

# Public Citizen



## NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Dr. E. Fuller Torrey (301) 571-2079 (Mon./Tues.)  
(202) 588-1000 (Wed.)

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Dr. Peter Lurie (202) 588-7781

### **Radio, TV Stations Often Deal With Mentally Ill Callers, Visitors**

#### ***Study Results Indicate Inadequate Treatment Availability***

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Radio and television personnel have been often threatened by individuals with severe mental illnesses who claim the station is talking about them or sending voices into their heads, a study conducted by the Treatment Advocacy Center and Public Citizen's Health Research Group has found. These individuals have on occasion threatened or attempted to harm station workers.

"The frequency with which this occurs is the consequence of permitting more than 2.5 million mentally ill Americans to go untreated at any given time," said Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, president of the board of the Treatment Advocacy Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to eliminating the legal and practical barriers to the treatment of seriously mentally ill Americans. "For some stations, dealing with the mentally ill is a part of their daily workload."

In the study, available on the Web at [www.citizen.org/hrg/PUBLICATIONS/1501.htm](http://www.citizen.org/hrg/PUBLICATIONS/1501.htm), 813 radio and television stations in the 60 largest U.S. media markets were sent two-page questionnaires regarding the frequency and nature of contacts with individuals with severe mental illnesses. Of the 259 stations that responded, 123 (48 percent) reported receiving a telephone call, letter, fax or e-mail from an individual asking that the station stop talking about him or her, or stop sending voices to his or her head.

The stations reported 3,155 communications with 284 individuals in the previous year. A person in Ohio complained that a television anchorwoman was using a pencil to send her messages. A New York woman said she thought a television station was using her body to transmit signals.

Forty-seven stations reported that individuals had threatened to harm station workers, and at 13 stations they came to the station and tried. In Illinois, a youth with a gun went to a radio station after calling to say that the station's equipment was reading his mind. An Oklahoma television station was visited by a person who appeared at the employee entrance with a gun. In

**Studies Concerning the Seriously Mentally Ill**  
**by E. Fuller Torrey, M.D., Sidney M. Wolfe, M.D., the**  
**Public Citizen's Health Research Group**  
**and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill**

**1985: Schizophrenics in the Shelters and in the Streets:** A survey of homeless shelters for single people found that 39% of homeless persons living in these shelters in D.C. had schizophrenia. This was one of the first such studies to be done and confirmed results in Philadelphia (37%) and Boston (36%).

**1990: Care of the Seriously Mentally Ill: A Ranking of State Plans** (earlier studies of this type were done in 1986 and 1988): In 1990, we collected data on public programs for in-patient care (hospitals), outpatient care (such as community mental health programs), rehabilitation services, housing and child mental illness services for the seriously mentally ill. In each category, a state could earn a maximum of five points for a best possible score of 25. The best state in that survey was Vermont, with only 17 out of 25 points. Only six states, including Vermont, had scores of more than 50% of the possible total (more than 12 out of 25 points) and 14 states had scores of six or lower (less than 25% of the possible number of points). A few exemplary local or statewide programs were identified belying the notion that there is no solution for this difficult problem. Their existence demonstrates that any state that has the will can deliver good services to its mentally ill residents.

**1990: Fiscal Misappropriations on Programs for the Mentally Ill: Illegality and Failure of the Federal Construction Grant Program for Community Mental Health Centers:** Our study found that half of the nation's 575 Community Mental Health Centers, funded with federal construction grants since 1965 by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), may be out of compliance with federal regulations. It was estimated that between \$50 million and \$100 million should have been subject to recovery by NIMH. Among the violations were centers which illegally operated as for-profit entities, exist only on paper, or failed to provide the specified minimum services to qualify under the program.

