

Media reporting of specific mental illnesses in the context of crime: implications for mental health literacy

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TO THE EDITOR: Mental health literacy of the general public is suboptimal, and knowledge and attitudes about some mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and substance use disorders, are particularly poor.¹ The media have been implicated in contributing to overall low levels of mental health literacy, with studies showing that mental illness is commonly portrayed negatively and linked with crime.^{2,3} However, few studies have considered whether particular mental illnesses are especially likely to be “framed” in the context of crime.

In 2000, we undertook a survey of media reporting of mental illness and crime. We retrieved 13 389 Australian media items on mental health or illness from 515 sources during the year 2000 (all national metropolitan daily and Victorian suburban and regional newspapers and all national radio and television networks). We extracted detailed information from a random sample of 1126 items, identifying the mental illness that was the item’s predominant focus (co-morbidity is not typically reflected in reporting) and whether this was mentioned in the context of crime.⁴

Overall, only 71 of the 1126 items (6.3%) referred to mental illness in the context of crime. However, a substantial proportion of items on schizophrenia (9 of 57, 16%) and substance use disorders (13 of 117, 11%) did so, as did 33 of 311 items (11%) about mental illness in

general. By contrast, only a small proportion of items on depression (7 of 218, 3%) and other disorders (9 of 146, 6%) referred to crime, while none of the items on eating disorders (29), dementia (133), or stress (115), did so.

Examples of media references to mental illness in the context of crime included:

- A teenager accused of a fatal stabbing was described as “psychotic, mentally retarded, displaying signs of schizophrenia [and] hearing voices” (*The Australian* 2000; 15 Nov: 4).
- A man was referred to as a “paranoid schizophrenic” and “lunatic” in association with attempted murder (ABC Television *World at Noon* 2000; 16 Nov: 12:19 h).
- A woman charged with “a spate of armed robberies” was described as “fighting a drug addiction” (Radio 3AW *News* 2001; 8 Jan: 13:02 h).

It was encouraging to find that relatively few items referred to mental illness in the context of crime, but confronting that those that did were disproportionately about schizophrenia and substance use. Studies that have considered the extent to which people with these disorders contribute to crime statistics suggest that public perceptions of them as criminally dangerous are exaggerated,⁵ and the media may have a role here.

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