Effects of News Media Messages About Mass Shootings on Attitudes Toward Persons With Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies

Objective: In recent years, mass shootings by persons with serious mental illness have received extensive news media coverage. The authors test the effects of news stories about mass shootings on public attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness and support for gun control policies. They also examine whether news coverage of proposals to prevent persons with serious mental illness from having guns exacerbates the public’s negative attitudes toward this group.

Method: The authors conducted a survey-embedded randomized experiment using a national sample (N=1,797) from an online panel. Respondents were randomly assigned to groups instructed to read one of three news stories or to a no-exposure control group. The news stories described, respectively, a mass shooting by a person with serious mental illness, the same mass shooting and a proposal for gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, and the same mass shooting and a proposal to ban large-capacity magazines. Outcome measures included attitudes toward working with or living near a person with serious mental illness, perceived dangerousness of persons with serious mental illness, and support for gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness and for a ban on large-capacity magazines.

Results: Compared with the control group, the story about a mass shooting heightened respondents’ negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness and raised support for gun restrictions for this group. Including information about the gun restriction policy in a story about a mass shooting did not heighten negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness or raise support for the restrictions.

Conclusions: The aftermath of mass shootings is often viewed as a window of opportunity to garner support for gun control policies, but it also exacerbates negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness.


On December 14, 2012, a gunman fatally shot 20 children and six adults at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. This mass shooting occurred less than 6 months after James Holmes shot 70 people in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. The Aurora shooting took place a year and a half after Jared Loughner shot 18 people, including U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, in Tucson, Arizona. In 2007, Seung-Hui Cho shot 57 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg. In addition to horrific loss of life, these shootings shared two common elements. First, all four shooters appeared to suffer from a mental disorder. While details about the Newtown shooter’s mental health history are still emerging (1), the Aurora, Tucson, and Virginia Tech shooters all appeared to suffer from serious mental illness (2–4), a category that includes conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (5). Second, all four shooters used guns equipped with large-capacity magazines, defined as magazines holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition (6, 7), which allow a shooter to fire more rounds before stopping to reload.

Gun control advocates view the aftermath of mass shootings as a window of opportunity to garner public support for gun control policy. Gun control policy options are limited by recent Supreme Court rulings, which prohibit comprehensive gun restrictions targeting the general population (such as handgun bans) (8). As a result, feasible gun control policies in the United States must, as Gostin and Record noted in a 2011 commentary (9), target specific categories of “dangerous people” or “dangerous weapons.”

The Aurora, Tucson, and Virginia Tech shootings prompted two specific types of gun control policy proposals: legislation to prevent dangerous people with serious mental illness from possessing firearms (10, 11) and legislation to ban large-capacity magazines (12). Efforts to enact a ban on large-capacity magazines have been unsuccessful. A federal
gun restriction law for persons with serious mental illness was enacted in 2008, in response to the Virginia Tech shooting (13). Existing federal law already prohibited gun possession for persons who have been involuntarily committed to psychiatric care or adjudicated to be mentally incompetent (14), and the 2008 law provided funding to states to report such persons to the background check system used by licensed gun dealers to screen potential gun buyers. Expanding prohibitions on gun possession by persons with serious mental illness to include persons required by a court or other legal authority to take medication or receive outpatient care for a mental disorder has also been proposed at the federal level (11). In addition, criteria for prohibiting firearm ownership because of mental illness vary by state (15), and some states have proposed further policies to prevent persons with serious mental illness from having guns (16). For example, in response to the Newtown shooting, New York State passed a law requiring that medical care providers report patients who they believe are likely to harm themselves or others to law enforcement authorities, who could then seize the individual’s guns and prohibit the person from purchasing additional firearms (16). While gun control efforts targeting those with serious mental illness are politically popular—President Obama mentioned such restrictions three times during the second presidential debate in 2012 (17)—they have provoked controversy in the medical and public health communities. Because of the significant burden of gun violence in the United States—over 65,000 people are shot in an attack each year (18; see also the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Web-Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars)—professionals in these fields typically support gun control initiatives. Gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, however, have generated concern on two grounds. First, the relationship between serious mental illness and violence is complex, and much of the risk of violence in this population is attributable to comorbid factors such as substance use (19, 20). Most persons with serious mental illness are not violent; prediction of future violence among such individuals is challenging (21), and there is little evidence to suggest that gun restriction policies for this population accurately target the subgroup of those with a heightened risk of committing violent acts (9). Second, it has been suggested that promotion of such policies may have the unintended consequence of exacerbating the public’s negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness and that implementation of gun restriction policies may deter such persons from seeking help (22, 23). Although stigma related to less severe mental disorders appears to have decreased in recent decades (24), stigmatizing attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness have remained largely unchanged or possibly increased (25, 26). The majority of persons with serious mental illness remain untreated or undertreated, and mental health experts view stigma as a key contributor to poor treatment rates (27).

