

Making headlines

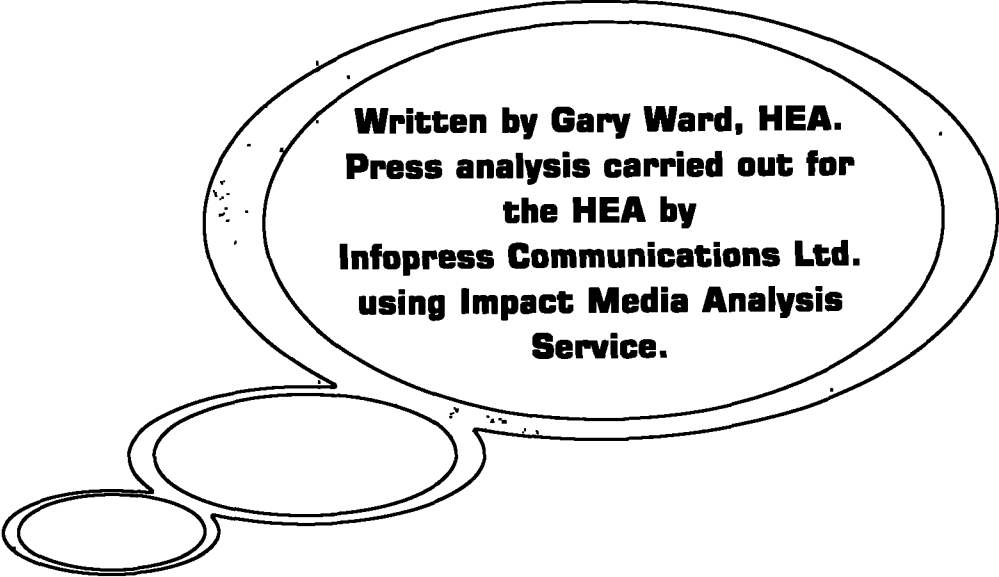
The truth is that people with mental health problems are no more likely to commit violent crimes than anyone else. Contrary to popular belief, there is no

increase in murders by people with mental health problems over the past twenty years.

The high proportion of stories linking mental ill health with criminality and violence contribute to a damaging stereotype - the people in mental distress are a danger to society.

There has been an increase in fear and misunderstanding.

Mental health and the national press



**Written by Gary Ward, HEA.
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Foreword

The taboos surrounding mental distress have a long history. Today's banner headlines – 'mad axeman schizo' – continue a tradition in which people with

mental health problems have come to symbolise society's fears and anxieties about the workings of the mind and the unconscious. Press coverage is only one of a complex range of factors which influence beliefs about mental health, but it is a crucial one. The high proportion of stories linking mental ill health with criminality and violence contribute to a damaging stereotype – that people in mental distress are a danger to society. The truth is that people with mental health problems are no more likely to commit violent crimes than anyone else. Contrary to popular belief, there has been no increase in murders by people with mental health problems over the past twenty years. Unfortunately, there does appear to have been an increase in public fear and misunderstanding of mental health issues.

People with mental health problems are as entitled to support, respect and high quality services as people suffering from any physical illness. Myths and stereotypes legitimise discrimination against some of the most vulnerable members of our community, while stigma adds greatly to the suffering of those experiencing mental distress and of their friends, families and carers. It erodes confidence and self esteem and makes it difficult for users of mental health services to participate fully in decisions about treatment, care and services. It stops people from recognising the early symptoms of mental distress or from seeking help, and may discourage people from seeking a career in mental health. It also excludes people with mental health problems from the workplace. Above all, it prevents us from recognising that the mental health of individuals, families, organisations and communities concerns everyone and underpins the health and well-being of society.

Many agencies across all sectors have a role to play in challenging stigma and contributing to an informed debate about mental health issues. This report highlights the role of the national press and asks journalists and editors to work with users and health professionals to uncover the wealth of positive stories about mental health that are not currently making the headlines.

Lynne Friedli
Health Education Authority

Summary of key findings

- ⊙ Almost 46 per cent of all press coverage was about crime, harm to others and self harm – with 54 per cent of tabloid coverage devoted to these issues and almost 43 per cent in the broadsheets
- Both broadsheets and tabloids made a clear link between mental ill health, criminality and violence – and stories making this link were generally given greater prominence than more positive pieces
- Forty per cent of daily tabloid articles and 45 per cent of Sunday tabloid articles about mental health contained stigmatising words like ‘nutter’ and ‘loony’
- Pieces giving advice and guidance about mental health issues accounted for less than 8 per cent of all coverage
- Eighty per cent of all mental health coverage was found in the broadsheets
- Sunday broadsheets covered mental health issues less positively than their daily counterparts
- Stories about politics, funding and services relating to mental health accounted for one fifth of all coverage
- More than a fifth of the coverage promoted the messages that mental health problems are treatable and that people with mental distress lead worthwhile lives
- Articles covering self harm and/or suicide were generally more balanced than those reporting on harm to others

Introduction

'They're the scum of the earth'

'These people want locking up'

'They're dangerous'

More newspaper stories about people with mental illness? No – the above comments are how three users of mental health services describe journalists. And these are not unusual views. Many users of mental health services, carers and health professionals seem to hold much of the media in contempt for the way they report mental health issues. One survey¹ found that 60 per cent of users of mental health services blamed the media for growing discrimination, a woman from south east England expressing a common view:

'There are lots of people who come to grips with mental health problems (myself included) and who manage an adequate lifestyle. Mass media always concentrate on the "doom and gloom" attitude and give a very bad press.'

But just how bad is the reality of media coverage about mental health issues? Most people will have seen screaming headlines about 'psychos', but are such extreme examples representative of all media coverage, or is there more understanding and helpful coverage than might be commonly thought?

This report aims to answer these questions, concentrating on how mental health issues were covered in the national press throughout the whole of 1996. No previous study has looked in depth at press coverage across such a long time period, although clearly this method does not assess a whole range of other media influences such as broadcast news, documentaries and drama, or magazine and regional press coverage.

What the report does do, however, is look at the quantity of coverage given to mental health issues in the national newspapers and also assesses the type of issues which received the most attention. It analyses how well the coverage communicated four key messages which, if promoted positively, would enhance understanding of mental health issues.

It finds that, across all of the national press, almost half of all coverage linked mental ill health with violence and criminality. While this is a smaller proportion than that found in previous media studies² it is significant, especially as much of this reporting attracts the most space and the biggest headlines. Given the evidence³ that people with mental health problems are more likely to be victims and no more likely to be violent than anyone else, such a concentration on negative issues gives cause for concern.

But this report is not all doom and gloom. Many of the articles examined gave balanced and well-informed coverage. The landscape of mental ill health pictured in the national press is not just one of axe-wielding psychos, but can be a more welcoming place, peopled by men and women experiencing a range of problems which can, potentially, affect anyone.

Method and rationale

The Health Education Authority asked Infopress Communications Limited, using the Impact Media Analysis Service, to evaluate national press coverage of mental health issues over the whole of 1996.

Press cuttings were supplied by the national mental health charity, Mind (see Appendix 1).

This report assesses:

- the quantity of mental health coverage
- what type of story received the most attention
- how positively the coverage communicated a number of key messages about mental health
- the language and assumptions used by the press

The cuttings were read by analysts who recorded the total volume of coverage and monitored each piece for the type of language used in relation to mental health issues.

