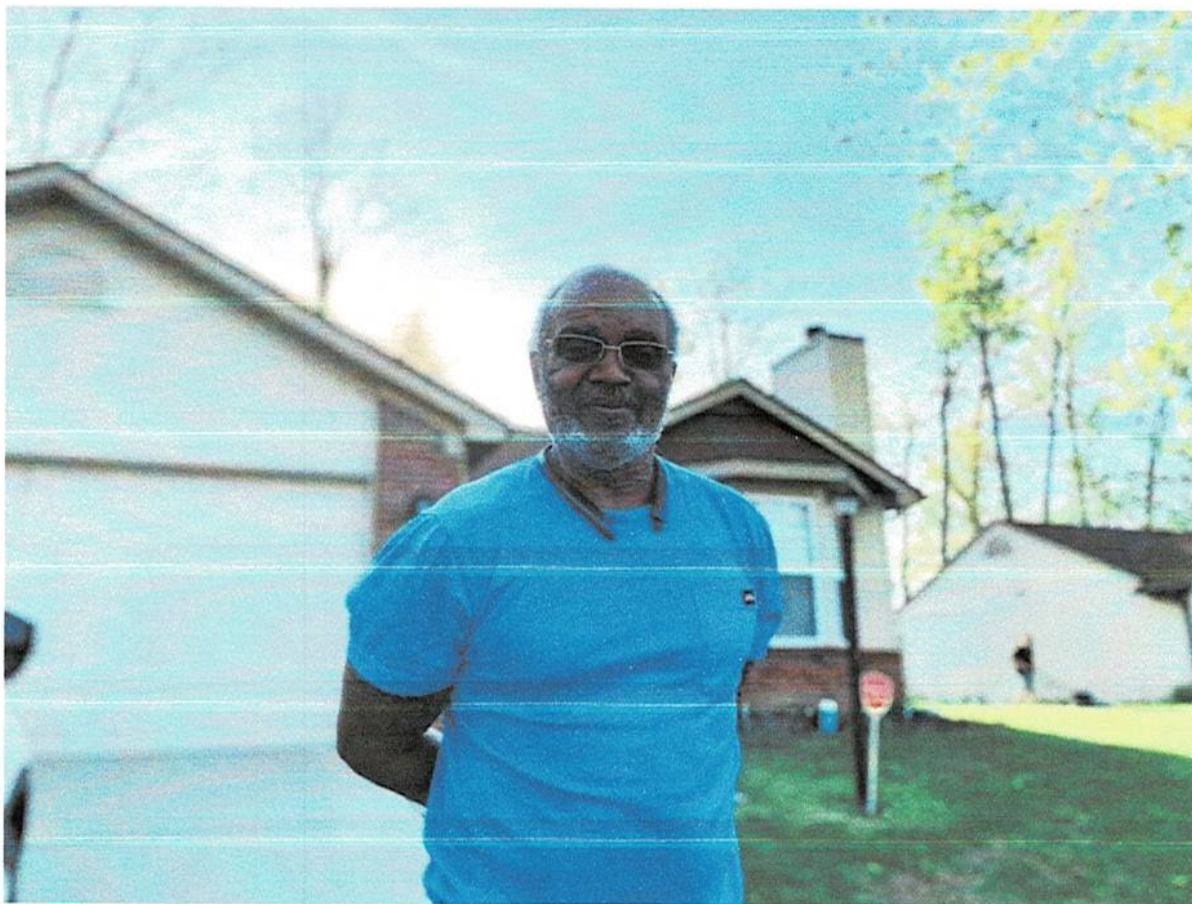


LOCAL NEWS PUBLIC SAFETY TOP STORIES

## Link between mental illness and mass violence is weak but stigma persists

By FARAH YOUSRY May 6, 2021 0



Ray Lay has been in recovery for over a decade. He says he did not miss a single appointment with his therapist and hasn't touched a drink or a drug since. Now, he is working to guide others to access the mental health help they need and start their recovery process by volunteering at local hospitals and community organizations in Indianapolis. (Photo/Farah Yousry)

Ray Lay lives in a tidy brick house on the east side of Indianapolis. His living room is filled with photos and souvenirs from his travels with his wife.

"This is us in the Cayman Islands. Here I was riding on two dolphins," the 60-year-old said, pointing to photos on a table.

In the backyard are five wind chimes that he got on trips or as gifts. On a breezy spring day, they combine for a beautiful, relaxing tune.

But his living conditions weren't always this serene.

"I am a formerly homeless, honorably discharged United States Marine. I live with two severe mental illnesses," he said.

For a long time, he used drugs and alcohol to cope with his schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Then he decided to commit to mental health help and it changed his life. He's now a business owner, recovery

[Español + Translate](#)





support specialist and mental health advocate in Indianapolis.



he sees the negative perceptions of people living with a mental illness. He once had a job as a washer and said he disclosed his mental health condition to his employer. But one day he had an episode and asked to leave work. His manager agreed but later that day, a co-worker called.

“She said, ‘Ray, they told me to call you and tell you that if you come to work in the morning, they’re going to call the police and have you arrested,’” he recalled.

That sort of reaction often flares up after a mass shooting, like the recent one at the FedEx facility in Indianapolis.

“You almost always hear that the people think that there was something wrong — that this person had a mental illness,” said Barbara Thompson, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Indiana. “And so it becomes something really difficult for people who are experiencing mental health conditions, to feel like maybe they’re being connected somehow to these tragic events.”

That can deepen the stigma surrounding these illnesses in America.

Yet studies show that people with a mental illness are actually more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators. In fact, they’re [2.5 times more likely](#) to be victims of violence than the general public. That’s [partly because of the false perception](#) that they’re violent or not trustworthy.

“That stigma shows up in terms of social rejection, shows up in terms of discrimination,” said Dr. Zachary Adams, a clinic psychologist at Indiana University.

“And one of the consequences is that people may be less likely to seek treatment.”

There are over [51 million Americans living with mental illness](#) in the United States and only 44% receive mental health help, according to federal data.

Bernice Pescosolido, an Indiana University professor of sociology, said, “In the United States, we’re such a medicalized society that we have equated horrendous acts as ‘sick,’ and ‘sick’ then ends up translating into mental illness.”

But the link between mental illness and mass violence is weak.

An [FBI study](#) was able to establish a link to mental illness in only 25% of mass shooting cases.

[Research](#) also suggests that social, demographic and economic factors are the main drivers behind violence. And Pescosolido said that’s what needs to be addressed.

“The same kind of things that can trigger a mental health problem in a person also leads other people without that vulnerability to the same outcomes,” she said.

At the root of the problem, she said, are issues such as social isolation, being bullied or feeling like you don’t matter.

Lay continues to see the negative perception of people with mental illness at play.

[Español + Translate »](#)

meet people as I was first starting to recover,” he said. “And I would tell



them that I have a severe mental illness. And I'm never seeing them again. I would say these people are missing out on a great friendship or a potential friendship."



At home, Lay shows off some awards for his work as a recovery specialist. He proudly describes himself as "a walking, talking example of hope."

In the aftermath of the FedEx mass shooting and incidents like it, he hopes to increase awareness and combat the stigma, so people like him can have a chance to get the help they need.

"Recovery is possible," Lay said. "If by the grace of God, I can change my life, I believe anybody can."

*This story was reported as part of a partnership between WFYI, Side Effects Public Media and the Indianapolis Recorder. Contact Farah Yousry at [fyousry@wfyi.org](mailto:fyousry@wfyi.org) or 857-285-0449. Follow her on Twitter @Farah\_Yoursrym.*

