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.

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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).

▸References

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