Each article was assessed to see how positively it promoted the key messages being examined, and given a rating between +10 and -10 for overall favourability. (See Appendix 2). This assessment determined whether there was a 'negative' or 'positive' result shown in the charts on the following pages. Pieces which had no relevance to a particular message did not register a score.

The messages

The following four messages formed the standard against which press coverage was measured. If these messages were clearly communicated, they would help to inform balanced and accurate reporting of mental health issues.

Mental health problems are treatable

There is a range of steps which people can take to diminish mental distress, either as individuals or through professional support. If coverage suggested otherwise this would register as a negative score.

People with mental health problems are not all criminals

People with mental health problems are no more likely to commit crime,⁴ including violent crime, than anyone else. Many users of mental health services say they feel criminalised by media coverage. If coverage suggested a general link between people with mental health problems and criminality, it registered a negative score.

People with mental health problems lead worthwhile lives

Many people live with mental health problems and make a positive contribution to society and to their families. This report analysed how well this fact was communicated.

People with mental health problems shouldn't be stigmatised

Stigma – being made to feel 'marked', being shunned, avoided or abused – adds to the suffering experienced by people with mental health problems and makes recovery more difficult. This survey also looks at how the language used by the press may itself have been stigmatising.

After being assessed on how positively they communicated these messages, the articles were placed in specific subject areas, depending on their main emphasis. These identified, in broad terms, which topics gained national press coverage concerning mental health. It was then possible to see how much press attention was given to these different areas and to assess the balance of 'positive' and 'negative' coverage in each subject, based on how well the pieces communicated the key messages being analysed.

The subjects were: home and relationships; stress; funding/services; politics; business; advice and guidance; harm to self; crime; harm to others; miscellaneous (including coverage of entertainment, celebrities and sport). Sometimes individual articles were allocated to more than one subject. For example, a piece about coping with post-natal depression and its effect on married life would have been classified within both 'advice and guidance' and 'home and relationships'.

Results

A total of 1035 national press cuttings was analysed, with more than 80 per cent of them specifically about mental health issues. In total, almost 1,222,000 words were written about mental health during 1996 (see Figure 1). The daily broadsheets accounted for two-thirds of all national press coverage, while the Sunday tabloids had just under 3 per cent. The daily tabloids printed 17 per cent of all coverage and the Sunday broadsheets about 14 per cent.

Those cuttings recorded as explicitly 'about mental health' included articles on the best form of care or medication, or funding issues, or stories wherein a person's mental state or diagnosis was central, including pieces about violence and other crime. Cuttings 'about some other subject', which made up less than 20 per cent of the sample, were those in which mental health was not the main focus but was referred to. Examples included articles on disability legislation, or a business story mentioning stress in the workplace.

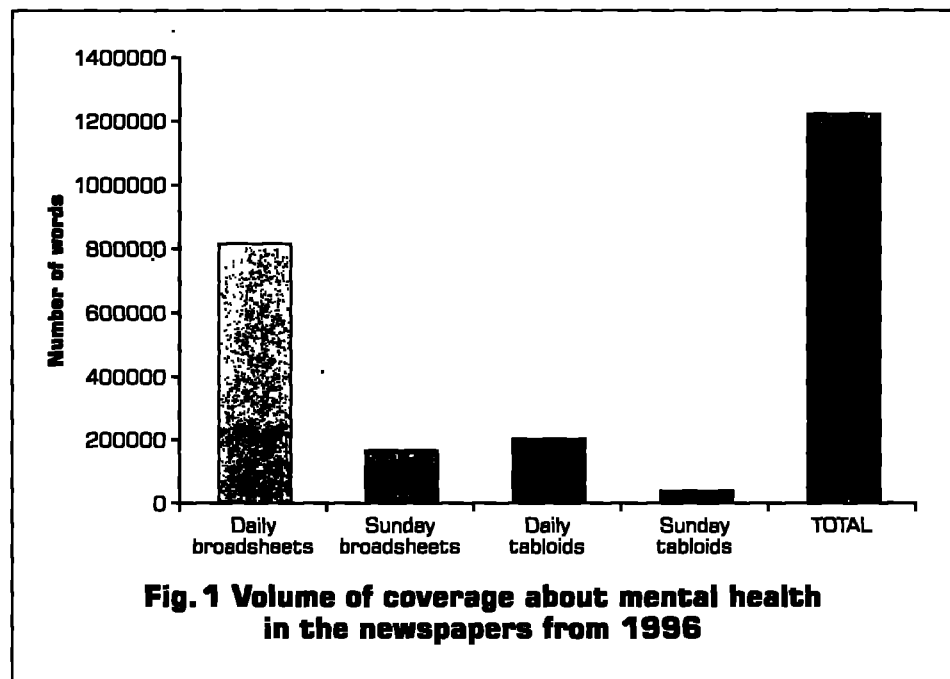
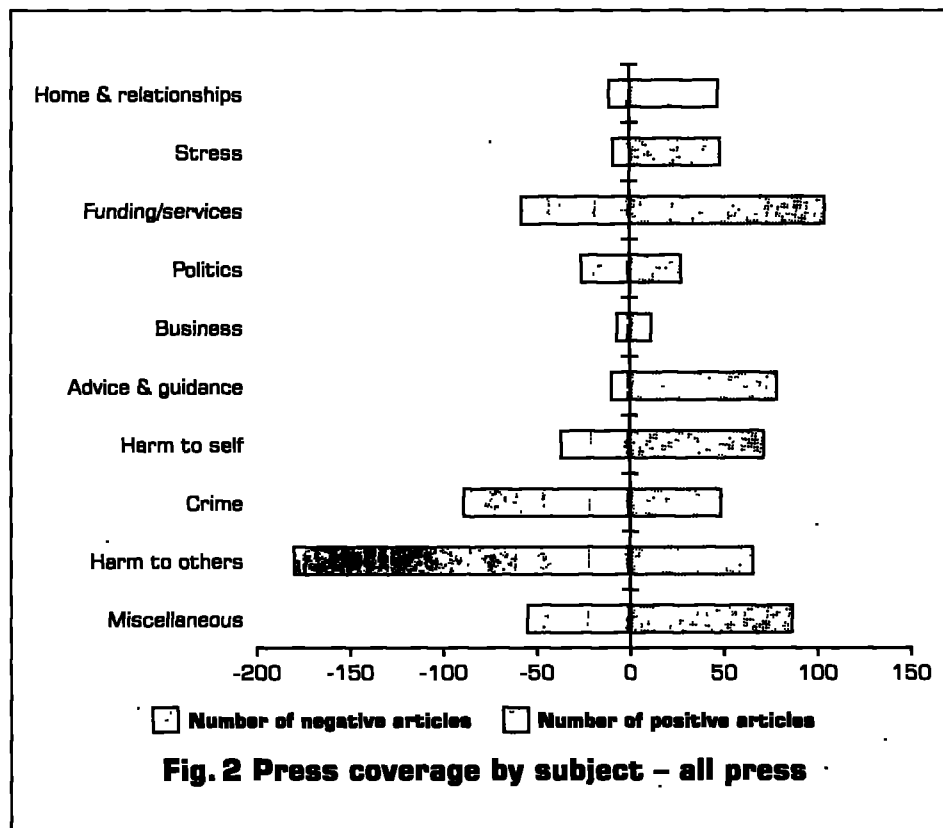


Figure 2 shows how many times articles covered each of the subjects, and whether they related any of the key messages in a broadly 'positive' or 'negative' way. For example, 89 articles were recorded as giving 'advice and guidance' on mental health issues: 79 of these positively reflected the key messages while ten did not.

