



Research Brief

The Commonwealth's Official Source of Population and Economic Statistics

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Issue Paper Released on Policing Persons with Mental Illness

MIDDLETOWN, Pa – “Police officers fear persons with mental illness because they believe that most, if not all, are dangerous, or at the very least, unpredictable. Persons with mental illness have reason to fear the police because they have the power to take them from their homes to a place that most do not want to go. For the most part, neither has an understanding of the other, which sets the stage for a physical confrontation.”

Policing Persons with Mental Illness: The Pennsylvania Experience is a report written by James Ruiz, PhD. Dr. Ruiz is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg. He served with the New Orleans Police Department for eighteen years, from 1967 to 1985.

Dr. Ruiz will be presenting a lecture on the report on April 10, 2003, from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm at the Penn State Harrisburg Downtown Center, located at 234 North Third Street, directly across from the Capitol Building in downtown Harrisburg.

This lecture will be free and open to the public. To ensure adequate seating, we ask that you please pre-register by phoning 717.948.6677 or email PaSDC-Reserve@psu.edu. The Pennsylvania State Data Center published the report as part of its ongoing series of issue papers. The report was just released in February of 2003.

This report describes related issues facing both police and persons with mental illness. Policing policies and procedures are examined with regards to both perceptions and characteristics of mental illness. The probable cause necessary to obtain an involuntary order of commitment to detain a person believed to be mentally ill is also discussed.

A main topic of the report is a survey that was mailed to all police departments in the state of Pennsylvania. The survey consisted of two parts. The first part requested that the departments supply copies of any policies, procedures, rules and/or regulations regarding responses to calls involving persons with mental illness. The second portion requested data regarding call response and personal perceptions of violence and dangerousness regarding persons with mental illness.

Measurements from the Survey Include:

- Number of respondents: 164
- Percent of respondents who were chiefs of their departments: 77 percent
- Mean age of respondent: 46.3 years
- Gender of respondent: 60.4 percent male, 39.6 percent female
- Mean years in service: 17.6 years
- Average percent of calls for service that involve persons with mental illness: 7.2 percent.

The report also includes copies of documentation regarding policies for police responses to mental illness that are issued by the Cumberland County Criminal Justice Policy Team, the Philadelphia Police Department, the Northeast Regional Police Department, the Milton Police Department, the Township of North Huntingdon Police Department, Allegheny County Police and the Clifton Heights Police Department.

For additional information, please contact the Pennsylvania State Data Center's State Capital Office at 717.772.2710.

The Pennsylvania State Data Center is the commonwealth's official source of population and economic statistics. It is based at Penn State Harrisburg's Institute of State and Regional Affairs. The Pennsylvania State Data Center is part of the U.S. Census Bureau's National State Data Center Program.

Editors: For additional data, contact the Pennsylvania State Data Center's State Capital Office at 717.772.2710 or for faculty comment on this topic, contact Penn State Harrisburg's Public Information Office at 717.948.6029.