

From Back Wards...to Back Streets...to Back Cells

Individuals living with a mental health illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it. Most never have any contact with the criminal justice system in their lifetime, yet these individuals are highly over represented in the criminal justice system. Why?

Estimates suggest that the rates of serious mental health problems among federal offenders, upon admission, have increased 60 to 70 % since 1997. This rate has increased as the process of de-institutionalization of such persons has taken place, coupled with inadequate reinvestment for community-based services. “Canadian penitentiaries are becoming the largest psychiatric facilities in the country”, states Correctional Investigator, Howard Sapers. “They were never intended to cope with such a profoundly ill population”. From a sampling of 1,300 incoming male offenders, over 38% required mental health follow-up for such illnesses as obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism. For those with a serious dependence on alcohol, 78% also reported mental health distress (concurrent disorder). In the past five years, female incarceration has increased by 40%. Among this population 70% have a history of sexual abuse, and 86% have been physically abused at some point in their lives.

It was with good intentions that our large psychiatric hospitals of the past were closed with the goal of integrating former patients into the community. But inadequate community supports made the situation for many of the more seriously ill even worse, thus prompting the observation, and film made many years ago, “From Back Wards to Back Streets”. When behaviours led to conflict with the law, the result became incarceration, and this is how we came from back wards...to back streets...to back cells. As Sapers has stated repeatedly in his annual reports, and as previously noted above, Canadian penitentiaries are becoming our largest psychiatric facilities, and a significant portion of this inmate population is “falling through the cracks”.

We need to address the social context in which persons who are ill become offenders. This includes the need to reduce environmental stressors. Poverty, being a victim oneself and lack of social supports all increase the risk of committing an offence. A recent British Columbia study showed that providing housing and support, even in the absence of mental health treatment, reduced arrests by 75%.

The Mental Health and Criminal Justice Policy Framework, October 2013, recommends “Having access to a well funded, coordinated and comprehensive community mental health system – with the support of hospital-based specialty care – will help prevent many people with mental illness from becoming involved in the criminal justice system”.

We can do better.

This article was written by Janet Fowler, retired public health director and active community volunteer.

The “Open Mind” column is sponsored by community partners who are committed to raising awareness about mental health, reducing stigma and providing information about resources that can help. Contact aheeley@cmhawwd.ca. For local mental health resources / information, visit www.communitytorchlight.com or call 1-844-HERE247.