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Sex offenders have higher rate of mental illness

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By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Men convicted of rape or other sexual offenses have a much higher-than-average rate of serious mental illness and history of psychiatric hospitalization, a new study suggests.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, run counter to conventional wisdom. Experts have traditionally held the view that the mentally ill are not more likely to be sexual offenders.

However, part of this belief may stem from comparisons with people convicted of murder, who appear to have a higher rate of psychiatric disorders than sex offenders do.

The new study, in contrast, compared male sexual offenders with men in the general population. It found that offenders were six times more likely to have ever been hospitalized for a mental illness.

This raises the possibility that identifying and treating these disorders could lower the odds of offenders repeating their crimes, said lead study author Dr. Seena Fazel of Oxford University in the UK.

"The criminal justice system needs to be aware that people who shows signs of being unwell need to be assessed," he told Reuters Health.

Fazel and his colleagues based their findings on data from Sweden's system of population registers, which includes databases on criminal convictions and hospitalizations for psychiatric illness.

The researchers compared 8,495 men convicted of sexual offenses between 1988 and 2000 with a sample of 19,935 men from the general population.

Sex offenders were five times more likely to have been hospitalized for schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders, and were three times more likely to have a history of bipolar disorder.

They also had a four-fold greater risk of alcohol or drug dependence, and were 30 times more likely to have been diagnosed with a personality disorder.

In all, 24 percent of sexual offenders had a history of psychiatric hospitalization, versus less than 5 percent of men in the general population.

The findings should not be used to stigmatize people with psychiatric disorders, according to Fazel. "Most people with a mental illness do not commit sexual offenses," he pointed out.

However, he added, the study does suggest that "an important minority" of sexual offenders have serious psychiatric disorders.

Future studies, according to Fazel, should look at whether appropriate treatment might lower the chances of re-offending.

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