those with mental illness. These policies contribute to the belief that all individuals with mental illness are dangerous. These tragedies repeatedly renew the debate over gun regulations as the appropriate response to gun violence, instead of raising awareness that these incidents may have been prevented if the perpetrator had received timely treatment. Policymakers have not focused on treatment, modified existing restrictive mental health laws, or increased funding for mental health services. Instead, they have concentrated on gun control and taking guns out of the hands of people who suffer from mental illness or behavioral health issues, as well as requiring mental health professionals to report dangerous people to the authorities.

The problem with tying mental illness to the gun control debate is that people assume those with mental illnesses are more prone to violence than those without these issues. The truth is that individuals falling into the category of “mentally ill” only account for a small fraction of all violent conduct. Simply having a mental illness is not a strong predictor of future violence. Individuals who have exhibited dangerous behaviors in the past, have a criminal record, or have a history of drug abuse, for example, are much more likely to commit future violent crimes. In fact, the risk of

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5 Katherine L. Record & Lawrence O. Gostin, Dangerous People or Dangerous Weapons: Keeping Arms away from the Dangerous in the Wake of an Expansive Reading of the Second Amendment, ADMIN. & REG. L. NEWS, Summer 2012, at 8, 8.
6 Katherine B. Cook, Revising Assisted Outpatient Treatment Statutes in Indiana: Providing Mental Health Treatment for Those in Need, 9 IND. HEALTH L. REV. 661, 662 (2012).
7 See Luo & McIntire, supra note 4 (stating that the recent mental health debate focuses mostly “on two areas: requiring mental health professionals to report dangerous people to the authorities and expanding the mental health criteria for revoking gun rights”).
11 Id. See also James B. Jacobs & Jennifer Jones, Keeping Firearms out of the Hands of
violence, if any, by a person suffering from a serious mental illness may increase when the proper treatment, support, and medication are not available.\textsuperscript{12}

Many shootings, whether on a college campus or in a workplace setting, could be prevented not solely through stricter gun control laws,\textsuperscript{13} but rather through a higher level of mental health awareness in these respective communities and increased funding for community and support services. Unfortunately, funding for mental health care has diminished significantly; over the past few years, states have cut approximately $4.35 billion from their mental health care budgets.\textsuperscript{14} While it is important to control access to firearms by those who are prone to violence (not just those with mental illness), it is more important that we fix the flawed mental health system, starting with increasing the funding for, and availability of, mental health services.

This Article will examine the ways in which recent gun control laws in the United States do or do not address relevant mental health issues. Part I presents an overview of mental illness and the importance of ongoing treatment throughout an individual’s lifetime. Part II discusses different current gun control laws across the United States and evaluates their impact on the mental health community. Part III explains the concerns of medical and mental health professionals, including the impact on doctor-patient relationships and confidentiality issues, among others. Part IV explores possible improvements to gun control laws and to the broken mental health system, such as the use of Behavioral Intervention Teams in educational and workplace environments. Finally, the Conclusion reinforces the argument that providing better mental health care resources for those with mental illness will do more in the long run to reduce violence than more stringent gun control laws.


\textsuperscript{13} Morgan Stanley, Comment, \textit{Gun Control Is Not Enough: The Need to Address Mental Illness to Prevent Incidences of Mass Public Violence}, 15 Scholar 875, 877 (2013). “The failure to take notice of warning signs, bullying, violent role models, drug use, [and] societal encouragement of violence and extremism,” among others, are all potential reasons that gun violence occurs. \textit{Id.}

I. UNDERSTANDING MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness refers to a diagnosed medical condition that “often result[s] in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.”\(^\text{15}\) The significant behavioral or psychological symptoms of these illnesses result in the impaired ability to think, feel, and relate to others.\(^\text{16}\) Early identification and access to treatment are extremely important when it comes to reducing symptoms and improving one’s quality of life.\(^\text{17}\) There is no “cure” for mental illness;\(^\text{18}\) in order to experience relief from symptoms, treatment (i.e., psychiatric medication, psychotherapy, brain-stimulation treatments, hospitalizations, residential treatment programs, or substance abuse counseling and support groups)\(^\text{19}\) must continue over the individual’s lifetime.\(^\text{20}\)

The recovery or treatment process can span a lifetime, meaning that the individual participating needs individual strength, insight, supportive relationships, and community services in order to function in society.\(^\text{21}\) There are two major aspects of recovery: first, stabilizing symptoms and restoring social function and, second, changing one’s attitudes and feelings, and developing a new meaning or purpose in one’s life.\(^\text{22}\) The key to both


\(^{16}\) NAT’L ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS, supra note 15.


\(^{20}\) See NAT’L ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS, supra note 18. It is interesting to note, however, that for certain mental illnesses, there may not be a “cure,” but there is a possibility that the individual no longer meets the criteria for diagnosis after a period of treatment.


\(^{22}\) MIKE SLADE, RETHINK RECOVERY SERIES VOL. 1, 100 WAYS TO SUPPORT RECOVERY 4
aspects, however, is having a support system; a support group, therapist, friends, or family members are essential as the individual goes through the challenges of recovery. Working with a mental health professional can help the individual achieve treatment goals. The reality is that there are sometimes severe consequences for the individual if a mental illness goes untreated: unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, incarceration, and suicide, among others. Through the use of medications and therapeutic services, most individuals suffering from a mental illness can minimize the impact of that mental illness on their life and experience some level of recovery.

Despite the beneficial outcomes that individuals can experience from adequate mental health care, significant barriers exist, blocking access to that care. The high cost of mental health care, the shortage of mental health professionals around the country, and the public’s negative attitudes about mental illness all prevent individuals from seeking help. Additionally, and with harmful consequences, recent gun control legislation targets the mentally ill which exacerbates the stigma about violence and mental illness and may deter individuals from seeking the care they need.

