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Stigma, schizophrenia and the media: exploring changes in the reporting of schizophrenia in major U.S. newspapers

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Abstract

Newspaper media are a major source of information about mental illness in the United States. Previous research has shown that some printed material has been both negative and stigmatizing, which can have a detrimental impact on individuals with mental illnesses. Such perceptions represented in the media may cause those with mental illnesses to internalize a negative and stigmatizing stereotype and hinder the public's understanding of mental illness. In recent years, advocacy groups have increased their efforts to combat stigmatization of those with mental illnesses. This study focused specifically on the use of stigmatizing language concerning schizophrenia in U.S. newspapers. Because advocacy to decrease stigmatization of mental illness has increased in recent years, this study compared media depictions of schizophrenia in 2000 and 2010 to determine if there had been a reduction in reporting of dangerousness and perpetration of crime by people with schizophrenia or in stigmatizing language. All articles published in five high-circulation newspapers from diverse urban geographical regions between January 1 and June 1 in 2000 and 2010 that contained the words "schizophrenia" or "schizophrenic" were reviewed. Articles were categorized under the categories of education, incidental reference, medical and pharmaceutical news, metaphorical use, charity, obituary, medically inappropriate, and human interest. Human interest articles were further subcategorized into advocacy, crimes committed by people with schizophrenia, crimes committed against those suffering from schizophrenia, and issues related to poor mental health care. There was a statistically significant decrease in reporting of crime committed by people with schizophrenia in 2010 compared with 2000. However, no significant difference was found in metaphorical usage of the terms schizophrenia and schizophrenic between 2000 and 2010.

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