

"Shooters Are Just Crazy?" Republicans' Dishonesty and Hypocrisy About Mental Illness and Health

After a mass shooting, it always seems that Republicans and the NRA really care about our mental health. The real problem we learn is that shooters are crazy. In case you thought that gun control legislation was the answer to the increasing incidence of gun violence in our country, (or, worse, in case you thought that challenging white supremacy was important), conservatives remind us that it's really about crazy people doing crazy things. Speaking about Patrick Crucius, the El Paso WalMart shooter, Donald Trump said, "Mental Illness and hatred pulled the trigger, not the gun." Avid gun rights Texas governor Greg Abbott said, "I can tell you that perhaps the most profound and agreed-upon issue that came out of legislative hearings on school shootings was the need for the state and for society to do a better job of dealing with challenging mental health-based issues."

This position, part of the kabuki dance that follows every mass shooting, predictably argues that gun control won't stop mentally deranged individuals and that unless we talk about mental illness, we'll never get to the bottom of the problem.

Rightfully seen by liberals as primarily a distraction — you know, changing the subject away from gun control and, more recently, from white supremacy, by professing concern for the mentally ill — the Right's call for more skillful psychiatric detection and care is also morally and intellectually corrupt for other reasons that are rarely discussed.

As a psychotherapist, I've been studying and treating mental illness for a living for 40 years, and I can tell you that, at best, these newly-minted mental health advocates on the Right don't know what they're talking about and, at worst, they're dishonest hypocrites.

Look at it this way: If they are really serious about changing the national "conversation" from gun control to mental illness; if they are genuinely concerned about finding and treating people with severe psychiatric illnesses, well then—here are seven things that conservatives would have to change and support:

- **1) Pre-natal care:** Pre-natal and perinatal insults and traumas can cause brain damage that later disposes its victims to violence. *Conservatives, then, should be*

advocating for improved health coverage, pre-natal screenings, extensive maternity care, and a massive public education campaign focused on prenatal and especially perinatal health.

- **2) Early dysfunctions in parenting:** Early problems in attachment that result from neglect, abuse, stress, and even a simple but deep lack of understanding of child psychology regularly produce depression, anxiety, aggression, and maladaptive behavior later on. But these disruptions may well be reparable. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, the University of California, San Francisco and San Francisco General Hospital pioneered a program in which young at-risk mothers with newborns were treated with a psycho-educational and supportive approach by trained mental health experts who helped these mothers better understand and bond with their infants. The results were hugely positive in insulating these children against later negative mental health outcomes. *So--If they're serious, conservatives should be advocating for a massive public investment in these programs and make them available to all new mothers.*

- **3) Headstart:** Early education programs have been repeatedly demonstrated to contribute to greatly improved psychological and educational adaptation later in life. Therefore, instead of cutting them, we should see *conservatives advocating for exponentially increased funding for Headstart and kindred early-intervention programs.*
- **4) Special Education Programs:** Children with obvious and soft cognitive, emotional, and physical disabilities, should get special care, but this is care that is extremely difficult to find. Most of these “crazy” shooters were obviously disturbed as children, disturbances that were not noted or treated. *The NRA and Republicans should be demanding massive increases in funding and training for special education programs and experts.*
- **5) Smaller class sizes and better teacher education:** If class sizes were radically reduced, not only would children learn more, but teachers could observe and help students who are clearly having difficulties, not only in

learning, but in their social adaptation. And if teachers then had a wide menu of options available to them in terms of assessment and treatment, these “first-responders” could greatly improve early-detection. But all this would depend on education reform, increased increasing funding to allow smaller class sizes, better teacher training, and an increased emphasis on social and psychological functioning in addition to the three Rs. *Conservatives and the Betsy DeVos led Department of Education should be leading the way toward securing the funding necessary for smaller class sizes and better teacher training.*

- **6) Psychiatric Care:** Children seen to be troubled should be offered highly-skilled intensive out-patient psychotherapy, affording them the chance to develop a relationship with a psychological provider who could then follow them over time, and who could act as liaisons between the schools and families. Medications might also be helpful. But such early intensive psychiatric care is expensive and scarce, usually not covered by insurance. To be taken seriously, *conservatives should be agitating*

for dramatic increases in funding for training mental health professionals and for underwriting massive increases in spending for mental health outpatient care.

- **7) Group treatment programs:** By the time these withdrawn and troubled children hit high school, their psychiatric symptoms have usually become more pronounced. They then need to be in a caring and well-run group home, half-way house, or hospital. But these are scarce, expensive, and not covered by insurance. Pro-gun advocates should be advocating for a huge investment in group treatment programs.

Were conservatives serious about their emphasis on the mental illness of shooters, the above points are just a few things that could be done to greatly improve our chances of identifying potentially dangerous and mentally ill individuals early on, and treating them before they go past the point of no return.

The cost? Well, it's high. And I'd wager that Trump and the pro-gun lobby would look at this and, in effect, say "O.K. never mind." The "conversation about mental health and

illness” would suddenly fade away, because these new found advocates for improved mental health services are about all about cutting social services, not expanding them. And that’s why after a mass shooting we shouldn’t take seriously anything that Trump, the NRA, or their Republican enablers say about mental illness seriously at all.