

## Violence and Mental Illness: The Facts

**The discrimination and stigma associated with mental illnesses largely stem from the link between mental illness and violence in the minds of the general public**, according to the U.S. Surgeon General (DHHS, 1999). The belief that persons with mental illness are dangerous is a significant factor in the development of stigma and discrimination (Corrigan, et al., 2002). The effects of stigma and discrimination are profound. The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health found that, "Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders - especially severe disorders, such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care. Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment (New Freedom Commission, 2003)."

**This link is often promoted by the entertainment and news media.** For example, Mental Health America, (formerly the National Mental Health Association) reported that, according to a survey for the Screen Actors' Guild, characters in prime time television portrayed as having a mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups: 60 percent were shown to be involved in crime or violence. Also most news accounts portray people with mental illness as dangerous (Mental Health America, 1999). The vast majority of news stories on mental illness either focus on other negative characteristics related to people with the disorder (e.g., unpredictability and unsociability) or on medical treatments. Notably absent are positive stories that highlight recovery of many persons with even the most serious of mental illnesses (Wahl, et al., 2002). Inaccurate and stereotypical representations of mental illness also exist in other mass media, such as films, music, novels and cartoons (Wahl, 1995).

**Most citizens believe persons with mental illnesses are dangerous.** A longitudinal study of Americans' attitudes on mental health between 1950 and 1996 found, "the proportion of Americans who describe mental illness in terms consistent with violent or dangerous behavior nearly doubled." Also, the vast majority of Americans believe that persons with mental illnesses pose a threat for violence towards others and themselves (Pescosolido, et al., 1996, Pescosolido et al., 1999).

**As a result, Americans are hesitant to interact with people who have mental illnesses.** Thirty-eight percent are unwilling to be friends with someone having mental health difficulties; sixty-four percent do not want someone who has schizophrenia as a close co-worker, and more than sixty-eight percent are unwilling to have someone with depression marry into their family (Pescosolido, et al., 1996).

**But, in truth, people have little reason for such fears.** In reviewing the research on violence and mental illness, the Institute of Medicine concluded, "Although studies suggest a link between mental illnesses and violence, the contribution of people with mental illnesses to overall rates of violence is small," and further, "the magnitude of the relationship is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general population" (Institute of Medicine, 2006). For people with mental illnesses, violent behavior appears to be more common when there's also the presence of other risk factors. These include substance abuse or dependence; a history of violence, juvenile detention, or physical abuse; and recent stressors such as being a crime victim, getting divorced, or losing a job (Elbogen and Johnson, 2009).

In addition:

- “Research has shown that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).”
- “. . . [T]he absolute risk of violence among the mentally ill as a group is still very small and . . . only a small proportion of the violence in our society can be attributed to persons who are mentally ill (Mulvey, 1994).”
- In a 1998 study that compared people discharged from acute psychiatric inpatient facilities and others in the same neighborhoods, researchers found that “there was no significant difference between the prevalence of violence by patients without symptoms of substance abuse and the prevalence of violence by others living in the same neighborhoods who were also without symptoms of substance abuse (Steadman, Mulvey, Monahan, Robbins, Applebaum, Grisso, Roth, and Silver, 1998).”

People with psychiatric disabilities are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime (Appleby, et al., 2001). Researchers at North Carolina State University and Duke University found that people with severe mental illnesses—schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or psychosis—are 2 ½ times more likely to be attacked, raped or mugged than the general population (Hiday, et al., 1999).

People with mental illnesses can and do recover. People with mental illnesses can recover or manage their conditions and go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives. They contribute to society and make the world a better place. People can often benefit from medication, rehabilitation, talk therapy, self help or a combination of these. One of the most important factors in recovery is the understanding and acceptance of family and friends.

- “Most people who suffer from a mental disorder are not violent — there is no need to fear them. Embrace them for who they are — normal human beings experiencing a difficult time, who need your open mind, caring attitude, and helpful support (Grohol, 1998).”

---

## References

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Fact Sheet: Violence and Mental Illness*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Appleby, L., Mortensen, P. B., Dunn, G., & Hiroeh, U. (2001). Death by homicide, suicide, and other unnatural causes in people with mental illness: a population-based study. *The Lancet*, 358, 2110-2112.

Corrigan, P.W., Rowan, D., Green, A., et al. (2002). Challenging two mental illness stigmas: Personal responsibility and dangerousness. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 28, 293-309.

DHHS. *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.  
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/toc.html>

Elbogen, E.B. & Johnson, S.C. (2009). The Intricate Link Between Violence and Mental Disorder. Results From the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 66(2):152-161.

Grohol, J. M. (1998). Dispelling the violence myth. Psych Central. Available: <http://psychcentral.com/archives/violence.htm>

Hiday, V.A., Swartz, M.S., Swanson, J.W., et al. (1999). Criminal victimization of persons with severe mental illness. *Psychiatric Services*, 50, 62-68.

Institute of Medicine, *Improving the Quality of Health Care for Mental and Substance-Use Conditions*. Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine, 2006.

Mental Health America. *American Opinions on Mental Health Issues*. Alexandria: NMHA, 1999.

Mulvey, E. P. (1994). Assessing the evidence of a link between mental illness and violence. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 45, 663-668.

New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America. Final Report*. DHHS Pub. No. SMA-03-3832. Rockville, MD: 2003.

Pescosolido, B.A., Martin, J.K., Link, B.G., et al. *Americans' Views of Mental Health and Illness at Century's End: Continuity and Change. Public Report on the MacArthur Mental health Module, 1996 General Social Survey*. Bloomington: Indiana Consortium for Mental Health Services Research and Joseph P. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 2000. Available: <http://www.indiana.edu/~icmhsr/amerview1.pdf> [PDF format - 149 Kb]

Pescosolido, B.A., Monahan, J. Link, B.G. Stueve, A., & Kikuzawa, S. (1999). The public's view of the competence, dangerousness, and need for legal coercion of persons with mental health problems. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89, 1339-1345.

Steadman, H.J., Mulvey, E.P., Monahan, J., Robbins, P.C., Appelbaum, P.S., Grisso, T., Roth, L.H., & Silver, E. (1998). Violence by people discharged from acute psychiatric inpatient facilities and by others in the same neighborhoods. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 55(5): 393-401.

Wahl, O. (1995). *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Wahl, O.F., et al. (2002). Newspaper coverage of mental illness: is it changing? *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Skills*, 6, 9-31.

**For more information on how to address discrimination and social exclusion**, contact the SAMHSA Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion Associated with Mental Health (ADS Center), a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services at <http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov>, e-mail [promoteacceptance@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:promoteacceptance@samhsa.hhs.gov), or call 800-540-0320.