

# **Violence & Mental Illness**

## **Review of the Research Literature**

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# Historical Perspective

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- Plato: How could we live in safety with so many crazy people?
- Aristotle: Madness could be the cause of bizarre murders.
- Philo Judaeus: The mentally ill are divided into two groups—those with an easygoing gentle style and those whose madness was of the fierce and savage kind.
- Benjamin Franklin (1751): Mental hospital in Pennsylvania is necessary because the mentally ill are a “terror to their neighbors.”

Courtesy of John Monahan

# Cautions about Interpreting Research

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## 1. Definitions of “violence”

- Throwing objects?
- Screaming in a threatening manner?
- Pounding fists on hard surface?
- Causing injury or near miss?

# Cautions about Interpreting Research

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## 2. Definitions of “mental illness”

- Personality Disorders (disgruntled employee)
- Traumatic brain injury (inmates on death row)
- Symptoms or Diagnosis?

# Cautions about Interpreting Research

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3. Sources of data about violence
  - Self-report
  - Collateral records
  - Arrests
  - Convictions
  - Emergency Room/Hospital Records

# Cautions about Interpreting Research

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4. Who is comparison group?

# Risks of Research Findings on Violence and Mental Illness

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- Social stigma
- Discrimination in housing, employment, relationships

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WHAT DOES  
RESEARCH  
SHOW ???

# RESEARCH QUESTION:

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DO VIOLENT  
INDIVIDUALS HAVE  
MENTAL ILLNESS??

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- Persons with mental disorder account for only 3-5% of violence in the United States.
  - At least 95% of violent acts are committed by persons without serious mental disorders.

# Incarcerated Individuals

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- 10-16% have mental illness
- 5% are severely disabled (similar to patients in acute inpatient settings)
- 10% have “significant psychiatric disability” (similar to patients needing community crisis bed)

# RESEARCH QUESTION:

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DO INDIVIDUALS WITH  
MENTAL ILLNESS  
COMMIT VIOLENCE??

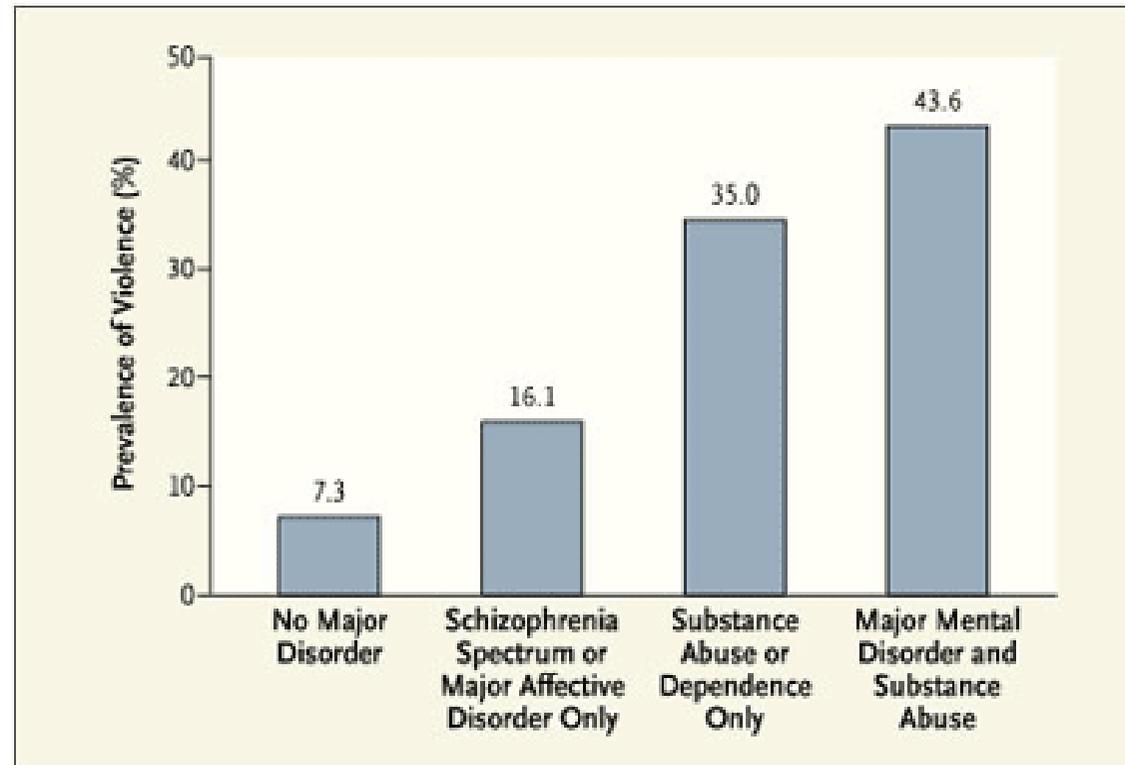
# NIMH Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study

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- 17,803 subjects in five communities were studied for rates of psychiatric disorder
- Data on violence for 7,000 subjects
- Violence = used a weapon in a fight, engaged in a fight that came to blows (with other than partner or spouse)

Reference: Swanson 1994.

# Lifetime Prevalence of Violent Behavior among Persons with or without Major Psychiatric Disorders and Substance Abuse



# Summary of Results of Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study

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- Patients with serious mental illness (schizophrenia, major depression, bipolar disorder) were 2-3 times as likely as people without such an illness to be violent
- Lifetime prevalence of violence among people with these illnesses was 16% compared to 7% among people without mental illness

# **Landmark study by Steadman et al.**

“Violence by People Discharged from  
Acute Psychiatric Inpatient Facilities  
and by Others in the Same  
Neighbors.”

Archives of General Psychiatry May 1998

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## Prevalence of violence within one year after hospital discharge for patients with major mental disorder

18% for patients without drug/alcohol problems

31% of patients with drug/alcohol problems

# Research about factors modifying risk of violence by people with mental illness

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- Situational factors are important (setting and circumstances). Situational factors modify other historical and clinical factors such as gender, age, diagnosis, SES, etc.
- History of violence
- Substance abuse/Alcohol abuse
- Type of acute symptoms and stage of illness (active/acute or chronic)
- Non-compliance
- Interpersonal factors (especially relationships with family members)

# Summary of Research

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- 1) There is association between violence and mental illness.
- 2) Most violence is committed by “non-mentally ill” individuals.
- 3) Most people with mental illness are not violent.
- 4) Various factors increase or decrease the risk of violence.

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QUESTIONS ????