**1992: Criminalizing the Seriously Mentally Ill:** A survey of responses from 1,391 city and county jails revealed that more than 7% of people held in the nation's jails are seriously mentally ill, meaning that more than 30,000 seriously mentally ill individuals are confined to jails on a given day. (This did not include inmates in state or federal prisons.) 29% of jails surveyed hold seriously mentally ill people without any criminal charges, often because no other facilities for their care are available. More than one in five jails have no access to mental health services of any kind and 69% of jails reported seeing far more inmates with serious mental illness now, compared with 10 years ago.

# Threats to Radio and Television Station Personnel in the United States by Individuals with Severe Mental Illnesses

E. Fuller Torrey, M.D.  
Treatment Advocacy Center

Peter Lurie, M.D., M.P.H.  
Public Citizen's Health Research Group

Sidney M. Wolfe, M.D.  
Public Citizen's Health Research Group

Mary Zdanowicz, J.D.  
Treatment Advocacy Center

**Public Citizen's Health Research Group**  
1600 20<sup>th</sup> Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone: (202)588-1000 Fax: (202)588-7796

**Treatment Advocacy Center**  
3300 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 220  
Arlington, VA 22201  
Phone: (703)294-6001 Fax: (703)294-6010

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## Summary

We carried out a national survey to assess threats against radio and television stations by individuals with severe mental illnesses. A questionnaire was sent to 813 stations (442 radio, 371 television); 259 (31.9 percent) responded.

- 123 stations (47.5 percent of those responding) reported having at some time received a telephone call, letter, fax, or e-mail from an individual asking the station to stop talking about them or sending voices to their head.
- The stations had received a total of 3,155 such communications from 284 separate individuals in the past year, with one station reporting having received 1,500 communications.
- 47 stations reported that staff members had been threatened with harm in such communications.
- 43 stations reported that an individual had at some time personally come to their station to ask them to stop talking about them or to stop sending voices to their head. The stations reported having received a total of 150 such visits from 61 different individuals in the past year.
- 18 stations reported that a staff member had been threatened with harm in person by such individuals in the past year.
- 13 stations reported that such visitors actually attempted to harm station personnel, including one completed homicide.
- 63 stations had at some time called law enforcement officials for assistance in cases of electronic or in-person threats.

Threats to radio and television personnel by individuals with severe mental illnesses are relatively common. They are one consequence of permitting over 2.5 million individuals with severe mental illnesses in the United States to not receive treatment at any given time. Other consequences include homelessness, incarceration, and episodes of violence. However, individuals with severe mental illnesses who are receiving treatment are not more dangerous than the general population. Problems of the sort described in this report are attributable to a relatively small fraction of those not being treated.

Twelve recommendations are made to minimize threats to radio and television personnel. These include educating station personnel about such threats, installing safety features such as emergency buttons and electronic door-opening devices, and involving law enforcement personnel when threats are received.

## Introduction

On August 31, 1994, William Tager shot and killed NBC employee Campbell Montgomery outside NBC studios at Rockefeller Center in New York City. Police stated that Tager, age 46, had told them that NBC, CBS and ABC "were bugging him, tapping his phones and sending rays through his TV set, and he couldn't take it anymore."<sup>1</sup>

There are over 5 million people in the United States with active symptoms of schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness (bipolar disorder).<sup>2</sup> Approximately 50 percent of schizophrenics are not receiving treatment at a given time.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that a similar fraction of people with bipolar illness are also untreated, this implies that over 2.5 million people in the United States with serious mental illness are untreated at any point in time. Delusions and auditory hallucinations relating to radio and television are common symptoms experienced by individuals with these diseases, including beliefs that people on radio or television are talking about them, putting thoughts into their heads (thought insertion), taking thoughts out of their heads (thought withdrawal), causing them to do specific things (delusions of control), or simply spying on them through radio or television. Some individuals with severe mental illnesses experiencing these delusions and hallucinations have been known to contact the radio and television stations. We undertook a survey to describe the frequency and consequences of these contacts.

## Methods

We identified the 60 largest media markets in the United States from the listing of Designated Market Areas (DMAs) prepared by Bacon's Information Inc.<sup>4</sup> All television stations ( $N = 371$ ) and all radio stations of 50,000 watts or greater ( $N = 442$ ) in these 60 markets were sent a two-page questionnaire. These 60 areas include 159.8 million out of the total United States population of 265.2 million (60 percent).

