

## **CJCJ IN THE NEWS!**

**\*\*\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\*\*\***

**Randall Sheldon, Senior Research Fellow with the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice writes about the mentally ill in the criminal justice system in the San Francisco Chronicle.**

**Read, "Justice System now Providing Mental Health Services" from the June 30, 2003 Open Forum:**



### **OPEN FORUM**

#### **Homeless and Mentally Ill Justice system now providing mental health services**

[Randall Sheldon](#)  
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On a recent trip to San Francisco, I read with some interest a front-page article in The Chronicle about an assault on a professor from Johns Hopkins University by a homeless man ("Street attack stuns visiting doctors," May 23). It brought close to home the realities of street life these days in virtually every American city.

The irony was that the victim was attending the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, a group involved in the treatment of serious mental illnesses suffered by people such as the homeless man who was the perpetrator of this attack. Marcie Goin, the president-elect of the APA, noted that "Those who need psychiatric care don't have it readily available."

Although the violence exhibited by the homeless man is rare, it nevertheless illustrates a trend that began back in the 1970s, at the start of what was called the "de-institutionalization of mental patients" movement. This movement, begun by people in and out of

the mental health profession, sought to end what amounted to "warehousing" of mental patients in what were often called "dungeons" and "snake pits." The result was the closing down of many institutions and the release of former mental patients into communities all around the country.

While many were helped by this move, growing numbers since then have suffered even more, as the money supposedly saved from such closures all too often never made it to the communities for out-patient treatment.

One result is that, throughout the intervening years, the criminal justice system, especially local jails and state prisons, have come to be relied upon to manage the problem. And "manage" is about all they can do, as the system is not equipped to handle such problems. Nevertheless, an estimated one-fourth to one-third of jail or prison inmates on any given day suffer one or more forms of mental illness. (The perpetrator in the above-referenced assault had a history of being in the criminal justice system for psychiatric evaluations. He was being held on two felony counts of assault and battery. During his first court appearance the next day it was determined that he could not understand what was going on.)

It has also been reported that the nation's mental health system is suffering severe cutbacks during the fiscal crises in virtually every state (brought about in large part because of increased expenditures on homeland security and the war on terrorism and the recent invasion of Iraq, plus looming tax cuts). A representative of the APA noted that these cutbacks will negatively affect more than 27 million people with mental health problems. One of the few programs in San Francisco, a residential treatment facility, faces a \$1.9 million cut, which would result in the loss of 20 of its 36 beds and its entire day-treatment program serving 80 people.

Thus, all over the country during the past 30 years, millions of mental patients have been deprived of needed care. Whenever this happens the criminal justice system is there to "manage" the problem. If I've heard it once, I've heard it thousands of times: Someone who should be on medication in an out-patient program or housed within a community program has been picked up by the police, usually for some minor offense such as disturbing the peace, vagrancy or trespassing. A study I helped conduct on jail overcrowding in Las Vegas in the 1980s found that the offense responsible for most of the increases in the local jail was the charge of "vagrancy." It is like this all over the country.

The bottom line here is that state and local governments, in an effort to save money, often start by slashing mental health budgets, but then, in another irony, taxpayers pick up the tab in another part of the government, the criminal justice system. And that tab is not cheap: From the early 1970s to the present, criminal justice expenditures increased by more than 1,200 percent, to more than \$150 billion a year. Yet the crime rate is about the same today as it was back then, perhaps a bit higher.

It's time we renew our social commitment to the neediest among us, particularly the mentally ill, and re-allocate money for their care up front, rather than facing the repercussions of ignoring them. Like everything else, we get what we pay for.

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