How Often Are Individuals with Serious Mental Illness Victimized?

(updated November 2014)

SUMMARY: Multiple studies have shown that individuals with severe psychiatric disorders are especially vulnerable to being victimized. This frequently involves acts such as theft of clothing or money but also includes assault, rape, or being killed. Women who have a severe psychiatric disorder are especially vulnerable. Some of the studies suggest that individuals who are victimized are less likely to have been compliant with their medication. This association is strongly supported by the 2002 North Carolina study by Hiday et al. that showed that individuals with severe psychiatric disorders who were on outpatient commitment, and thus were taking their medication regularly, were *victimized only half as often* as those who were not on outpatient commitment.

- A 2014 analysis of six American studies of victimization among homeless individuals with serious mental illness reported lifetime rates of victimization from 74% to 87%. In the largest such study the victimization rate after just two months was 77%. Women who were homeless and mentally ill were especially vulnerable; in a study in Washington, DC 63% of the women had been raped in the previous year.


- Recent studies from England confirm the high rate of victimization of individuals with serious mental illness. In a study of 303 psychiatric outpatients, 10% of the women “had experienced sexual assault in the past year.” In another study, 45% of the individuals “with severe mental illness had been victims of crime in the previous year, and were five times more likely to be a victim of assault than were people in the general population.” And in a study of all homicides over a 3-year period, 6% of the homicide victims “had contact with mental health services in the 12 months before their death.”


- A 2014 analysis of five American studies of the victimization of “adults with mental illness” included 4,480 individuals. Victimization was defined very broadly to include “slapping” and “pushing, grabbing or shoving” as well as “sexual assault” or “using a weapon.” The 6-month prevalence of having experienced at least one such episode was 31 percent.

A 2012 meta-analysis of studies of victimization of adults with disabilities included 21 studies worldwide; 17 of these studies included data on individuals with mental illness. Within the previous 12 months, 24 percent of the mentally ill individuals had been victimized. Among these, 21 percent had experienced physical violence and 6 percent had experienced sexual violence.


A 2009 review of victimization studies reported: “Rates of victimization among severely mentally ill persons were 2.3–140.4 times higher than in the general population.” Victimization occurred more frequently among individuals who were also abusing drugs and/or alcohol and among individuals who had the most severe symptoms.


In 13 rural counties in Vermont, all individuals with serious mental illness who were victimized in a one-year period (July 2005 through June 2006) who came to the attention of the police were studied. If the victimization did not come to the attention of the police, it was not included. Among 2,610 individuals with serious mental illness, 7.1 percent were the victim of a crime. Among those who were 18 to 34 years of age, the percentage victimized was 13.2 percent, compared to those who were 50 or older, for whom the percentage was 4.5 percent.


In San Francisco, 103 individuals with schizophrenia spectrum disorders and 36 with bipolar disorder were asked whether they had been victimized (by robbery, rape, mugging, or assault) within the past six months. At the time of the interview, all were living in residential homes. One-third of those with bipolar disorder and one-fifth of those with schizophrenia spectrum disorders had been victimized. Females were almost twice as likely to have been victimized compared to males.


A National Crime Victimization Survey interviewed 936 patients with “chronic and severe mental illnesses.” “More than one quarter . . . [of them] had been victims of a violent crime in the past year, a rate more than 11 times higher than the general population.” The authors suggested that the study “may underestimate victimization.”


In a study in Connecticut, 207 patients with severe psychiatric disorders who were living in the community were followed for one year. Individuals who also were substance abusers had significantly more episodes of violent victimization than did the patients without
substance abuse. Much of the victimization was said to be associated with “social isolation related to disorders such as schizophrenia [which] may lead persons with co-occurring disorders to make poor judgments about whom to trust.”


- In Baltimore, data on physical and sexual abuse was collected for one year on three groups of women who were also substance abusers: schizophrenia, nonpsychotic affective disorders (e.g., depression), and not mentally ill. The results demonstrated “high rates of past year violent sexual and physical abuse,” with significantly higher risks among the women with schizophrenia.


