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Mental illness not an indicator of violence

By Geoff Chaulk and Colleen Simms

Violence and mental illness have been back in the news again recently and in the most horrific forms — a massacre and quasi-serial killings. In Virginia and Nova Scotia, the men who (allegedly) perpetrated the violence have apparent histories of mental illness that had been left untreated despite efforts to help both men. The number of family members and friends on both sides of these tragedies who continue to grieve and suffer is untold.

So, do these murders make the stereotypes of people with severe mental illness worse? Are people with mental illness really more dangerous and violent than the next person?

Some 15 years ago, the Canadian Mental Health Association in another province conducted a public survey, which showed that 88 per cent of respondents held the misconception that generally people with serious mental illness are more prone to violence and are dangerous. Many of these misunderstandings have been perpetuated by the consistently negative portrayal of mental illness in the media, be it movies, television or even newscasts (CMHA, 2006).

The tragedies of Virginia and Nova Scotia have dominated the news, as they should. However, we need to look closely at some truths which rarely get discussed when these events are covered. People with severe mental illness commit a lesser portion of violent crime than the general community.

Look at it this way: we know that 20 per cent of the population will have a mental illness in his/her lifetime — treated or not. That equals 100,000 of us in our province alone. About three per cent of the population will develop a severe form of mental illness, including illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Many of these individuals will live productive lives in the community. However, about 15 per cent will require intensive treatment and support.

That equates to about 2,250 people in our province.

So, with these numbers in mind, when was the last time you met or heard of a local citizen who committed a random act of violence and who was mentally ill? What does that tell you?

Here are some facts:

- The strongest predictor of violence is a history of violence and criminality.
- Research has shown that alcohol and drug abuse significantly outweigh mental illness as a contributing factor to violence.
- Studies have shown that people with severe mental illness are 2.5 times more likely to be victims of violence than those in the general community. This may, in part, be due to their vulnerability as a result of serious illness, poverty (over 50 per cent of individuals who use outpatient services at Waterford receive income support), limited social support and stereotypes.

Collectively, we have been working in the field of mental health for more than 50 years. In that time, acts of violence by mentally ill persons in the community have been rare. With significant improvements in medication, increased knowledge about the type of community-based support that works best for people, and access to better housing, education and employment, recovery is possible.

However, recovery is hard work. It requires dedication and support from family and friends, and only gets more difficult when the stereotypes are applied. The struggle to recover from serious mental illness is tough. Let's not add to it with myths and stereotypes.

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