The two-page questionnaire (see attached) consisted of 11 questions dealing with contacts with radio/television stations by individuals with serious mental illnesses, with additional space for comments on the answers. The stations were also asked to identify how they were "best characterized" by type of radio (news, talk, bluegrass/country, classical music, rock/popular, religious, or other) or television (network affiliate, cable, other) station. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality. Questions were written to reflect symptoms frequently experienced by individuals with schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness, specifically a belief that people on the radio or television were talking about them or spying on them (called delusions of reference).<sup>5</sup> These symptoms usually decrease when such individuals are being treated with antipsychotic medication, and reducing them is one of the goals of treatment.<sup>6</sup> Follow-up questionnaires were sent twice to stations that had not responded.

The results from the questionnaires were entered into an Access database, rechecked individually, and then transferred to a Stata database. Categorical variables are described with percentages, while continuous ones are described as medians. In addition to the descriptive data, the following comparisons were conducted for each variable in the questionnaire:

a) radio vs. television (respondents with both radio and television stations and those not stating whether they were a radio or television station, a total of 20 stations, were excluded); b) talk radio vs. non-talk radio stations; c) survey round 1 vs. survey round 2 vs. survey round 3. If one variable was dichotomous and the other categorical or dichotomous, the chi-square test was used. If one variable was dichotomous and the other continuous, the Wilcoxon rank-sum test was used. If one variable was categorical and the other continuous, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. All statistical tests were 2-sided, and a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

## Results

A total of 259 stations returned completed responses (31.9 percent of those sent questionnaires). These included 129 radio stations, 110 television stations, 18 that identified themselves as both radio and television stations, and 2 in which the type of station was not indicated. The response rate for radio stations (129/442, or 29.2 percent) was virtually identical to that for television stations (110/371, or 29.6 percent).

Among the 129 radio stations that responded, 49 identified themselves as news stations, 41 as talk stations, 19 as bluegrass/country stations, 12 as classical stations, 61 as rock/popular stations, 7 as religious stations, and 33 as other stations. Among the 110 television stations that responded, 100 identified themselves as a network affiliate, 4 as cable, and 26 as other. Many stations identified themselves in more than one category.

The geographical distribution by state of questionnaires sent and received was also virtually identical (e.g., 11 percent of the questionnaires were sent to stations in California and the same percentage of responses were received; 10 percent were sent to stations in Texas and the same percentage received). The response rate for each of the three mailings was similar: 10.9 percent, 12.7 percent, and 11.1 percent of those remaining after previous mailings.

Among the 259 responding stations, 123 (47.5 percent) indicated that they had ever received a letter, telephone call, fax, and/or e-mail from an individual asking them "to stop sending voices to his/her head or to stop talking about him/her" (see attached figure). The requests were most commonly received by telephone (85 percent of stations that received a communication received a telephone call), followed by letter (70 percent), fax (22 percent), and e-mail (17 percent). Most stations that had received a communication indicated having received more than one form of communication.

The stations were asked to estimate the number of separate communications they had received from such individuals in the past year. The stations had received a total of 3,155 communications, including one station that estimated it had received 1,500 such communications. The median number of communications per station that had received a communication was 5.

The stations were also asked to estimate the number of separate individuals sending such communications in the past year. The stations indicating receipt of such communications reported that they had been contacted by 284 separate individuals (median 1-2). This included one station that reported it had been contacted by 20 separate individuals.

