

POLICE DISCRETION AND ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL ILLNESS

The Significant Factors

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Police discretion as it applies to encounters with people experiencing mental illness has far-reaching implications. In this study, some of the factors that are related to police officers' decisions following encounters with people experiencing mental illness were explored. Officers in Australia were presented with one of three videos depicting a police encounter with an individual who was either mentally ill, not mentally ill, or with an ambiguous mental state. Participants were asked how they would "likely" and "ideally" resolve the encounter. Discriminant function analysis revealed that officers' responses were related to (a) the severity of symptoms presented and (b) the officers' attitudes toward people experiencing mental illness, as measured by an attitudes questionnaire. There was a discrepancy between participants' likely and ideal outcomes to the scenarios, which supported the well-known fact that police officers face considerable obstacles when attempting to resolve encounters with people experiencing mental illness.

Keywords: police; mental illness; attitudes

For many years, the frequency of encounters between police officers and people experiencing mental illnesses has been steadily increasing (Bonovitz & Bonovitz, 1981; Pogrebin & Poole, 1987). To this end, the alarmingly high proportion of people diagnosed with mental illnesses housed in Australia's police cells (Ogloff, Warren, Tye, Blaher, & Thomas, 2010) and prisons (Butler & Allnutt, 2003; Mullen, Holmquist, & Ogloff, 2003) serves as compelling evidence and is a trend that is reflected internationally (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). These data do not, however, account for the myriad police encounters that result in mental health dispositions or other less formal outcomes that nonetheless consume police resources.

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