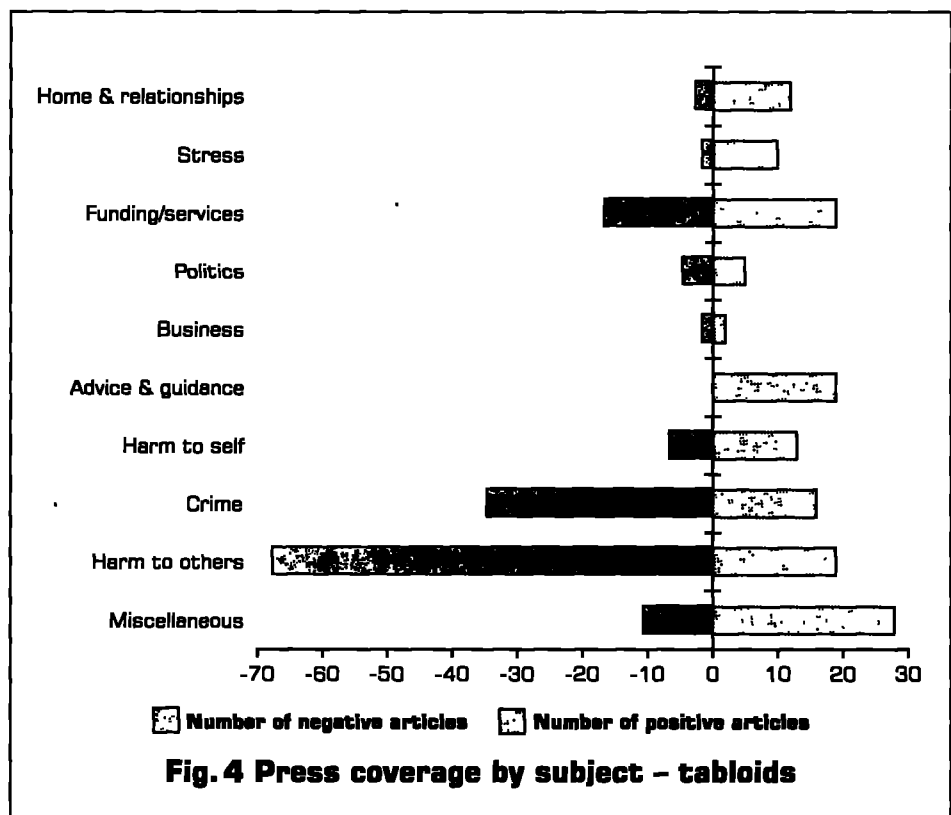
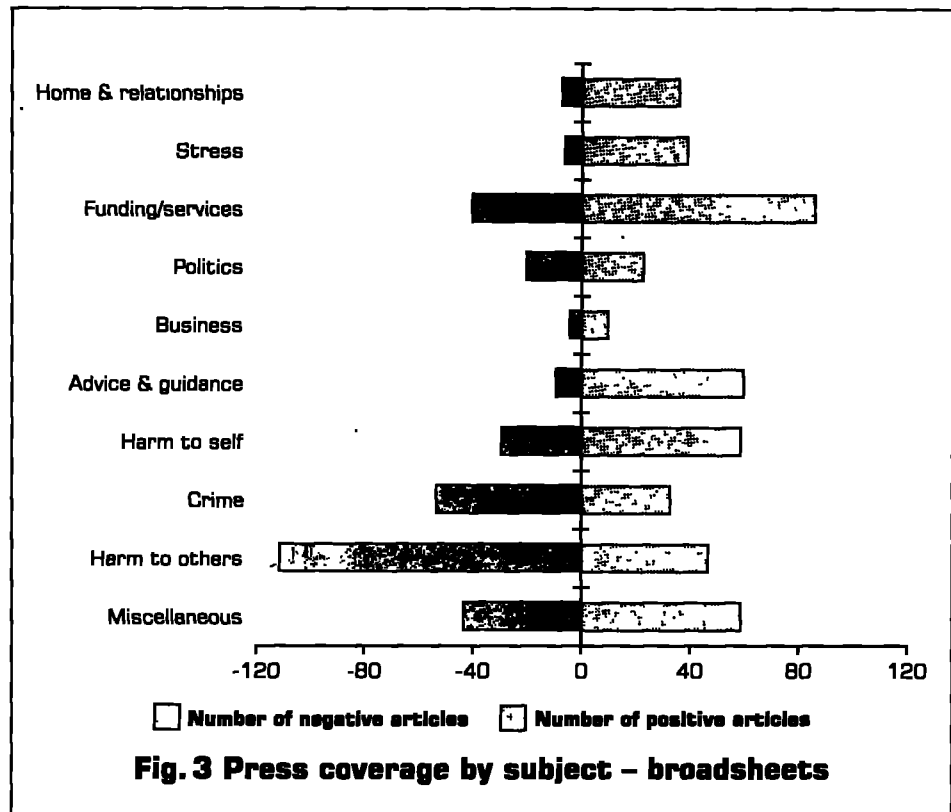
Across all national newspapers, coverage linking mental health with 'harm to others', 'crime' and 'harm to self' accounted for almost 46 per cent of all coverage. Pieces concerning self harm were generally more sensitively handled, with positive coverage outnumbering negative by almost 2:1. For example, the *Daily Mail* (13/12) reported on two 'drug-related' suicides at a sixth form college. The story headed 'Boy whose grief made him easy meat for the pushers' reported that one of the deceased had been depressed after his father's death. Articles covering harm to others and crime often used pejorative language and rarely conveyed the messages being assessed. For example,



The People (9/6), under the heading 'LIST ALL HOSPITAL PSYCHOS', reported on a call to register 'deranged hospital patients' to 'protect the public'. Stories concerning advice and guidance, which included pieces on coping with phobias and eating disorders, accounted for just under 8 per cent of all coverage. For example, the *Daily Mail* (10/7) gave extensive coverage to depression – 'The silent disease striking at the heart of 3m families comes out of the closet'. Articles about politics and mental health funding and services between them accounted for just over one fifth of all coverage. These tended to frame the issues in a wider context and did not always stigmatise individuals. For example, *The Express* (21/2), 'Mentally ill betrayed by health chiefs' was a piece critical of the standard of care.

Almost 43 per cent of all broadsheet coverage about mental health concerned the subjects of crime, harm to others and self harm, while almost 54 per cent of tabloid coverage was devoted to these areas. Both broadsheets and tabloids, however, covered these issues negatively, clearly linking violent criminal activity with mental health problems. The proportion of negative coverage was, though, greater in the tabloids, with almost 75 per cent of their editorial about crime and harm to others being negative, compared to 67 per cent of corresponding broadsheet coverage (see Figures 3 and 4).

The broadsheets ran more articles on funding/services and political issues, such as *The Independent* (21/2), 'The politicians take over the asylum' reporting on the Government's new approach to care for people with severe mental illness. After 'harm to others' and 'crime', the 'miscellaneous' subject accounted for the most tabloid coverage. This included coverage of sport, celebrities and entertainment, which, as they generally do not cover mental



health issues, were not well represented in the cuttings. However, what coverage did relate to mental health was largely positive, such as the *Daily Mail* (7/5) reporting on playwright Tom Kempinski's experience of therapy, headlined 'How I became a prisoner of my anxieties'. Pieces on 'advice and guidance' and 'home and relationships' were also favourable, such as 'Postcards from the hedge' (*The Express*, 4/10) describing how John Major copes with stress by gardening. Overall, though, such pieces formed a small proportion of total coverage.

