

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/bringing-back-mental-institutions-wont-stop-mass-shootings>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last month following horrific mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio [President Donald Trump made statements supporting an increase in institutionalization for people with mental illness](#) as a means of reducing gun violence.

This equation of gun violence with mental illness ignores decades of scientific research and stigmatizes people with mental health needs. And while deficiencies in our mental health system including a shortage of psychiatric beds should be taken seriously, we cannot allow the horrors of our nation's history of over-institutionalization to return. Research and history suggest that bringing back mental hospitals would do nothing to reduce mass shootings, but would inflict serious harm on people who need care.

Long-term, institutionalized care was a common solution to mental health for a large part of the 20th century, and people with psychiatric and other developmental disabilities often lived indefinitely in state-run hospitals. The number of people living in mental hospitals in the United States [peaked at 560,000 people](#) in 1955. This system was plagued with [horrific stories of abuse](#), including involuntary confinement, forced sterilization, torture, sexual abuse, and unsanitary living conditions. Public outrage over these conditions, in addition to budget concerns and the development of new psychiatric medicines, [led to a shift in U.S. culture](#), policy, and practice away from institutions and towards a community-based mental health care model.

The vast majority of people living with mental illness in their communities today are not violent. According to the American Psychiatric Association, people with serious mental illness commit just 3 percent of all violent crime. It is worth noting that 60 percent of gun deaths each year are from suicide, and those numbers are, in fact, impacted by mental illness. But [research shows](#) that people who commit acts of violence against others are often influenced by a complex set of factors that exist outside of mental health, including histories of substance abuse, violent victimization and trauma, or exposure to neighborhood violence.

It's inaccurate and cruel to blame people with mental illness for societal violence. Rather than reverting to outdated, ineffective, and inhumane approaches to mental health, we should instead invest in community-based treatment that works. [Comprehensive, integrated, and evidence-based care](#) in communities can foster recovery and allow people to live functional and meaningful lives.

Notwithstanding the real challenges to creating and maintaining a robust community mental health system, the benefits of community-based care have been widely accepted for decades. They were also reinforced by the [1999 Supreme Court decision in *Olmsted v. L.C.*](#), which ruled that the unjustified isolation of people with disabilities in institutions is a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

At Vera, our support for community-based care is grounded in the evidence and knowledge that it works. In line with our work in jails and prisons across the country, we believe that reducing the number of people held in any institution and restoring human dignity for everyone is the best way to foster public health and safety.

The first step to making this vision a reality is ending misinformation. Gun violence in the United States is a legitimate concern: there were more than 15,000 gun-related homicides in 2017, according to the latest data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, embracing the failed policies and practices of the past will do nothing to address this problem. Instead, we should embrace humane, evidence-based solutions to both the challenges of improving mental health treatment and reducing violence in our communities.

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