



FACT SHEET #2

People with Serious Mental Illnesses in Jail and Prison

THEIR STORIES

People with mental illnesses often come into contact with the criminal justice system.

◆ Steven, 28, has bipolar disorder. He can maintain a normal family life and a job as a landscaper. He had never had problems with the law or any history of violent behavior. One night while he was driving, the police pulled him over. He heard voices telling him to keep going. He did, was shot in the hand, bitten by police dogs and arrested. He spent four months in jail, without the medication that had kept him stable. Eventually, he was found not guilty by reason of insanity and was hospitalized; the charges were dismissed. (Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, 8/00)

A man with a mental illness who was homeless was arrested in Florida for shoplifting an ice-cream sandwich that cost \$ 1.16, then imprisoned because he lacked the \$25 bail for release. (*Sun-Sentinel*, Ft. Lauderdale, 11/98)

Many lack access to adequate services through the public mental health system.

◆ Roy was so desperate for mental health treatment that he showed up at the courthouse and signed his commitment papers. On the day of his hearing, he packed, ready for a hospital stay, but the hospital couldn't take him for two months. "What am I supposed to do until then?" he asked. No other services were offered him. Seven weeks later, Roy walked into the woods, strapped his belt around a low branch and stepped off a plastic bucket. His body was found a week later, on the day his mother got a call that the hospital was ready for him. (*Time*, 7/00)

◆ Seeking help for their 20-year-old son who was exhibiting unexplained paranoia, a Latino family called the community mental health crisis line. Nine hours later a mental health professional arrived with police. After a brief exam the mental health worker said the young man may need hospitalization and the officers agreed to take him to a mental health facility. Although they had found him passively sitting on a sofa, the officers used physical force, beating him with nightsticks and ultimately pepper-spraying the apartment. The family watched, stunned. The young man was diagnosed with schizophrenia and more than a year later remains withdrawn and unable to return to his job. His family is discouraged about accessing any public services. (Report from a Washington DC suburb, 4/02)

The criminal justice system is used to fill the void.

◆ A man with a history of epilepsy was arrested after appearing confused and disrupting service on a city bus. Upon release, he was found outside the jail banging his head on a wall and crying. He was then admitted to hospital, where he threatened people with pencils. Hospital staff called the police and allowed them to enter patient areas with firearms. After the man became agitated from complications associated with epileptic seizures, he was shot dead by a police officer. His family had brought his seizure medication to the hospital the

day before, but they spoke only Spanish and no one could communicate with them. The medicine was set aside. (*Mental Health Weekly*, 6/01)

Once people are in the criminal justice system, their mental health needs are not met.

- ◆ An Oregon man with a mental illness gouged out his eyes as he waited in a Portland jail cell for a psychiatric hospital bed. (*The Oregonian* 6/12/02)
- ◆ Romus was arrested and brought to the Orange County jail in New York, shouting gibberish. As a result of budget cuts, no psychiatrist was on call, so Romus was pepper-sprayed and shackled to a restraint chair, where he sat shouting, twisting and kicking for hours. Eventually, an officer dragged Romus, in the chair, to the jail's mental health unit and pushed him in. (*Middletown Times Herald-Record*, NY, 7/01)
- ◆ Shawn, 20, diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder, has been in and out of state hospitals. He was arrested after punching a security guard who tried to stop him from stealing. While in jail awaiting a court hearing, Shawn has tried to kill himself at least four times. "I use razors, floor tiles, nails, screws, glass, anything," he says, "I want to die." When he tries to hurt himself, the jail locks him in the medical observation cell. "When I get locked up like that, all I do is cry, punch myself in the face, bang my head against the wall." Guards then strap him in a restraint chair. "There is not a day...that I don't think of killing myself," he told a reporter. "I just want help. I want this to end. I've come to the conclusion that death is the only way out." (*Portland Press Herald*, 11/01)

Criminal justice and mental health systems have not collaborated well.

- ◆ Paul, 24, was arrested for breaking and entering. While processing him, police saw that he was highly agitated and his behavior was strange. Concerned, the arresting officers called the area mental health center, a hospital, the state police and the District Attorney's office to find out what to do. While the various organizations argued over who should take him, Paul hanged himself in his cell. (Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, 8/00)
- ◆ Joseph is deaf, has a serious mental illness and cannot speak. He was arrested on a misdemeanor charge. Although the charges were dropped, he remained in the detention center for two years, lost somewhere between the city's criminal justice and mental health bureaucracies. (*The Washington Post*, 9/01)

Collaboration between mental health and criminal justice can lead to better outcomes.

- ◆ Richard, 43, has schizophrenia. He has been arrested 137 times for petty crimes such as trespassing and panhandling. Unwilling to take medication on his own, he was caught in a dangerous cycle, from jail to hospital to homelessness. *Thresholds*, a nonprofit rehabilitation agency, convinced a judge to release Richard to their custody. Now he has a single room the group provides for him, food, money and constant support. It took time, but Richard has been able to break his cycle of living on the streets or in prison. Over a year later, he remains arrest-free and says he has never felt happier. *Thresholds* costs \$25 a day, while jail costs \$75 a day. (Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, 8/00)