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Inside Track

Did Psych Meds Cause the Fort Hood Shooting?

Another mass shooting is added to the list of violent acts linked to psychiatric drug use. The Fort Hood shooter, Ivan Lopez (shown), had prescriptions for various medications to treat depression, anxiety and insomnia, and he was being evaluated for possible post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



On April 2 he smuggled a semi-automatic handgun into Fort Hood, Texas, killing 3 and wounding 16 before taking his own life by turning the pistol on himself. In a [statement](#) following the tragedy, Fort Hood Base Commander Lt. Gen. Mark Milley said that initial investigations revealed no relation between the shooting and any medical condition or dramatic combat experience. Rather, the precipitating factor seemed to have been an argument he had with fellow soldiers. Within a week Army criminal investigator Chris Grey [confirmed](#) the quarrel was related to Lopez's request for leave to attend his mother's funeral last November. Investigators do not believe he acted due to any ongoing mental problem.

Nevertheless, media reports harp on the possibility of Lopez' PTSD causing the violence, prompting NPR's Joseph Shapiro to answer in an April 3 report, [Shooting Unfairly Links Violence with Mental Illness — Again](#). He points out that those with mental illness are much more likely to be victims of violence rather than perpetrators. Yet Shapiro barely mentions the role psych med side effects are known to play. He even makes the claim, "There are few factors that are more likely than others to be present among people who do become violent."

On the contrary, many such violent acts involve psychotherapeutic drugs. Following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut, CNN's chief medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta [commented](#), "If you look at the studies of other shootings like this that have happened, medications like this were a common factor." Former Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge also warned of the undeniable link between mass violence and psychiatric drugs.

Army spokesmen have confirmed Lopez was taking the sedative-hypnotic Ambien for insomnia. Literature accompanying this prescription warns users they may experience depression, suicidal ideation, abnormal thinking or behavior changes, and "complex sleep related reactions" such as sleep driving, sleep eating and sleep shopping. Defense lawyers for a North Carolina man who gunned down eight people at a nursing home in 2009 successfully argued the shooter was not in control of his actions due to Ambien's influence. Charges were reduced from eight counts of first-degree murder to eight counts of second-degree murder, despite the fact the gunman was targeting his estranged wife who worked as a nurse at the facility.

Ambien is well known in criminal courts for its dangerous amnesic effects. Prosecutors dropped DWI charges in 2011 against a Missouri woman because Ambien, not alcohol, was to blame for her reckless



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driving. A Texas flight attendant's erratic sleep-driving turned fatal for 3 people and left a baby with severe brain damage, but the Ambien defense reduced her sentence from ten years to six months in prison with ten years probation. Robert F. Kennedy's daughter, Kerry, crashed her car into another vehicle in 2012 and fled the scene under the influence of Ambien, and her cousin, former Rhode Island congressman Patrick Kennedy, was on the sleep med in 2006 when he crashed his car into a Capitol Hill barricade, claiming he was late for a vote, though voting had ended six hours earlier. Ambien left each of these people with no recollection of their bizarre behavior.

But the Fort Hood shooter was also prescribed anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds, according to Army reports. Which drugs he was taking have yet to be revealed, but all antidepressants bear the strongest warnings required by the FDA short of pulling a drug from the market. These "black box warnings" alert consumers to major hazards of antidepressants including suicidal and homicidal thinking, worsening of depressive symptoms, and unusual changes in behavior.

The drugs seem even more likely culprits in this recent Fort Hood crime considering the reaction of Lopez' family and friends to news of the tragedy. [CNN reports](#) that his hometown in Puerto Rico is reeling from shock, quoting a statement from Lopez' father in which "he described the soldier as 'a calm family man' and 'a good son.'" Prior to his military career he served on the Puerto Rico police force, and military statements confirm Lopez had no prior criminal record. "My son could not have been in his right mind," his father said. "He was not like this."

Photo of Ivan Lopez: AP Images



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