

Mental health and risk

Over the last twenty five years violence by the mentally ill and the risk posed by mental health patients to others often dominates debate about mental health services. Scientific studies have established beyond reasonable doubt that mental disorders lead to violence in only a minority of sufferers.

The assessment and management of risk are integral to psychiatric practice. Negative outcomes, including violence, by those suffering with a mental disorder can be avoided or reduced in frequency by sensible contingency planning. Risk, however, cannot be eliminated. There has been a culture in England of concern with risk, instead of stimulating better and safer practice, which appears to have had a negative impact on mental health professionals, professional practice, service users and the public.

All psychiatrists are conscious of the immeasurable impact of homicides and violence on victims, perpetrators and families, and recognise their responsibility to their patients and the wider public to use their professional skills to reduce risk.

Cooperation with patients and carers in assessing and managing risk should be fostered through care planning and other evaluated initiatives.

What is the risk?

Over a third of the public think people with a mental health problem are likely to be violent - in fact people with severe mental illnesses are more likely to be victims, rather than perpetrators, of violent crime.

The majority of violent crimes and homicides are 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.

According to the British Crime Survey, almost half (47 per cent) of the victims of

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violent crimes believed that their offender was under the influence of alcohol and about 17 per cent believed that the offender was under the influence of drugs.

Another survey suggested that about 30 per cent of victims believed that the offender attacked them because they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In contrast, only 1 per cent of victims believed that the violent incident happened because the offender had a mental illness.

Substance abuse appears to play a role: The prevalence of violence is higher among people who have symptoms of substance abuse (including discharged psychiatric patients and non-patients).

Victims themselves?

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: 116 123; 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.