



Crime and Mental Health

Whether it's due to the influence of the media, or the stigma surrounding mental health, there is an unfounded belief that people who suffer from mental health problems are inherently dangerous; that they are monsters who need to be locked up for everyone's safety. But as you may have guessed from this introduction, that belief is nonsense. The majority of people who suffer from mental illness are in no way violent. In fact, many people suffering from severe mental health problems are actually more susceptible to becoming victims of violent crime themselves.

In many cases, a person who suffers with a mental health condition is also more of a danger to themselves than they ever would be to the general public, with some estimates suggesting that 90% of UK suicides are committed by people who are already experiencing mental distress. Whilst we acknowledge that some people can commit crime and be violent when they are unwell, we want to stress that this is not the case for the majority of sufferers.

In this brochure, we'll highlight some statistics relating to crime committed by those who are unwell, and we'll look at the startling statistics relating to the way they are victimised. We will also briefly touch on the prison system and its relationship to mental health problems.

Whilst there are many reasons why people are biased in their beliefs about mental illness and violence, the media must acknowledge its role in perpetuating the stigma. As well as fictional programmes that often portray mental illness as dangerous, we have observed that news broadcasts rarely cover a gruesome crime without insinuating a role for mental illness. That is bad enough, but if the broadcasters fail to revisit the story to clarify the true nature of the crime later, many viewers can be left in fear of mental illness, believing it is the cause of most crime. So even if broadcasts (or written articles) seem to suggest a mental health cause, we ask that you remember this brochure and await further evidence before coming to your own conclusions. Hopefully in this way, we can remove some of the stigma surrounding mental illness that prevents people seeking help when they really need it.

Victimisation of those with mental health problems

As mentioned, there is evidence that reveals that those who are suffering from mental health problems are far more likely than the general population to be the victims of crime, especially violent crime. These already vulnerable people also tend to be more greatly impacted by the crime and may get less support than

they need to deal with the aftermath. This can lead to deterioration of pre-existing conditions, leading to crisis and potential hospital stays. The impact of domestic or sexual violence has been shown to be particularly detrimental, with some studies finding that a quarter of men, and two fifths of women who are mentally unwell attempt suicide after experiencing these events.

Whilst there may be limitations to the findings of studies, with some mental health problems being undiagnosed and therefore not included in statistics, the findings we do have show this is not a small-scale problem. Compared to the general population, it is thought that those with a serious mental health problem are three times more likely to be a victim of crime; with some studies suggesting that 40% to 45% of this at-risk population were victims of crime within the past year compared to 14% of the general population.



When looking at violent assaults, those with a serious mental health problem were five times more likely to be a victim than the general population, with estimates being nearer ten times the general rate when looking specifically at women. This means that approximately one-in-five sufferers has experienced a violent assault. It is also thought that those with severe mental health problems are much more likely to be the victims of crime on multiple occasions and that these people are four-times more likely than the general population to be victimised by acquaintances or family. Unfortunately, the trend of increased risk of victimisation also applies to murder. It is thought that patients with mental illnesses are two and a half times more likely than the general population to be murdered. This equates to approximately 2.34 victims of homicide per 100,000 for mental health users, compared to 0.91 in the general population.

It can be difficult to pinpoint why this vulnerable group is often victimised. Studies have looked into potential causes and have asked victims why they believe they were targeted. Unfortunately, in many cases it is thought that a person's mental health problems are the reason for their victimisation, with perpetrators picking up on signs that they are unwell and less able to fight back. Others believe that they were targeted for abuse because it was thought their testimony would be discredited by authorities (although more research is needed to confirm if reports from people with mental illness are actually treated in this way.)

Regardless of why a person is victimised, it is important for them to feel they are able to reach out for support and help without the fear of being stigmatised. If you are reading this and feel you have been victimised, then we encourage you to seek help from your local police department and to discuss any feelings this has caused with your health care provider.



