



LENS

Mercy Bookings of Mental Patients

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During the 1800s, individuals with mental disorders would be placed in jails and prisons in the United States. Dorothea Dix and others pushed for more humane treatment, and state mental hospitals began to be built. During the 1950s, another movement began to overcome the lack of adequate treatment found in many state hospitals. This community mental health movement sought to give individuals with mental disorders more freedom and dignity by moving their care and treatment out of institutions and into the community. However, the lack of funding for community facilities has left many of these individuals without treatment and literally on the streets of many cities. This has involved the police in dealing with those with mental illness.

Traditionally, law enforcement is there to protect the public, while the mental health system is there to treat the individual. However, these roles become more ambiguous in what is referred to as *mercy booking*. As mental hospitals were closed in the last half of the twentieth century, many of the individuals who would previously have been hospitalized found themselves in the community or literally on the streets. Mental hospitals or wards currently give priority to those who are a danger to themselves or others. Others with mental disorders find themselves released to the community, their

family, or the streets. This leaves some of these individuals, especially women, open to becoming victims of robbery or even rape. Mercy booking is the situation in which police fabricate a charge to enable jailing the person in order to protect him or her.

Police from around the United States have described their involvement in mercy booking (see Reisig & Kane, 2014; Torrey, 1997). One police officer in Los Angeles, California, described mercy booking as crisis intervention in that the individuals arrested were malnourished, in need of medical care, and often hallucinating. By arresting the individuals, they were able to obtain shelter and food and the necessary medications.

Sometimes, it is the person with a mental disorder himself that creates the arrest situation. In this situation, he commits a minor crime near a police station so that he can be arrested and live in the protected context of a jail. There are also cases of families who are unable to care for an individual who refuses her medications and shows disruptive behaviors. The family will often use the police to protect the individual through having her arrested.

It is a critical question for society to determine who should be responsible for treating individuals with mental disorders and how that should be done. In the 1800s, jails were shown not to be the best solution. In the 1900s, mental hospitals offered an alternative that came to have a number of problems in terms of humane treatment. In the 2000s, those with mental disorders experience a patchwork of agencies including the police that determine their treatment. A consistent approach is sorely lacking and seems long overdue.

Thought Question: What do you think are the pros and cons of mercy booking? What would you recommend as a consistent approach to community mental health treatment?