



Crime rates and Alaska criminal justice reform

Brad A. Myrstol and Pamela Cravez

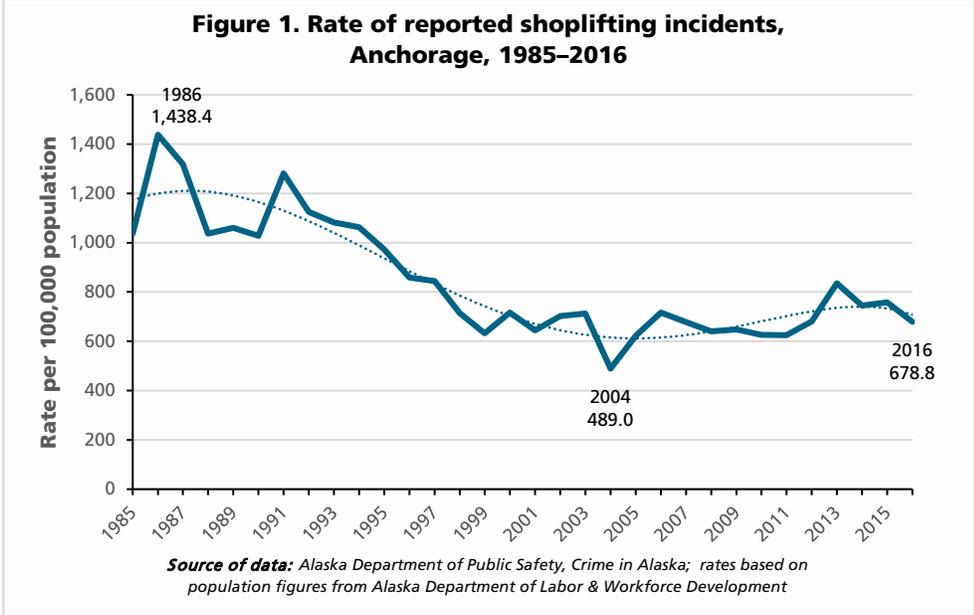
Overview: Definitive conclusions about the impact of SB91 on the rate of property crimes are not possible for a number of reasons, including that 2016 data (the most recent data available) cover less than six months following implementation of the first phase of the law and that the rate of property crime was increasing before the enactment of SB91.

In July 2016, Governor Bill Walker signed into law Senate Bill 91, a bipartisan effort to rein in the state's growing cost of criminal justice and persistent problem of recidivism. Informed by decades of academic research and implementation of best practices from other states, the law was drafted based on data-driven policy recommendations made by the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission. The law includes comprehensive sentencing and corrections reforms to be implemented over time and evaluated for effectiveness. The goal is to reduce recidivism rates and prison populations and save \$380 million by 2026.

Between 1984 and 2015, Alaska's prison population grew more than 180 percent, from 1,798 to 5,095. From 1995 to 2014, prison costs grew 160 percent, from \$126 million to \$327 million. While the cost of incarcerating individuals continues to increase in Alaska, recidivism rates remain high. Approximately two out of every three individuals incarcerated return to prison within three years.

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Reducing recidivism is one among many strategies for reducing overall crime rates. Public safety is enhanced and criminal justice costs reduced when an individual does not reoffend.

Decades of research show that longer prison terms do not reduce crime rates or

Reducing recidivism is one among many strategies for reducing overall crime rates.

recidivism. Research also shows that that non-custodial sanctions are often equally effective — sometimes more effective — at reducing recidivism than incarceration. Provisions of SB91 include, but are not limited to, a focus on using prison beds for serious and violent offenders and diverting nonviolent misdemeanor offenders to alternatives; revising penalties to focus on the most severe punishments for higher level offenders; strengthening probation

and parole supervision, and emphasizing swift, certain and proportional incentives to comply.

Because SB91 has been in effect for a little more than a year, important provisions, including pretrial practices and risk assessments have not yet been implemented. What has changed are sentencing guidelines for many offenses, including the reduction of sentences for minor misdemeanors and reduction of the presumptive sentencing range for non-sex felony offenses. The threshold for felony theft increased from \$750 to \$1,000. For theft under \$250, the use of incarceration has been eliminated for the first two offenses, though it is still a crime and a person convicted will have a misdemeanor on their record. Sentences for the third and subsequent offenses are limited to five days suspended and six months of probation. Restitution and a fine are also authorized sanctions.

