

MEDIA BACKGROUND

Fact Sheet #5: Mental Health, Victimization and Crime

- The majority of people with a mental illness, including those with severe mental illness, do not commit crimes; although in Australia, people with a mental illness are over-represented in the criminal justice system.¹
- There is a much higher incidence of mental illness among Australia's prison population than in the general population. In NSW, 74% of prison inmates had a mental disorder at some time in the past year, compared to 18% of the Australian adult population.²
- Research shows that people with severe mental illness are more than 11 times more likely to be victims of a violent crime than the general population.³
- In the US, studies have shown that people with severe mental illness have a 6 to 23 times greater prevalence than the general population of being the victims of certain types of violent crime (rape/sexual assault, robbery and assault).⁴
- An Australian study showed that patients with schizophrenia were more likely to experience a higher level of victimisation compared to the general community.⁵ Further, the researchers found a major predictor of victimisation related to people not being engaged in meaningful activities.
- A similar study in the US concluded that people with schizophrenia living in the community were at least 14 times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than be arrested for committing a violent crime.⁶
- Victimization is common among people with mental illness. People with severe mental illness are a high-risk group because issues such as disorganised thought processes, poor problem solving and impaired reality perception compromise a person's ability to perceive and protect themselves against harmful risks.⁷
- Victimization of people with a mental illness can exacerbate pre-existing conditions and result in a substantially diminished quality of life.
- Although classifying 'victimisation' is complex and differs across studies and research methodology, it is apparent that vulnerable people with schizophrenia are the most likely to be victimised in the community; often exacerbated by other issues, such as substance abuse and homelessness.

The MHCA is the independent, national representative body of the mental health sector in Australia. Ph:02 6285 3100 Email: admin@mhca.org.au Web: www.mhca.org.au

¹ Senate Select Committee on Mental Health: A national approach to mental health – from crisis to community. Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, p 333.

² Senate Select Committee on Mental Health: A national approach to mental health – from crisis to community. Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, p 333.

³ Teplin, L., McClelland, G., Abram, K., & Weiner, D., "Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness", Arch Gen Psychiatry 62, August 2005.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fitzgerald, P, de Castella, A.R., Fila, K.M., Benitez, J., Kulkarni, J., "Victimization of patients with schizophrenia and related disorders," Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre, Melbourne 2004.

⁶ Brekke, J., Prindle, C., Bae, Sung., & Long, J., "Risks for Individuals with Schizophrenia Who Are Living in the Community", Psychiatric Services, Oct 2001, Vol 52 No 10.

⁷ Teplin, L., McClelland, G., Abram, K., & Weiner, D., "Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness", Arch Gen Psychiatry 62, August 2005.