After mass shootings, the public is exposed to extensive news coverage of the shooting event, as well as coverage of gun control policies proposed in response to a shooting. Gun control advocates contend that these stories are effective in garnering support for gun control policies, and mental health advocates contend that the same stories lead to negative public attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness. Limited empirical evidence is available to test either claim. A 1996 study using national survey data from the former West Germany found that the public desire for social distance from persons with schizophrenia increased after two violent attacks on politicians by individuals with schizophrenia, both of which received extensive news media coverage (28). However, the relationship between news coverage of violence by persons with serious mental illness and negative public attitudes has not been tested using experimental methods, and it is unclear how news coverage of mass shooting events, as opposed to news coverage of gun control policy proposals, influences public attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness or support for gun control measures. The distinction between these two types of stories is potentially important. Policy makers and advocates can influence news coverage of gun control policy responses to mass shootings by choosing which policies to promote, but they have little ability to influence coverage of the shooting events themselves.

In this study, we examined these issues in a survey-embedded randomized experiment. Participants in an online survey panel were randomly assigned to groups instructed to read one of three news stories or to a no-exposure control group. The three news stories described 1) a mass shooting event by a person with serious mental illness who used a gun with a large-capacity magazine; 2) the same mass shooting event and a proposal for a gun restriction policy for persons with serious mental illness; and 3) the same mass shooting event and a proposal to ban large-capacity magazines. This approach allowed us to test whether exposure to a news media portrayal of a mass shooting heightened negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness, raised support for gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, and raised support for a ban on large-capacity magazines. This approach allowed us to test whether exposure to a news media portrayal of a mass shooting heightened negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness, raised support for gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness, and raised support for a ban on large-capacity magazines, compared with the control condition. We also assessed whether information describing a gun restriction policy for serious mental illness or a ban on large-capacity magazines in a news story about a mass shooting differentially affected attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness or support for gun control policies compared with the shooting event story alone.

Method

Data and Procedures

A survey-embedded randomized experiment was conducted using the GfK Knowledge Networks (KN) online survey research
NEWS STORIES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD PERSONS WITH SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS AND GUN CONTROL POLICIES

We examined how news stories affected attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness, with serious mental illness. Policy questions, adapted from two public opinion polls (CBS News/New York Times Poll, January 15–19, 2011; and ABC News/Washington Post Poll, January 13–16, 2011), assessed support for a gun restriction policy for persons with serious mental illness and a policy banning large-capacity magazines. For all outcomes, 5-point Likert scales were collapsed to create dichotomous indicators of attitudes and policy support. In the survey instrument, attitude and policy measure block order was randomized, as was question order within blocks.

The independent variables of interest were the three randomly assigned news stories (Figure 1). Stories were written on the basis of the content analysis of news stories about mass shootings published in U.S. newspapers. All three stories included an identical paragraph describing a mass shooting by a person with a history of serious mental illness. The paragraph in story 2 describing a proposed gun restriction policy for persons with serious mental illness was identical to the one in story 3 describing a policy proposal for a ban on large-capacity magazines, with the exception of the passages indicated in bold italic type in Figure 1. Respondents who were assigned to read a news story viewed a screen instructing them to “Please read the following excerpt from a news story and then answer the following questions.” Respondents in the no-exposure control group, who did not read a news story, were instructed to “Please answer the following questions.”

We examined how news stories affected attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness and support for gun control policies. Attitude questions, adapted from two previous surveys (25, 32), assessed willingness to work closely with a person with serious mental illness, willingness to work near a person with serious mental illness, and perceived dangerousness of persons...
persons with serious mental illness than respondents in
alone also reported a higher perceived dangerousness of
were exposed to a story describing a mass shooting event
a person with serious mental illness. Respondents who
a Passages in bold italic type indicate the differences between stories 2 and 3.
FIGURE 1. Experimental Conditions and News Story Texta

**Control condition (N=456)**

No story.