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Crime rates

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► Policy & practice changes and crime rates

The question that some people are asking is whether changes under SB91 are having an impact on current crime rates.

Alaska's criminal justice reform efforts are aimed at reducing recidivism, one of many strategies for reducing crime. When passed, the goal of SB91 was to reduce the prison population and enhance public safety through reduced recidivism. Because of the short time during which SB91 has been in effect, it is too early to tell whether it is having its intended effect. This also makes it difficult to assess its impact on crime.

To understand the effects of the policy and practice changes spurred by passage of SB91, it is necessary to take into consideration a number of factors.

Crime is contextual. There are different policy effects in different locations and jurisdictions. Crime in Anchorage is different from crime in Juneau and crime in Bethel is different from crime in Petersburg.

Causes of crime are complex. It is impossible to reduce crime to a single factor; it has multiple variables and is influenced by many factors.

Crime is more easily understandable taking the long view. Historical trends, highs and lows, are more easily distinguished when looking at crime over time.

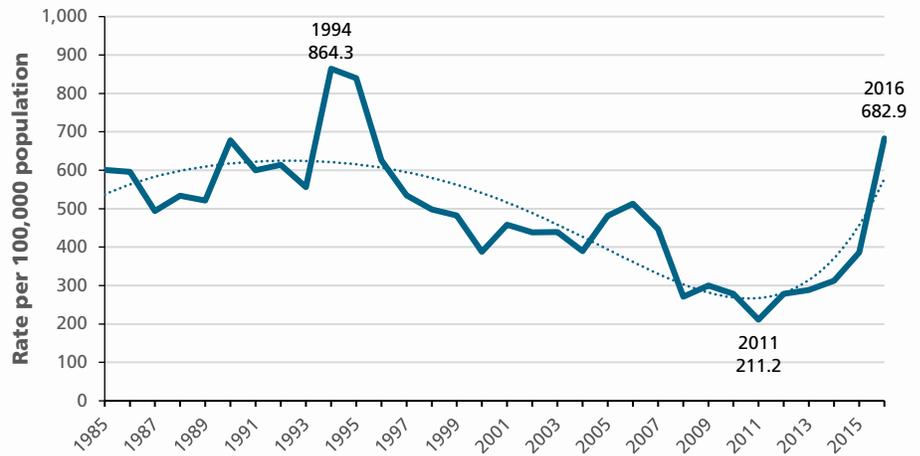
► Has SB91 affected Anchorage crime rates?

Looking at historical crime rates in Anchorage from 1985–2016 for shoplifting, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts, 2016 rates are neither the highest nor lowest over the last 30 years.

Shoplifting incidents reported to the police spiked in 1986 to a rate of 1,438.4 per 100,000 population (3,347 reports) and dropped to a low in 2004 of 489.0 (1,354 reports). In 2016, Anchorage had a rate of 678.8 shoplifting reports per 100,000 (2,030 reports), trending downward since 2013 (Figure 1).

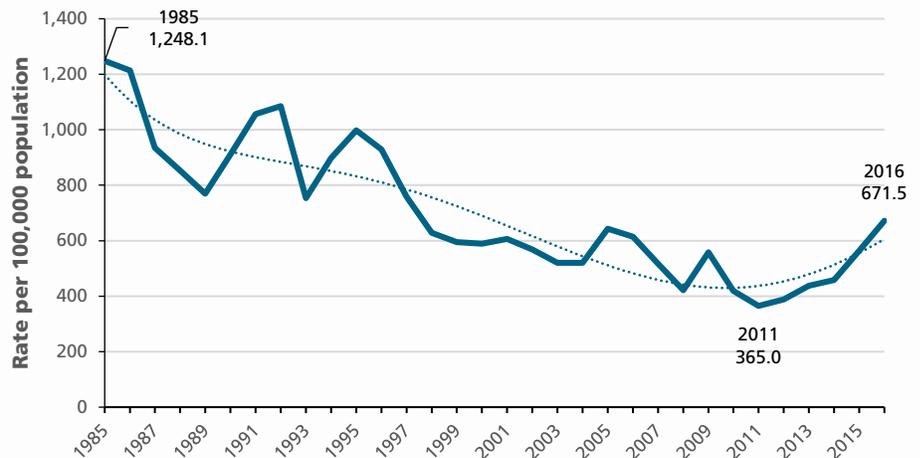
Motor vehicle thefts reported to the police peaked in 1994 at a rate of 864.3 per 100,000

