

MENTAL ILLNESS WITHIN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Introduction. The prevalence of mentally ill individuals within the United States correctional system is greater today than ever before. As defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, mental illness “includes currently having or having within the past year a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder that are able to meet the diagnostic criteria of the fourth edition of the DSM.” Looking at the criminal justice system as a whole, the rates of mental illness in jails, prisons, and federal facilities were listed as 64%, 56%, and 45% respectively.

Historical Context. The criminalization of the mentally ill as a side effect of deinstitutionalization has been recognized by both lawmakers and practitioners as one of the main factors influencing their overrepresentation within the criminal justice system. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, many mentally ill patients were released from mental hospitals into community-based treatment facilities due to a dramatic decrease in hospital beds in state and general mental hospitals from 559,000 to 68,000, termed deinstitutionalization. Those who did not receive treatment ended up within the community without support. The disproportionate incarceration levels of the mentally ill was termed the “criminalization” of mentally disordered behavior, implying that jails became substitutes for mental. In turn, law enforcement would target the mentally ill and charge them as criminals, often on trivial charges, in order to control their presence within society.

Effects of Correctional System Environment on Mental Illness.

The environment of the correctional system interferes with the proper means of treatment for the mentally ill:

- Lacks the resources necessary to provide proper treatment, so, treatment is often provided in the form of medication, if at all.
- Corrections officers also do not receive the proper training required to identify mental illness and act accordingly.

Mental illness interferes with the individual’s ability to understand the rules and regulations of the corrections system:

- Commonly, administrative segregation is used to control the behaviors of mentally ill inmates.
 - ❖ Includes tactics such as isolation or heightened surveillance.
 - ❖ These factors have only been found to increase symptoms of mental illness.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “over 75% of the mentally ill inmate population had at least one prior sentence.”

- Suggests the likelihood of individuals with mental illnesses to end up back in prison upon release.
 - ❖ High rates of recidivism, or criminal re-offense, correlates to a lack of resources within the community.

Alternative Methods of Incarceration.

- Jail Diversion Programs
 - ❖ Crisis Intervention Teams: officers trained to recognize symptoms of mental illness
 - ❖ Mental Health Courts: provide treatment to the mentally ill within the criminal justice system.

Effective Means of Preventing Criminal Recidivism.

Mental health and criminal justice professionals must collaborate their efforts in order to effectively prevent criminal recidivism:

- Must combine the most effective practices of each discipline in order to reduce criminal recidivism among the mentally ill.
- Intervention programs within the criminal justice system: electric monitoring or home detention
 - ❖ Focus primarily on punishment and have proven to be relatively ineffective
- Intervention programs within the mental health system: pet therapy and yoga
 - ❖ Rehab-based, or behavioral, programs which have proven to be more effective in preventing criminal recidivism

Mental health and criminal justice professionals must also assess the client’s mental illness and determine the factors that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior:

- 8 factors of criminal behavior that encourage recidivism:
 - ❖ Antisocial behavior, antisocial personality pattern, antisocial cognition, having criminal companions, family/marital problems, work/school problems, lack of healthy leisure/recreational pursuits, and substance abuse

Professionals must aid their clients in their transition from the criminal justice system back into society:

- High risk of relapse and recidivism
- Outpatient appointments allow for observation of warning signs of relapse