Several responding stations commented on the volume of such communications:

- “Phone calls from these clearly suffering from mental illness are routine— averaging perhaps 10 a week.”  
*Television station in Texas*
- “I am in HR [staff human resources] and this is a daily part of my job— dealing with people who hear voices and suffer from various mental illnesses.”  
*Television station in Oregon*

Examples of communications received were as follows:

- “The anchor [reporter] was accused [by the caller] of sending messages through the TV set. . . . She accused the station of having cameras positioned around the city so we could spy on her.”  
*Television station in Connecticut*
- “One individual complained that the anchorwoman was sending messages by the way she held her pencil.”  
*Television station in Ohio*
- “One individual felt she was being watched by our on-air personnel for the government.”  
*Television station in Maryland*
- “One caller said that one of our program themes said bad things about her and we should change the theme so no one would hear those things again.”  
*Radio station in Oklahoma*
- “She thinks that we are using her body to transmit station signals.”  
*Television station in New York*

We asked whether any of the individuals described above had “ever threatened harm to a member of your station’s staff.” Forty-seven stations (18.1 percent of all 259 stations) answered that they had been threatened with harm. Examples of such threats were as follows:

- “He thought the station was talking about him and he was going to shoot us— teach us a lesson.”  
*Radio station in Ohio*
- “Incoherent ramblings and threatened harm to two announcers.”  
*Radio station in Colorado*

- “Said he would come to the station and make us stop talking about him.”

*Television station in Michigan*

- “One person filed charges against us saying we were beaming signals into his head.”

*Television station in Massachusetts*

We asked whether any such individual had “ever personally come to your station to ask you to stop sending voices to his/her head or stop talking about him/her.” Forty-three stations (16.6 percent of all 259 stations) indicated that they had received such a visit. The stations indicated they had received a total of 150 such visits (median 2) from a total of 61 different individuals in the past year. Examples of such visits were as follows:

- “We have experienced an individual who has come to the station because they felt that one of our personalities was communicating with them over the airwaves.”

*Radio station in Pennsylvania*

- “A couple of [mentally ill persons] have come into our lobby to tell us to stop talking about them. One told me to ‘turn the red light’ off on his TV set.”

*Television station in Texas*

- “Most of the confused visitors claim to converse with the TV and have arranged appointments with our anchors in this manner.”

*Television station in Maryland*

- “He [came] to the station and made threatening comments; stalked the individual. Station obtained a restraining order; the stalker violated it and was jailed for one year.”

*Television station in Ohio*

Among the stations that reported that individuals had come to their station, 18 (6.9 percent of all 259 stations) had experienced threats by visitors in the past year. Examples of such threats were as follows:

- “A youth with a gun was discovered outside the radio station after complaining on the phone about our equipment reading his mind.”

*Radio station in Illinois*

- “We had an individual show up at the station with a gun at the employee entrance.”

*Television station in Oklahoma*



- “A woman who harassed one of our air personalities for years returned to [the] premises and left notes/items etc. taped to her van.”

*Radio station in Oregon*

- “The person climbed our tower in our parking lot and said he was going to take us off the air.”

*Radio station in California*

A total of 63 stations (24.3 percent of the total 259 stations) had called law enforcement officials to help in such situations. In 32 cases, the request for help was in response to electronic threats, and in 31 cases it was in response to station visitors. In some cases, the station pressed charges, resulting in involuntary psychiatric hospitalization or incarceration. One station reported:

- “Had to call the police to remove individuals from property who we felt [were] threatening to our staff or property.”

*Radio station in Arizona*

At 13 stations (5.0 percent of the total 259 stations), the visitor attempted to harm a member of the station staff. Examples were as follows:

- “One of our air personalities was attacked by an individual—attempted blows to the head.”

*Radio station in Louisiana*

- “Death threats on the phone and possibly a shooting (we were never able to confirm who exactly fired the shot into the side of the nightshift jock’s car).”

*Radio station in Oklahoma*

- “A 25-year-old female came into the station with a 9 mm gun and extra cartridges. She said she was going to kill a woman in the news room. She was not let into [the] news room. She shot a man two times (flesh wounds) in the main lobby and shot at others in the lobby. This woman [then] went up to the 4th floor of the building and killed a young mother of one child.”

