
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

‘Lock em up’?

Think straight about muddled minds

When a troubled mind turns to violence, other minds wonder what to think. Grief seems an insufficient response when a disturbed mind disturbs the peace. Ire rises up, and so does bewilderment. What are we to feel and do, we ask ourselves, when murderous people turn out to be sick people? Is there any way to keep such horrors from erupting in the first place?

The questions are worth dwelling on, even if not easily answered. They touch upon an enduring debate over the genesis of crime, the nature of guilt and the purpose of punishment. Societies have long struggled to draw a line between “madness” and evil — generally assuming that people afflicted by mental illness aren’t really culpable for their deeds.

Never mind that thousands of Minnesotans suffering from untreated addictive and psychiatric disorders now sit behind bars. That fact is too big to face. What preoccupies Minnesotans now is whether they should feel any sort of sympathy for people like Martha Donald, the woman involved in a fatal shootout with Minneapolis Police Officer Melissa Schmidt last month. That Donald grappled with mental instability is evident. Yet anyone who attributes her murderous act to her mental state risks accusations of trivializing a tragedy.

No one would argue that mental illness and murder are equivalent calamities. Still, it must be recognized that Donald was a victim in her own way — and that taking earlier note of her psychic distress might have averted a mortal battle. This is true of many cases in which mental illness has led to violence.

Yet what does it mean to take note? It needn’t mean locking up the mentally ill — as one Minneapolis police officer recently advocated on this page. That’s a Dark-Ages solution which

Mental health

Seeking a system

doesn’t happen to work. The grim truth is that mental illness is so ubiquitous and its behavioral consequences so unpredictable that locking people up would do virtually nothing to avert violence. Every year thousands of Minnesotans experience chronic or episodic mental illnesses; only a fraction are ever diagnosed. The link between such disorders and violence is weak at best — and, as psychiatrists can attest, determining which few sufferers might turn violent is next to impossible. Indeed, the one thing that is known about mental illness and violence is that its sufferers are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators.

Which isn’t to say nothing can be done to reduce the dangers mental illness may pose. The most promising tactic is to treat it like the life-threatening disorder it is. That means recognizing rather than overlooking obvious psychiatric symptoms in friends and strangers alike — and creating a system of intervention that assures the unwell get the help they need. It means underwriting an array of services — from outreach programs and day-treatment centers to medication-monitoring and supportive-housing strategies — that assure no sick person goes untreated.

Minimizing the dangers of mental illness also requires that hospitals care for psychiatric patients until they’re truly stable — and follow up on them after discharge.

Given how many people suffer from mental illness, locking them up might lighten the traffic flow at rush hour. But it wouldn’t do much to keep the streets safe, or to keep Minnesotans happy and healthy.