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MENTAL ILLNESS AND MORAL PANIC: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF A LINK BETWEEN VIOLENT CRIME AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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Introduction: The crime committed by mentally ill offenders has continued to attract higher degrees of media interest and concerns over public safety.

Objectives: To explore study participants' views over public perceptions of mental illness, and psychiatric illness and violent crime link.

Aims: To study public perceptions of mental illness.

Methods: The study was conducted using a qualitative research design, using audi-taped, semi-structured interviews of 8 University students and healthcare professionals. Qualitative research themes and categories were obtained through qualitative data analysis of interview transcripts.

Results: Qualitative categories were obtained using open, axial, and selective coding of transcribed data. The analysis identified a public fear of mental illness displaying in rejection of mentally ill and through expressive communication using stigmatizing language. The study identified that the public sources of knowledge about mental illness are derived from family and peer contact and also through media exposure rather than formal learning opportunities in schools.

The study highlights the need for a public policy debate on harmful effects of social stigma of mental illness and further need for ongoing attempts to educate general public and policy makers. Three major categories emerged through this process are:

1. Negative media portrayal of mental illness
2. Sufferer stigma and carer burden
3. Mental illness and Moral Panic

The study identified that an atmosphere of moral panic exists against mental illness and that this moral panic is reflected in media coverage of crime by mentally ill offenders.

Conclusions: Study confirms negative public perceptions and stigma of mental illness.