23 See Diane R. Gehart, The Mental Health Recovery Movement and Family Therapy, Part I: Consumer-Led Reform of Services to Persons Diagnosed with Severe Mental Illness, 38 J. MARITAL & FAM. THERAPY 429, 433 (2012); Recovery, MENTAL HEALTH FOUND., http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/R/recovery/ (last visited Aug. 24, 2014), archived at http://perma.cc/AA2D-7JJL. Challenges include patients’ potential lack of insight that they have a mental illness and need treatment for it, as well as adverse side effects from psychiatric medication. Cook, supra note 6, at 666–67. Stigma and a lack of available services are further challenges that many individuals must overcome.


26 Cook, supra note 6, at 668 n.45 (“Most people with serious mental illness need medication to help control symptoms.” (internal quotation marks and citation omitted)); NAT’L ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS, supra note 25.

II. GUN CONTROL LAWS AROUND THE UNITED STATES

The purpose of the federal and state gun reporting laws is to ensure that communities across the United States are safe from gun violence. In order to achieve this objective, those gun laws should be based on propensity or actual violence, not mental illness. “[R]eactionary gun control legislation” fails to halt violent gun crime,” however, “because [it] do[es] not address the root causes of gun crime.” Nevertheless, several states passed measures aimed specifically at keeping people who are mentally ill from accessing guns. State legislatures must acknowledge that it is more effective to aim our efforts at preventative mental health measures than to engage in endless gun control debate. This Part will discuss different gun control laws across the United States and explore their impact on the mental health system, highlighting two states that have recently targeted the mentally ill.

A. NEW YORK

After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the first gun control bill to become law was the New York Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement Act of 2013 (“SAFE Act”). The SAFE Act is a prime example of “reactionary gun control legislation” as it was essentially passed overnight. The intention behind passing the SAFE Act


29 Id. at 319. See Consortium for Risk-Based Firearms Policy Recommends Evidence-Based Changes to State and Federal Gun Policies, supra note 10, at 6, for a list of “categories of individuals at high risk of [gun] violence.”

30 See Mental Health Reporting Policy Summary, LAW CTR. TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE (Sept. 16, 2013), http://smartgunlaws.org/mental-health-reporting-policy-summary/, archived at http://perma.cc/8LQU-6RCQ (“Forty-three states have laws that require or authorize the reporting of some mentally ill people to the federal NICS database or a state database for use in firearm purchaser background checks.”).


32 See Barron, supra note 2.


34 Kaloyares, supra note 28, at 330.

35 The New York SAFE Act passed the New York State Senate on January 14, 2013,
was to enhance public safety by preventing “criminals and the dangerously mentally ill” from purchasing a gun through the use of universal background checks. This legislation significantly impacts all mental health professionals, but was created with “seemingly little input from [them].”

Certain mental health professionals in New York are now required to report patients they deem dangerous to themselves or others. The SAFE Act establishes Section 9.46 of the New York Mental Hygiene Law, which requires “physician[s], psychologist[s], registered nurse[s], [and] licensed clinical social worker[s]” to report patients they believe are “likely to engage in conduct that would result in serious harm to self or others” to county authorities. This standard, as defined in Section 9.01 of the Mental Hygiene Law, means “threats of or attempts at suicide or serious bodily harm” to self or “homicidal or other violent behavior” towards others. The reporting requirement, which went into effect in March 2013, allows the state—after following a long and laborious procedure—to revoke a person’s firearms license and confiscate any weapons. “[E]ven if [the] mental health clinician believes that the patient would respond well to treatment and has no reason to believe the patient owns [or has access to] a gun,” the professional must report the patient.


38 N.Y. MENTAL HYG. LAW § 9.46(b) (McKinney Supp. 2014).
39 Id. § 9.46(a).
40 Id. § 9.46(b).
41 N.Y. MENTAL HYG. LAW §§ 9.01(a), (b) (McKinney 2011).
In an attempt to improve public safety, the SAFE Act created a statewide database of firearms license holders maintained by the New York State Police, which uses the database to determine whether a particular individual is qualified to possess a firearm.\textsuperscript{44} Through this provision, individuals who are the subject of a mental health professional’s determination that they are likely to engage in dangerous behavior are disqualified.\textsuperscript{45} The SAFE Act amends the Mental Hygiene Law to require the Office of Mental Health (OMH) and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) to transmit the information that is being submitted to the federal database\textsuperscript{46} to the New York Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to determine whether a person possesses a firearms license, and if so, suspend or revoke that license.\textsuperscript{47} The person must then surrender their license and all firearms;\textsuperscript{48} if they do not, the police are authorized to remove such weapons.\textsuperscript{49}

Lastly, the SAFE Act expands New York State’s Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) law, known as Kendra’s Law,\textsuperscript{50} which allows courts to order individuals who have a history of noncompliance with treatment to receive mental health services and treatment while living in the community (instead of commitment to a psychiatric facility).\textsuperscript{51} For example, the SAFE Act extends the duration of the initial court order of AOT from six months to one year\textsuperscript{52} and extends the AOT law until June 30, 2017.\textsuperscript{53}


\textsuperscript{45} Id. at 2.


\textsuperscript{47} N.Y. MENTAL HYG. LAW § 9.46 (McKinney Supp. 2014).

\textsuperscript{48} Id.


\textsuperscript{50} N.Y. MENTAL HYG. LAW § 9.60 (McKinney Supp. 2014).


\textsuperscript{52} New York Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement (SAFE) Act, 2013 N.Y. Sess. Laws 1 (McKinney) (amending MENTAL HYG. § 9.60(j)(2)).

