

Violence and mental illness

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Factsheet

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**Mental illness and violence are loosely linked in the public mind.
This association is promoted by the entertainment and news media.**

How accurate is the portrayal of mental illness on television?

An authoritative study in the US analysed drama programs on television for a whole year — including soap operas and plays as well as films. The study found that 73% of people shown with a mental illness were depicted as violent. The study also found that 23% of people shown with a mental illness were depicted as homicidal maniacs.

It might be thought that news reporting would be more accurate. However, when the same study analysed television and print news media, it was found that nearly 90% of stories about people with a mental illness depicted them as violent and usually homicidal. This portrayal in the media of people with a mental illness as overwhelmingly violent is grossly inaccurate and stigmatising.

What is the truth about mental illness and violence?

Research indicates that people receiving treatment for a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the general population. To put things in proportion, it has been calculated that the lifetime risk of someone with an illness such as schizophrenia seriously harming or killing another person is just .005%, while the risk of that person killing themselves is nearly 10%. In other words, they are 2,000 times more likely to fatally harm themselves rather than another person.

So is there any association at all between mental illness and violence?

Yes, there does appear to be a weak statistical association between mental illness and violence. This seems to be concentrated in certain sub-groups, for example — people not receiving treatment who have a history of violence, and those who abuse drugs or alcohol. However, this association is still weaker than that between violence and people who abuse alcohol in general. And it is even weaker than the association between violence and being a young male between the ages of 15 and 25.

What can be done to help?

Mental health professionals, people with a mental illness and their families all agree that the most important step is to improve access to quality treatment. An important part of this is for mental health professionals to identify those most at risk of committing violence and ensure they receive appropriate, prompt and ongoing assistance. It is also important for society to have an accurate and non-sensationalized understanding of this issue. SANE Australia campaigns actively to improve community attitudes on this and other issues related to mental illness.

How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns you have.

SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness.

For more information about this topic see:

■ *The SANE Guide to Reducing Stigma*

Describes what stigma actually means, explains the harm that stigma in the media does, and gives practical suggestions on how you can fight it.

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