

Are we at risk from the mentally ill?

At any one time a quarter of us will experience mental ill health. There is still a great deal of stigma and discrimination which surrounds common conditions like depression, psychosis and schizophrenia. This lack of understanding is often exacerbated by the media who link mental illness and violence together.

Recent headlines include "1,200 killed by mental patients: shock 10-year tool exposes care crisis"; "Bipolar bomb hoaxer is jailed for 18 months"; "Mental patient who broke ASBO is released back into community"; and "Truth about dangerous mental patients let out to kill".

News stories like these have resulted in over a third of the public thinking that people with a mental health problem are likely to be violent, according to Time to Change (England's biggest programme to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination).

People with severe mental illness are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violent crime. A recently published, three year UK study found people with mental health problems are up to ten times more likely to become victims of crime than the general population. The study also found people with severe mental illness were more likely to be repeat victims of crime, yet were far less likely to be satisfied with their treatment by police. They were also more affected by crime than those without mental health problems.

How common are mental health homicides?

Violent crimes and homicides are usually committed by people who do not have mental health problems.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2011-12 the police recorded 550 homicides. Since 1990 the number of homicides involving a person with a diagnosed mental health condition have remained between 50 - 70 each year. We should not underestimate the tragedy of any life lost or fail to address any concerns about care provided. However, these statistics clearly do not support the sensationalised media coverage about the danger people with mental health problems present to their local community. In fact, people with mental health problems are more dangerous to themselves – with high numbers choosing to die through suicide.

According to another national survey of victims of violent crime, just 1% believe the violent incident happened because the offender had a mental illness.

Do alcohol and drugs play a part?

While not the only factor, substance abuse does appear to increase the risk of violent crime in people with and without a mental health diagnosis. According to the British Crime Survey almost half (47%) of those involved in violent crime believed the offender was under the influence of alcohol.

Victims not perpetrators?

A research study undertaken by Victim Support in partnership with a number of charities and academics recently found that people with severe mental illness were five times more likely to experience assault than those without. While women with mental health problems are ten times more likely to be assaulted.

The study also highlighted that people with a mental health diagnosis were likely to be victimised by someone they knew and are much more vulnerable to exploitation by others. Mental health charity, Mind says people with mental health problems often don't feel safe in their local area; reporting all kinds of harassment from being stalked, verbal abuse in the street, having their homes vandalised and physical and sexual assault.

Research published in the Lancet in 2012 says the reasons for this are complex. It suggests people with a mental illness may find it harder to develop / maintain personal relationships, are more likely to participate in substance abuse, be in prison or live in poverty – all of which can increase the likelihood of being a victim.

Many people with a mental health condition were reluctant to report crimes to police or other professionals, saying they feared their illness would be used to discredit them or they would be sectioned.

Getting help and support

People who are victims of crime should report this to the police. Locally the Trust has a very strong relationship with the police. Psychiatric nurses and doctors work with police officers to help them support people with mental health problems. All reported crimes are taken seriously by the police.

Further information:

Victim Support

Tel: 0845 30 30 900.

Web: www.victimsupport.org

Free and confidential help to victims of crime, witnesses, their family, friends and anyone else affected.

Respect

Helpline for perpetrators: 0808 802 4040.

Web: www.respect.uk.net

UK membership association for domestic violence perpetrator programmes and associated support services.

Samaritans

Tel: 08457 90 90 90; email: jo@samaritans.org.

Web: www.samaritans.org

Confidential, non-judgmental support 24 hours a day by telephone and email for anyone who is worried, upset, or suicidal.

Centre for Mental Health

Aims to improve the lives, mental health and wellbeing of offenders and enhance the lives of people with mental health problems through employment.

Web: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/

Narcotics Anonymous

Tel: 0300 999 1212. Web: www.ukna.org

Alcoholics Anonymous

Tel: 0845 769 7555.

Web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/

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