*Television station in Utah*

This last incident took place in January 1999 and was widely reported in the media. The alleged assailant had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. According to a news account, in 1996 she had gone to a different station “with a butcher knife, demanding to see a disc jockey she believed was putting the voices in her head. . . . she [then] went through a mandatory counseling program, police reports show, but after counseling ended, she was not required to continue with her medication or to see a doctor.”<sup>7</sup> Three years later, she went to the television station and allegedly committed the homicide described above.

Several stations also mentioned precautions they had taken to protect their employees from threats by severely mentally ill individuals. These included bullet-proof glass, electronic door-opening devices, and police restraining orders. In one instance, a station being harassed with threatening phone calls was able to obtain involuntary psychiatric commitment for the individual, but "she then started to call from the institution [so] we had the phone company block our number from all the pay phones" (Radio station in North Carolina). Other stations have taken extreme measures to protect their personnel. For example:

- "For approximately 6 months I paid off-duty police officers to park in front of our facility and watch over one of our female personalities who was being stalked."

*Radio station in Utah*

- "The man in question writes very incoherent rambling letters. He also tends to call during off-hours and leave similar lengthy messages on our overnight recorder. The police officer who visited his home took a camera and suggested another person at the house take a picture of the two of them (this was a ruse to get a picture of the man, which our reception has so we would know what he looks like if he ever comes in person)."

*Television station in Ohio*

There were no statistically significant differences between radio and television stations or among any of the types of radio stations or television stations on any of the variables except that talk radio stations were more likely to have received a communication by telephone call, letter, fax, or e-mail compared to other types of radio stations (chi square;  $p = 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

This survey presents data on contacts and threats to radio and television station personnel by individuals with severe mental illnesses. The data came from 259 radio and television stations among 813 that were sent questionnaires. It is difficult to know how representative the 259 stations are or whether the self-reported nature of the study could have led to bias. It would be expected that stations that had experienced these problems would be more likely to return the questionnaire. It is somewhat reassuring, however, that the study results did not vary by survey round (data not shown).

We recognized that multiple people might receive such contacts at a station; although we encouraged stations to consult widely within their organizations when filling out the questionnaire, it is likely that many contacts at the responding stations were not reported. The turnover of personnel at many stations is also likely to lead to some underreporting. The numbers reported in this survey should therefore be considered minimum estimates of the number of episodes in the entire target study population.

The survey confirms that threats to radio and television station personnel by individuals with severe mental illnesses are relatively common and occasionally result in

tragedy. These results are consistent with an increasing pattern of problems in the United States caused by individuals with severe mental illnesses who are not receiving treatment. For example, in 1976 the New York City police department took approximately 1,000 "emotionally disturbed persons" to hospitals for psychiatric evaluation.<sup>8</sup> By 1986 this number had increased to 18,500, and in 1998 the number was 24,787.<sup>8,9</sup> One-third of the homeless, or approximately 150,000 persons, are severely mentally ill.<sup>8</sup> A recent Department of Justice study reported that 16 percent of inmates in local jails and state prisons, 275,900 individuals, are mentally ill.<sup>10</sup> Another Department of Justice study indicated that almost 1,000 homicides each year are committed by individuals who have a history of mental illness.<sup>11</sup> For many of these severely mentally ill individuals, their failure to take the medication needed to control their symptoms is a direct cause of their becoming homeless, incarcerated, or violent. It is interesting that three of the respondents to the questionnaire spontaneously associated the failure of the individual to take medication with their threats against the station:

- "Usually worst when these people go off medication."  
*Television station in Oregon*
- "He was a diagnosed schizophrenic who had not been taking his medication . . . according to his mother who picked him up."  
*Radio station in Rhode Island*
- "This person would get off medication and stalk our announcers. Also, she contacted our clients and identified herself as part of our station."  
*Radio station in Oklahoma*

Based in part on the approaches adopted by our responding stations, we offer the following 12 recommendations for radio and television stations to minimize threats to their personnel:

- Give an introductory pamphlet on how to respond to threats by callers or visitors to all newly hired personnel.
- Have the telephone number of the local community mental health center available. Inform them of any threats. Invite them to the station to help educate station personnel regarding severe mental illnesses.
- Have the telephone numbers of local law enforcement officials readily available. Inform them immediately of any threats.
- Use bullet-proof glass to protect on-air personnel who are visible from outside the station.
- Install electronic door-opening devices.
- Install a red button to allow receptionists to summon help in an emergency.