Figure 2. Rate of reported motor vehicle thefts, Anchorage, 1985–2016



Source of data: Alaska Department of Public Safety, Crime in Alaska; rates based on population figures from Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development

Figure 3. Rate of reported burglaries, Anchorage, 1985–2016



Source of data: Alaska Department of Public Safety, Crime in Alaska; rates based on population figures from Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development

and fell to a low of 211.2 in 2011. Rates have gone up since 2011 to 682.9 in 2016 (Figure 2).

Burglaries reported to the police between 1985–2016 show a high in 1985 of 1,248.1 per 100,000, dropping to a low of 365.0 per 100,000 in 2011. Rates have climbed since 2011. In 2016, the rate of burglaries reported reached 671.5 per 100,000 (Figure 3).

During the 30 years for which these rates have been calculated, Anchorage has experienced a variety of economic highs and lows, as well as staffing and policy changes in the justice system, which includes police, courts, and corrections. It is impossible to assess the impact of any single variable on the crime rate at any given time.

Definitive conclusions about the impact of SB91 on current Anchorage property crime rates are not possible given that 2016 data (the most recent data available) cover less than six months following the implementation of the first phase of the law. What the data presented do show is that rate of property crime was increasing for years prior to the passage of SB91. Find full citations online.

Brad A. Myrston is interim Justice Center director and director of the Alaska Justice Statistical Analysis Center and Alaska Justice Information Center (AJIC). In October, AJIC released, "Alaska Results First Initiative: Adult Criminal Justice Program Benefit Cost Analysis." Pamela Cravez is editor of the Alaska Justice Forum.



Editor's Note

In this issue we look at crime rates in relation to criminal justice reform and police staffing. In Alaska, crime rates, particularly property crime, have been increasing. Trend lines tell us that this increase has been occurring for the last few years. While we are not at an all-time high, we are continuing to move up. Both stories caution using crime rates as a single factor to determine policy. Another story in this issue, on Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT), shows how specific training provides law enforcement with knowledge and skills for improving police interactions with individuals with a mental illness and/or substance use disorder. The newly formed Mat-Su CIT Coalition is using this training and collaborative approach between health and mental health providers, first responders, and the justice system to aid in responding to a growth in 911 calls involving mental health and substance use.

For purposes of disclosure, I am a board member of the Anchorage affiliate of NAMI (the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill). NAMI and many local affiliates collaborate with CITs. NAMI Anchorage, however, is not a partner in the Mat-Su CIT Coalition.

I encourage you to go to the *Forum* online — www.uaa.alaska.edu/justice/forum/ — and read about specialized police responses in addition to CIT. Online you'll also find full citations to references in *Forum* articles and a place to sign up to get the *Forum* electronically.

Pamela Cravez

AlaskaJusticeForum@alaska.edu

How do you determine the right size of a police department? Don't look to crime rates

Troy C. Payne

Studies have shown that changing the number of police officers has no effect on crime rates. Most scholars agree that if there were zero police, there would be an increase in crime — but within the range of police staffing changes seen in the US, we cannot detect any change in crime rates. This essay describes recent systematic reviews of the research on police staffing, the number of police per capita in Alaska and the US, and describes alternative measures that should be used to determine police staffing levels.

► Why might police force size be related to crime?

Police administrators have often argued that adding more officers to their agency's ranks will decrease crime. The thinking goes that if there are more officers, the risk of arrest is greater for offenders. Potential offenders perceive this risk and are less likely to commit offenses. That increased perception of risk could be general (all offenders are at increased risk for arrest) or specific (certain offenders are at increased risk). Even if offenders are not rational or cannot perceive the increased risk, it's possible that more po-

lice could result in an incapacitative effect because arrested offenders are less able to commit offenses while they are under correctional supervision.

