

# Police Encounters with the Mentally Ill

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A bridge for law enforcement  
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## Why are police more likely than ever before to have frequent interactions with the mentally ill?

Since the 1970's Federal and state legislation has moved mentally ill people from locked institutions into the community. The advent of improved medications made it easier to control symptoms which significantly decreased impairment. Civil rights laws also helped the pendulum to swing over to more humane community-based care.

As a result more people with mental illness are able to live productive lives in their communities.

However, in many urban and suburban settings, people have been released from locked wards into a community that was not set up to meet their needs. Community-based services for the mentally ill are spotty at best, and in some places, non-existent. Some people are so impaired by their illness, that constant supervision is needed to monitor medication compliance. Their impaired and sometimes bizarre behavior gets them into trouble with the law. In many instances, the plight of the mentally ill is left in the hands of law enforcement.

## Criminalization of the mentally ill

A Justice Department report found that in 1999, approximately 16 percent of inmates in state prisons and local jails, roughly 283,000 inmates, could be classified as mentally ill. Another 7 percent of federal inmates fit that description. Mental illness among local jail inmates is about twice that of the general population.

This can lead many to believe in the false impression that most mentally ill individuals are people to be feared and more likely to engage in dangerous or criminal behavior.

## Level of dangerousness

Research has shown that mentally ill persons who are at greater risk to become violent suffer from psychosis. **Alcohol or drugs can cause psychosis.** So can medical conditions such as delirium and high blood sugar.

A psychotic person has lost touch with reality. A psychotic person, regardless of the cause, can have a greater risk toward violence because of the following three symptoms:

- Delusions of paranoia
- A belief that one's mind is controlled by external forces
- Command hallucinations (voices commanding certain actions, for example, to kill oneself or someone else.

Studies have shown that roughly **ONE PERCENT** of persons diagnosed with psychotic disorders are dangerous to others. Caution must be used if psychosis is suspected. **For law enforcement, a basic understanding of the mechanics of these potentially volatile situations can greatly enhance their own safety and the safety of others.**