

Key Messages Mental Illness and Violence January 2008

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario seeks to inform people about risk factors associated with violence while validating that people with mental illness should not be discriminated against.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MENTAL ILLNESS TO VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY IS VERY LOW

The existence of a possible link between mental illness and violence does not mean that persons with mental illness are responsible for much of the violence in society. On the contrary, the majority of crimes are not attributed to mental illness at all. In general, the causes of violent behaviour amongst persons with mental illness are as varied and complex as those in the general population¹.

Many studies examining the link between mental illness and violence can be misleading due to the fact that mentally ill persons have higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse. There is a much more significant correlation between substance abuse and violence than there is between mental illness and violence. However, because there is a higher prevalence of substance use amongst people with mental illness than in the general population, acts of violence are often mistakenly attributed to the mental illness.

- The prevalence of substance abuse among the mentally ill is 47% for people with schizophrenia and 56% for people with bipolar disorder².
- In the absence of substance abuse, the prevalence of violence among people with a mental illness is no greater than among people without a mental illness³.
- The actual contribution of mental illness to overall rates of violence is very low. The term "attributable risk" refers to the overall effect a factor has on the level of violence in the population. For those with a major mental illness, the population-attributable risk is only 4.3%. In contrast, the population-attributable risk for those with a substance abuse disorder is approximately 34%⁴.

MENTAL ILLNESS IS ONLY ONE OF MANY RISK FACTORS FOR VIOLENCE

The presence of a mental illness in a person who has committed a violent act does not alone infer causality. Though there is a moderate risk for violence associated with mental illness, there are many other risk factors for violence as well. Some of the more significant risk factors for violence include substance abuse, history of violence, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. For a true understanding of this issue, mental illness and violence should be examined in context, and the risk attributed to mental illness should be compared with the risk attributed to these other factors.

- The strongest predictor of violence is a past history of violence and criminality, regardless of the diagnostic group⁵.
- Compared with the risk associated with the combination of male gender, young age, and lower socioeconomic status, the risk of violence presented by mental illness is modest⁶.
- Violence among discharged patients is partly a function of the high-crime neighbourhoods they reside in, not of the mental illness itself⁷.
- When stressful life events and impaired social supports are factored out, the association between mental illness and violence is considerably weakened⁸.

¹ Swanson JW et al. (2002). The Social-Environmental Context of Violent Behaviour in Persons Treated for Severe Mental Illness. *Am J Public Health*, 92, 1523-1531.

² Skinner, W., O'Grady, C., Bartha, C., & Parker, C. (2004). *Concurrent Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders*. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

³ Steadman, HJ. et al. (1998). Violence by People Discharged From Acute Psychiatric Inpatient Facilities and by Others in the Same Neighborhoods. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 55, 393-401.

⁴ Swanson, JW. (1994). Mental disorder, substance abuse, and community violence: an epidemiologic approach. In: Monahan J, Steadman HJ., editors. *Violence and mental disorder: developments in risk assessment* (pp. 101–136). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ Public Health Agency of Canada. (1996). *Mental Illness and Violence: Proof or Stereotype?*

⁶ www.sahmsa.gov

⁷ Monahan, J. Steadman, HJ. Silver, E., et al. (2001). *Risk assessment: the MacArthur Study of Mental Disorder and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE VICTIMS OF CRIME

Because most people with mental illness reside in the community, they are vulnerable to the actions of those around them. Like other vulnerable populations, persons with mental illness are at a high risk of being victims of violence. This risk of being harmed or of harming themselves greatly exceeds any risk of harming others.

- Persons with mental illness are victimized much more often than the general population. A study of 936 people with severe mental illness found that over one quarter had been victims of violent crime in the past year, a rate of 11 times higher than the general population. The annual incidence of violent crime in the seriously mentally ill sample is more than 4 times higher than the general population rates⁹.
- People with mental illnesses are at an increased risk for suicide: a recent study of 3,275 suicide victims found that 87.3% of victims had been diagnosed with a mental illness¹⁰.

WHEN VIOLENCE DOES OCCUR, IT IS USUALLY NOT TOWARDS THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Like people without mental illness, those with mental illness are unlikely to harm strangers, as violent behaviour by anyone is most often aimed at family or friends rather than the general public. Though the risk for violence by persons with mental illness is low, potential signs of threat or danger should be taken seriously.

- The most likely targets of violence by persons with mental illness are family members or friends (87%), and the violence typically occurs in the home¹¹.
- Like violence in the general population, violence by persons with mental illness can be prompted by outside factors. In a social network study that followed 169 people with serious mental illness over thirty months, violence most frequently erupted in the family when relationships were characterized by mutual threat, hostility, and financial dependence¹².
- The prevalence of violence among family members of persons with mental illness is low. Of the over 3,000 social network members studied, only 1.5% were ever targets of violent acts or threats¹³.

TREATMENT SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCES THE RISK OF VIOLENCE

There is some evidence to suggest that some active psychotic symptoms may cause a person to be at an increased risk for violence. This type of symptom-consistent violence, in which an individual believes they are commanded to commit a violent act, or feels compelled to act violently based on perceived threat, can be prevented through treatment. Therefore even the most severely mentally ill individuals are not more dangerous than the general population when they are receiving treatment.

- Research showing a lower likelihood of violence in patients who are receiving treatment suggests that violence is related to the level of psychiatric symptoms, not the diagnosis itself¹⁴.
- People with mental illness who are receiving support from mental health professionals are no more likely to be violent than the general population¹⁵.

⁸ Silver, E. & Teasdale, B. (2005). Mental disorder and violence: An examination of stressful life events and impaired social support. *Social Problems*, 52(1), 62-78.

⁹ Teplin LA, McClelland GM, Abram KM, and Weiner DA. (2005). Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 62, 911-921.

¹⁰ Arsenault-Lapierre, G., Kim, C., & Turecki, G. (2004). Psychiatric diagnoses in 3275 suicides: A meta-analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 4, 37-47.

¹¹ Monahan, J. Steadman, HJ. Silver, E., et al. *Risk assessment: the MacArthur Study of Mental Disorder and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2001.

¹² Estroff SE, Swanson JW, Lachicotte WS, et al. (1998). Risk reconsidered: targets of violence in the social networks of people with serious psychiatric disorders. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*, 33, S95-S101.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Friedman, RA. (2003, March 4). BEHAVIOUR; Revising the script on mental illness and violence. *New York Times*, online.

¹⁵ CMHA fact sheet on mental illness and violence: http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-108