Policing scholars have been studying the effect of police force size on crime since the 1960's. Recent systematic reviews of the accumulated research have found that crime rates are rarely associated with increases in police force size (Lim et al., 2010), and when changes are found they are small (Carriga and Worrall, 2015; Lee et al., 2016). This essay focuses on Lee et al. (2016), as this is the most recently published and most rigorous study on the subject of police force size and crime; their findings are consistent with the other studies.

► What do the studies say?

Lee and his colleagues (2016) conducted an exhaustive search of academic and practitioner literature. They found 62 studies published between 1971 and 2013 that reported the effect of police force size on crime and included enough information to include in a meta-analysis. These 62 studies offered 229 findings (many studies report multiple usable findings). Overall,

Lee et al. (2016) found that 32 of the 62 studies (51.6%) found a reduction in crime with an increase of police size. If the effect of police force size on crime were zero, we would expect about half of studies (50%) to show a reduction and about half to show no reduction.

Police officers spend more time on activities not related to crime, such as traffic accidents, noise complaints, and service delivery, than on crime.

In more sophisticated meta-analyses, Lee et al. (2016) found that the overall effect size of police force size changes is very small, especially when compared to problem-oriented policing, neighborhood watch, hot spots policing, and focused deterrence strategies. This small overall effect size of police force changes persisted even after examining studies published in different time periods.

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Police department size

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The findings were similar among studies using both primitive and more sophisticated statistical methods. The small effect sizes persisted when studies were grouped by geographic units used (cities, counties, etc.) and other methodological differences. In short, Lee and his colleagues find that the most likely effect of police force size changes on crime is zero.

► Does this mean we can safely reduce the number of officers?

The accumulated research on the topic has found that adding police does not decrease crime. But that does not mean we can reduce police force size without consequence.

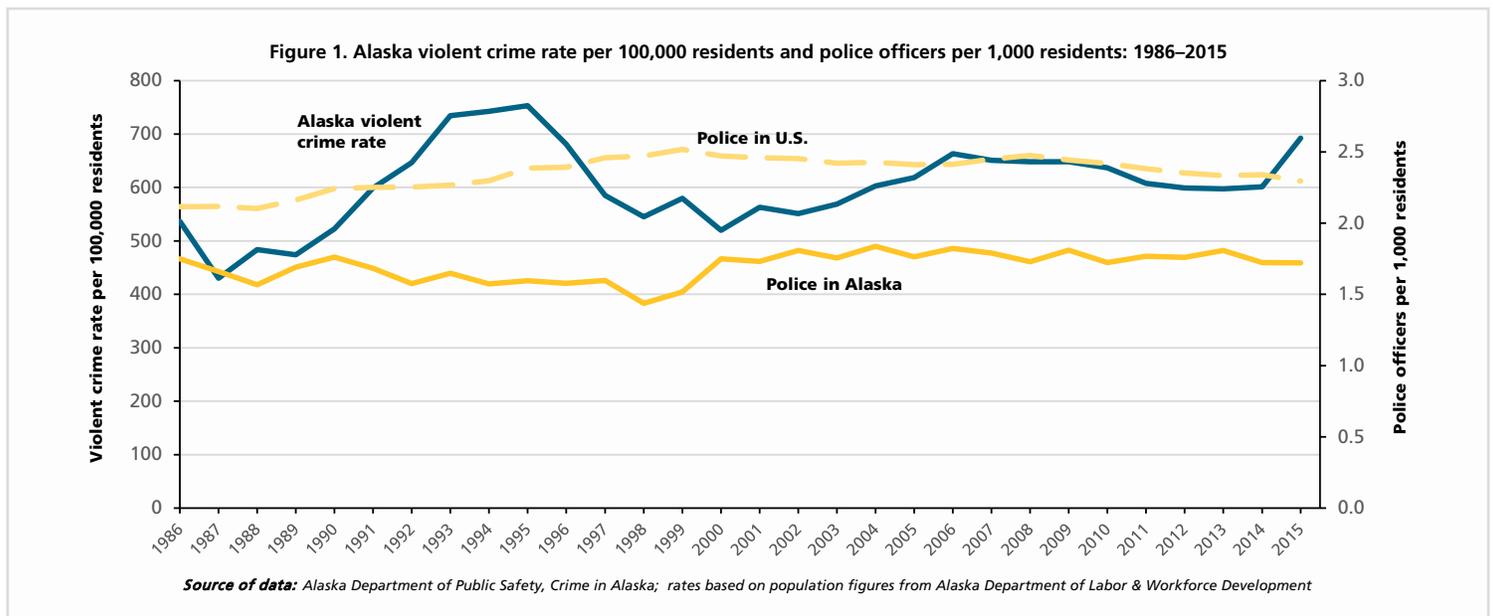
not be able to taste the difference in a finished meal. If you added two grains of salt, you still would not be able to taste the difference. The minimum amount of salt you'd have to add to taste the difference depends on the nature of the dish and the other ingredients. Particularly in Alaska, where police jurisdictions are as large as some states, adding one officer to a police agency is often like adding one grain of salt to a tablespoon of salt.