\textsuperscript{53} MENTAL HYG. § 9.60.
There are several issues with the reporting requirement and the attempted expansion of AOT. The concerns of medical and mental health professionals with respect to the reporting requirements in the new gun control legislation are discussed further in Part IV. As for the problems with the AOT expansion, the SAFE Act did not provide for increased funding to effectuate this expansion. An AOT order must include care coordination through the use of case management or Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams. Other possible components of an AOT order include alcohol or substance abuse counseling, blood or urinalysis testing for alcohol or illegal substances, medication management, and supportive housing. Without proper funding, the SAFE Act’s expansion of AOT is unlikely to be implemented successfully. It seems that New York’s reactionary gun control legislation is in need of major and realistic reform.

B. ILLINOIS

Illinois also recently passed legislation to make it easier to prevent those with severe mental illness from purchasing a gun, but avoided addressing the underlying need for reformation of the flawed mental health system. The Firearm Concealed Carry Act was passed in July 2013 and went into effect in January 2014. A provision contained within this legislation, the Firearm Owner Identification (FOID) Mental Health Reporting System, tightens the requirements of criminal and mental health background checks on applicants.

Additionally, and analogous to New York’s system, some mental health practitioners are required under the new law to report potentially dangerous patients, which may harm doctor–patient trust. Specifically, physicians, clinical psychologists, and qualified examiners must report

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54 See infra Part IV.
55 MENTAL HYG. § 9.60(a)(1).
56 Id.
58 § 66; Rubin & Glanton, supra note 57.
60 Rubin & Glanton, supra note 57.
61 Qualified examiners include clinical social workers, registered nurses, licensed clinical professional counselors, and licensed marriage and family therapists. 405 ILL. COMP. STAT. ANN. § 5/1-122 (West 2011).
patients determined to pose “a clear and present danger”62 or to be developmentally disabled63 to the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS).64 The IDHS then cross-references the reported individuals with the Department of State Police FOID database and reports any matches to the police.65 The Act grants the police the authority to deny an application for a FOID card or revoke and seize a FOID card.66 It seems this system was created with the intention of reducing gun violence by taking guns away from the mentally ill. The system as it stands, however, compromises doctor–patient confidentiality and directly associates mental illness with violence.67

C. OTHER STATE GUN CONTROL POLICIES

While federal lawmakers failed to make any progress,68 several states passed gun control bills with the goal of preventing gun violence.69 For

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62 “Clear and present danger” is defined as “a person who . . . communicates a serious threat of physical violence against a reasonably identifiable victim or poses a clear and imminent risk of serious physical injury to himself, herself, or another person.” Firearm Owners Identification Card Act, 430 ILL. COMP. STAT. ANN. § 65/1.1 (West 2014).
63 Id. § 65/8.1(d)(1).
64 Id.
65 Id. § 65/8.1(c)–(d). To possess or purchase firearms or ammunition, Illinois residents must have a FOID card, which is issued by the Illinois State Police. Id. § 65/2.
66 Id. § 65/8.
67 See infra Part III (discussing concerns of medical and mental health professionals when it comes to the reporting requirements in new gun control legislation).
68 There was not a single federal law passed in the year after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that was aimed at gun violence prevention, including legislation to expand background checks. Lindsey Boerma, One Year After Newtown, Congress Still Stalled on Gun Control, CBS NEWS (Dec. 14, 2013, 7:02 AM), http://www.cbsnews.com/news/one-year-after-newtown-congress-still-stalled-on-gun-control/, archived at http://perma.cc/4BRY-FVED. In April 2013, the Senate blocked a plan to expand background checks as well as several other gun control measures. Jonathan Weisman, Gun Control Drive Blocked in Senate; Obama, in Defeat, Sees ‘Shameful Day’, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 18, 2013, at A1. President Barack Obama referred to this failure as “a pretty shameful day for Washington.” Id.
example, Colorado,\textsuperscript{70} Connecticut,\textsuperscript{71} Delaware,\textsuperscript{72} Maryland,\textsuperscript{73} Nevada,\textsuperscript{74} New Jersey,\textsuperscript{75} and New York\textsuperscript{76} “now require background checks for all gun purchases in person or online, including at gun shows.”\textsuperscript{77} Even states with historically weak gun laws, such as Florida,\textsuperscript{78} Missouri,\textsuperscript{79} and Texas,\textsuperscript{80} took action to strengthen their gun control laws in 2013. These states and many others adopted new gun control provisions or laws with varying degrees of consequences for the mental health world.

\textsuperscript{72} Delaware requires background checks for all private gun sales. \textit{Del. Code Ann. tit. 11, § 1448A(a)} (Supp. 2012).  
\textsuperscript{77} Clark, \textit{supra} note 69.  
\textsuperscript{78} Florida expanded existing state law to restrict anyone who is voluntarily committed for treatment from purchasing a gun. \textit{Fla. Stat. Ann.} § 790.065(2)(a)(4)(b)(II) (West Supp. 2014); \textit{Florida Mental Illness Gun Control Bill Passes}, \textit{Huffington Post} (Apr. 30, 2013, 3:37 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/30/florida-guns-mentally-ill_n_3187474.html, \textit{archived at} http://perma.cc/N3V3-3E6Q. Now those individuals will be reported to Florida’s Mental Competency Database (MECOM) and to the NICS. \textit{Id.} Previously, only those individuals who were involuntarily committed under Florida’s Baker Act were prohibited from purchasing a gun. \textit{Id.}  
\textsuperscript{80} S.B. 1189, 83d Leg. Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2013). Texas has implemented new regulations that allow law enforcement to confiscate weapons from individuals in mental health crisis situations. Dan Freedman, \textit{State Revises Mental Crisis Policy}, \textit{Hous. Chron.}, Oct. 19, 2013, at A1. Texas law states that police cannot give a seized weapon back to the individual if he or she has had court-ordered in-patient psychiatric treatment. \textit{Id.}
The sad truth is that none of the recently enacted state gun laws will likely prevent major acts of gun violence. For example, the mental health professionals who examined Adam Lanza said he was not a risk to himself or to others. Further, Lanza used guns and ammunition purchased legally by his mother. Aaron Alexis was never convicted of a crime or involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital, both of which might have led to his name being entered into a federal database. Instead of developing new legislation focused on keeping guns out of the hands of those with mental illness, legislation should call for increased funding and awareness of mental health issues that will help identify, intervene, evaluate, and oversee the mentally ill. Being proactive and preventive means a greater possibility of treatment, recovery and stability for those individuals suffering from a mental illness.

