



NEWS RELEASE

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Unique study asks those with mental illness about experiences with police

Calgary, AB March 11 2010 – One of the most challenging issues facing law enforcement today is handling encounters involving people with mental illness. Although the majority of people with mental illness do not commit criminal acts, around 1 in 5 will come into contact with the law as police officers are often the first to respond to incidents.

A new research project funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) will study interactions between police and those living with a mental illness. The study is being led by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services and is conducted in partnership with Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the Canadian Mental Health Association – BC Division.

“This is the first study of its kind in Canada,” says Dr. Dorothy Cotton, psychologist and member of the MHCC’s Mental Health and the Law Advisory Committee. “Significant resources are going into furthering police understanding of mental illness, and how interactions between people with mental illness and the police can be improved.”

Retired Police Chief Terry Coleman, also a member of the Mental Health and the Law Advisory Committee, notes the results will influence police training and education across the country.

The research will study four key areas:

1. Under what circumstances do people living with a mental illness interact with the police?
2. What are the factors that result in positive or negative perceptions regarding police interactions?
3. Do people with a mental illness have different attitudes toward the police than the general population?
4. How do people with mental illness think that perceptions of, and interactions with, the police can be improved?

Focus groups involving approximately 25 people living with a mental illness (who have also had direct contact with the police) are taking place in Metro Vancouver. In addition, individual interviews will gather in-depth information regarding participants’ perceptions of police, and further surveys will also be distributed across British Columbia to people living with severe mental illness. The surveys will focus on participants’ feelings, attitudes and beliefs about the police.

The MHCC is a non-profit organization created to focus national attention on mental health issues. It is funded by the federal government but operates at arm’s length from all levels of government. The Commission’s objective is to enhance the health and social outcomes for Canadians living with mental health problems and illnesses. The Commission is working on four key initiatives and has eight Advisory Committees.

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