► Is crime the only concern of police departments?

Crime rates are a poor proxy for officer workloads. Decades of direct observation research has shown that police officers spend more time on activities not related to crime,

not argue for increasing police force size. Instead, police force size should be determined by a complex set of factors. Police departments must evaluate the number of sworn staff required to cover citizen demand for services, conduct cutting-edge policing practices, train, provide shift relief, and provide enough leave time to prevent officer fatigue.

The factors police departments should use to determine their optimal size cannot be easily reduced to a simple formula. Staffing studies of police departments are commonly produced using computer-aided dispatch data that contains information about the types of incidents, incident locations, and time spent on incidents. These measures of citizen demand for services are combined with community preferences for how much



Lee et al.'s findings that changes in police force size have no impact on crime come with a significant caveat. When measured as a rate per population, police force sizes in the US are nearly constant. Statistically, this makes detection of an effect difficult. This is similar to a dose–response relationship in pharmacology and epidemiology: small changes in exposure are often unlikely to produce a response, especially in the middle of the possible dosage range.

To understand how the dose–response relationship works, imagine you have a tablespoon of salt. If you add one grain of salt to the tablespoon, you've increased the amount of salt — but you certainly would

such as traffic accidents, noise complaints, and service delivery, than on crime-related activities (for a recent study and a review of previous studies, see Terrill, Rossler, and Paoline, 2014). Responding to serious traffic accidents, for example, or defusing disputes before a crime occurs are both non-crime activities that the public expects police departments to do. Given that most incidents police respond to are not crimes, it would be somewhat surprising if increased police staffing reduced crime.

The recent systematic reviews of research on police force size and crime therefore do not argue for reducing the number of police. At the same time, increased crime also does

time officers should spend on proactive activity, community policing, and training. Operational concerns, such as shift relief and leave time needed to prevent officer fatigue, must also be included (Wilson and Weiss, 2012).

► What about Alaska?

In Alaska, formal workload-based staffing studies are rare in recent years. The Police Executive Research Forum conducted a thorough workload-based staffing study of the Anchorage Police Department in 2010 (PERF, 2010). Other agencies may have conducted

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Crisis Intervention Teams assist law enforcement



Retired Anchorage Police Officer and former CIT Coordinator Wendi Shackelford (L) and Anchorage Police Officer Ruth Adolf, current CIT coordinator.

Pamela Cravez

Retired Anchorage Police Officer Wendi Shackelford remembered an incident from when she was working as a School Resource Officer inside Chugiak High School. She saw a man walking the hall who seemed out of place. The school had five or six unlocked entrances at the time. Though there were some older special needs adults at the school, Shackelford didn't recognize this man. She followed him and engaged him in conversation, asked who he was and why he

was at the school. He was slow to answer her questions.

Just as she was about to put hands on him to detain him for trespass, he got out a few words indicating he'd gotten lost after going to use the bathroom. He could not find his classroom with the Life Skills teacher.

"I left about 60 feet of mental skid marks," Shackelford said. Although trained and highly experienced in identifying signs of behavioral health problems and disabilities, the time it took Shackelford to see beyond the

surface of suspicion was nearly not enough to avoid escalating a situation. In that moment, she felt the physical tension between her duty to serve, and her duty to protect.