III. CONCERNS OF MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

A. BARRIERS TO SEEKING TREATMENT

Recent gun control legislation creates a barrier to participation in counseling and treatment and further stigmatizes those suffering from a mental illness. Instead of focusing on treatment and recovery, new gun control legislation asks mental health professionals to predict which patients may act on their violent thoughts. This type of legislation adds to the negative stereotype that individuals with mental illness are more prone to violence. For the most part, medical and mental health practitioners are frustrated with recent attempts to legislate gun restrictions and sweep in mental illness.

81 See Barron, supra note 2.
82 Clark, supra note 69.
83 Id.
84 See Shear & Schmidt, supra note 3.
85 See 18 U.S.C. § 922(d)(4) (2012) (prohibiting the sale of firearms to certain individuals with a history of mental illness); id. § 922(t)(1)(A) (requiring licensed dealers to request a background check prior to transfer of a firearm); Rubin & Glanton, supra note 57.
86 Dinah Miller, Gun Control and Mandatory Reporting of Dangerous Patients, PSYCHOL. TODAY (Jan. 22, 2013) http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shrink-rap-today/201301/gun-control-and-mandatory-reporting-dangerous-patients, archived at http://perma.cc/XG9H-68S7. See, e.g., N.Y. MENTAL HYG. LAW § 9.46(b) (McKinney Supp. 2014) (requiring mental health professionals to report to the director of community services when such professionals “determine[ ], in the exercise of reasonable professional judgment, that [a patient] is likely to engage in conduct that would result in serious harm to self or others”).
B. THREATENING THE DUTY OF CONFIDENTIALITY

New gun control laws that contain provisions requiring certain mental health professionals to report patients to the state, such as the New York SAFE Act, are quite troubling. “The duty of confidentiality between a doctor and patient is one of the core guiding principles of the practice of medicine.”

In order to effectively treat individuals with mental illness, patients must trust that any “disclosure of their inner thoughts and feelings[,] including anger, hostilities, and resentments”—is kept confidential. This type of reporting requirement amounts to an invasion of patient privacy, forcing the professional to break a perceived bond of confidentiality and causing a “chilling effect” on those seeking help.

The mental health reporting requirements recently passed by many state legislatures threaten doctor–patient trust; patients may fear that their openness will lead to a report to a federal or state database and may jeopardize their current or future employment and gun license. This directly impacts the formation of a doctor–patient relationship and may cut off the mentally ill from the social support and medical or mental health care that is necessary for their recovery. This type of legislation may have the unintended consequence of reducing the number of individuals who seek treatment, which, in turn, could result in an increase of the occurrence


89 Press Release, N.Y. State Psychiatric Ass’n, supra note 88.


91 See LAW CTR. TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE, supra note 30.


93 Ritter & Tanner, supra note 87 (quoting Dr. Paul Appelbaum, Columbia University) (stating that people who need treatment may not report their “disturbing impulses” or may not seek treatment at all).
of suicide or violence. Treatment is an essential piece of recovery from a mental illness, and new mental health reporting systems pose “one more obstacle” to obtaining such treatment.\textsuperscript{95}

There are reporting rules already in place whereby mental health professionals do not have to potentially break a bond of trust. For example, “[m]ental-health professionals already have an ethical obligation to respond to threats of violence, such as warning potential victims of possible threats.”\textsuperscript{96} The common law duty to warn was initially articulated in a 1976 California Supreme Court case, \textit{Tarasoff v. Regents}.\textsuperscript{97} The \textit{Tarasoff} court held that when a mental health professional determines that a patient poses a serious danger of violence to another individual, the professional has an “obligation to use reasonable care to protect the intended victim against such danger.”\textsuperscript{98} Since 1976, “duty to warn” statutes were adopted in most jurisdictions and have expanded to include a wide variety of health care practitioners.\textsuperscript{99} Unlike the permissive \textit{Tarasoff} duty to warn, recent gun control laws, such as the New York SAFE Act, mandate reporting and allow for police to remove an individual’s firearms.\textsuperscript{100} The new mandatory reporting laws in many states require clinicians to break confidentiality before exhausting clinical remedies.\textsuperscript{101} While new gun control legislation may enhance public safety, it comes at a price: creating another barrier for those pursuing treatment.

C. ALIENATING THOSE WHO NEED TREATMENT

The stigma associated with mental illness is prevalent among the individuals who suffer from a mental illness as well as among the general public.\textsuperscript{94}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{94} Miller, \textit{supra} note 86.
\bibitem{96} El-Ghobashy, \textit{supra} note 92.
\bibitem{97} \textit{Tarasoff v. Regents} of Univ. of Cal., 551 P.2d 334 (Cal. 1976).
\bibitem{98} \textit{Id.} at 340. The professional can fulfill that duty by notifying police that an individual may be in danger, warning the potential victim, or by taking other reasonable steps to protect the threatened individual. \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{101} El-Ghobashy, \textit{supra} note 92.
\end{thebibliography}
population. The stigma adversely affects the mentally ill individual’s “pursuit of treatment, employment and income, self-worth, and family.” Many individuals suffering from a mental illness report that the way in which other people judge them is “one of their greatest barriers to a complete and satisfying life.” An individual’s willingness to comply with treatment is adversely affected by the stigma associated with having a mental illness. Stigma affects self-esteem, social functioning, and willingness to comply with medications. To further compound the negative stereotype, mental illness is commonly associated with violence. Stigma has led to fear, prejudice, and discrimination toward individuals suffering from a mental illness. The negative portrayal of mental illness in the media exacerbates the misinformation about mental illness available to the public and contributes to the fact that stigma is “the most formidable obstacle to future progress in the arena of mental illness.”