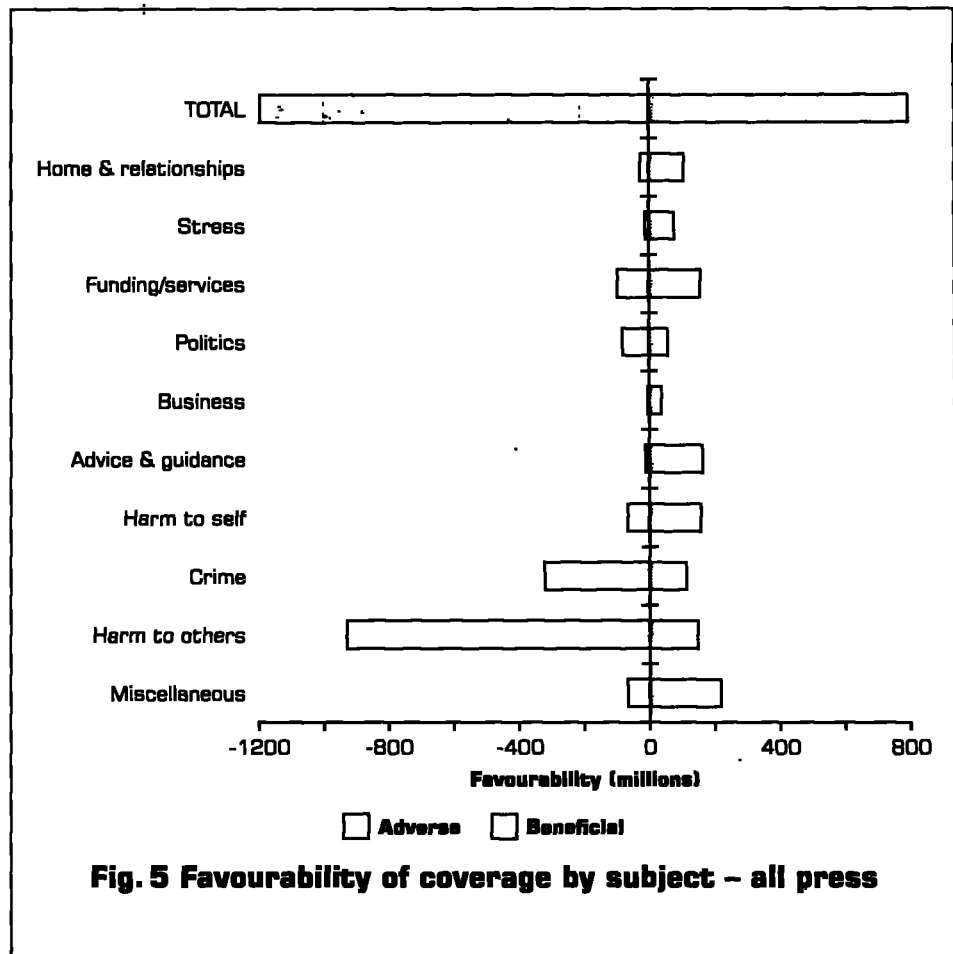
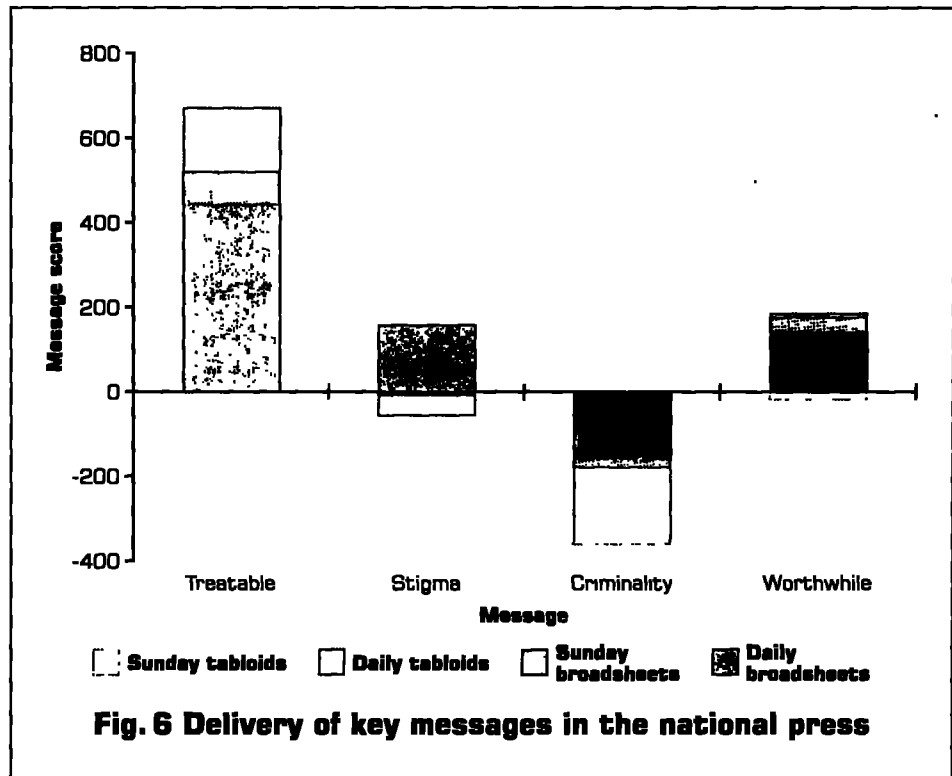


Figure 5 measures overall favourability of coverage according to each subject across all national newspapers. This is weighted, so the 'adverse' and 'beneficial' sections reflect how well each piece communicated the key messages on the +10 to -10 scale, multiplied by the circulation of each newspaper in which the item was carried.

It clearly shows the very negative impact of stories concerning harm to others and reflects the fact that the tabloids carried a high proportion of this type of coverage. As the tabloids generally have higher circulations they were measured as having a bigger impact. Crime stories in general also had an adverse impact, although the issue of self harm, which includes suicide, was treated with more balance.

Overall, most other subject areas received more balanced and positive coverage, with an adverse result for political reporting tending to reflect criticism of Government policy. However, this type of story could also stigmatise people with mental health problems, for example: *The Sun* (21/2) reporting on a 'U-turn on Care in Community policy' headlined with 'WE'LL LOCK UP 5000 PSYCHOS', with other pieces also stressing the need to 'protect the public'.

Stress was one aspect of mental distress most newspapers seemed more at ease with and covered in a positive way. For example, *The Guardian* (1/10) in a feature headed 'Working to a frenzy' looked at how people in different professions cope with pressure at work.



Looking specifically at how different newspapers promoted the four messages being analysed, it is again clear that the link between criminality and mental ill health is made across broadsheets and tabloids. The other messages, however, were reported more favourably (see Figure 6).

Mental health problems are treatable

This message received the most positive treatment in both broadsheets and tabloids, particularly in the daily broadsheets. There was a trace negative result for Sunday tabloids, but overall the findings suggest that the treatable nature of mental health problems was given credence.

