Chapter 9
Criminology, dangerousness and schizophrenia

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9.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the relationship between suffering a schizophrenic illness and an increased propensity to act in a criminal, and in particular a violent manner. This is an emotive issue, because in part to argue for such a connection is to risk reawakening in our community the fear of the mad with its attendant demands for containment, and in part, because if accepted it could indiscriminately stigmatize all those who come into contact with the mental health services. The demystifying of madness and the refuting of popular and professional prejudices about the violent proclivities of the mentally disordered, particularly those with schizophrenic conditions, was important in the change in emphasis from control and containment toward management and normalization. Those of us committed to further progress along this particular road have every reason to be wary of the use that will be made by those who favour a return of asylum incarceration, any suggestion that those with schizophrenic disorders are prone to criminality and violence.

In addressing questions of dangerousness it is necessary to clarify the context in which the question is posed and the purpose for which the answer is required. The potential dangerousness of sufferers of chronic schizophrenic disorders, posed in the context of the threat to the community presented by the closure of the large mental hospitals, requires one approach. A different approach to the available evidence is required when the same question is posed in terms of the measures, if any, a clinical service should introduce to minimize aggressive outbursts among patients in their care. Not only are different studies relevant to these two contexts, but different levels of relative risk are appropriate to guide action. The possibility, albeit distant, of violence in a particular patient living in the community may well justify more frequent monitoring of their clinical and social state. The same relative risk would not however justify placing restrictions on this individual or provide reasons for opting for custodial care.

The notion that in our present state of knowledge it is possible to provide a single answer to the question of the potential violence of those suffering from schizophrenia which transcends the contingencies of context has led to considerable confusion and sterile debate. This chapter will review a number of studies of violence and criminality among the mentally disordered with particular attention to schizophrenia. These
Criminality, dangerousness and schizophrenia

studies be employed in discussing the clinically relevant questions.

9.2 WHOSE DANGEROUSNESS, WHOSE CRIMINALITY?

Violence and dangerousness are qualities which may be ascribed to actions, but they are not abiding attributes the individuals themselves. Dangerous actions occur within contexts which, for the individual, have particular meanings. Violence is rarely, if ever, the product of a non-specific reaction, rather it is the result of responses to situations which, however, mistakenly, are believed to be sufficiently threatening or provocative to justify aggression. Some of us are predisposed to cope with stress in a belligerent manner, but this does not inevitably involve violence. These points may seem too obvious to be worth mentioning, but they can all too easily be lost sight of and dangerousness become reified into a thing attributed to a class such as that of schizophrenics.

Integral to the ordinary person’s view of mental illness is a loss of self control and disturbed, if not frankly violent, behaviour (Nunally, 1961). In the popular imagination violence and madness walk hand-in-hand. Though public attitudes are becoming less negative, the fear of the unpredictability and potential for violence of the mentally ill remains (Rubkin, 1974). Sadly, such prejudices are also apparent in studies of the attitudes of medical and nursing personnel (Viukari et al., 1979). These fears are fed by the media. A study of television in the USA revealed that mental illness was depicted in some 17% of drama programmes with 73% of the mentally disordered portrayed as violent and no less than 23% as homicidal maniacs (Gerbner et al., 1981). Fear, as Gunn (1982) has argued, is at least as important in the attribution of dangerousness as any statistical calculation of actual risk. Because the mad are objects of fear they will be viewed as dangerous by many, irrespective of actual behaviour. Such pre-existing fear will also look for justification in any suggestion that the mentally ill have been responsible for acts of violence. It is against this background that the public debate takes place on the dangerousness of the mentally disordered.

The realities of life in the community for many disabled by schizophrenic disorders places them at high risk of coming into conflict with the law. For those to whom inadequate community support is given or for those who lose contact with such services, there is a risk of social dislocation and eventual vagrancy. The homeless and drifting, particularly when also evincing odd behaviours, become not only objects of fear for their fellow citizens, but often find themselves arrested on a range of public nuisance offences. Poverty is the lot of many disabled by schizophrenia and this, combined with dependence on various pensions and social security payments, can lead to temptations to indulge in petty thefts and minor benefit frauds. Those disabled by schizophrenia have difficulties coping with the demands of urban living: they may as a result withdraw and give up or they may become frustrated and angry. The angry outbursts and occasionally associated damage to property can lead to them appearing before the courts. It is this criminality of the disabled and disadvantaged which contributes disproportionately to the offending rate of the mentally disordered.

In assessing the criminality of those with a history of mental disorder the frequency of criminal convictions among the general population needs to be taken into consideration. In western societies nearly half of the male population will appear before the courts on charges other than traffic related offences at some time in their lives (Farrington, 1981; Blumstein and Cohen, 1987). Those at highest risk of arrest are the economically and socially deprived (Reiss and Tonry, 1986) and it is into the socially disadvantaged that the disabled schizophrenics are so often recruited. Once an individual has been convicted of an offence