Crime and Mental Illness Fact Sheet One

Mental Illness and Violent Crime

November 2002

Key Facts and “Quick Quotes”

• The vast majority of people with mental illness are no more likely than anyone else to commit a violent crime.

• Mental illness is responsible for only a very small proportion of murders in New Zealand each year.

• Around 30,000 people a month use mental health services in New Zealand. Compare this figure with the handful of high profile instances, where crime and mental illness are linked.

• People using forensic mental health services, who have entered mental health via the criminal justice system, are only 3% of the total mental health service users.

• Mental illness is not a highly significant contributor to violence in society and the risk of a crime being committed by someone with a mental disorder is small.
• Research has found that people with mental illness are more likely to be victimized by violence than they are to commit acts of violence.

• A combination of the following three factors make for an increased risk of violence: currently experiencing symptoms of severe mental illness, not using effective medication and abusing alcohol and/or drugs. Nevertheless, only some people with these three risk factors will commit acts of violence and most will not.

• Young adult males are a higher risk group, in terms of violence to society, than people with mental illness.

• The strongest risk factors for violence are not attributable to mental illness or substance abuse. They are having a past history of violence and threatening to commit acts of violence in the future.

**Background Information: Research on Violence and Mental Illness**

Initial research in the 1980s found no evidence that violence from people with experience of mental illness was any more common than in the general population. This meant that mental health organizations were able to say that there was no link between violence and mental illness.

However, more recent studies find some association between mental illness and violence across the whole population, although the association is not large (of course, for certain individual crimes, there may be a clear link).

When publicizing their findings, most researchers take pains to make it clear that research on violence should not be used to stigmatise people with mental illness, the vast majority of whom are no more likely to commit crimes than anyone else. However, there are a range of expert views on the best term to describe the link between violence and mental illness, from “trivial” (John Monahan), and “weak”
MacArthur statement) to “modest, but by no means trivial” (Paul Mullen). Here are some expert conclusions in more detail:

“Acute mental disorder is a modest risk factor for the occurrence of violence….mental health status makes at best a trivial contribution to the overall level of violence in society.”


“Mental disorder’ and violence are closely linked in the public mind…. The experience of people with psychiatric conditions and of their family members paints a picture dramatically different from the stereotype. The results of several recent large-scale research projects conclude that only a weak association between mental disorders and violence exists in the community. Serious violence by people with major mental disorders appears concentrated in a small fraction of the total number, and especially in those who use alcohol and drugs.”


Paul Mullen prefers to describe the link between mental illness and violence as “modest, but by no means trivial”. He believes that it is important to emphasize that “violence can be a reflection of a failure of treatment and support, and that therefore, in principle, it is preventable.”


A recent Otago study strongly linked violence in the community with mental disorders. However, the focus was not on severe mental illness, but on the one third of young people in its sample who were said to be mentally disordered, since they showed some psychiatric symptomatology. A substantial proportion of reported violence came from this group, which would have included many “troubled youth” without severe mental illness.

**Supporting Literature**

More detail is available in the following bibliography produced by the Commission in 2002: Forum on Media, Violence and Mental Illness: Brief Annotated Bibliography of Key References. (available on [www.mhc.govt.nz](http://www.mhc.govt.nz) or by emailing info@mhc.govt.nz)

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