There were numerous mentions of self-help groups as being 'the way forward' for care in the community, for example *The Guardian* (17/11). Dr Thomas Stuttaford in *The Times* (9/7) wrote that depression is common, nothing to be ashamed of and treatable, while the *Daily Mail* (7/10) reported on actor Jack Shepherd's mental distress and what had helped him. The *Mail* also reported on a new surgical treatment for depression, and continuing this theme *The Daily Telegraph* (23/4) reported on a treatment at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital where oestrogen patches had been used to treat post-natal depression. In a piece linked to Defeat Depression Day, *The Independent* (24/4) reported on a consultant psychiatrist at Gwent Community Health Trust who was helping men to deal with their depression and 'black, isolated loneliness'.

Coverage of this 'treatable' message was very varied, *The Independent on Sunday* (27/10) showing that children with Attention Deficit Disorder could be successfully helped, while *The Guardian* ran pieces about 'social phobia'

(23/1) and how a range of therapies could help, and looked at whether mental health promotion initiatives could ultimately reduce the cost of care (11/12). Lack of treatment was highlighted as a potential risk factor for individuals and the public, the *Daily Mail* (10/11) reporting how Matthew Hooper stabbed John Trinder to death because he 'apparently was not getting treatment for his obvious mental illness'. In April, most newspapers gave a lot of space to the case of Darren Carr who deliberately started a fire in a house where he was a live-in baby sitter. *The Express* (30/4) described him as a 'Community care maniac' and blamed 'a series of blunders' for the tragedy which allowed him to kill two sisters.

Across all broadsheets and tabloids there were more than 200 occasions when the message that mental health problems are treatable was positively reported. This was by far the most clearly communicated of the messages – a very encouraging finding which can only help to increase understanding about mental health issues. However, these stories did tend to appear on feature pages and health columns which do not gain the same high profile as banner headlines and stories higher up the news agenda.

People with mental health problems are not all criminals

All newspapers registered a negative result in reporting this message, with many emotive reports of criminal violence committed by people with mental health problems. Overall, negative coverage outnumbered more balanced reporting by almost 3:1, with stories about harm and crime accounting for the biggest quantity of all mental health pieces in broadsheets and tabloids.

By covering individual cases, many of the articles assessed in this report left the unquestioned impression that there was a general link between people with mental health problems and crime and/or violence. Much of this coverage was not factually inaccurate, but the headline use of pejorative language is what most angers users of mental health services. For example, the *Daily Star's* (18/9) page 2 report on Government plans to issue new guidelines to managers about allowing people with serious mental illness to leave hospital was reported 'The Government last night moved to stop mental perverts being freed' beneath the headline 'DON'T LET THEM OUT'. Who are 'they'? The *Star* goes on to describe 'them' as 'fiends' and 'sex beasts', but such headlines may leave many users feeling under a cloud of suspicion.

In a piece about 'paranoid schizophrenic Wayne Hutchinson', the *Daily Star* (2/2) headlined with 'Life six times for "Tiger of Terror" – a dangerous nutter who killed two people and injured three others after a hospital blunder let him on the loose.' In a similar vein, *The Sun* (7/3) ran the following: 'Maniac Anthony Smith hacked his mother and little brother to death with an 11-inch Bowie knife.' *The Guardian* (8/3) covered the same story with the headline 'Schizophrenic freed to kill mother and brother'. This story was followed up

later in the year when Smith threatened to sue the health authority over the care he had received – reported by *The Mirror* (25/10) as ‘Nut may sue docs who freed him to kill’.

While the issues covered in reports like these are clearly of public interest, this survey confirms that the amount of coverage dedicated to them is very high. Such cases apply to a tiny proportion of users of mental health services, and overall such users are no more likely to be violent than the rest of the population and are more likely to be victimised or attacked than they are to attack others.⁵

Stalker stories became popular in 1996, with most newspapers in October reporting on the ‘crazed rapist who stalked a Pamela Anderson lookalike’. Special hospitals were also a source of continual fascination, a story in *The Mirror* (14/5) alleging that nurses fuelled the desires of inmates by supplying pornographic videos and drugs.

There was little attempt to place such cases in any context, although there were exceptions. *The Express* (20/9) quoted a doctor who said that while the general murder rate had quintupled in the past 30 years, ‘there has been no increase in homicides committed by the mentally ill’. In *The Observer*, Dr Louis Appleby wrote: ‘That modern urban nightmare, the crazed killer encountering his victims at random is exceedingly rare.’ He said that while such cases were a cause of great concern, ‘the number of incidents is small and does not appear to be increasing’, adding that future prevention ‘will not be achieved by press outrage’. Broadsheets published letters taking issue with pejorative press coverage. For example, *The Guardian* (11/6): ‘the automatic linking of schizophrenia with violence. . . does a great disservice to the majority of people diagnosed with schizophrenia who are not violent.’

People with mental health problems lead worthwhile lives

This message was reported positively in 79 pieces, with 25 negative. Only the Sunday tabloids registered a slight negative rating. However, the total quantity of coverage reflecting this message was less than for the other three across all sections of the press. This may suggest an untapped source of stories and features which could go towards breaking down stigma and damaging stereotypes by looking at the way people are surviving a range of mental health problems.

There was generally no sympathy for attempts to rehabilitate seriously mentally ill people who had committed crime. *The Mirror* (15/2), ‘SEX FIEND’S VIP DAY OUT’ reported on a man’s trip to London as part of his treatment, while *The Sun* and *The Mirror* (20/4) reported how two Rampton patients planned to marry, giving the reaction of their victims’ families – ‘why should the two of them be able to enjoy a single moment’s happiness after what they have done?’.

Positive coverage of this message included *The Guardian* (23/7) which reported on a man with a schizophrenia diagnosis who was responding well to treatment, and said: 'I've made new friends and I'm filling my social calendar.' The *Daily Mail* (8/7) reported how one woman experiencing 'Seasonal Affective Disorder was able to return to a normal life following drug and psychiatric treatment, while the *Daily Telegraph* (20/7) told the story of a woman with a schizophrenia diagnosis who had 'moved on and is training to be a counsellor herself'. *The Sunday Times* (29/6) in a piece headed 'Panic stations' showed how phobias could be dealt with, enabling sufferers to enjoy life, while *The Times* in a series on 'Defeating Depression' (starting 19/2) showed how people can and do get through depression to lead fulfilling lives.

The Independent on Sunday (17/3) ran an article on how mental well-being can be learnt, while another piece in the same newspaper (4/7) looked at the issue of ethnicity and mental health, asking whether the life of a black person with mental health problems was 'worth less than that of others, or is even worthless' because of the added stigma of racism.

People with mental health problems shouldn't be stigmatised

Articles communicating a message directly about stigma were rare. However, a judgement could be made about the impact of newspaper coverage by looking at the language used in stories covering mental health issues. Stigma can make people feel vulnerable and less likely to seek help, so media influence is clearly important in setting a tone.

Seventy-four pieces positively communicated this message, with 49 advancing the opposite view. The tabloids recorded a negative score for this message, with a trace negative result also for the Sunday broadsheets.