► **Specialized training**

Police are increasingly being called upon to deal with people who have a mental illness and/or addiction disorder (Watson & Fulambarker, 2012). These interactions, though,

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Police department size

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internal workload analyses when setting staffing levels.

In the absence of comprehensive data, we are left discussing the number of police officers per population — a very coarse indicator of the number of police officers required to service a jurisdiction's workload. Officers per capita is a poor proxy for officer workloads, which are determined by many factors including citizen demand for service,

operational realities, and community preferences for the type of policing practiced by an agency.

The number of police officers per 1,000 population has remained essentially constant in Alaska for the past 15 years. The number of officers has ranged from 1.7 to 1.8 per 1,000 in the years 2000–2015. Figure 1 plots violent crime per 100,000 population and police officers per 1,000 population (as reported by the Alaska Department of Public Safety in their annual *Crime in Alaska* report). Figure 1 also plots the number of

police officers per 1,000 residents in the US. The number of police officers per 1,000 population is considerably lower in Alaska than in the US average. If Alaska had the same number of police officers per 1,000 residents as the nationwide average (2.3 in 2015) we'd have to hire 424 more officers statewide. To put that in perspective, the Anchorage Police Department had 362 officers in 2015 according to DPS's *Crime in Alaska* report. *Find full citations online.*

Troy C. Payne is an associate professor in the Justice Center.

CIT

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pose challenges for law enforcement. Questions and commands may be misunderstood. Situations may escalate quickly. Police must determine whether an individual's behavior requires an arrest or treatment: delivery to jail or a hospital. To improve encounters between people with mental illness and/or addiction disorders, law enforcement agencies are partnering with mental health providers and their communities to develop "specialized policing responses" (SPRS). These include specialized training that emphasizes de-escalation techniques. They incorporate collaborations that better connect law enforcement with community health providers and support systems, helping officers prioritize treatment over jail when appropriate (Reuland, Draper & Norton, 2010). One of the most established SPRS is the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT).

Developed by the Memphis Police Department in 1988 in response to the shooting of a man with mental illness, the Memphis Crisis Intervention Team Model (Memphis Model) is a police-based, first responder pre-arrest jail diversion model for individuals with mental illness and/or addiction disorder. The Memphis Model emphasizes partnerships between law enforcement, the community, mental health providers, individuals with

CIT is a police-based, first responder pre-arrest jail diversion model for individuals with mental illness and/or addiction disorder.

mental illness, their family, and advocates. It is a collaborative approach that helps law enforcement address the needs of persons with mental illness and/or addiction disorders in a way that emphasizes treatment for nuisance crimes, rather than incarceration.

The Memphis Model includes 40 hours of specialized training. The training is provided by mental health clinicians, consumers, family advocates, and police trainers. It includes information on the signs and symptoms of mental illness, role playing, and de-escalation techniques. Dispatchers are trained to identify calls involving people



Alaska State Trooper Col. Hans Brinke spearheaded the creation of Mat-Su CIT Coalition. Photo courtesy Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman. Robert DeBerry, photographer.

with mental illness and to steer the calls to officers with CIT training. The model also involves designating a single point of entry treatment facility where patients may be taken for evaluation and treatment.

Since its development nearly 30 years ago, the Memphis Model has been embraced by jurisdictions throughout the country. There are 2,645 local Crisis Intervention Teams, according to the University of Memphis

CIT Center website. This includes 348 regional programs. The Anchorage Police Department, Juneau Police Department and Fairbanks Police Department have CITs. A new CIT is developing in the Mat-Su Borough.

What makes SPRS such as the Memphis Model particularly effective is how a community adapts the program to reflect its unique needs. (Reuland, Draper & Norton, 2010). Each jurisdiction must do critical program planning and development in order to develop an effective CIT. A commitment to collaboration is a key element to CIT success.

► **Mat-Su adapts CIT**

In response to a growing number of 911 calls involving individuals with mental health and/or substance use, Alaska State Trooper Captain (now Colonel) Hans Brinke led the creation of a Mat-Su Borough Crisis Intervention Team Coalition in January 2015. The initiative is based on the Memphis model, and receives technical assistance and financial support from the Mat-Su Health Foundation and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.

