

More mental health care alone will not stop gun violence

19 June 2018, by Jonathan Spiegler And Jacob Smith

5 states with highest rate of gun deaths

With 18.88 gun deaths per 100,000 people in 2012 and 2013, Wyoming had the highest rate of gun deaths in the country.

STATE	GUN DEATHS PER 100,000 PEOPLE	GUN CONTROL LETTER GRADE*	PERCENT WITHOUT ACCESS TO NEEDED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES
Wyoming	18.88	F	21.5%
Alaska	18.80	F	17.9%
Louisiana	18.75	F	18.7%
Mississippi	17.73	F	25.0%
Alabama	17.52	D-	16.3%

*Higher grade equals stricter gun control laws, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence State Scorecards.

Credit: The Conversation

Gun violence remains a highly controversial issue in the wake of school shootings in [Parkland, Florida, and other communities](#). At such times, politicians seem compelled to offer the public solutions.

The two most prominent solutions put forth are [stricter gun control laws](#) and [addressing mental illness](#).

The frequency with which these two solutions are proposed might suggest that they are equally important. Yet, there is little research that directly tests the relative effectiveness of stricter [gun control](#) versus a mental illness solution.

[We are political scientists](#) who have studied this issue. In a forthcoming paper from [Policy Studies Journal](#), we report on our study of stricter [gun control laws](#) versus greater access to [mental health](#) services. We examined the relative effectiveness of each policy approach on the number of gun-related deaths for each state during the years 2012 and 2013.

What we find casts serious doubt on the ability of

mental health care alone to reduce the rate of gun violence.

Testing each approach

Gun [control](#) refers to a wide variety of laws designed to reduce gun violence. These measures include restrictions on the types of guns that can be manufactured and sold, the size of ammunition magazines, where one can carry a firearm, and who can carry one.

There are two main rationales behind these types of restrictions. One, they make it less likely that someone intent on violence will be able [to get a gun](#). And two, by making the weapon less deadly, gun control laws reduce the danger that the victim of a [gun attack will die](#).

The other approach to reducing gun violence advocated by many politicians is the mental health approach. They argue that there is a link between mental illness and violence and say that addressing that link would [reduce gun violence](#). Since mental illness can often be managed by treatments including [psychotherapy and/or drug therapy](#), proponents say that providing mental health services will make it less likely that those with a mental illness [will become violent](#).

We wanted to test whether these ideas were true. So we looked at both the strictness of gun control laws and access to mental health care for those who need it at the state level. We wanted to determine the relative effects of these two approaches on the number of gun-related deaths in each state.

To do that, we used data on gun control from the [Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence](#), and data on mental health from the [federal government](#).

What we found was surprising.

Policy choices are real

While strict gun control laws alone were strongly correlated with fewer gun deaths (as expected), greater access to mental health services alone appeared to have no significant effect on the number of gun fatalities.

We also found evidence that a combination of both approaches was effective at reducing the rate of gun deaths. States that had both strict gun control laws and a high percentage of residents with access to mental health care experienced fewer gun deaths than the mental health care solution alone.

The results of our study can be further broken down into two categories: suicides, which represent the majority of gun deaths, and non-suicides, which include mostly homicides and a few accidental shootings.

The results for non-suicides are the same as the overall results. Both strict gun control and the combination of gun control and mental health care were effective at preventing non-suicides.

However, for just suicides, the combination approach was ineffective.

The reason for this difference may result from the way that gun laws target those with mental illness. To legally [take away someone's guns](#) due to mental illness, he or she must first be declared mentally incompetent by a court, or [committed to a mental institution](#).

In practice, those with a mental illness that makes them more likely to be homicidal than suicidal – such as schizophrenia – are more [likely to be committed](#) or [declared mentally incompetent](#). And greater access to mental health care likely leads to greater rates of commitment due to mental illness.

So gun control laws related to mental [health](#) – such as those that allow law enforcement to take guns away from a person likely to harm others – are more likely to target those with a mental [illness](#) that makes one homicidal rather than suicidal. As a result, these laws reduce homicides committed by

those with a [mental illness](#), but are ineffective at reducing suicides.

The implication of this for policymakers interested in reducing gun [violence](#) is that providing more [mental health care](#) alone is unlikely to significantly reduce gun deaths in the United States. Instead, any policy to reduce [gun violence](#) should include stricter gun control laws.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: More mental health care alone will not stop gun violence (2018, June 19) retrieved 11 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-06-mental-health-gun-violence.html>

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