The negative portrayal of mental illness in the media exacerbates the misinformation about mental illness available to the public and contributes to the fact that stigma is “the most formidable obstacle to future progress in the arena of mental illness.” Media coverage often solidifies the mistaken belief that these individuals should be avoided or feared due to their propensity for violence and unpredictability. Pictures of James Holmes with his hair dyed orange; Jared Loughner’s mugshot grin; and

103 DAVID WHALEN, CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASS’N, THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS 2, http://www.cmhanl.ca/pdf/Stigma.pdf, archived at http://perma.cc/6NX3-W3NR; see also Bruce G. Link et al., The Consequences of Stigma for the Self-Esteem of People with Mental Illnesses, 52 PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES 1621, 1621 (2001) (finding that the stigma of mental illness can lead to a significant loss of self-esteem as well as discrimination in the workplace).
105 Deborah A. Perlick, Special Section on Stigma as a Barrier to Recovery: Introduction, 52 PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES 1613, 1613 (2001).
108 WHALEN, supra note 103, at 2.
109 Perlick, supra note 105, at 1613 (quoting the Surgeon General’s 1999 report on mental health) (internal quotation marks omitted).
110 CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASS’N, supra note 104.
images of Seung-Hui Cho holding a gun to his head incite fear, rather than understanding. After the passage of the NY SAFE Act in January 2013, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said “people who have mental health issues should not have guns . . . they could hurt themselves. They could hurt other people.” Statements like this, especially made by individuals in a position of power, add to the misconception that all individuals with a mental illness are violent.

The truth is that mental illness is not a major risk factor when it comes to potential for violence. In fact, the U.S. Surgeon General has found that “the overall contribution of mental disorders to the total level of violence in society is exceptionally small.” Most individuals suffering from mental illness are more often victims of violence than perpetrators. However, if an individual suffering from mental illness is aggressive or violent, treating that individual significantly decreases any potential for violence. Treatment—such as the use of antipsychotic medications or court-ordered assisted outpatient treatment—has resulted in the reduction of aggressive behavior or violence. By stigmatizing mental illness and associating it
with violence, we are depriving many individuals of the opportunity to participate in treatment and improve their quality of life.

For individuals with mental illness to recover, meaning “live, work, learn and participate fully in their communities,” those individuals must receive treatment and support. This means that as a society, we should be more accepting and respectful of those individuals suffering from a mental illness. Education and raising awareness about mental illness is possibly the best way to reduce stigma and increase understanding. Evidence shows that individuals who are well informed about mental illness are less likely to stigmatize the mentally ill. Preventing discrimination is equally important; we should not discriminate against those with mental illness when it comes to housing, employment or education. Stigma against individuals with mental illness prevents many of them from seeking treatment and denies them access to the support systems they need to recover.

IV. IMPROVING THE FLAWED MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

When reflecting on the recent tragic events in the United States involving gun violence, it seems that the gaps in the nation’s mental health

121 Whalen, supra note 103, at 4.
123 “[T]he stigma related to housing [is] labelled as ‘Not in My Back Yard,’” meaning that residents of a community may wish to exclude mentally ill individuals from moving into their community. Whalen, supra note 103, at 2.
124 Individuals suffering from a mental illness may have difficulties securing employment, lose respect or responsibility, or experience a lack of opportunity to advance in the workplace. Elaine Brohan & Graham Thornicroft, Stigma and Discrimination of Mental Health Problems: Workplace Implications, 60 Occupational Med. 414, 414 (2010).
125 Higher education administrators often take harsh disciplinary action against students with mental illness. Kim Lachance Shandrow, Discrimination Against Students with Mental Health Issues on the Rise, HealthCentral, http://www.healthcentral.com/depression/news-210912-5.html (last visited Sept. 6, 2014), archived at http://perma.cc/LQ88-ADLZ. Students may be forced to leave campus after seeking help for mental health issues rather than being offered counseling and treatment. Id. Schools fear violent outbursts and liability issues. Id. Furthermore, many higher education settings do not have sufficient funding or services available, both of which are necessary to treat students with mental health issues, forcing students to drop out. Darcy Gruttardaro & Dana Crudo, Nat’l Alliance on Mental Illness, College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health 8, 12–18 (2012), available at https://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Find_Support/NAMI_on_Campus/collegereport.pdf, archived at http://perma.cc/4GXN-S3DF.
126 Canadian Mental Health Ass’n, supra note 104.
system, rather than loose gun laws, are to blame. Gun legislation is not effective at keeping guns out of the hands of a dangerous individual before an act of violence occurs, and the mental health system has failed to identify those individuals who are a danger to themselves or others. Many Americans simply are not getting the mental health care that they need, a sad truth that is only exacerbated by budget cuts and closings of mental health facilities. A better solution is to (1) amend current state mental health laws to increase funding and provide more readily accessible and comprehensive mental health services; (2) offer community programs and preventive training to allow for early interventions; and (3) fix the flaws in the federal and state background check systems.

A. ALLOCATING RESOURCES AND INCREASING ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT AT THE STATE LEVEL

While strengthening gun laws is an important piece of reducing gun violence, the bigger issue is the need for funding of mental health treatment and the need for increased access to such services. However, and quite shockingly, states have made significant budget cuts to mental health programs and resources over the past several years. From fiscal year 2009 through 2012, states cut mental health budgets by a combined amount...
of $4.35 billion. The services affected “include community and hospital-based psychiatric care, [supportive] housing, and access to medications.” For example, in Illinois, state budget cuts of approximately $114 million between 2009 and 2011 led to the closure of six of the twelve mental health clinics that existed in Chicago. These budget cuts, in Illinois and around the country, eliminate essential services to those with mental illness.