Mat-Su Borough, roughly the size of West Virginia, is served by Alaska State Troopers (AST), Palmer Police Department, and Wasilla Police Department. Unlike more urban areas, the Mat-Su Coalition includes all three law enforcement agencies, Mat-Su Regional Medical Center Emergency Department, Emergency Medical Services, Fire Department, and professionals in the behavioral health and justice system, as well as family members and volunteers. The coalition is developing a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) and a high utilizers program (HUMS) as part of their care coordination efforts.

Coalition meetings are held monthly and a memorandum of understanding between

first responders (troopers, police, firefighters, paramedics) medical and behavioral health providers, state law, corrections, courts, and family service providers is being developed.

Retired APD Officer Wendi Shackelford, one of the first CIT-trained officers in Alaska and former coordinator of APD's CIT, is leading Mental Health First Aid courses for the Mat-Su CIT Coalition. As a training coordinator currently employed at UAA Center for Human Development's Alaska Training Cooperative, Shackelford partnered with AST Captain Brinke to lead the first 40-hour CIT training in Mat-Su in April 2017. At the training, Shackelford shared the story of her experience at Chugiak High School, showing how easy it is for first responders — even with training — to misinterpret responses to simple questions in a state of heightened alert.

Thirty people graduated from the CIT training academy, including troopers, Palmer and Wasilla police officers, emergency medical personnel, behavioral health providers, corrections and probation officers.

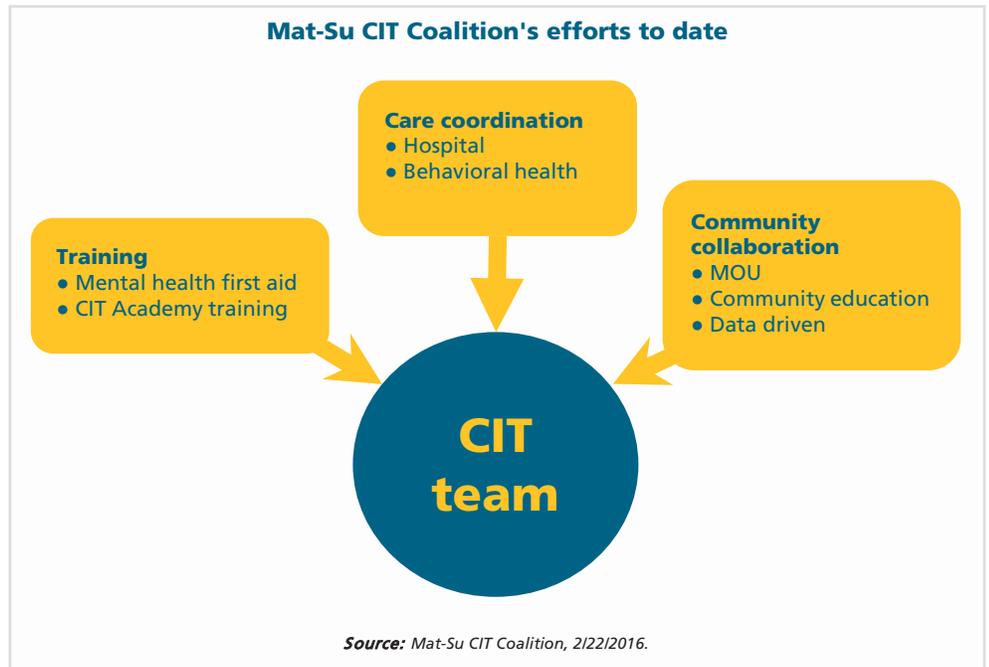
► **CIT requires culture shift**

With 20 years on the police force and more than 15 years working with the CIT model, Shackelford understands the tremendous effort that goes into the culture shift and understanding necessary to make the program effective.

“It was like turning the Titanic” when CIT was introduced in Alaska in 2001. Now it is a best practice.

“It was like turning the Titanic,” she said, recounting how CIT challenged the traditional models of policing when first introduced in Alaska in 2001. By the time she retired from APD in 2015, there were over 90 CIT trained officers and 30 dispatchers in APD.

