

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a nation-wide, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. For more information about the CMHA and our services, please go to www.cmha.ca

Violence and Mental Illness



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Are people with mental illness more violent than the rest of the population?

If you only listen to the media, you are sure to answer, “Yes”.

However, most of us know that the media is not the most reliable source of information. In fact, the media has a tendency to bend the facts, plucking out stories and statistics that colour the truth in order to popularize their medium.

So, what is the truth?

The Facts

Research into this question reveals a number of important facts that we want to share with you.

#1. Mental illness and violence

As a group, people with mental health issues are not more violent than any other group in our society. The majority of crimes are not committed by people with psychiatric illness, and multiple studies have proven that there is very little relationship between most of these diseases and violence. The real issue is the fact that people with mental illness are two and a half to four times more likely to be the victims of violence than any other group in our society.

#2. The effects of a small group

A small group of people with mental illness (those with severe and untreated symptoms of schizophrenia with psychosis, major depression or bi-polar mood disorder) may have an increased rate of violence. In this group, individuals who are suffering from psychotic symptoms that cause them to feel threatened or manipulated by outside forces have a greater tendency towards violent behaviour.

In spite of this, with early assessment and appropriate treatment, individuals with severe

illness are no more dangerous than the general population. Community treatment programs have also been found to be helpful in the management of behaviours that lead to crime.

We want to emphasize that the actual number of people who belong to this group is extremely small, particularly when compared to the overall number of people who are coping with mental illness.

#3. Bending the truth

Unfortunately, the media spotlights this small group of individuals, unfairly painting all people with mental illness as potentially violent criminals. There is no doubt that the results of a rampage can be tragic, but the media tends to exploit the drama and leave out the context.

#4. Risk Factors

Aside from the group of severely ill individuals, multiple studies have shown that mental illness alone does not incline a person to violence. Instead, it is the influence of “co-variants” (factors that are present in addition to mental illness) which increase the risk of violent behaviour. In fact, the presence of co-variant factors is a strong indicator for violence in any individual, *regardless of whether or not they have a mental illness.*

Let's look at some of the co-variants:

- **A history of violence:** One of the strongest predictors of future violent behaviour is a past history of violence, whether it was experienced as an observer, a victim or a perpetrator.
- **Substance use problems:** Whether it is drugs or alcohol, use of either substance seems to increase the likelihood of violence by seven-fold. In fact, some studies show that substance use problems increase the risk of violence in any individual far more than the effects of a major mental disorder.
- **Socioeconomic environment:** Not surprisingly, homelessness, lack of social support, poverty and inadequate housing have also been found to contribute towards violent behaviour.
- **Gender and youth:** Being a young, male adult can also add to the risk factors associated with violence.

Remember – a person with co-variant factors but no mental illness is far more likely to commit acts of violence than someone with mental health issues and none of the co-variants.

#5. The victims of violence

As we mentioned previously, people with mental illness are far more likely to be *victims* of crime, than perpetrators. Often, their living conditions make them highly vulnerable to robbery, rape and assault.

Contrary to media portrayals, if a person with mental illness does become violent, their targets tend to be family members or friends – not random strangers. Most incidents of emotional eruption occur in the home, not out on the streets.

The truly vulnerable

People with mental illness are really the vulnerable ones. They not only battle a disease that is invisible, they battle society's perception of who they are and what they do. Violence is not only a physical threat; it can also be an emotional, intellectual and spiritual attack. The stigma we place on mental illness is an assault on a person's dignity and an insult to their humanity.

Reduce the violence against those with mental illness. Learn all you can about mental health issues from reliable sources and spread the word. For further information, please go to the Canadian Mental Health Association at www.cmha.ca