Reducing the availability of necessary programs and support services can worsen conditions and have an adverse effect on communities around the country. Cutting mental health budgets so drastically forces individuals with mental illness to overwhelm emergency rooms, community hospitals, homeless shelters, and correctional facilities. The costs of emergency treatment and the use of law enforcement personnel and resources will force states to spend more money in the long run. Individuals suffering from a mental illness need increased access to and funding for AOT, outpatient treatment programs, residential treatment programs, psychiatric case management, and appropriate psychiatric housing, among others.

Access to adequate mental health services and compliance with court-ordered treatment are essential components of the recovery process. Aaron Alexis was exhibiting signs of mental illness for many years leading up to the tragic shooting; he is a prime example of an individual with a mental illness who was living in the community, but not receiving adequate community-based mental health services. If Alexis’s red flag behaviors were identified and treated—perhaps after one of his multiple run-ins with the law and naval officials—the shooting at the Navy Yard could have

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130 Maciag, supra note 14.
131 Honberg et al., supra note 12, at 1.
133 Fisher, supra note 129.
134 Honberg et al., supra note 12, at 4 (stating that the consequences of decreased funding and services “include frequent visits to emergency rooms, hospitalizations, homelessness, entanglement with juvenile and criminal justice systems, . . . premature deaths and suicides”).
135 Id. at 1.
136 See id. at 8.
137 See Ben Wolfgang, Aaron Alexis’ History Renews Debate Between Mental Issues, Gun Crimes, WASH. TIMES (Sept. 18, 2013), http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/18/shooters-history-renews-debate-between-mental-issues/?page=all, archived at http://perma.cc/832Q-EQGU. Alexis may have been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as paranoia, hearing voices, and other issues. Id.
138 Alexis was involved in two shooting incidents in 2004 and 2010 in Fort Worth, Texas and Seattle, Washington. Kevin Johnson et al., Signs of Trouble, but Motive a Mystery, USA
been prevented. Keeping people with mental illness in the community rather than in a more costly acute or long-term hospital care is a good idea in theory, but, in reality, there is insufficient planning, funding, and support for these community-based services and for oversight such as psychiatric case management.

Pennsylvania Representative Tim Murphy took a step in the right direction when he introduced legislation in December 2013 aimed at solving many of the problems raised by mental health professionals, individuals, and families suffering because of the broken mental health system. The Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013 proposes increased funding for AOT programs and mental health courts as alternatives to inpatient hospitalization, among many other reforms. Representative Murphy also tackled the privacy issues of the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Specifically, Murphy proposed that caregivers should have access to the individual’s “protected health information” or “certain education records” to protect the “health, safety, or welfare of such individual.” This type of access, which enables family support, is crucial when it comes to recovery. With the proper community supports in place, individuals with mental illness will have an easier time transitioning from institutional settings to community-based care.

This country’s obsession with gun control as the means of reducing violence has steered us off-track; we must focus on allocating funds for mental health services and increasing the availability of these services for the mentally ill. Individuals living with mental illness can, and often do,
recover and gain independence. However, these individuals need the proper support system. Individuals suffering from a mental illness, whether they are homeless, involved in the criminal justice system, or living in adult homes or nursing homes, must receive services that will focus on recovery and enhance their quality of life.

B. PREVENTATIVE TRAINING AND BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAMS IN EDUCATIONAL AND WORKPLACE COMMUNITIES

Too often, families, peers, or the community know of an individual who is experiencing psychiatric symptoms, but do not know how to react or help. On the other hand, family members, friends, or the community at large often fail to take notice of warning signs or red flags that forewarn of an act of violence. In educational or workplace environments, it is problematic that managers, supervisors, human resource professionals, coworkers, administrators, faculty, and staff are often untrained in recognizing and preventing violence. Providing these people with an education in conflict resolution, and in early recognition and management of escalating behavior or warning signs, is essential and should be mandatory. Furthermore, communities should offer support programs designed to educate families and the public about mental illness. Overall, increased awareness and education “will lead to more effective, timely interventions that can prevent tragedies.”

Many school and workplace environments have already created Behavioral Intervention Teams (BIT), a step in the right direction towards “preventing and ameliorating distress [in the workplace or] on

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145 Id. This may also include providing support to family members who house and care for individuals with mental illness. See Mental Illness and the Family: Recognizing Warning Signs and How to Cope, MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA, http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/recognizing-warning-signs (last visited Sept. 6, 2014), archived at http://perma.cc/65AY-HGQJ.

146 Stanley, supra note 13, at 877.

147 See Stephen J. Romano et al., Workplace Violence Prevention: Readiness and Response, FBI L. ENFORCEMENT BULL., Jan. 2011, at 1, 5–6, available at http://leb.fbi.gov/2011/january/leb-january-2011, archived at http://perma.cc/6T9M-J57L (stating that those who have not been properly trained to deal with these stressful situations are often helpless when a crisis occurs).


149 Id.

Whether in a school or workplace environment, a BIT is a group of trained professionals from different disciplines within an organization that discusses and evaluates behaviors of concern that could precede a violent event. The BIT “receives reports of disruptive, problematic or concerning behavior or misconduct from coworkers, community members, friends, colleagues,” or students, among others. The overall purpose of a BIT is to gather information, investigate the allegations and possibly perform a threat assessment, define a plan or response, implement that response, and monitor the disposition of the case referred to it. The BIT may focus on assessing a threat that already exists or may focus on preventing a threat or crisis before it occurs.

Members of the BIT work together to identify early signs of a potential crisis, or “red flags,” rather than waiting for an impending threat and implementing an emergency response. The team is made up of individuals with specialized knowledge, such as health professionals (psychologists/counselors), academic affairs administrators, managers or supervisors, legal counsel, consulting mental health counsel, and law enforcement personnel. Interventions should incorporate the individual of concern, the educational administrators or workplace supervisors (when appropriate), other community resources, and the family (when appropriate) to support that individual. Different interventions include engaging directly with the person, referring the individual for mental health assessment or treatment, mandating psychological assessment, hospitalizing the individual involuntarily for evaluation or treatment, taking disciplinary action, or notifying family members. Every educational institution or workplace should have a BIT in place to mitigate risk and prepare for emergency situations.

