Are people with schizophrenia more violent than the general population? – A look towards the stigma on mental illness

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Abstract

Introduction: Mental illness and mentally ill patients are surrounded by stigma and discrimination. Stigmatizing views about mental illness include the belief that psychotic patients, particularly those with schizophrenia, are violent persons. However, violent behaviour is quite uncommon among patients with schizophrenia. On the other hand, being object of society stigma and discrimination may increase the unemployment and the feeling of not being part of anything and decrease the social network, self-esteem and the financial income of patients. These findings have been related with violence in the general population.

Objectives: The author’s goal is to review the literature concerning the prevalence rates of violent behavior among schizophrenic patients in comparison with the same prevalence rates in general population. The authors also aim to understand whether there are grounds for the generic attribution of violence to these patients. Additionally we try to find which factors increase the risk of violence in schizophrenia patients.

Methods: A literature search was performed using the following key words schizophrenia, violent behaviour, violence prevalence and stigma and retrieved papers were selected according to their relevance.

Results: Patients diagnosed with schizophrenia are four to six times more likely to commit a violent crime than the general population. However, a significant amount of the excess risk appears to be mediated by substance abuse comorbidity. In fact, the risk of violence in schizophrenia patients with substance abuse is similar to that of substance abusers without psychosis. Due to the fact that schizophrenia is a disease with a prevalence of only 1%, even an increased risk of violent behaviour still remains a low absolute risk. In Western countries the homicide acts committed by schizophrenia patients are around 6%. Younger age, male sex, being single, lower socioeconomic status, refusing treatment, substance abuse and duration of illness were associated with the risk of violence in these patients.

Discussion and Conclusions: The vast majority of schizophrenia patients are not violent people so they don’t deserve the stigma of being considered potential murderers. However, the community and the mental health professionals in particular should reflect on the risk factors of violence and how to prevent them.

Supplementary material: Complete presentation available at http://ijcnmh.arc-publishing.org

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