- In Pittsburgh, 270 individuals with severe psychiatric disorders who had been recently discharged from psychiatric hospitals were followed for 10 weeks and compared with 477 neighborhood controls. During this 10-week period, 15 percent of the psychiatrically ill individuals were violently victimized compared to 7 percent of the neighborhood controls.


- In New York, *New York Times* reporter Clifford Levy, in a 2002 Pulitzer Prize–winning exposé, illustrated how egregiously seriously mentally ill people can be victimized. Residents of a board-and-care home in Queens were subjected to prostate surgery and eye surgery (mostly cataract surgery), most of which was completely unnecessary but done simply to generate Medicaid fees for the physicians involved. At least 24 male residents were subjected to prostate surgery, and more than 30 residents had eye surgery; at least 8 residents had both.


- In North Carolina, detailed information on victimization was obtained on 184 individuals with schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and affective disorders, who were followed for one year. Eighty-five of the individuals were on outpatient commitment for part or all of the year, and 99 were not. Victimization was classified as either a violent crime (e.g., assault, rape, or mugging) or a nonviolent crime (e.g., burglary, theft of money, being cheated) against the psychiatrically ill person. Among the 85 individuals on outpatient commitment, 24 percent were victimized, while among the 99 not on outpatient commitment, 42 percent were victimized. The authors noted: “Furthermore, risk of victimization decreased with increased duration of outpatient commitment.” Individuals in the outpatient-commitment group were victimized significantly less often despite the fact that individuals in both groups received standard outpatient care and case management services. The authors suggest that
“outpatient commitment reduces criminal victimization through improving treatment adherence, decreasing substance abuse, and diminishing violent incidents” that may evoke retaliation.


- In Seattle between 1997 and 1999, 819 women who had been sexually assaulted were asked about their history of psychiatric disorders. Eighty of the women (10 percent) had been diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, and an additional 55 (6 percent) had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder or severe depression. Because of the way the study was carried out, the authors said they believed that “most likely we underreported the prevalence of major psychiatric diagnosis in this population.” Women with a severe psychiatric disorder, compared to those without such disorders, were significantly more likely to have been sexually assaulted by a stranger, assaulted by multiple assailants, and injured during the assaults. They were also more likely to have been homeless or to have spent time in jail. The authors concluded that “sexual assaults in women with a major psychiatric diagnosis are common” and “more violent” than in women without such diagnoses.


- In North Carolina, 331 individuals with severe psychiatric disorders (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, affective disorders with psychotic features) were questioned about victimization in the four-month period immediately preceding their psychiatric hospitalization. All 331 individuals had been referred for outpatient commitment, strongly suggesting that they were noncompliant with their medications. Of the 331 individuals, 27 (8.2 percent) had been the victim of a violent crime (assault, rape, or mugging) within the previous four months, a rate 2.7 times higher than the annual rate of violent criminal victimization in the United States. The authors point to factors that “probably caused underreporting of some victimization” and also note that the rate of violent victimization in North Carolina is lower than the rate for the United States as a whole. These facts, plus the fact that the study compared victimization for four months in the study population to one year in the control population, all suggest that the difference between the patients and controls was substantially greater. Using a multivariate analysis, the two variables that most strongly predicted criminal victimization among these individuals with severe psychiatric disorders were occasional drug or alcohol use and homelessness during the four-month period.


- In Los Angeles, 172 individuals with schizophrenia who were living in the community in stable housing were followed for three years. During that time, 34 percent of them were victimized by violent crimes (robbery, assault, or rape). Individuals who were victimized were more likely to have had more severe symptoms, although medication compliance was not
assessed in this study. The authors concluded: “This finding suggests that the most ill and vulnerable persons with schizophrenia are the most likely to be victimized.”


- Seven hundred eighty-two (782) individuals with serious mental illnesses living in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Maryland, and North Carolina were asked whether they had been victimized. Within the previous year, 20 percent of women and 8 percent of men had been sexually assaulted, and 33 percent of women and 37 percent of men had been physically assaulted.