**Story 1: Mass shooting event (N=467)**

The gunman who opened fire in an Indianapolis park
yesterday morning has been identified as Indianapo-
lis resident Jake Robinson, age 30. According to police,
the shooter has a history of serious mental illness. Mr.
Robinson's motivation for opening fire in Smith Park
in central Indianapolis is unclear. Witnesses said Mr.
Robinson arrived at the park around 7:30 a.m. and ap-
peared agitated, pacing up and down and talking to
himself. At approximately 8:15 a.m., Mr. Robinson took
a gun out of his bag and began to shoot. Three adults
passing through the park on their way to work were
shot and killed. Three more adults and two children
were wounded. The police officer leading the investi-
gation said that Jake Robinson used a semiautomatic
weapon to shoot about 30 bullets in a row before he
was tackled by a security guard from a nearby building.
Little is known about Mr. Robinson, who lived alone
and appears to have no immediate family. Mr. Robin-
son's cousin, who lives in South Carolina, said Mr. Rob-
inson was hospitalized for mental illness last year.

**Story 2: Mass shooting event and gun restrictions
for persons with serious mental illness (N=438)**

The gunman who opened fire in an Indianapolis park
yesterday morning has been identified as Indianapo-
lis resident Jake Robinson, age 30. According to police,
the shooter has a history of serious mental illness. Mr.
Robinson's motivation for opening fire in Smith Park
in central Indianapolis is unclear. Witnesses said Mr.
Robinson arrived at the park around 7:30 a.m. and ap-
peared agitated, pacing up and down and talking to
himself. At approximately 8:15 a.m., Mr. Robinson took
a gun out of his bag and began to shoot. Three adults
passing through the park on their way to work were
shot and killed. Three more adults and two children
were wounded. The police officer leading the investi-
gation said that Jake Robinson used a semiautomatic
weapon to shoot about 30 bullets in a row before he
was tackled by a security guard from a nearby building.
Little is known about Mr. Robinson, who lived alone
and appears to have no immediate family. Mr. Robin-
son's cousin, who lives in South Carolina, said Mr. Rob-
inson was hospitalized for mental illness last year.

Yesterday's shooting in downtown Indianapolis left
residents looking for solutions to the problem of gun vi-
olence. According to the Indianapolis Coalition against
Violence—a group whose membership includes city
lawmakers, law enforcement officials, researchers, ad-
vocacy groups, and citizens concerned about violence
in Indianapolis—gun violence in the United States
has reached epidemic proportions. “With more than
65,000 Americans shot in an attack last year, we have
to do something to keep guns out of the hands of dan-
gerous people,” said Kim Jones, the spokesperson for
the group. One proposal currently being considered by
Congress is a good start, Jones said. Congress is consid-
ering legislation to require states to enter people with
serious mental illness into a background check sys-
tem used by gun dealers to identify people prohibited
from buying guns, or face a penalty. According to Kim
Jones, “Getting this law in place is one way to protect
the public from dangerous people.”

**Story 3: Mass shooting event and ban on high-ca-
pacity magazines (N=436)**

The gunman who opened fire in an Indianapolis park
yesterday morning has been identified as Indianapo-
lis resident Jake Robinson, age 30. According to police,
the shooter has a history of serious mental illness. Mr.
Robinson's motivation for opening fire in Smith Park
in central Indianapolis is unclear. Witnesses said Mr.
Robinson arrived at the park around 7:30 a.m. and ap-
peared agitated, pacing up and down and talking to
himself. At approximately 8:15 a.m., Mr. Robinson took
a gun out of his bag and began to shoot. Three adults
passing through the park on their way to work were
shot and killed. Three more adults and two children
were wounded. The police officer leading the investi-
gation said that Jake Robinson used a semiautomatic
weapon to shoot about 30 bullets in a row before he
was tackled by a security guard from a nearby building.
Little is known about Mr. Robinson, who lived alone
and appears to have no immediate family. Mr. Robin-
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gerous people,” said Kim Jones, the spokesperson for
the group. One proposal currently being considered by
Congress is a good start, Jones said. Congress is consid-
ering legislation to ban large ammunition clips, which are mili-
tary-style high-capacity magazines that can shoot
30, 50, or 100 bullets without requiring the shooter
to stop and reload. According to Kim Jones, "Getting
this law in place is one way to protect the public from
dangerous guns."
shooting did not affect attitudes compared with a story describing a shooting without mentioning a policy response. Effects of news media messages on support for gun control policies are summarized in Table 4 and Figure 2. As expected, a news story describing a mass shooting raised support for both gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness and a ban on large-capacity magazines compared with the control condition. Compared with the control condition, a story describing both a mass shooting and gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness raised support for a large-capacity magazine ban, and a story describing both a mass shooting event and a ban on large-capacity magazines raised support for both gun control policies. As the lower section of Table 4 indicates, including information describing a gun restriction policy for persons with serious mental illness in a news story describing a mass shooting did not affect support for either policy compared with a story solely describing a mass shooting event. In contrast, including information about a proposed large-capacity magazine ban policy in a news story describing a mass shooting raised support for a ban compared with a story solely describing a shooting.

