

# OPINION: Paul Ryan blames mass shootings on mental health laws

## Citing mythical link between gun violence and mental illness, lawmaker insists on pushing shameful bill

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Less than 24 hours after Wednesday's horrific mass shooting at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan spoke to the media about gun violence. He blamed two things: Islamic terror and weak mental health laws.

[On CBS This Morning. Ryan said](#), "We have seen, in a common theme, among many of these mass shootings, is a theme of mental illness. And we need to fix our mental illness laws, our policies. They're outdated. And that is something we're working on right now. We're moving a bill through the process here, the Murphy legislation, because we think ... people with mental illness are getting guns and conducting these mass shootings."

When politicians draw links between gun violence and mental illness, they set us on a path to strip away rights from disabled Americans without making us safer. The Murphy bill, in particular, is both immoral and would be ineffective.

To be disabled is to be at risk. This is not because of anything inherent in particular medical conditions, but because society discriminates so dangerously. People with disabilities are vastly more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it. They suffer [high rates of domestic, sexual, financial and legal abuse](#). [A 2012 meta-study in The Lancet](#) found people with psychiatric disabilities particularly at risk of violence of all sorts, up to four times more likely than non-disabled individuals within any given group.

Disabled individuals also regularly experience violence at the hands of the state — from [law enforcement](#), in [schools](#), and [in the prison system](#). For example, children with disabilities are [20 times more likely](#) to be restrained in school than their non-disabled peers. A third to a half of all individuals killed by police are disabled. The jails are full of disabled prisoners [who receive horrific abuse](#). Given the ample data, the primary mission of the state should be to protect disabled Americans while promoting inclusion in communities, workplaces and schools. Instead, Ryan, Tim Murphy (R-PA, the bill's sponsor) and too many others scapegoat them, blame them for violence and threaten to take away their freedoms.

At its core, the Murphy Bill — titled [Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2015 \(H.R.2646\)](#) — proposes to address gaps in mental health coverage through the removal of privacy protections, forced

institutionalization (also known as [involuntary outpatient commitment](#)) and compelled compliance to drug regimes. Notice how even in the title of this current iteration of the bill (it has failed to pass in previous Congresses), the emphasis is on families, not people with disabilities themselves. It's a classic case of people legislating [about disability without talking to disabled individuals](#). Daniel B. Fisher, M.D., Ph.D., Board President of the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery, [writes](#), "The most ominous aspect of this Murphy legislation is its intent to silence the voice of persons with lived experience in the formation of its provisions and in future policy development."

Instead of gun control, Paul Ryan and Tim Murphy are proposing 'human control.'

The link between homicidal gun violence and mental illness is largely a myth. There's no evidence that forcing people with mental illness to take drugs or incarcerating them in hospitals will reduce the rate of shootings. Liza Gold, editor of "Gun Violence and Mental Illness," [says that while homicides might be committed](#), "by individuals who are angry, violently impulsive, and often fueled by alcohol or drugs," they are only rarely "committed by individuals with mental illness."

Unfortunately, while the Murphy bill won't make us safer from gun violence, it will erode civil liberties and increase stigmatization. Even people who are in favor of court-ordered drug regimes and other outpatient treatments [do not argue](#) they are effective violence-reduction strategies. Such forced compliance also doesn't lead to recovery.

"This is out and out promotion of irrational prejudice based upon disability," Mike Bachluber, Co-Chairperson of National Council on Independent Living ADA/Civil Rights Subcommittee, told me about the bill. Robert Bernstein, president and executive director of the Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, said that Ryan's bill is not only "misguided" but "fails to address the real problems in the mental health system."

We do have plenty of problems in that system. Bethany Lilly, a policy attorney at Bazelon, told me that right now the system has substantial gaps in services, and H.R. 2646 would just pour more money on the most coercive elements of how we respond to people in crisis: court-mandated treatment and asylums. Instead, she said, "We need to invest in intensive community-based services that people need," such as access to providers, supported housing, assertive community treatment teams that help individuals live in a community and many other services intended to help people from getting into crisis in the first place. Such services are both cheaper and more effective than institutions or forced medication. But they also require embracing the principles of inclusion and accommodation.

Ironically, the Inland Resource Center, the site of Wednesday's tragic violence, supports this kind of community investment. Its mission statement cites its "core values of independence, inclusion and empowerment." It's a place where people get community-based services of all types, including care for mental health issues. In the wake of the massacre, Speaker Ryan suggests turning our backs on its mission.

Or maybe he just doesn't want to talk about guns and uses mental illness as a convenient scapegoat. Ryan received an "[A rating](#)" from the National Rifle Association, which has donated to both him and Murphy. Instead of gun control, they are proposing "human control." Stigmatizing people with disabilities after a shooting at a disability-services center must seem like good politics.

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