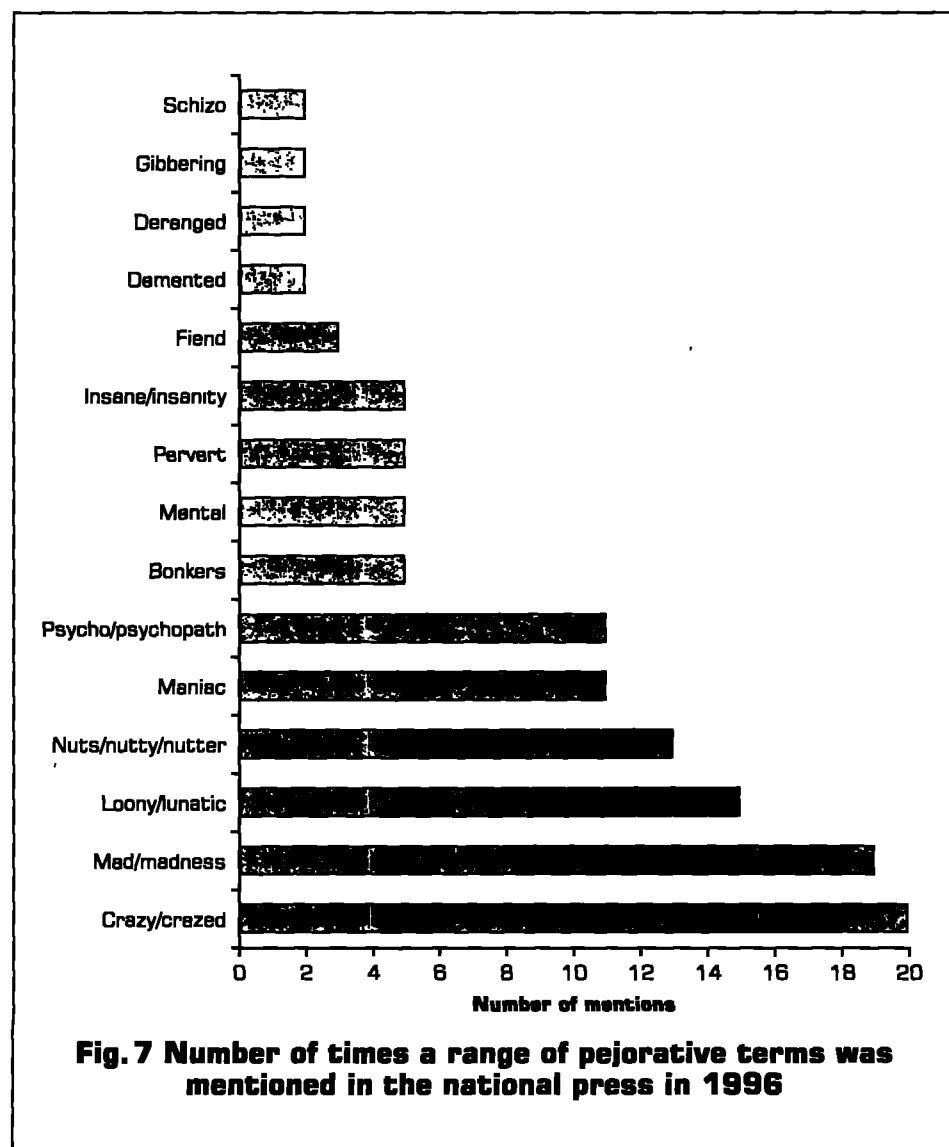
An example likely to increase stigma was on the front page of the *Daily Star* (26/1), reporting that patients at Ashworth Special Hospital didn't want to eat beef following the BSE scare 'because it might send them MAD', providing a menu for inmates including 'bread and nutter pudding'. Special hospitals featured again in the *News of the World* (4/2) in a piece headlined 'KILLERS GET A DAY OUT ON THE NATIONAL LOTTERY', describing how 'maniacs' from Rampton Special Hospital enjoyed a 'luxury day out' as part of their rehabilitation.

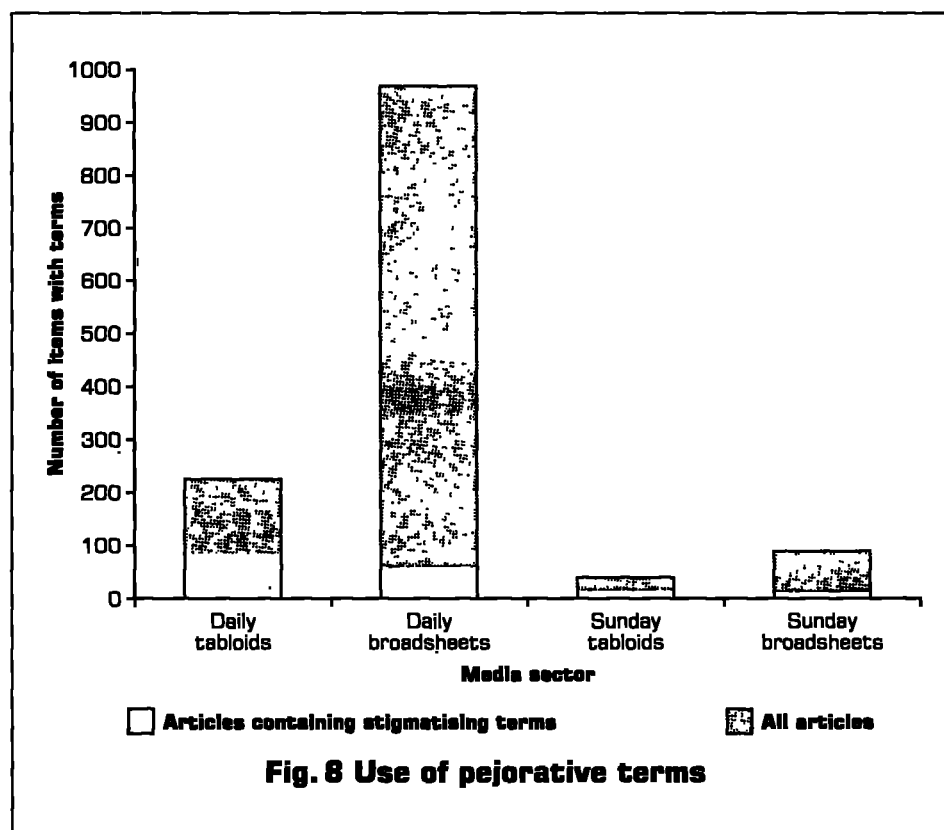
As well as the use of language like the above, some pieces demonstrated a lack of sympathy around mental health issues. *The Sunday Times* (14/1) was one of many newspapers to cover trips by the Princess of Wales to see a therapist in an article critical of therapy headlined 'It may not be good to talk'.

In a piece likely to de-stigmatise serious mental illness, *The Mirror* (21/6) told the story of a young woman with a schizophrenia diagnosis being cared for by her mother, stating 'most schizophrenics are not violent towards others'. *The Guardian* (22/7) in a piece headed 'Mind field' reported that while 'people

with schizophrenia are often portrayed as mad axe murderers. . . very few are violent, they are just ill'. *The Independent* (13/8) told how many health professionals failed to seek help for their own stress and mental well-being 'because of the stigma and career consequences of diagnosis'.

Another positive example was found in the *Daily Telegraph* (18/6) which publicised efforts by the National Schizophrenia Fellowship to challenge the stigma attached to the diagnosis, pointing out that many people with schizophrenia are 'gentle, often creative and very subdued people who are slow to show anger'. In July, most newspapers covered the decision of Liberal Democrat MP, Alex Carlisle, to quit politics to spend more time with his clinically depressed daughter. In May the *Sunday Telegraph* (12/5) carried a big feature, 'A view from the asylum' by Anna Reynolds, who spent six months in a mental hospital and argued that fear stops people from helping others in mental distress. And a letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* (8/11) responding to a news story (6/11) headlined 'Health shake up after care in the community fails' pointed out that 'the vast majority of people with mental health problems are not a danger', but a 'small minority' had been 'let down' by successive Governments who had failed to implement the policy properly.





