

## **HOW MANY MORE JARED LOUGHNERS? AMERICA'S MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS**

By Nick Gier

The cracks in the mental health care system in America are not fissures; they are canyons.

—Dr. Keith Ablow, Fox News psychiatrist

I screamed at the top of my lungs that my son was one day going to hurt someone, but no one in a position to avert the tragedy would listen or do anything.

—Jeannette Halton-Tiggs, whose son shot and killed a Cleveland police officer

Jared Loughner, the gunman who killed six and wounded 14 at a Tucson Safeway, has all the symptoms of someone who is mentally ill. Even though anti-government rhetoric was found in his writings, many people want us to believe that Loughner's actions are exclusively those of a deranged mind.

Loughner's philosophy professor found him strange and detached from reality, but at least he demonstrated in class and in his on-line syllogisms that he understood the form of a valid argument. Loughner's problem was that a valid syllogism must have true premises in order for him to draw a true conclusion.

In a heart-wrenching letter in my local newspaper, a father wrote about his autistic son, who can program a computer but "has no concept of relating to other people other than to annoy them." The son listens to Rush Limbaugh every day and sends frightening e-mails to his father, who confesses that he "can easily see how Eric might decide to make himself instantly famous with the aid of a gun." Violent rhetoric can indeed have violent consequences.

The chances that Loughner's mental illness will persuade jurors to cut him any slack, however, are slim. (Timothy Dalton was sentenced to life in prison for his crime.) Ironically, the people who blame the shootings on mental disorder alone will be the type of juror who will reject the insanity defense and insist that Loughner take full responsibility for his actions.

Mental health professionals are reminding us that not all those who have a mental disorder are violent individuals. In fact, the mentally ill are more often the targets of abuse not perpetrators. It is estimated that only 40,000 of 4 million mentally ill Americans can be considered violent. A study conducted by the MacArthur Foundation found that those released from treatment, as long as they are not drug abusers, commit no more crimes than the average population.

Loughner should have been referred to a mental health clinic, and Arizona, as Sam Stein explains, has one of the "most expansive mental health laws in the country." Writing for *The Huffington Post*, Stein states that the law allows any person "concerned about the mental state of

others to petition local authorities to have the persons evaluated if they are a danger to themselves or others or are mentally ill but may not know it.”

Even if Loughner had been referred, he most likely would not have received treatment. In his own Pima County 45 percent of those in mental health programs were disenrolled in 2009 because of budget cuts. The coverage for another 3,800 patients was drastically reduced. As Stein explains: “They were still allowed to get generic medications, but lost their case manager, their doctor and access to group therapy, as well as transportation and housing subsidies.”

A 2007 study in the British medical journal *The Lancet* estimated that 67 percent of Americans with mental disorders do not receive any treatment (vol. 370: 878-89). As with other social and health statistics—such as teen births and infant mortality—U.S. mental health care ranks among the developing countries. In other industrialized countries the percentage of those not treated ranges from 30-50.

In the 1970s there was a move to close down the nation’s mental hospitals—the abuses of which were dramatized in the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*—and concentrate on more humane community treatment programs. Out of concern for personal autonomy and civil rights, cases of involuntary confinement were drastically reduced. With so many of the mentally ill languishing without treatment on our streets (over 600,000) or locked up in our prisons (about one quarter of our 2 million inmates), some people are now rethinking the criteria for involuntary commitment. The toughest decisions are those concerning those who can take care of their basic needs but still have the potential for anti-social behaviors.

Fox News’ psychiatrist Keith Ablow states that “in most states, the mental health care delivery systems have been gutted by disproportionate cuts that leave them reeling, understaffed and unreliable.” He also blames private health insurers “who routinely deny comprehensive services (like hospitalization) to people, even if they are psychotic and drug addicted and even if they have expressed very serious thoughts of violence.” But Ablow and his friend Glenn Beck still condemn the civilized world’s socialized medicine that offers much better mental health coverage.

In their monumental study *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Stronger Societies*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown a strong correlation (and arguably causation) between economic inequality and mental illness. In 1998 the World Mental Health Survey Consortium did a study that, in order to control for cultural and genetic differences, asked the same questions of people in 12 industrialized countries.

Using these data Wilkinson and Pickett found, as they did on many other social and health problems, that unequal countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. had the highest numbers of mental disorders while the egalitarian countries such as Japan, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands had the fewest. Continental welfare states have much better treatment programs than the U.S. or the U.K.

Republicans now control the House and the most state legislatures ever, and they will make sure that economic inequality increases and funding for social and health programs

decreases. The GOP mantra of “No New Taxes” will prevent the implementation of the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health’s recommendations. Set up in 2002 by then President George W. Bush, the commissioners bemoaned the collapse of the nation’s mental health services and proposed increased federal funding in this area.

The advocacy group America Mental Health makes a strong pitch to the nation’s business leaders by reminding them that “untreated and mistreated mental illness costs the United States \$150 billion in lost productivity each year, and U.S. businesses foot up to \$44 billion of this bill.” American Mental Health proposes that “many considerations—ranging from social justice to economic self-interest—make it imperative that the federal government assume a major, focused, coordinated role in mental health policy, a role both different and larger than it currently plays.”

In his state of the state address Idaho Governor “Butch” Otter encouraged families to gather around the kitchen table to solve their problems rather than relying on “soul-crushing” state and federal programs to help them. Even the strongest families are helpless in the face of the challenges posed by the Jared Loughners of the nation. Even the wisest fathers and mothers on limited Idaho budgets must admit that government subsidized mental health is the only way their troubled children are going to get the help they need. What is really sad is that after the Columbine shooting 83 percent of those polled believed that the parents were responsible for their sons’ behavior.

Gov. Otter is not calling for cuts in Health and Welfare in his FY12 budget, but the department has suffered a 21 percent reduction over the past three years. In mental health alone 49 positions have been eliminated in the adult and youth divisions. In 2009 a Pocatello man, who had been removed from a mental health program, shot and wounded a man near his home.

When I travel to India it is depressing to see so many beggars on the streets and so many people that are obviously mentally ill. The US Conference of Mayors estimates that 40 percent of America’s 1.6 million homeless people are mentally ill. This is a national disgrace and an international embarrassment.

No amount of Otter “table talk” is going to solve these basic social and psychological problems. Far too many souls have already been crushed and fallen through the huge holes in America’s social safety net.

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