

Oral presentation

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Whom should we divert and to where? Looking at arrests in a 10-year cohort study of persons with severe mental illness

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Background

For the last decade, diverting arrestees with mental illness from the criminal justice to the mental health systems has been a mainstay of US mental health policy. However, data allowing us to gauge the size and charge characteristics of arrestees with mental illness have been generally unavailable to planners and policymakers in this area. This paper represents an effort toward providing such data.

Methods

We examined charges lodged against a cohort of nearly 14,000 adults with severe mental illness receiving mental health services in Massachusetts in 1992 and followed for roughly 10 years, and also examined the relationship between services received, individual characteristics, and likelihood of offending.

Results

Roughly 30% of all cohort members were arrested at least once, many for serious felony charges. Moreover, our findings suggest that: (a) substantial numbers of arrestees with mental illness do not fit the profile of the stereotypical "low-level misdemeanor and diversion client"; (b) that services such as residential programming and case management are effective, but not across the full spectrum of arrestees, and (c) that correlates of poor performance in such settings include factors known to increase risk for offending in the general population.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that "criminogenic" risk factors be considered alongside mental health issues in planning the next generation of policy and diversion services for addressing this problem.