

MENTAL HEALTH

Intervening Early To Stop Killers

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Preventing school site mass killings requires early intervention. David Greene talks with Brian Van Brunt, the executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

Investigators are trying to piece together what led a 19-year-old to open fire in a Florida high school this week. They're asking questions about the shooter's mental health, and that is something President Trump alluded to yesterday.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: We are committed to working with state and local leaders to help secure our schools and tackle the difficult issue of mental health.

GREENE: Now, mental health of course comes up a lot after mass shootings, but how do you tackle that issue, and whose job is it? Well, our next guest thinks it goes beyond just law enforcement or mental health professionals. He's Brian Van Brunt, and he's executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association. Good morning.

BRIAN VAN BRUNT: Good morning.

GREENE: So whose job is it to watch out for mental illness and, you know, try to keep schools safe?

VAN BRUNT: Well, I'd argue that it's the community's job, that there's not one single person who's responsible for this. Most of the work we do at NaBITA is with college campuses and K-12 schools. We really encourage this to be an issue that's looked out from various facets. We're looking at this from a law enforcement lens, from a mental health lens, from a student conduct lens and from disability support. So we're really looking at this from multiple perspectives. So the idea that there's a singular answer to this question - gun control, mental health - I think is a little complicated.

GREENE: You said the community, though. Does that mean if I'm a parent of a student, I mean, I should be doing something to somehow watch out for for potential red flags and mental health problems in other students?

VAN BRUNT: I think the red flag part is right on and exactly accurate. I think it's beyond mental health red flags, though, that we know that people with mental health disorders are 5 to 6 times more likely to be the victim of a violent crime, never to be the one who's committing it. When we see these extreme events, almost like when an airplane crashes - we had that a few years back with a lot of airplane explosions and accidents - you know, people began to worry about air travel. And we also understand that driving to the airport's a lot more dangerous than actually getting on an airplane. So I think understanding this idea that when we hear these events that we have this visceral reaction to remove guns, to deal with this as a mental health issue, and we really need to look at this from a research-based, more scientific approach and understand what are the protective elements that we need to help our young folks with, and what are the risks elements that put them at a higher risk for committing this kind of violence.

GREENE: Help people grip onto something. I mean, what does the research, the science, suggest could have happened, say, differently in a case like the school

shooting in Parkland this week?

VAN BRUNT: Sure. I think, again, shifting away from just simply looking at mental health diagnostics here - someone with schizophrenia, someone with Asperger's or autism spectrum disorder - and moving way closer to the risk elements. Individuals, for example, who have a sense of hopelessness and desperation and suicidality. It's a mental health issue in that those individuals are at a higher risk to move forward with these attacks. It's a gun issue in that every attacker who has this unfettered, easy access to lethal means can move more quickly to their goal. And I do think from a gun perspective, we can have freedom and access to guns in this country along with tighter controls. We've seen that in other countries, as well.

GREENE: I think about Nikolas Cruz, this young man who we're talking about. Of course, there's so much we don't know at this point. But there are already reports that there were neighbors and others who, in retrospect now, feel like they saw a very troubled, isolated young man. But there are a lot of young students who might be isolated who could you know, be sort of on their own. And you don't want to target or label people with something like that. So I mean, where do you find that balance?

VAN BRUNT: Yeah. There's two concepts that we talk about in the field. One is threat assessment, and the other is threat management. The idea initially is when we get these reports coming in and these teams, these behavioral intervention teams at schools and colleges where we talk about the risk, that we get these reports from the community. We analyze the reports. We come up with a level of risk that we're concerned with. Then we move towards intervention. Those interventions, when they're best, are about connecting the student to resources and moving them off the pathway to violence and towards a pathway of social connection. The idea of simply punishing them, locking them up into an inpatient unit, you know, looking at arrests or, you know, taking them away from society just ends up pushing the problem somewhere else. It's like rolling the problem downhill to the next place, which is problematic.

GREENE: Brian Van Brunt is the executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association. Thanks a lot for the time this morning.

VAN BRUNT: Thank you.

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