

## Mothers are the most common target of violence by a person with a severe mental illness

Under the tutelage of Professor Phyllis Solomon and with a grant from the Ortner Center, PhD student Travis Labrum conducted an online survey of nearly 600 persons with a family member with serious mental illness (SMI). Expanding upon prior studies, and in conflict with widely-held beliefs about mentally ill persons, they found that assaults against strangers were rare compared to assaults against family members. Travis' account of the work and its implications follows.

News reports about gruesome mass shootings, with their questions about the shooters' mental health, have brought the topic of serious mental illness (SMI) into focus for the general public and policy makers. Politicians increasingly advocate restricting access to firearms by persons with SMI as a way to decrease gun violence. However, those who have studied this subject agree that persons with SMI seldom commit violence against strangers.

Our study, made possible through an Ortner Center student research grant, found that SMI-related violence is a major concern, but the most common victims of violence by persons with SMI are not strangers but family members. Twenty percent of our nearly 600 survey respondents reported that they were the victim of violence by their relative with SMI in the past six months. Nearly half reported being victimized since their relative with SMI was first diagnosed with a mental health condition. These rates are similar to those obtained in other research on community-recruited samples.

One of the key findings of our survey was that family members providing persons with SMI with the most care—housing, financial assistance, money management, and care giving with daily living activities—were the ones who were most likely to be a victim of violence. Similarly, we found that rates of victimization were higher among family members who attempted to modify potentially problematic behaviors by relatives with SMI.

Preventing family violence by persons with SMI will require innovative solutions. Because there is inadequate community and health care support for mental health problems, persons with SMI typically rely on family members for assistance and care. This places a burden on these families, which may strain relationships that contribute to conflict. Addressing this public health concern will require alleviating the burden placed on families of persons with SMI and/or modifying the impact this burden has on familial tension and conflict.



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*Travis Labrum earned his Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Gender Studies and his MSW from the University of Utah and just completed his third year in Penn's Ph.D. program in Social Welfare. His primary research interest is to improve understanding of the familial relationships of persons with major psychiatric disorders, including family conflict and violence. Prior to entering the Ph.D. program, Travis worked as clinician, clinical supervisor, and field instructor for MSW students at a forensic community-based mental health center.*