151 JED FOUND., HIGHER EDUC. MENTAL HEALTH ALLIANCE, BALANCING SAFETY AND SUPPORT ON CAMPUS 32, http://www.jedfoundation.org/campus_teams_guide.pdf, archived at http://perma.cc/TD5W-N32P. See also id. at 3 (stating that the purpose of a BIT is to prevent instances of disturbing behavior from “falling through the organizational cracks” and to connect separate pieces of information that together may indicate a more serious problem).
153 Id.
154 However, none of this is possible if members of a campus community or workplace environment do not know that the BIT exists or how they can make a report to the team.
155 See NAT’L BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAM ASS’N., supra note 152.
156 Id.
157 Id.
158 JED FOUND., supra note 151, at 17.
To prevent dangerous situations, educational and workplace environments should have a system in place to connect small pieces of information that, together, may indicate a more serious problem. The BIT tracks red flag behaviors over time, which involves “detecting patterns, trends, and disturbances in individual or group behavior”\(^{159}\) such as aggression, resentment, lack of motivation, performance issues, behavior issues, paranoia, interest in weapons, financial problems, and personal problems, among others.\(^{160}\) The key to a successful BIT is communication. This means that departments across a college campus or within a workplace must communicate with each other when one of the above-mentioned concerning behaviors, or other disturbing behavior, occurs. Avenues must exist for students, staff, faculty, and employees to report concerning behaviors to their administrators or supervisors.\(^{161}\) Open communication between departments within an organization or school campus and with members of the campus or workplace community will contribute to the prevention of any particular instance of disturbing behavior from falling through the cracks.

The lack of information sharing on the Virginia Tech campus contributed to the failure of the university to identify Seung-Hui Cho as a potential threat of danger to himself and others and prevent the horrific tragedy of April 16, 2007.\(^{162}\) The Virginia Tech Police Department and Department of Residence Life knew that fellow students made complaints of stalking and unwanted communications against Cho on two separate occasions.\(^{163}\) Cho’s parents knew of his history of mental illness and struggles at school, both of which started in elementary school.\(^{164}\) His teachers in high school and his professors in college were aware of his strange behavior in class: he refused to talk, frightened classmates and faculty with his writings, and refused faculty advice to seek treatment at the counseling center.\(^{165}\) Even though the Virginia Tech campus had a CARE

\(^{159}\) NAT’l BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAM ASS’N, supra note 152.

\(^{160}\) See Mayo Clinic Staff, Mental Illness: Symptoms, MAYO CLINIC (May 3, 2014), http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/basics/symptoms/con-20033813, archived at perma.cc/VS5F-ZPSX, for a list of common symptoms of mental illness.


\(^{162}\) VA. TECH REVIEW PANEL, supra note 113, at 52.

\(^{163}\) Id. at 33–34.

\(^{164}\) Id. at 36, 41–43. It is important to note, however, that Cho was evaluated three times
individual members of the team and the team as a whole failed to see the bigger picture. Information was not shared appropriately among academic, administrative, counseling, and public safety departments. Further, the team lacked an expert on threat assessment who could have identified Cho as a substantial risk of danger to himself or others due to all of the red flag behaviors.

It is important that everyone in the workplace or educational environment work collectively to piece together little bits of information that, when organized all together, provide a bigger and more accurate picture of the individual of concern or the threat of violence. Too often tragedies have occurred because of a lack of dialogue between people with differing levels of information about a concerning individual; they fail to connect the dots. Increased training and forming a BIT on campus or in the workplace can prevent a potential threat or crisis before it occurs.

C. INCONSISTENT BACKGROUND CHECK POLICIES

Important pieces of legislation pertaining to state and federal background check databases have attempted to make it harder for certain individuals to purchase guns due to their criminal history and mental health records. Under the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, federal law requires gun dealers to perform a background check before selling a firearm. Further, in 2007, Congress passed the NICS Improvement Amendments Act in the wake of the April 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech to strengthen the background check system, improving how mental illness is reported. In January 2014, the Obama administration proposed new executive actions on gun background checks that would make it easier for


VA. TECH REVIEW PANEL, supra note 113, at 52. CARE stands for “Communicating Action Response for Emergency” or “Campus Assessment, Response and Evaluation.” JED FOUND., supra note 151, at 7. A CARE Team serves a similar purpose to a Behavioral Intervention Team. See NAT’L BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAM ASS’N., supra note 152.

VA. TECH REVIEW PANEL, supra note 113, at 52.

Id.


states to identify and submit certain mental health information to the federal background check system.\footnote{One proposal seeks to clarify that HIPAA does not “preclude states from submitting records to the FBI federal background check system for gun purchases.” Sy Mukherjee, The White House’s New Mental Health Regulations Are a Big Step Toward Gun Violence Prevention, THINK PROGRESS (Jan. 8, 2014, 4:07 PM), http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/01/08/3135021/federal-mental-health-background-checks-gun-violence/, archived at http://perma.cc/9Q55-JUPF (quoting Arkadi Gerney, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress). The other proposal would clarify that those who are involuntarily committed to a mental institution—both inpatient and outpatient—count under the law as “committed to a mental institution.” Ashley Parker, Actions Seek to Further Gun Control, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 4, 2014, at A11.} Filling these information gaps will better enable the system to keep guns out of the hands of persons prohibited by federal or state law from receiving or possessing firearms.\footnote{Perpetrators of gun violence such as Jared Loughner, Seung-Hui Cho, for example) does “not have a known history of mental illness on record or if their medical records were not reported to NICS, then a background check—which is part of [many state gun] licenses[ing] application[s]—would never reveal a problem.” Furthermore, states are}

