Mental Health Issues Aren’t the Main Driver of Violence Toward Others

June 16, 2016

In the aftermath of the mass shooting in Orlando, the mainstream media is widely reporting that the attacker, Omar Mateen, may have had a history of violence and mental illness. Mateen killed 49 people and injured more than 50 others at a gay nightclub this past weekend, and mental health advocates are stressing that news stories often wrongly link violence with mental illness. Meanwhile, recent study findings, published in the journal Health Affairs, show that less than 5 percent of violent attacks in the United States are actually linked to people with mental disorders, ScienceDaily reports.

For the study, researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health reviewed a random sample of 400 stories in the popular press reporting on mental illness over the last 20 years. They found that between 1994 and 2014, 55 percent of stories about mental illness mentioned violence. What’s more, 38 percent of these articles reported “violence against others” and 29 percent linked mental health issues with suicide.

In addition, researchers also reported that the mainstream media’s depictions of mass shootings by individuals with mental illness increased by almost 13 percent over this time period. The findings also showed that just under half of the stories linking violence with mental illness during this time period mentioned any sort of effective mental health treatment, and only 14 percent of newspaper articles described any sort of possibility for successful recovery from mental disorders. Additionally, only 8 percent of stories that focused on mass shootings in the study mentioned that up to 95 percent of people with mental illness are never or rarely violent toward others.

“Despite all of the work that has been done to reduce stigma associated with mental health issues, this portrayal of mental illness as closely linked with violence exacerbates a false perception about people with these illnesses, many of whom live healthy, productive lives,” said Emma E. McGinty, PhD, MS, an assistant professor in the departments of health policy and management and mental health at the Bloomberg School and leader of the study.

Researchers said the misperception that the mentally ill are violence-prone continues to perpetuate stigma and discrimination that can cause people with symptoms of mental illness not to seek treatment.

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illness and are raising awareness about treatment and recovery from mental health disorders.

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