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The Mental Health Scapegoat

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"Now, the party's rhetoric on gun violence as a mental health crisis isolates the same vulnerable community they've abandoned by positioning them as a dangerous fifth column."

Sarah Jones is a staff writer at the *New Republic*. In the following viewpoint, Jones criticizes political rhetoric that positions mental illness as the primary source of gun violence in the United States. Such rhetoric, the author asserts, perpetuates myths about the relationship between violence and mental illness and allows its proponents to ignore and evade necessary conversations about gun control. She contends that conservative lawmakers' uses of mentally ill people as scapegoats are disingenuous because they blame mental illness for mass shootings while also taking actions that make mental health care more difficult to access and afford.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, how do conservative policies and rhetoric regarding gun control affect people with mental illnesses?
2. How does the author use information about gun ownership in the United States to support her argument that gun rights advocates use mental illness as an excuse to deter gun control legislation?
3. Do you agree with the author's charge that the National Rifle Association poses a greater security threat to the United States than people with mental illnesses? Explain your answer.

Nobody doubts that Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old man responsible for killing 17 people in Parkland, Florida, on Wednesday, is troubled. The troubles are obvious now, the troubles are chyrons on the television, and experts are busy exploring the ruins those troubles have created. Every time someone troubled picks up a gun and murders mass numbers of people, we ask ourselves why it happened as if the answers will ever materialize.

We're doing it again now, along with another near-ritualized display: Every time a mass shooting occurs, conservatives go on TV to offer thoughts and prayers and to suggest—politely—that you just can't fix crazy. "This horror shouldn't exist, and we don't know right now exactly why this deranged individual did this," Ted Cruz intoned on Fox News. Attorney General Jeff Sessions wants to "study" the role of mental health in school shootings; Florida Governor Rick Scott similarly wants to "work on how they can make sure people with mental illness aren't able to get guns." President Trump, meanwhile, suggested profiling. "So many signs that the Florida shooter was mentally disturbed, even expelled from school for bad and erratic behavior. Neighbors and classmates knew he was a big problem. Must always report such instances to authorities, again and again!" he tweeted. For good measure, during a televised statement on Thursday, he also agreed that officials must "tackle the difficult issue of mental health."

Here is what we know about Nikolas Cruz. He reportedly abused a girlfriend and killed small animals. He published racist posts on social media and posed often with guns. He had recently been orphaned. Several classmates have described him as "off" and "weird." Of all these traits, two fit most neatly into the profile of the average mass shooter: violence against women and an obsession with guns. Cruz is also said to have had "flashes of rage." And certainly mass shooters are angry, but a person can be angry, even violently angry, without meeting any diagnostic criteria for mental illness. White supremacy, for what it's worth, is also not a label in the DSM-V.

And yet the right-wing suggests that mental health is clearly the culprit. Never mind that in reality, mental illness is rarely violent in an external sense. It tends to direct violence toward the self: Research suggests that people with mental illness are more likely to commit suicide rather than they are to kill others if they have access to firearms. They are 16 times more likely to be killed by police even though a 2014 study by the American Psychological Association found that only 7.5 percent of all violent crime could be linked to perpetrators' symptoms of mental illness (<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/04/mental-illness-crime.aspx>).

There is really only one way to effectively reduce gun violence, and that is to reduce the number of gun owners. But the only

reductions that interest Trump and his party are reductions to the very social safety net that ensures access to affordable mental health care to begin with. For people with mental illness, conservative policies and rhetoric represent an existential threat: The GOP's war on welfare and Medicaid could make it dramatically harder for people to access care, and Republicans have proposed expansive waivers for essential health benefits that would also impact mental health parity in private insurance.

Now, the party's rhetoric on gun violence as a mental health crisis isolates the same vulnerable community they've abandoned by positioning them as a dangerous fifth column. There's a McCarthyite impulse here, a drive to identify and scrutinize the deviant so as to purify society. Profiling the "off" and the "weird" won't reduce the number of mass shootings any more than eliminating their care will. Meanwhile, the grim total of Americans who die at the end of a gun will continue to rise.

In America, some lives always matter more than others. But guns matter more than almost anything else. The United States is flooded with guns, a reflection both of its cowboy mythos and its obeisance to profit. It's lucrative to make guns, to sell them, and to lobby for their unfettered possession. In 2016, there were nearly 300 million guns in America (<https://www.npr.org/2016/01/05/462017461/guns-in-america-by-the-numbers>)—the highest rate of per-capita gun ownership in the developed world. Globally, the United States represents half of the world's supply of civilian-owned guns. But while there's roughly one gun for every person in the country, gun ownership is hardly evenly distributed. *The Washington Post* reported in 2016 that 3 percent of Americans own half the country's guns. What we do not possess in any disproportionate measure compared with other countries, however, are people with mental illness.

Look exclusively at the money fueling the National Rifle Association, and a clearer picture emerges: Only 19 percent of the nation's gun owners donate to the NRA (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/05/among-gun-owners-nra-members-have-a-unique-set-of-views-and-experiences/>). Those gun owners lean heavily to the right, and their hostility to any restriction on gun ownership places them firmly outside the American mainstream. If there is an American pathology, this is the demographic where it resides. And if we must rank human threats to American security, the NRA's activist network comes far above even the seriously mentally ill. The beliefs and donations of a select few grip the Republican Party so tightly that they are able to essentially contravene democracy. Most Americans want gun control (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>). But whenever the nation is confronted with tragedy, the Republican Party offers prayers and scapegoats—and people with mental illness are among the easiest, most vulnerable targets the country has to offer.

The scapegoat, as defined in the Book of Leviticus, is a propitiation. He is to be presented alive before the Lord as an atonement for the sins of the people. The goat is an individual solution to a collective problem; he becomes too dangerous to tolerate. So he is sent into an uninhabited place to wander, where no one can see him. If he suffers, then he suffers alone. This is how the guilty scrub themselves clean: They pass their shame to the innocent. They create outcasts. And then they continue to sin.

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