**TABLE 1. Weighted and Unweighted Descriptive Characteristics of Experiment Participants (N=1,797)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Weighted (%)</th>
<th>Unweighted (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–29</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–44</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–59</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥60</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>76.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;High school education</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school education</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$10,000</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000–$29,999</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000–$59,999</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000–$99,999</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥$100,000</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Weighted results apply the GfK Knowledge Networks survey weights to generate nationally representative estimates. No significant differences were seen on any variable across experimental groups.

**TABLE 2. Attitudes Toward Persons With Serious Mental Illness and Support for Gun Control Policies, Control Group (N=456)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social distance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Would you be willing to have a person with serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job?”</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Would you be willing to have a person with serious mental illness as a neighbor?”</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived dangerousness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“People with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population.”</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun policy support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Would you support or oppose increasing federal funding to pay for a background check system to identify people with serious mental illness in order to prevent them from purchasing a firearm?”</td>
<td>70.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As you may know, high-capacity gun magazines or clips can hold many rounds of ammunition, so a shooter can fire more rounds without manually reloading. Would you support or oppose a nationwide ban on the sale of high-capacity gun magazines that hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition?”</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, definitely willing; 2, probably willing; 3, neither willing nor unwilling; 4, probably unwilling; and 5, definitely unwilling. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for negative attitudes (ratings of 4 or 5) and 0 otherwise (ratings of 1–3).

*b* Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, strongly disagree, 2, somewhat disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4, somewhat agree; and 5, strongly agree. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for negative attitudes (ratings 4 or 5) and 0 otherwise (ratings of 1–3).

*c* Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, strongly oppose; 2, somewhat oppose; 3, neither support nor oppose; 4, somewhat support; and 5, strongly support. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for support (ratings of 4 or 5) and 0 for oppose (ratings of 1–3).

**Discussion**

News media portrayals of mass shooting events by persons with serious mental illness appear to play a critical role in influencing both negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness and support for gun control policies. The news story describing a mass shooting event heightened desired social distance from and perceived dangerousness of persons with serious mental illness. The same story raised public support for both gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness and a ban on large-capacity magazines. Mental health experts have long suspected that news media depictions of violent persons with serious mental illness contribute to the public’s negative attitudes toward persons with serious conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (34–36). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to confirm this suspicion. Study results support the opinion of former
TABLE 3. Logistic Regression Results of News Story Effects on Attitudes Toward Persons With Serious Mental Illness (N=1,797)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Story</th>
<th>Attitudes Toward Persons With Serious Mental Illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Distance: Work Closely With**a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 1: Mass shooting event</td>
<td>N: 923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 2: Mass shooting event and gun restrictions for serious mental illness</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: Mass shooting event and ban on large-capacity magazines</td>
<td>892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 2: Mass shooting event and gun restrictions for serious mental illness</td>
<td>Reference=shooting event (story 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: Mass shooting event and ban on large-capacity magazines</td>
<td>Reference=no exposure (control condition)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a For this question, respondents were asked, “Would you be willing to have a person with serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job?” Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, definitely willing; 2, probably willing; 3, neither willing nor unwilling; 4, probably unwilling; and 5, definitely unwilling. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for negative attitudes (ratings of 4 or 5) and 0 otherwise (ratings of 1–3).

b For this question, respondents were asked, “Would you be willing to have a person with serious mental illness as a neighbor?” Responses were coded as outlined in note a, above.

c For this question, respondents were asked, “People with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population.” Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, strongly disagree; 2, somewhat disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4, somewhat agree; and 5, strongly agree. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for negative attitudes (ratings 4 or 5) and 0 otherwise (ratings of 1–3).