Figures 7 and 8 show the number of times a range of stigmatising words were used in the national press across all of the coverage analysed in this research. They show that, in the daily tabloids, 40 per cent of all coverage on mental health issues used these terms, while in the Sunday tabloids the proportion was 45 per cent. As these newspapers tend to have a bigger readership, they have a wider impact and may normalise the use of the very terms which users of mental health services find so offensive. However, articles which did use this sort of language accounted for less than ten per cent of all coverage about mental health.

The fact that some of these terms were also used in the broadsheets was mainly because they printed letters which used them, for example *The Guardian* (8/5): 'the assertion that anyone who resorts to a shrink must be bonkers, daffy, squirrely, bananas, dippy, wacko or loony, off the wall, in orbit. . . is extremely offensive'.

While it may be difficult to take offence at the use of some terms with mental health connotations, for example rugby's 'barmy army', certain language does have an impact. The Royal College of Psychiatrists, for example, has stated that the use of pejorative terms to describe mental health problems adds to mental distress, stigmatises users, and makes people reluctant to seek help.⁶

However, sometimes complaints are listened to. The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) recently upheld a complaint against pieces in the *Daily Star* (9/11 and 10/11 1995). These described a man who had experienced mental health problems following the death of his father as 'a raving nutter' and a 'loony' after he approached the Princess of Wales in the street. The PCC

ruled that this breached Clause 15 of its Code and discriminated against the man by making pejorative references to mental illness. A further complaint against the *Star's* story about patients at Ashworth Special Hospital (26/1) who were worried about eating beef – headlined 'DON'T MAKE US MAD' – was also upheld as breaching Clause 15.

This issue has been recognised by the National Union of Journalists which in June 1997 published a new leaflet entitled *Shock treatment – a guide to better mental health reporting*. If the advice in it was taken, more balanced reporting would surely follow. The leaflet quotes a service user who draws attention to the enduring taboos surrounding mental distress: 'Journalists wouldn't get away with using words like nigger or queer – so don't call us psychos.'

Discussion

This report has made value judgements about the quality of mental health coverage in the national press. It weighed up the articles that actually appeared against four messages selected to represent how balanced, non-stigmatising press coverage might look. Against such an ideal, perhaps it is not surprising that the reality was found wanting. And yet there is much more to the findings than simply failure to match an ideal.

Almost half of all coverage, in broadsheets and tabloids, was about the subjects of crime, harm to others and self harm. Stories linking violence and individuals with a mental illness diagnosis were common, and generally given more prominence than more positive pieces. Editors will say that they are driven by news values, by what will appeal to their readers. Yet to give so much attention to these issues seems odd, especially since those with mental health problems are no more likely than anyone else to harm others and because there has been no increase in killings by people with mental illness.⁷

Mental health problems are common, with at least one in seven⁸ adults experiencing a range of difficulties. But to judge from some of the press coverage in this area, you might be forgiven for thinking that somebody in mental distress was likely to be a 'madman' waiting to spring out on unsuspecting strangers.

Community care

Clearly, a major reason for the extent of this type of coverage is interest in the policy of care in the community. In July 1996, the Royal College of Psychiatrists called for an immediate halt to bed closures for the mentally ill and an inspectorate to monitor a system in 'deep crisis'. A *Daily Mail*, editorial (30/3), reflected a common view: 'Care in the community is a phrase redolent of compassion and concern. But in practice it sums up a world of ugliness and threat.' It added '...the list of deranged killers goes on and on'. Unlike some newspapers it also stressed the need for these 'unfortunate people' to 'get the treatment they require'.

However, a thorough study⁹ of murders committed by people who had been in contact with psychiatric services found that these were a very small proportion of murders as a whole, and that those responsible were a tiny proportion of people experiencing mental health problems. It also found that the popular view that scores of people with mental illness were being 'freed to kill' was a myth. It also made clear that people with a mental illness killed themselves at the rate of two a day in England.

An earlier media study,¹⁰ which also looked at the broadcast, regional and consumer media during one month, found that as much as two-thirds of coverage linked mental health with 'harm to others' – a higher proportion than this survey found. It concluded that the media does not just reinforce existing opinions, but also influences 'beliefs, attitudes and emotional

response' about mental health issues.¹¹ The power of the press is not just a cliché!

While there is little or no public sympathy for killers, what is lacking is a sense of proportion and wider context. One role of the press is to try to explain often complex realities in a way which is easy to understand. However, a large part of the 'influence' from headline news coverage found in this study was unlikely to promote greater understanding.

Stigma

Clearly, though, stigma, fear and misunderstanding about mental health and ill health, precede the current tabloid obsession with violence. Terrifying images of strait-jacketed inmates at 'Bedlam' are testimony to that and the press is just one of many factors influencing attitudes. Others include family background, the fact that you can't 'see' mental distress like you can see a bruised knee, and a lack of agreement among health professionals about what constitutes mental health and mental illness. All of these factors help to make the issue an enduring taboo.

Another key influence is personal experience,¹² which may outweigh the 'evidence' presented by media portrayals of mental health. However, screaming headlines do have an impact. A survey by Mind¹³ found that more than half of respondents feared violence from people with mental health problems living in the community, but that the media, not evidence or experience, was the source of this fear.

Nevertheless, journalists do not seem deliberately bent on misrepresenting the issues. Some feel constrained by the newspapers they write for. One tabloid journalist¹⁴ said it was 'difficult to compete' with stories about 'schizophrenics on the rampage', while a broadsheet health specialist described the whole issue of mental health as 'intrinsically unsexy' – so gaining positive coverage was difficult. A tabloid health reporter, however, felt that 'scare in the community' stories were getting tired, but admitted that as mental health was 'such an intractable problem', for a tabloid, 'unless it's a dramatic study of some kind, there's little to report besides cases where things have gone horrendously wrong'. A broadsheet specialist acknowledged that headline-grabbing 'violence' stories represented 'a tiny minority' but were often 'portrayed as representative of anybody with such problems, which skews public understanding'. Another survey¹⁵ found a lack of specialist knowledge and understanding of mental health issues among journalists – who were possibly informed by reading their own coverage!

Encouragement

However, this report does have some encouraging findings. Broadsheets and tabloids conveyed the fact that mental health problems are a part of life that can be dealt with. And the broadsheets, in particular, showed that people with

mental health problems lead worthwhile lives. The tabloids, while accounting for just 20 per cent of all coverage and giving most attention to crime and violence, did cover 'advice and guidance' issues with great understanding. There were, perhaps unsurprisingly, no cases of a celebrity opening his or her heart to a newspaper about the stresses of fame being described as a 'nutter'.

The future

One stumbling block in gaining more positive coverage may be the nature of the subject itself. Perhaps the best way of breaking down stigma and damaging stereotypes about mental distress is for users of mental health services to speak to the press. While many user groups are willing to do this, it is very hard for people to expose the most intimate and painful details of their lives to public scrutiny. This needs more sensitive handling than many users believe they will receive. Nevertheless, the efforts of those individuals willing to publicise their experiences should be applauded. Newspapers should seek the views of mental health service users to provide more balance.

In 1995, 3000 psychiatrists signed a petition calling on editors to stop stigmatising portrayals of mental illness.¹⁶ However, such portrayals have continued in the national press, and perhaps now is the time for mental health service users and others interested in mental health to add their voices to the demand for better coverage.