- When confronted with a mentally ill person, speak slowly and directly. If the person is physically present, make eye contact.
- Do not ridicule or argue with the person about the validity of his or her delusional system. Simply state once that his or her belief is not true, but decline to be drawn into an extended discussion.
- In response to threats, do not hesitate to set firm limits on what will be acceptable behavior.
- Obtain as much background information as possible on persons making threats. The strongest predictors of violent behavior are a past history of violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and, for individuals with severe mental illnesses, a history of not taking their medication.
- When an individual has threatened the station, obtain a picture of the individual if possible and make it available to station personnel.
- Do not hesitate to seek a restraining order in response to threatening behavior.

Finally, it should be emphasized that individuals with severe mental illness who *are* being treated are not more dangerous than the general population. It is a small number of such individuals who are not being treated who cause the majority of problems in the community, with threats to radio and television personnel being one such problem.

The ultimate solution to the problem of threats to radio and television personnel by individuals with severe mental illnesses is to improve the treatment of such individuals. Since studies have shown that over 2.5 million individuals with severe mental illnesses in the United States are not receiving treatment at any given time,<sup>3</sup> such threats are likely to be a continuing problem. It is also known that approximately half of all individuals with severe mental illnesses lack insight into their illness (i.e., they are not fully aware that they are sick),<sup>12-14</sup> and therefore some form of assisted treatment is often necessary. Examples of assisted treatment include conditional release from the psychiatric hospital and outpatient commitment by a court; in both cases, the person's right to live in the community is dependent on their following their treatment plan, including taking medication when indicated. These approaches, combined with efforts to expand the availability of treatment, can reduce the suffering of the mentally ill as well as the threatening behavior toward employees of radio and television stations reflected in this survey.

