Which Three Mental Health Disorders Contribute to Violent Offenses?

Men in jail who have posttraumatic stress disorder, panic disorder and alcohol use disorder are more likely to commit violent crimes.

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New findings published in the Journal of Criminal Psychology by researchers at Western California University (WCU) reveal that adult males in prison with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic disorder (PD) and alcohol use disorder (AUD) are more likely to commit violent offenses.

For the study, scientists evaluated the mental health of male detainees at local detention centers to assess associations between PTSD, PD and AUD and violent crimes.

Results showed that less than half of detainees exhibited symptoms consistent with PTSD, while one quarter reported having panic attacks in the past year. More than one third of these males met the criteria for moderate or severe AUD. Furthermore, researchers found that inmates frequently suffered from all three conditions.

“Determining how these conditions interact to exacerbate the propensity for violence can help inform the development of proper prevention and intervention programs in local detention centers as detainees prepare to reenter the community,” said Alexa Barrett, a clinical psychology master’s student at WCU and one of the study’s researchers.

Another key finding showed that many male detainees experienced panic attacks, which were linked to their charges of violence. (Scientists suggested that it’s possible inmates who undergo these feelings of intense fear are more prone to respond to stressful occurrences in life with aggressive behavior.)

Researchers advised that affordable screening and evaluation processes could and should be implemented for detainees after release.

“Positive indications could be referred for full assessment, and those results could be used to inform appropriate community-based interventions following release,” Barrett said.

In addition, these findings offer scientists useful information about the effects of PTSD, PD and AUD in combination. Researchers plan to conduct further studies on a tactful method that could be

used to determine whether violent offenses signal the presence of these disorders in the prison population.

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