



# 'Forensic' labelling: An empirical assessment of its effects on self-stigma for people with severe mental illness<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Increasingly, specialized 'forensic' mental health services are being developed to address the criminogenic and clinical needs of people with mental illness who are involved in the criminal justice system. Theoretically, the construction of such specialized services can produce simultaneous positive benefits and negative consequences. This mixed methods study examined and compared the level of self-stigma that was experienced by people who receive compulsory community-based treatment services in the forensic ( $n = 52$ ) and civil ( $n = 39$ ) mental health systems of British Columbia, Canada. The quantitative findings indicate that 'forensic' labelling was not associated with elevated levels of self-stigma. Quantitative level of self-stigma was significantly associated with psychiatric symptom severity, history of incarceration, and history of homelessness. The qualitative findings suggest that access to high-quality, well-resourced forensic mental health services may, for some service users, come at the risk of increased exposure to social and structural stigma. Together, these findings reveal some of the strengths and weaknesses that are associated with organizing forensic mental health services using a specialized service delivery model.

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## 1. Introduction

Subjective experiences are shaped by macro-level social and structural factors. The manner in which society chooses to deal with mental illness – reflected in and enshrined by mental health policy and service delivery models – has both direct and indirect effects on those who live with mental illness. The structural factors that influence the subjective experience of self-stigma for people with mental illness have been the subject of little empirical attention, even though it has been acknowledged that such factors are important for the creation and perpetuation of stigma: "The policies and institutional practices we create to address social problems are critical for stigma – they can induce it or they can minimize or even block it" (Link et al., 2008, p. 409). The present study evaluates the degree to which delivering services through a specialized forensic mental health system contributes to experiences of self-stigma among 'forensic' service users.

### 1.1. Self-stigma

Self-stigma has been defined as a subjective process, embedded within a socio-cultural context, characterized by negative feelings and adverse outcomes that result from an individual's experiences, perceptions, or anticipation of negative social reaction on the basis of their mental illness (Weiss et al., 2006; Livingston and Boyd, 2010). A large body of research has documented the ways in which self-stigma affects the lives of people with mental illness. Studies have found that self-stigma is associated with low self-esteem (Link et al., 2001, 2008; Ritsher et al., 2003; Lysaker et al., 2007b, 2008c; Yanos et al., 2008), poor quality of life (Bjorkman and Svensson, 2005; Rüscher et al., 2006; Lysaker et al., 2007a), reduced self-efficacy (Corrigan et al., 2006; Fung et al., 2007; Watson et al., 2007), and elevated psychiatric symptom severity (Link et al., 2002; Kahng and Mowbray, 2005; Rusch et al., 2008; Rüscher et al., 2009). Research has also found that self-stigma is related to poor treatment adherence (Tsang et al., 2006, 2009; Fung et al., 2008; Adewuya et al., 2009; Fung and Tsang, 2010). While these studies offer important insights into the devastating effects of self-stigma for people with mental illness, they do not expose the structures and processes that are responsible for producing and legitimizing differences in power and social status.

Several contemporary stigma theorists (Link and Phelan, 2001; Parker and Aggleton, 2003; Scambler, 2006; Yang et al., 2007) have highlighted the need to move beyond the tradition of studying stigma at an individual-level. Accordingly, a small number of studies have attempted to consider structural-level factors by examining the extent

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