Unfortunately, many states face state law barriers or lack the technology and resources to update NICS mental health and criminal history records.\footnote{See U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-12-684, GUN CONTROL: SHARING PROMISING PRACTICES AND ASSESSING INCENTIVES COULD BETTER POSITION JUSTICE TO ASSIST STATES IN PROVIDING RECORDS FOR BACKGROUND CHECKS 12 (2012).}

The ability to perform an effective background check on a prospective purchaser depends on the NICS database having complete, accurate information.\footnote{See LAW CTR. TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE, supra note 30.} Unfortunately, this is the biggest defect in our current system, for a variety of reasons. First, if an individual who plans to perpetrate a mass shooting (Jared Loughner, Adam Lanza, or Seung-Hui Cho, for example) does “not have a known history of mental illness on record or if their medical records were not reported to NICS, then a background check—which is part of [many state gun] licenses[ing] application[s]—would never reveal a problem.”\footnote{See Lacey & Herszenhorn, supra note 1.}

Second, states are required to use HIPAA to report mental health information to NICS, yet the information is not always complete or accurate.\footnote{See Barron, supra note 2.} For example, Cho did not ever attend the counseling center.\footnote{See Hauser & O’Connor, supra note 113.}

Seung-Hui Cho was diagnosed with severe social anxiety disorder and received therapy and special education support during his adolescence.\footnote{Seung-Hui Cho was able to purchase a gun due to these gaps in the background check system. Elise Foley, Virginia Tech Families Call on Congress to Fix Gun Background Checks, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 14, 2011, 6:00 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/14/virginia-tech-families-gun-background-checks_n_809395.html, archived at http://perma.cc/9J2F-GTYF.}

Virginia Tech initiated the process to have Cho committed to a mental hospital; however, the judge only ordered him to obtain outpatient treatment at the university’s counseling center.\footnote{Seung-Hui Cho were able to purchase a gun due to these gaps in the background check system. Elise Foley, Virginia Tech Families Call on Congress to Fix Gun Background Checks, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 14, 2011, 6:00 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/14/virginia-tech-families-gun-background-checks_n_809395.html, archived at http://perma.cc/9J2F-GTYF.} Id. at 56; Jacobs & Jones, supra note 11, at 400. Cho did not ever attend the counseling center.\footnote{Perpetrators of gun violence such as Jared Loughner and Seung-Hui Cho were able to purchase a gun due to these gaps in the background check system. Elise Foley, Virginia Tech Families Call on Congress to Fix Gun Background Checks, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 14, 2011, 6:00 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/14/virginia-tech-families-gun-background-checks_n_809395.html, archived at http://perma.cc/9J2F-GTYF.} Id. at 400–01. After this tragedy, Virginia tightened their gun control laws to improve reporting to the NICS.\footnote{Alexander C. DePalo, Note, The Doctor Will See You Now: An Argument for Amending the Licensing Process for Handguns in New York City, 29 Touro L. REV. 867, 876 (2013).}
not required to submit information to NICS under federal law.\textsuperscript{181} For states that do authorize or require that a report be made to NICS, many only require that a report be made within thirty days (Mississippi,\textsuperscript{182} Nebraska,\textsuperscript{183} Texas,\textsuperscript{184} and Utah\textsuperscript{185}) or “one month” (Florida\textsuperscript{186}). Between the time of the initial report and any restriction on gun purchases actually taking effect, the individual might have ample time to perpetrate a crime, harming him- or herself or others. Lastly, there are other individuals who are not mentally ill and who are not prohibited from purchasing a firearm but may exhibit dangerous behaviors indicating a risk of harm to him- or herself or others.\textsuperscript{187} Improving the background check system may prove valuable in the long run if we focus on preventing all dangerous individuals from accessing guns, not targeting only the mentally ill. If the background check system is going to successfully help prevent gun violence, then the remaining states must mandate reporting to the NICS and provide additional funding to strengthen the system.

The current system does not support those suffering from a mental illness and in need of treatment and certainly does not alleviate the stigma associated with mental illness. Blocking access to guns as a method of decreasing violence only skims the surface of the issue; the better solution is to increase the availability of services, raise awareness, and provide funding for treatment of mental illness.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

State legislatures continue to pass gun control measures to remove guns from the hands of the mentally ill as a method of reducing violence. As a result of these misguided attempts to reduce violence, the focus on

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] \textit{Miss. Code Ann.}, § 9-1-49 (Supp. 2013); \textit{Id.} § 45-9-103.
\item[184] \textit{Tex. Gov’t Code Ann.} § 411.0521 (West 2012).
\item[185] \textit{Utah Code Ann.} § 53-10-208.1 (LexisNexis 2010).
\item[187] 18 U.S.C. § 922(d) (2012) (stating that it is unlawful to sell a firearm or ammunition to any person convicted of a felony, “an unlawful user of or addict to any controlled substance,” or an individual who “has been adjudicated as a mental defective or has been committed to any mental institution,” among others).
\end{footnotes}
improving our nation’s mental health is weakening. Categorical restrictions such as those based on mental illness fail to protect the public and infringe upon individual rights.\textsuperscript{188} Instead, resources must be made available to family members and the community in order to enhance an individual’s chances of recovery.\textsuperscript{189} Linking gun control to issues of mental illness has threatened the ability to seek treatment and has perpetuated the false belief that individuals with a mental illness are violent. We must educate the public and focus on preventative measures that will significantly reduce the possibility of violence. Instead of advocating for stricter gun laws targeted at the mentally ill, we must raise awareness for the need for increased mental health funding and available resources. We are pointing at the wrong target.

\textsuperscript{188} Record & Gostin, supra note 5, at 9.

\textsuperscript{189} Rickhoff & Patterson, supra note 31, at 747. Resources include “treatments, medications, hospitals, and the criminal and civil mental health courts,” among others. Id.