Recommendations

- ⊕ Editors should examine their coverage of mental health issues to see if it accurately reflects the reality that mental health problems are common and that violence by people with a mental health problem is rare
- ⊕ Efforts should be made to put the reporting of violence in context to help minimise public fear and misunderstanding
- ⊕ Newspapers should not automatically and unquestioningly link a serious act of criminal violence with someone who has a mental health problem
- ⊕ Editors should avoid using stigmatising language and recognise that it adds to mental distress, creates a climate of hostility and discourages people from seeking help
- Clinical terms such as schizophrenia have precise meanings and should not be used in non-specific or derogatory ways
- By giving more space to articles which seek a greater understanding of mental health and mental illness, one of the most common causes of ill health in this country, editors can help to reduce stigma
- Journalists should follow the professional guidelines outlined in the National Union of Journalists' guide to better mental health reporting, *Shock treatment*, and the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice
- ⊕ Journalists themselves should seek to influence the way mental health issues are reported
- ⊕ Users of mental health services should seek and be given access to the media to break down damaging stereotypes about people with mental health problems
- ⊕ Health professionals can also contribute to better understanding by co-operating with the media seeking information on mental health issues
- ⊕ Users and others should complain if coverage is unfair or misrepresents them, in the first place to the editor of the newspaper or other source responsible, then to the PCC if they remain dissatisfied
- Public education campaigns, including World Mental Health Day and Respect, should continue to receive support

References

1. Read and Baker, *Not just sticks and stones. A survey of the stigma, taboos and discrimination experienced by people with mental health problems*. Mind, 1996.
2. Philo *et al*, *Mass media representations of mental health/illness*. Glasgow University Media Group/Health Education Board for Scotland, Report 1: Content Study, 1993.
3. For example:
 - *Not just sticks and stones*, (note 1 above), found that 14 per cent of users of mental health services had been physically attacked. This is a much higher victimisation rate than that experienced by the general public shown by two other surveys:
 - *British Crime Survey* (1996) (figures for 1995) estimates that the total adult victimisation rate for violent crime is 286 people per 10,000 – 2.9 per cent.
 - The *Home Office* figure of total recorded crimes of violence against the person in England and Wales (1996) is 239,109, or one in 217 – 0.46 per cent.
 - Revolving Doors Agency (1995), *People with mental health problems in contact with the criminal justice system*, in Guite and Field (1997) *Services for mentally disordered offenders*, in *London's Mental Health*, The report to the King's Fund London Commission. Between 1.85 and 3.95 per cent of people arrested for any crime in London have a mental disorder.
 - Research by Hafner and Boker (quoted by Bowden, Homicide, in Bluglass and Bowden (eds), *Principles and practice of forensic psychiatry*. Churchill Livingstone, 1990) found that people with schizophrenia are 100 times more dangerous to themselves than to others.
 - Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP), *Report of the confidential inquiry into homicides and suicides by mentally ill people*. RCP, 1996. During a three-year period (1991–1993), there were 34 murders in England and Wales by people who had been in touch with psychiatric services in the year before the incident. During this period 2000 murders were actually committed. The inquiry examined 22 cases in detail – only two involved the killing of a stranger, only one perpetrator had been an in-patient and three had been previously detained under the Mental Health Act.
 - Audit Commission, *Finding a place: a review of mental health services for adults*. HMSO, 1994. In the last two decades of community care the number of homicides committed by mentally ill people has not increased while the number committed by others has more than doubled.

4. *London's Mental Health, Confidential inquiry, Not just sticks and stones, Finding a place*, notes 1 and 3 above.
5. *Not just sticks and stones*, note 1 above.
6. Quoted (p.113) in Philo (ed), *Media and mental distress*. Glasgow Media Group, Longman, 1996.
7. *Finding a place*, note 3 above.
8. Melzer *et al*, *The prevalence of psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households*. OPCS (Report 1), 1995.
9. *Confidential inquiry*, note 3 above.
10. *Media representations of mental health/illness*, note 2 above.
11. *Media and mental distress*, p.104, note 6 above.
12. Friedli and Scherzer, *Positive steps: mental health and young people. Attitudes and awareness among 11–24 year olds*. HEA, 1996. This survey found that one in four young people had come into contact with someone with a mental health problem.
13. Repper *et al*, *Tall stories from the back yard. A survey of 'Nimby' opposition to community mental health facilities, experienced by key service providers in England and Wales*. Mind, 1997.
14. *Media audit for World Mental Health Day*, prepared for the HEA by Munro & Forster Communications (unpublished), 1997.
15. *Schizophrenia and the media*, report of a survey of 70 UK journalists about schizophrenia undertaken by Understanding Schizophrenia, 1997.
16. Quoted in *Media and mental distress*, p.113, note 6 above.

Press cuttings for the media analysis were supplied by the mental health charity, Mind. Mind received the cuttings from the Press Express agency.

- 1 The newspapers covered in this report were: *The Express, Daily Mail, The Mirror, The Sun, Daily Star, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, Mail on Sunday, News of the World, The People, Sunday Express, Sunday Mirror, Independent on Sunday, The Observer, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times.*

Mind received cuttings which mentioned any of the following:

Ashworth Special Hospital, Broadmoor Special Hospital, children/young people – re mental health, community care, Civil Rights (Disabilities) Bill, Disability Discrimination Act, DSS – re benefits for disabled/mentally ill, depression, disability, fiction book reviews – re mental health, law reports – re disability and mental health, mental illness – including anxiety, schizophrenia, senile dementia, phobias, obsessions, addiction to tranquillisers, and nervous breakdowns, mentally disordered offenders, Millennium awards, Mind, Prison Medical Service, psychiatric/mental hospitals, psychiatric/mentally ill patients, psychiatrists, Rampton Special Hospital, Reed Committee (re mentally ill and the legal system), regional secure units, Right to Silence, sexuality – re lesbian/gay mental health, stress, suicide, and treatment, including minor tranquillisers, anti-depressants, sleeping pills, major tranquillisers, electro-convulsive therapy, psychosurgery, psychotherapy and counselling.

- 2 The Impact Media Analysis Service consisted of both quantitative measurement (volumes of coverage, presence of subjects and words, etc) and qualitative analysis (scoring the presence and strength of nominated messages on a scale of +10 to –10 for each press article). To reduce the effect of individual bias, a team of four analysts was used on the assessment. (To guarantee consistency, all analysts are tested every three months. Each one analyses the same set of items selected from a real project and the results are compared to see if any individual shows a tendency for bias or inaccuracy.)

In every analysis, once the findings are collected they are subjected to a number of software tests during processing to check for incorrect entries and items which display extreme values. These are identified for manual re-examination.

Making headlines - mental health and the national press

How accurately do national newspapers cover mental health issues? How does coverage in the tabloids compare with that in the broadsheets? Is the coverage positive and mental health promoting or negative, stigmatising and criminalising? By surveying the total national press output during the whole of 1996, this unique piece of research compared the coverage of mental health issues with four key messages, which, if communicated clearly and consistently, would constitute balanced and informed reporting of mental health in the press.

The results, whilst showing clear evidence of biased and ill-informed coverage, also reveal some signs of more balanced and considered reporting that will provide much-needed encouragement to both the users and providers of mental health services in the UK.

Editors and journalists, as well as other media professionals, should all find this report a salutary read. But if they follow the recommendations outlined, they can offer much support to users of mental health services by influencing public opinion towards a greater understanding of this complex and challenging issue.



Health Education Authority
Hamilton House
Mabledon Place
London
WC1H 9TX

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