Though the mentally ill are more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than the perpetrators the saturation of negative media images can lead to the belief that the mentally ill are more likely to commit violence. This connection between mental illness and violence can lead to the desire to distance socially from those with mental illness. It can also lead to stigma and discrimination that can limit treatment options, decrease employment opportunities, and restrict housing access for those with mental illness. This study provides evidence of the perceived connection between news reports of violent crimes and mental illness.

In a 3x2 experiment design MTurk participants read one of six stories designed to replicate Associate Press newspaper articles. Stories were written at three different violence levels. No violence (check fraud and petty theft), low violence (bar fight), and high violence (mass/workplace shooting). One story from each level framed the suspect as potentially having a mental illness (bipolar disorder). A second story from each level did not include this frame.

Participants were asked to rank the likelihood of mental illness as a motive among a field of potential motives. In the no violence conditions mental illness was ranked below several other motives. However, the researcher was able to demonstrate that news consumers connected mental illness with violent criminal acts, even without a mental illness element, in the high violence conditions, as well as in the low violence condition with the mental illness frame.