* p<0.05. ** p<0.01.

TABLE 4. Logistic Regression Results of News Story Effects on Support for Gun Policies (N=1,797)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Story</th>
<th>Policy Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gun Restrictions for Serious Mental Illnessb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N: 923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 1: Mass shooting event</td>
<td>Reference=no exposure (control condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 2: Mass shooting event and gun restrictions for serious mental illness</td>
<td>Reference=shooting event (story 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: Mass shooting event and ban on large-capacity magazines</td>
<td>Reference=no exposure (control condition)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a For this question, respondents were asked, “Would you support or oppose increasing federal funding to pay for a background check system to identify people with serious mental illness in order to prevent them from purchasing a firearm?” Responses were originally recorded on a 5-point scale: 1, strongly oppose; 2, somewhat oppose; 3, neither support nor oppose; 4, somewhat support; and 5, strongly support. This scale was collapsed into a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for support (ratings of 4 or 5) and 0 for oppose (ratings of 1–3).

b For this question, respondents were asked, “As you may know, high-capacity gun magazines or clips can hold many rounds of ammunition, so a shooter can fire more rounds without manually reloading. Would you support or oppose a nationwide ban on the sale of high-capacity gun magazines that hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition?” Responses were coded as outlined in note a, above.

* p<0.05. ** p<0.01. *** p<0.001.

APA President Steven Sharfstein, expressed in a 2012 commentary, that negative attitudes toward persons with serious mental illness are unlikely to decline “as long as there are untreated, delusional, disheveled, threatening homeless individuals on our streets and in high-profile media examples of violence” (34).

Our findings do not support the mental health community’s contention that messages about gun restrictions for persons with serious mental illness worsen negative attitudes toward this population. However, the results have potential implications for advocates and policy makers who promote gun control policy responses to mass shootings. While news media messages about banning “dangerous guns” with large-capacity magazines raised support for such bans, messages about preventing “dangerous persons” with serious mental illness from possessing guns failed to raise support for gun restrictions for those with serious mental illness. As baseline support

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for such restrictions was high (70%), this finding may be
due in part to ceiling effects, but it may also be due to
public perceptions that persons with serious mental
illness, not access to guns in society, are primarily re-
ponsible for mass shootings. Research has shown that
the public is less likely to support policy efforts when they
hold individuals—as opposed to society—responsible for
the issue the policy seeks to address (37). By focusing re-
pondents’ attention on serious mental illness as a causal
factor, messages about gun restrictions for persons with
serious mental illness may lead the public to see mass
shootings as isolated events, perpetrated by a small group
of individuals, which gun control policy cannot prevent.
Pew polling data suggest that the proportion of Ameri-
cans who view mass shootings as “just the isolated acts
of individuals” as opposed to reflections of “broader
problems in society” has increased over the past 5 years,
to 67% in 2012 (38). While the majority of Americans sup-
port specific gun control measures, overall support for gun control
appears to have decreased over the same period (38).

Results of this study should be interpreted in the context
of several limitations. First, the exposure to a one- or two-
paragraph news story tested in this experiment differs from
the public’s typical experience with news media content
about mass shootings, which involves extensive exposure to
news media messages, typically over the course of several
weeks and from varied news sources, about the shooting
event. Second, we did not examine the contributing effects
of photographs and images that often accompany news cov-
erage of mass shootings and may profoundly affect how the
public comprehends the issue. Third, the effects of news
stories were measured immediately after exposure, and it is
unclear whether effects last over time. Fourth, web-based
experiments have been criticized as vulnerable to sampling
biases (39). KN attempts to minimize such problems by
using probability-based sampling of households, including
those without landline telephones or Internet access (29).
Experiment invitations do not include the topic of the
experiment, so it is unlikely that participants choose whether
or not to participate according to their interests.

In the aftermath of mass shootings, the public is exposed
to a torrent of news stories describing the shooter with
serious mental illness, his history, and his actions during
the shooting. These portrayals of the shooting events raise
public support for gun control policies but also contribute
to negative attitudes toward those with serious mental
illness. Negative public attitudes have been linked to poor
treatment rates among persons with serious mental health
conditions (40–42). Future research should consider how
mass shootings influence public support for initiatives to
improve the adequacy and quality of mental health care
for Americans with serious mental illness.

References

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