

Severe Mental Illness and the Risk of Child Abuse Perpetration

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Objectives/Background: Despite a dearth of literature, parental mental illness is often cited as a major risk factor for violence against children. Studies often conflate mental illness with substance abuse. We sought to clarify the risk of child abuse perpetration by parents with treated and untreated serious mental illness. *Methods:* Therefore, we re-analyzed the MacArthur Foundation Study on Mental Illness and Violence (a large study with clearly defined cases of mental illness, community controls, clear definitions for violence, and collateral data) regarding prevalence of violence against children. *Results:* Of 1136 subjects discharged from psychiatric hospitals, 30 committed violence towards a child (2.6%) in the following 10 weeks. Subjects who were parents were categorized into Serious Mental Illness (SMI, 7.0% of whom committed violence towards a child), Substance Abuse alone (SA, 3.3%), both SMI and SA (3.6%), or those who did not meet criteria for SMI or SA (8.3%). 41 (13.7%) of those parents in the community comparison group committed violence towards a child in the 10 weeks.

Conclusion/Discussion: Our analysis suggests that treated serious mental illness in a parent does not translate to increased risk of violence, and in fact patients who have been admitted to an acute psychiatric facility appear to be at lower risk of abusing their children than parents in the community.

Key words: schizophrenia, bipolar, child abuse

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