

News in Brief

TENUOUS LINK BETWEEN MENTAL ILLNESS AND FUTURE VIOLENCE.

A large prospective epidemiological study from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Medicine indicates that baseline mental illness by itself is not a significant predictor of future violence. But mental illness combined with substance abuse might signal the likelihood of future violence.

The researchers stated that while there was a link between severe mental illness and violence, the link was not as strong as most people believe. The findings challenge the widespread belief that the mentally ill are dangerous. The researchers cited the example of the 2007 Virginia Tech slayings, where 33 people died including the shooter, who was revealed to have had received psychiatric care. Such cases led to questions about whether mental illness had prompted the killings, and whether mental health professionals should or could have foreseen the problem.

The study (the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions or NESARC), consisting of face-to-face interviews using a structured diagnostic interview, was conducted in two rounds – 2001 to 2003 and 2004 to 2005.

In the first round, there were 43,093 participants. Questions were asked about mental illness and different risk factors for violence (for example history of violence, income, education and parental physical conflict). The second round involved 34,653 of the original participants.

A multivariate analysis indicated that future acts of violence were significantly associated with

the following factors: (a) Being younger than the median age of 43, being male, annual income less than US\$20,000 a year ($P=0.001$); (b) Having parents with a history of criminal activity, having a history of violence or juvenile detention and witnessing parents physically fighting ($P=0.001$ for all, except $P=0.01$ for the last); (c) Substance abuse or dependence, by itself ($P=0.05$); (d) Bipolar disease and substance abuse combined ($P=0.02$), or depression and substance abuse combined ($P=0.002$); (e) Being victimised ($P=0.003$), divorced or separated ($P=0.001$), or unemployed in the past year ($P=0.001$). Of the top 10 significant factors in terms of effect sizes, co-morbid mental illness and substance abuse was 9th on the list.

There was no significant association with schizophrenia, bipolar disease, or depression, by themselves.

The researchers suggested that health professionals treating the mentally ill might be able to use the data to "red flag" patients who should undergo a more detailed analysis using validated instruments to detect a risk of violence.

The study had certain limitations. Violence was self-reported, although the researchers felt that there was no group of participants that was more or less reticent in reporting incidents of violence. Also, the study involved non-institutionalised subjects. ■

Source: Elbogen EB, Johnson SC. The intricate link between violence and mental disorder: Results from the National Epidemiologic Survey On Alcohol And Related Conditions. Archives of General Psychiatry 2009; 66(2): 152-161.