

# Public perceptions of risk in criminality: The effects of mental illness and social disadvantage

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## Abstract

We examined how different types of mental illness elicited varying levels of predicted criminality and compared this with factors which might also elicit a negative response, specifically, a criminal history and social disadvantage. A sample of 243 participants undertook an anonymous, online experiment. Each participant was exposed to one of six vignettes: three involved mental illness (schizophrenia, depression/anxiety, or alcohol dependency); two in which socio-economic background was manipulated; and a control. The impact of mental illness, history of criminality and social disadvantage on the likelihood that the character in the vignette would commit future crime, and levels of sympathy, trust and potential for rehabilitation in the character were measured. Age and personal experience of mental illness and/or criminal behaviour in the participants was also examined. The sample were significantly more likely to think that a character would 'possibly' commit future crime if he had mental illness in comparison to the control, but crimes were expected to be minor. Significantly more discriminatory behaviour was reported towards the character with no mental illness but a disadvantaged background. Familiarity ameliorated this effect. Prejudice towards those with a criminal past and a disadvantaged background may be stronger than prejudice against those with mental illnesses.