



# Texas Police Chiefs Association

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## Violence, Mental Illness and Guns

*A Discussion of Issues*

### I. Introduction

In light of several recent events, members of the Texas Police Chiefs Association (TPCA) have engaged in numerous discussions regarding violence in our society, including various related topics such as what conditions stimulate or facilitate violent behavior and what might be done to mitigate these behaviors. The State of Texas, like many other areas of the United States, has been touched by horrendous acts of violence. This document is created in an effort to describe the consensus views of the Association's membership. Whether these terrible acts have occurred in Texas, Connecticut, Colorado, Massachusetts or any other location, the 1000 members of the TPCA are saddened and send our sympathies to the victims, family members, first responders and communities as they struggle with the aftermath of these senseless criminal acts.

### II. An Issue of Violence

This Nation is the greatest social experiment in human history. A society based on individual freedoms and self-determination, the United States of America was designed to function according to the rule of law that facilitates the individuals' pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. This noble cause cited in the Declaration of Independence is at the root of the nation's identity. The openness of this great society sometimes allows opportunities for those who shun the responsibility of good citizenship to manifest violence toward their neighbors.

Although the violent tendencies of some have been evident throughout history, it is particularly painful to see the senseless acts of mass violence that are occasionally perpetrated in these times. Violence, randomly committed against anyone, especially the most innocent of victims, is unreasonable and intolerable to the normal mind, regardless of its method. In recent history, criminal acts of mass violence have occurred in places of education, work and recreation. In each case those acts were designed by the criminal to make or prove some intellectual point which rational minds recognize as demented and the violent action was clearly unreasonable.

Violence and depictions of violence are far too prevalent in this culture. Popular culture sometimes celebrates violence while ignoring the consequences. Media depictions of violence are many times devoid of moral context and focus on sensationalizing or celebrating revenge, subjugation or humiliation as reasons for extreme violence. Criminality in some ways has become acceptable and excused. Violent video games or other media can reinforce the paradigm that extreme violence is an enjoyable outlet and may desensitize the marginal mind to the real consequences of the conducts depicted. Violence among crowds at sporting events suggests the culture is too accepting of violence as a solution to frustrations or disagreements. The control of violence generally should be a primary goal in any discussion and the discourse structured to include those who have large scale influence on cultural mores.



### **III. The Issue of Mental Illness**

Those who work within the criminal justice system, like many in other disciplines, are keenly aware of the prevalence of mental illness in society. Some studies have suggested that as many as half of those in prison or jail suffer from mental illness. Law enforcement officers encounter the mentally ill on a regular basis during the performance of their routine duties. The health care system also feels the impact of mental health issues as hospital emergency rooms and clinics struggle to find solutions for those who have mental illness. Families find it difficult to locate resources for their members who are mentally ill, even when the person is actively seeking help.

Systems to address issues of mental illness are overworked and underfunded. Resources are inconsistently available depending on the location. Many times processes are complex and hard to navigate for people seeking mental health assistance and the procedures for compulsory intervention through the courts is not always timely. Dealing with mental health issues in an emergency context many times falls to law enforcement and commonly the mental health system is not oriented toward quick reactions. In some cases it is simply difficult or impossible under the current configurations to deliver mental health services to those who desperately need but resist them.

Almost every act of mass violence in history contained a component of mental illness. People who knew the perpetrators of these acts many times say after the fact that certain behaviors were odd or that comments were made indicating concern. Very often these indicators are ignored because witnesses do not want to think the worst or trust their own instincts. In most cases, people fail to understand the various types and severities of mental illness so they miscalculate the potential dangers.

In light of current events, this may be the greatest opportunity in history to have meaningful conversation about this serious issue. Significant benefit would come from a nationwide strategy to deal with mental illness. This would involve substantive funding to close gaps in service, provide for the handling of emergency mental health issues and establish safeguards in those cases wherein the potential for violence exists.

### **IV. Firearms**

Although firearms have been the chosen tool in many violent acts, it was in every case a tool chosen rather than a motivation for the violence. In the State of Texas, millions of legal firearm owners live and work in communities of all sizes. Although no definitive numbers are available, polls have indicated between 40% and 50% of the households in America own guns. Gun ownership seems statistically much more common in less urbanized areas across the United States. According to some research, there are only six States where less than 20% of their populations own guns and, with the exception of Hawaii, all are located in the Northeast. Firearms are legally owned and safely used by citizens for hunting, sport shooting, self-protection and collecting. Firearms are passed down as family heirlooms and are a significant part of these family histories. Although used on occasion for illegal reasons by dishonorable or deranged people, much more commonly they are used for legal reasons by honorable and productive people.



For some Americans, firearms are viewed as frightening and unsettling. For those individuals, gun ownership and use is not familiar and they can never see a desire to have one in their home. However, for some Americans, firearms are common parts of their history and culture. For these, they have grown up knowing about gun safety in hunting and sport shooting and they see them as safe in the hands of responsible owners and users.

Not all persons are responsible gun owners and users. Reasonable restrictions regarding the access of firearms by those who are criminal in their intent, mentally ill, or otherwise potentially dangerous to others are appropriate. But to broad brush the issue and negatively impact the millions of law abiding citizens who pose no threat to any innocent person is excessive and unreasonable. Laws currently exist to restrict access to firearms by those who pose a threat but the specifics of enforcement are sometimes lacking. Long ago the United States recognized the need to have special punishment capabilities for criminals who use firearms but likewise, enforcement is not consistent.

### **V. Conclusions**

For the reasons discussed above, the Texas Police Chiefs Association has concluded the following:

1. Efforts and discussions should focus on the control of violence in society generally. Civility and restraint are qualities that should be valued in the public discourse at every level, especially exemplified by leaders.
2. Although graphic representations and depictions of violence are easily put into context by the rational mind, one who struggles with mental illness may have more difficulty.
3. Mental illness should be the primary focus in discussing acts of mass violence. A national discourse regarding the improvement of the systems in place to address mental illness should be a priority.
4. Streamlining the process to effectively deal with mental health emergencies should be addressed nationwide.
5. Emphasis should be placed on enforcing current firearms restrictions, especially the prosecution of criminals who use firearms in the commission of their crimes.
6. Discussions regarding additional gun regulations should recognize that not all areas of the United States are alike. As a result, no legislation should unreasonably restrict one region because of the concerns of another.
7. The Nation should be reminded that every criminal act that has shocked the American collective conscience in recent history was already by definition a crime. Laws previously written and passed were ignored by people bent on doing harm.

Although there is much discussion to be had in regard to responding to these recent events, care must be taken to insure that bad policy doesn't result from haste. The TPCA is a reasonable voice in these policy discussions, accurately representing the thoughts of the majority of Chiefs in Texas.

**Texas Police Chiefs Association President Chief Michael R. Gentry**