
Principles: The Stigma of Mental Health and Violence

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BACKGROUND

Individuals with mental health disabilities often face stigma and bias because of the false assumption that people with mental health disabilities are dangerous or violent. The perpetuation of misconceptions about violence and mental health disabilities results in these individuals facing discrimination in housing, employment, social situations, and basic civil rights protections.

Millions of adults in the United States have mental health disabilities and live successful, productive lives.¹ They are our family members and friends, co-workers and colleagues. They live independently, work in jobs, and actively and positively contribute to society and the United States economy.

The federal New Freedom Commission on Mental Health found that, “Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders²—especially severe disorders,

¹ http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1ANYDIS_ADULT.shtml. [“Return to Main Document”](#)

² DRC prefers to use the term “mental health disability” rather than the term “mental disorders.” We use this term here because it is a direct quote from the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health report. [“Return to Main Document”](#)

such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness...Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment (<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/mentalhealthcommission/press/july03press.htm>).

Many Americans believe people with mental health disabilities pose a threat of violence, a perception that has nearly doubled in the past half-decade. The media promotes these stereotypes through selective reporting, which reinforces the public's stereotypes linking violence and mental health disabilities. From dramatic depictions on television and in movies to media accounts and news stories, the vast majority portray people with mental health disabilities as dangerous and focus on negative characteristics of these conditions (e.g., unpredictability and unsociability). Few highlight positive stories of recovery or individual contributions to society.

In fact, only a small amount, about four percent, of violence to others in the United States is attributable to mental health disabilities.³ This represents a small percentage of people who are violent, given some estimates that as many as one half of all Americans report having a disabling mental health condition at least once in their lifetime.⁴ Individuals with mental health disabilities are more often the victims of violence than the perpetrators of violence. People are 2.5 times more likely to be attacked, mugged or raped than the general population if they have mental health disabilities, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or psychosis.⁵

³ Consortium Report at p.5; NAS Reference Manual at p.847. See also Surgeon General Report at p.7 ("the overall contribution of mental disorders to the total level of violence in society is exceptionally small"); NASMHPD Toolkit at p.82 ("[m]ental illness is only a weak predictor of violent behavior"). ["Return to Main Document"](#)

⁴ Kessler RC, Berglund P, Demler O, Jin R, Merikangas KR, Walters EE (June 2005). ["Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication"](#). Arch. Gen. Psychiatry **62** (6): 593–602. ["Return to Main Document"](#)

⁵ Hiday, V.A., Swartz, M.S., Swanson, J.W., et al. (1999). Criminal victimization of persons with severe mental health disabilities. *Psychiatric Services*, 50, 62-68. ["Return to Main Document"](#)

The vast majority of gun violence occurs during domestic violence disputes, the commission of felony crimes, and by gangs.⁶ Yet, the media sensationalizes stories of mass shooting and gun violence that involve individuals with perceived mental health disabilities and fails to report on violence attributable to other factors, such as societal pressures in poor urban areas and domestic and gang violence.

PRINCIPLES

Disability Rights California (DRC) is committed to the elimination of stigma and bias against individuals with disabilities including stigma and discrimination stemming from the false link between mental health disabilities and violence. In furtherance of this principle, DRC will oppose legislation that,

1. Attributes violence to individuals with mental health disabilities.
2. Does not consider other indicators of violence such as substance use, youth (people in their teens and early twenties), and a criminal history, as they have stronger associations with violent acts.
3. Attempts to predict whether a specific individual poses an increased risk of violence, since it is difficult to do so.
4. Attributes gun violence to mental health disability. The prevalence of mental health disabilities across the world (in countries where data is gathered) varies somewhat, with the United States being slightly higher. However, the general prevalence of gun violence in the United States, including gang and domestic violence, is much greater than similar industrialized nations.
5. Perpetuates misconceptions about violence and mental health disability because such misconceptions increase stigma against people with mental health disabilities. It is stigmatizing to equate every mass shooting with a mental health disability. Very few people with mental health disabilities are violent.
6. Imposes firearm restrictions based on disability status rather than findings of violence and dangerous behavior.

⁶ <http://nij.gov/topics/crime/gun-violence/Pages/welcome.aspx>. [“Return to Main Document”](#)