Although CIT is not yet an evidence-based practice, it has become a best practice. The IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police), the professional association for law enforcement worldwide, advocates for



responding in ways that maintain police and public safety and de-escalating situations. It encourages all staff, officer and support personnel to be trained in Mental Health First Aid.

Does CIT divert people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders from the criminal justice system? There is little data to suggest that. However, there are some reported success stories since the trainings in Mat-Su. Dr. Anne Zink, medical director of Mat-Su Regional Medical Center, is seeing a change.

Before Mental Health First Aid and CIT trainings, the police would just drop a person off at the emergency department, “get a cup of coffee, and take off,” Zink said. They didn’t see interacting with emergency department doctors and staff as part of their job. “Their job was to be on the street,” Zink said.

“Now they share information about the person and situation that brought them to the emergency department. They fill out paperwork that helps the doctors understand the situation and better serve the patient. It’s become a partnership,” she said.

Police officers meet people who are in crisis nearly 100 percent of the time, Shackelford said. CIT gives first responders a chance to hear the stories of recovery and to understand the physical and emotional challenges of mental illness. It helps them

see the individual behind the crisis. *Find full citations online.*

Pamela Cravez is editor of the Alaska Justice Forum and author of the recently published “The Biggest Damned Hat: Tales from Alaska’s Territorial Lawyers and Judges.”

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Editor: Pamela Cravez

Editorial Board: Allan Barnes, Lindsey Blumenstein, Jason Brandeis, Sharon Chamard, Ron Everett, Ryan Fortson, Kristin Knudsen, Cory R. Lepage, Brad Myr Stol, Troy Payne, Deborah Periman, André Rosay

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College of Health
University of Alaska Anchorage
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 786-1810
(907) 786-7777 fax
ajjust@uaa.alaska.edu
<http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/justice/>

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When mental illness becomes a police matter

Mental illness is not a police matter in and of itself and most people with mental illness are not involved in the criminal justice system.

When police do interact with people who have a mental illness it is often when the person is the victim of a crime, abuse or neglect, unable to take care of themselves, when they are missing or when they are the perpetrator of a crime, according to the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing publication by Gary Cordner, "People with Mental Illness" (Cordner, 2006).

Most of the crimes attributable to individuals with mental illness do not involve violence. In fact, only a very small proportion of violent and criminal acts in the United States can be directly attributable to mental illness (Cordner citing Marzuk, 1996, p. 485). A person with mental illness is most likely to commit a personal or property crime or engage in disorderly and disruptive behavior.

People with serious mental illness (SMI), which includes schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and affective disorders with psychotic features are especially vulnerable to victimization and suffer at rates more than double the general public. Victimization is even greater when they are incarcerated (Gur, 2010).

► Interactions usually not violent

Interactions between law enforcement and people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders can pose safety problems for all involved, but are usually not violent. When they are, they tend to be more dangerous to the person with mental illness, according to Cordner.

In 2004, the FBI reported one out of every 59 assaults on officers and one out of every 42 officers feloniously killed had "mentally

deranged" assailants. A relatively small number (Cordner). In 2005, the Treatment Advocacy Center estimated that people with SMI were four times more likely to be killed by police. This number includes suicide-by-cop, another dangerous interaction between law enforcement and a person with mental illness. The encounter can leave police officers traumatized after having been put in a position where they are forced to kill a person who wants to die.

► Hard to quantify

The percentage of calls and time that law enforcement spend responding to situations involving a person with mental illness is hard to quantify. In 1999, it was estimated that 7 percent of calls in areas with populations of 100,000 or more involved a person with mental illness (Deane, et al). In 2015, field officers in the Albuquerque Police Department estimated that over 30 percent of their calls involved people with mental illness (Tinney & Rosenbaum, 2015).

These calls can be more complex and require more time than standard calls. The discrimination related to mental illness and challenge of dealing with a person with mental illness can lead to the person being labeled as the problem.

While many police problems involve voluntary behavior, those that involve people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders do not involve "wholly voluntary behavior — rather, they involve behavior that medical conditions cause or compound. Consequently, police have to be careful not to blame people with mental illness, but instead focus on behavior that causes harm to self or others" (Cordner, 2006, p. 6). *Find full citations online.*

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