Perpetration of crime by those with mental health problems

When we look at crimes committed by people with a mental health problem it is important to remember that the crimes committed do not differ to those committed by the general population. What is even more important to remember is that a person can have a mental illness and commit a crime, with the two aspects being mutually exclusive. In other words, the mental illness is not the cause or reason for the crime being committed, suggesting that even without a mental illness, this person would have carried out that criminal activity. In fact, one study has found that only 7.5% of the crimes committed by those with an illness (in that sample) were directly related to a mental illness.

Crimes can not only be categorised as directly related to illness, they can also be categorised on a scale from mostly-related and mostly-unrelated to the illness. A mostly-related crime would involve the crime having a basis in the illness, but maybe occurring when the sufferer is lucid. When combining the directly-related and mostly-related crimes, the researchers found that crime contributable to mental illness in their sample rose from 7.5% to 18%. Whilst this may seem like a big rise, it is important to consider that even when combining these statistics, the estimates for mental health causing crime were still less than 1 in 5. Schizophrenia is often painted in a bad light by the media, and is often categorised as violent. Whilst there may be a slight increase in the risk of violence in this group, it is important to remember that most people with schizophrenia will never be violent or act criminally due to their illness. This study supported this notion, finding that only 23% of the crimes committed by those in their sample with schizophrenia could be linked to the illness.

There are certain situations in which a person may be more likely to be violent, but in most cases these are the same, whether a person is suffering with a mental illness or not, so it is unfair to suggest they only affect this one group. Being exposed to violence and abuse at a young age, and struggling with substance misuse are big contributors to risk. When looking specifically at those who are mentally unwell, the times where they are most likely to be violent are when they are experiencing psychosis, or delusions, or not adhering to treatment programmes and drug therapies. For the vast majority of people who are unwell, especially those who are adhering to treatment programmes, their risks are the same as the general population.

It is often murder and attempted murder cases where the media tries to lay a lot of blame on mental health problems, but researchers have found this is not entirely based in fact. A 2006 study in Sweden looked into murder and attempted murder over a 13 year period between 1988 and 2000. They found that 18% of these crimes were committed by those with a mental illness. This may sound sizeable but it also means that over 80% of murders and attempted murders were conducted by people without a mental health condition, which is in stark contrast to the media representations we often see. The same study did also encompass all violent crime and found that during the 13-year period, just 5.2% of all violent crime was conducted by those suffering from a severe mental health problem, meaning almost 95% of these crimes were committed by those who were not severely mentally ill.



Imprisonment

Here we will briefly touch on mental health in the prison system. People with severe mental health problems are more likely to be sentenced to secure hospital settings rather than prisons so they can receive appropriate treatment and care, whilst those with less severe conditions can be treated within the prison system. There may appear to be some discrepancy here: whilst we have stated that the majority of violent crimes are committed by people without mental health problems, the populations of prisons have extremely high levels of mental health problems, with some estimates suggesting 9 out of 10 prisoners have a condition. This may be for a variety of reasons, including the way that mental illness may be classified. For example, some people may include drug and alcohol dependency in their statistics for mental illness, whereas we tend to categorise these separately. Prison statistics may also include personality disorders such as anti-social personality disorder. Again, in many cases, personality disorders are not included in mental illness statistics and the diagnosis of anti-social personality disorder includes violent or criminal behaviour, so it's unsurprising that it occurs in such high rates in the prison system.



According to one study, 10% of men and 30% of women had a previous psychiatric admission before they entered prison ...

Whilst some estimates may suggest 90% of the prison population is mentally unwell, other studies have found a range of other results. According to one study, 10% of men and 30% of women had a previous psychiatric admission

before they entered prison, and 25% of women and 15% of men reported symptoms of psychosis whilst incarcerated. This is a lot higher than the 4% seen in the general population but is more in line with the statements we have made earlier in this brochure.

