

Researchers ID risk factors that predict violence in adults with mental illness

March 1 2016

Researchers have identified three risk factors that make adults with mental illness more likely to engage in violent behavior. The findings give mental health professionals and others working with adults with mental illness a suite of characteristics they can use as potential warning signs, allowing them to intervene and hopefully prevent violent behavior.

"Our earlier work found that adults with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators - and that is especially relevant to this new study," says Sarah Desmarais, an associate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and co-author of a paper describing the work. "One of the new findings is that people with mental illness who have been victims of violence in the past six months are more likely to engage in future violent behavior themselves."

The researchers compiled a database of 4,480 adults with [mental illnesses](#) - including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression - who had answered questions about both committing violence and being victims of violence in the previous six months. The database drew from five earlier studies that focused on issues ranging from [antipsychotic medications](#) to treatment approaches. Those studies had different research goals, but all asked identical questions related to violence and victimization.

The researchers assessed the data to determine which behaviors, events and characteristics were most predictive of violent behavior over a six-month period. Violent behavior, in this context, ranged from pushing

and shoving to sexual assault and assault with a deadly weapon.

The researchers found three risk factors that were predictive of violent behavior: if an individual is currently using alcohol; if an individual has engaged in violent behavior over the past six months; and if an individual has been a victim of violence within the past six months.

"We found that these risk factors were predictive even when we accounted for age, sex, race, mental illness diagnosis and other clinical characteristics," Desmarais says.

In contrast, the researchers found that current drug use was not predictive of [violent behavior](#), when age, sex, race, mental illness diagnosis and other clinical characteristics were considered.

"This is useful information for anyone working in a clinical setting," Desmarais says. "But it also highlights the importance of creating policies that can help protect people with mental illness from being victimized. It's not only the right thing to do, but it makes for safer communities."

More information: Kiersten L. Johnson et al. Proximal Risk Factors for Short-Term Community Violence Among Adults With Mental Illnesses, *Psychiatric Services* (2016). [DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.201500259](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201500259)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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