

Violent Crime Study: Standing Stigma on Its Head

A study published in the August 2005 Archives of General Psychiatry stands stigma on its head in how violence should be perceived relative to mental illness.

In 1999, the U.S. Surgeon General's Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General noted that despite increasing public understanding of mental illness, fear of violence remains the root of stigma, even though "the overall likelihood of violence is low" and "the overall contribution of mental disorders to the total level of violence in society is exceptionally small."

The August 2005 study, "Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness," authored by Linda Teplin, Ph.D.; Gary M. McClelland, Ph.D.; Karen M. Abram, Ph.D.; and Dana A. Weiner, Ph.D., at Northwestern University's School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, goes even farther to find that in a single year, more than 25 percent of people with mental illnesses are the victims of violent crime - more than 11 times higher than the rate of the general population.

In acute care settings, psychiatric inpatients are often hit, threatened or attacked with weapons, or sexually assaulted.

More than 21 percent of consumers are victims of personal theft - a rate 140 times higher than that of the general population. (Personal theft is theft in which an item is taken from one's actual person.) Property crimes are more common: 28 percent of people with mental illnesses are victims of property crimes, a rate four times higher than that of the general population.

The study poses several policy implications—besides the need to overcome stigma. Crime victimization can lead to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other conditions. These in turn only exacerbate pre-existing disorders and increase the need for hospitalizations or other treatment. Crime prevention and risk minimization should be part of consumer education; screening and monitoring for risks also are important.

Housing is important. Poverty, homelessness, and transient living all correlate to crime victimization. Many people with mental illness live in impoverished neighborhoods with high crime rates, or they have unstable housing situations. Improved housing options and financial stability could reduce vulnerability and the real costs of violence - the kind rarely shown on TV.

(From the national NAMI website, www.nami.org)