

Are our prisons becoming twenty-first Century asylums for the mentally ill?

Michael Brennan, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin
Dr. Damien Brennan, Sociology Dept. Trinity College Dublin

WHO (2007) report that there are nine million prisoners world-wide, at least one million suffer from a significant mental disorder, and even more suffer from common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. There is often co-morbidity with conditions such as personality disorder, alcoholism and drug dependence. Gunn (2004) noted that there has been a steady reduction in psychiatric beds over the past twenty years but a continuing increase in the number of mentally ill offenders and an increase in the general prison population with major mental problems (cited in Penhale & Parker 2007). Penrose's law (1939), showed an inverse relationship between the number of mental hospital beds and the number of prisoners in any given society, suggesting that a reduction in psychiatric hospital beds leads to an increase of mentally ill people in the criminal justice system. Studies have shown that the prevalence of mental illness in prisons is higher than in the general population (Singleton et al 1998, Linehan et al 2005). Linehan et al (2005) study of the extent of mental illness within Irish prisons revealed an incidence of psychosis among men on remand of 7.6% and among those on a sentence 2.6%. The rate of psychosis in remand prisoners is much higher than in comparable samples from abroad. This is most likely due to the fact the Republic of Ireland has had no system of court diversion until 2005. The findings also revealed 70% of prisoners were addicted to drugs or alcohol (Linehan et al 2005). However, the quality of mental health care provided in prisons has been criticized, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Amnesty International Irish Section report (2007) reiterated its serious concerns about how Ireland's criminal justice system provides for the needs of prisoners with mental health problems. WHO Health in Prisons Project (2007) draws the attention of all countries in Europe to the essential need for greater focus on mental health problems among people in custodial settings. The following statement known as 'The Trencin Statement' highlights the vital need for research to be carried out amongst this population:

“Without urgent and comprehensive action, prisons will move closer to becoming twenty-first Century asylums for the mentally ill, full of those who most require treatment and care but who are held in unsuitable places with limited help and treatment available.”

(WHO, The Trencin Statement 2007)

Aims & Objectives of this research:

To understand the experiences of prisoners with mental health problems when trying to access/maintain a link with mainstream mental health services prior to incarceration

Objectives

- To explore the process through which people with mental health problems encounter the Criminal Justice System
- Identify current strengths and weaknesses in policy, protocols and service delivery for people with mental health problems within the criminal justice system.

Aim of this presentation:

To provide an overview of the findings so far of this study, the main themes which have emerged from the first part of this study are; Predisposing factors to involvement with the criminal justice system (CJS), factors influencing access to mental health care, perceptions of mental health care provided in prison and expectations for continuity of care post CJS involvement.