## Acknowledgments

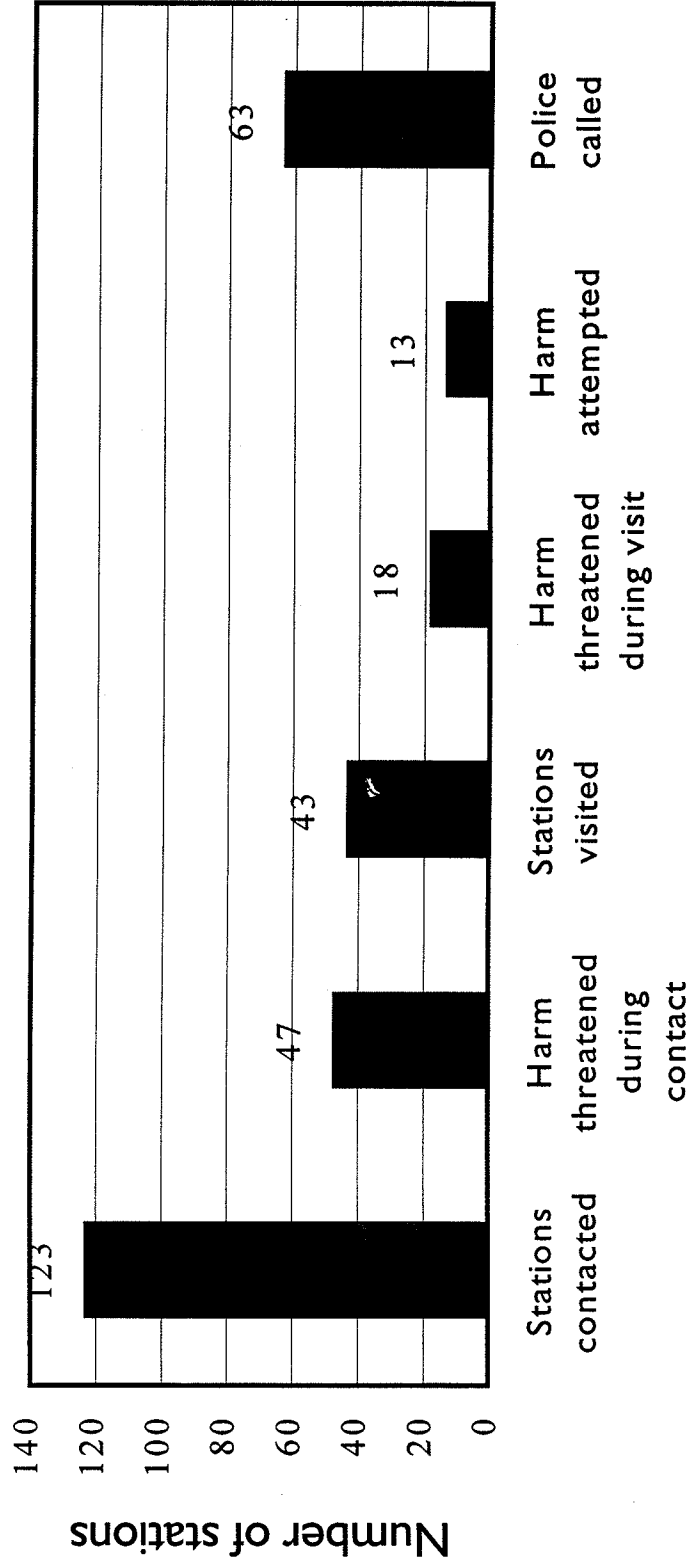
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# Number of Radio and TV Stations Reporting Encounters with Individuals with Severe Mental Illness



Source: Treatment Advocacy Center/Public Citizen's Health Research Group Survey, 1999

## QUESTIONNAIRE: THREATS TO RADIO AND TELEVISION STATIONS

Note: The receptionist and/or security personnel at your station may have additional information that is useful for this survey. You may want to consider discussing this matter at your staff meeting.

1. a. Has your station ever received a \_\_\_ letter; \_\_\_ call; \_\_\_ fax; or \_\_\_ E-mail (check all that apply) from a listener/viewer asking you to stop sending voices to his/her head or to stop talking about him/her?

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

(If yes, please answer b, c and d)

- b. Please estimate the total number of different individuals who have communicated with you in this manner during the past year: \_\_\_

- c. Please estimate the total number of communications (from all such individuals) during the past year: \_\_\_

- d. Has such an individual ever threatened harm to a member of your station's staff?

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

If yes, please give brief details: (additional space next page)

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2. a. Has such an individual ever personally come to your station to ask you to stop sending voices to his/her head or stop talking about him/her?

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

(If yes, please answer b and c)

- b. Please estimate the total number of different visitors who have personally come to your station to ask you to stop during the past year \_\_\_\_.

- c. Please estimate the total number of such visits in the past year \_\_\_\_.

- d. Has such an individual ever threatened harm to a member of your station's staff?

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

If yes, please give brief details: (additional space next page)

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3. Has such an individual ever attempted to harm a member of your station's staff?

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

If yes, please give brief details of such events: (additional space next page)

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4. Has your station ever called law enforcement officials to help in such situations?

Yes  No

If yes, please give brief details of such events: (additional space next page)

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5. In recent years, is it your impression that events such as the above are becoming:

Less common  
 Staying about the same in frequency  
 More common

6. Your station is best characterized as follows:

Radio

news  
 talk  
 bluegrass/country  
 classical music  
 rock/popular  
 religious  
 other

TV

network affiliate  
 cable  
 other

Use the space below to add any additional details that you think would be helpful:

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Thank you very much for your assistance.

Please return this questionnaire in the postpaid envelope by \_\_\_\_\_ [30 days after mailed].

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