

Fear of mental health service users misplaced research shows

By Zephaniah Samuels
19/11/09

New research shows that people with mental health problems are the least likely of any group to commit homicide.

Mentally ill least likely to commit homicide

Flying in the face of public opinion findings published in the medical journal *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, show that people who are mentally unwell are among those least likely to commit murder.

These latest finding confirm data from a growing body of research which shows that people who use mental health services are in fact more likely to be a danger to themselves than to others .

This new research shows that people have only a one in 14 million risk of being killed by a stranger who has been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia.

‘What the paper shows, more than anything else, is that the public fear of the mentally ill is completely misplaced. These events are so rare that they are almost impossible to study, yet the fear of serious violence by the mentally ill is a major cause of stigma,’ Dr Matthew Large of the Prince of Wales university

said.

This latest research shows that homicides of strangers by people with schizophrenia are exceptionally rare and unpredictable events, showing that the perception of people who use mental health services as dangerous is completely unwarranted.

Equalities groups have welcomed this new research.

They say that this new data needs to be taken on board by professionals working in mental health institutions. The disproportionately high number of people from African Caribbean communities who are given a diagnosis of schizophrenia means that black patients are routinely confronted with double discrimination, because of the associations made with this diagnosis, with little or no support from agencies working within this sector.

Stranger

homicides by schizophrenics one in 14 million population per year

The study

brought together data from Australia, Canada, Finland and the Netherlands and is one of a series of studies of homicide by the mentally ill.

The research

team was led by two senior lecturers in psychiatry at the University of New South Wales, Dr Olav Nielssen at St Vincents Hospital and Dr Matthew Large at Prince of Wales.

An

international multicentre study needed to be set up as there have been so few stranger homicides by people with mental illness in New South Wales over the last 15 years.

The study

calculated a rate of stranger homicide by people diagnosed with schizophrenia of one in 14 million population per year in western nations.

It also compared the characteristics of 42

patients who killed strangers with a matched sample of patients who killed family members.

Findings

from this research show that stranger homicide offenders were more likely to be by someone who is homeless and has a history of antisocial conduct.

The victims

were more likely to be males and the offences rarely occurred in the victim's home or workplace. More than half of the subjects in both groups had never received treatment for schizophrenia.

'The lack of any particular distinguishing features and the extremely low base rate means that it would be impossible to predict who might commit this sort of offence and when they might occur', Dr Nielszen said.

Findings

need to be taken up in anti stigma campaigns

Community leaders

have welcomed these findings and say work now needs to be done to publicise this information in order to dispel the myths which are often used to stereotype the large numbers of people from African Caribbean communities who are given a diagnosis of schizophrenia as dangerous, when they come in contact with mental health services.

Findings

from the latest Count Me In

Census has revealed that black people are 44% more likely to be detained against their will under the Mental Health Act.

Once in

the system research also shows that they are more likely to be medicated against their will, forcibly restrained and placed in seclusion than their white counterparts.

This is despite

evidence showing that black people do not have a higher prevalence for mental illness than any other ethnic group.

A report

published by the House of Commons Health Inequalities Select Committee revealed that rather than being a danger to others patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, are likely to die ten years younger than the rest of the population.

People from

African Caribbean communities continue to face the greatest barriers to appropriate healthcare. The first national statistics on the self reported experience of patients in black and minority ethnic groups, produced by the Department of Health and the Healthcare Commission, revealed that black people in particular continue to be effected by discrimination when trying to access appropriate health care.

Health experts working in the community are clear that both the perception and treatment of those diagnosed with schizophrenia urgently need to be addressed, if the treatment of one of society's most vulnerable groups is going to improve.