Depression and anxiety are also thought to be higher among those who are incarcerated than in the general population, with some estimates from the Ministry of Justice suggesting that 49% of female inmates and 23% of male inmates are currently suffering. This is a lot higher than the general population where the overall prevalence is around 16%. Mental illness in the prison system is not limited to the UK, with estimates out of the USA suggesting that more than 1.2 million people with mental illnesses are incarcerated in some form, with these people also being significantly more likely to be on parole. Other USA-based research suggests that half of all inmates at the state level and below have some form of mental illness, most commonly depression or bipolar disorder. When looking solely at females, some estimates rise to a startling 73% of the population. Unfortunately this trend appears to be global, with Australian statistics also showing a high level of mental illness in their correctional facilities. Here estimates for mental illness are just shy of 50% of all inmates.

When we look at these statistics, you can see that many people are already suffering with mental health problems prior to their entry into the prison system. This begs the question: why are they going to prison and not receiving treatment?

Well, firstly, this may be because their crime is unrelated to their illness, as discussed earlier. If the crime is unrelated then it makes sense that they will go to prison.



Secondly, in many countries, facilities are not available to treat people in crisis, and they are then placed in prisons so they can be kept away from the general public. This is partly due to the lack of facilities, but also to the general stigma still surrounding mental health issues and the misguided belief that everyone with mental illnesses is dangerous. Regardless of the reasoning, this is obviously an unacceptable reason for imprisoning somebody, and is a clear violation of a person's human rights.

The lack of appropriate facilities in hospitals and in the community is also a significant reason why people who are found to be ill whilst they're in prison have to remain incarcerated, as it can take weeks, months or even years for suitable treatment facilities to become available. Many places are attempting to introduce prison-based treatments to assist those who are suffering, but these services are often also underfinanced and unavailable to the people who really need it. This can especially be the case in private prisons, which can see closing mental health programmes as a way to cut costs.

It's not surprising that people in prisons develop mental health problems, or have their current conditions exacerbated. Prisons are often dangerous places where instances of violence are commonly occurring, and drug use may be rampant. They are often overcrowded, lack privacy, and in some countries, see complicit use of torture, and violations of human rights. Any of these conditions on their own may lead to mental health problems, but a combination of them is a tinderbox for problems.

Segregation is a common punishment tool in prison which is highly detrimental to a person's well-being. Humans are social creatures, and so, being cut off from others for extended periods of time has been shown to cause mental health problems, including depression and hallucinations. These punishments can have a huge impact on people who were mentally well before segregation, but the effects are amplified for those who are already suffering. This is particularly problematic as, due to a lack of resources, many prisons have resorted to using segregation as a way of separating those who are severely mentally ill from the general prison population. Unsurprisingly this is not an effective way to help the people who are ill and can actually lead to a decline in their mental wellbeing.

There are ways in which we could reduce the number of mental health problems seen in the prison system, e.g. improving the treatment facilities offered to inmates, moving people towards treatment instead of prison for minor offences, and improving the continuity of care for those entering and leaving prison who are also suffering from a mental health problem. This is more problematic for countries where the prison and health care professions are completely separate entities. And it is still challenging for countries such as the UK where the health service covers the needs of prisoners, (although improvements are now being seen). Ensuring the availability of beds in secure hospitals, as opposed to prisons, may also be an improvement for the future, although there is still debate about the effectiveness and suitability of these hospitals.

We hope this brochure has given you a fresh insight into the relationships between mental health and crime. Whilst we have barely scratched the surface of this complex topic, we hope we've shown that the general consensus that the mentally ill are inevitably dangerous is unfounded. These vulnerable people are more likely to be victimised and stigmatised, and do, in fact, need our support, not our fear.

For more information on living with mental health problems please visit our website: www.shawmind.org



The Foundation Centre, Navigation House
48 Millgate, Newark, Nottinghamshire
NG24 4TS, United Kingdom

contact@shawmind.org

www.shawmind.org

Follow the conversation:



Registered charity in England (no. 1167947), and a registered charitable company (no. 09921207) in the UK

Registered Office

The Foundation Centre, Navigation House, 48 Millgate, Newark, Nottinghamshire, NG24 4TS, UK