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Can Mental Health Courts Stop the 'Revolving Door' of Justice?

By **TCR Staff** | August 4, 2017



A three-year study of participants in one Florida mental health court program found that the rate of recidivism dropped “significantly” after they successfully completed the course of treatment mandated by the court as an alternative to jail time.

According to the authors of the Florida Institute of Technology (FIT) study, their findings, which represent the longest period of examination of mental health court outcomes of any previously published study, demonstrates that alternative courts can end the “revolving door” which cycles many mentally troubled individuals between jail and the streets.

“The ‘revolving door’ has been exhaustive of institutional resources, resulting in such a poor system of treatment that many argue that the system ...treats offenders with mental health challenges to the extent that recidivism is inevitable,” wrote the study authors, Julie Costopoulos of FIT’s School of Psychology; and Bethany Wellman, a doctoral student at the school.

Their study of 118 participants in a Florida mental health court, which was not named, found that three months after release, 90% were not rearrested. After six months, 81% remained free of any charges; and three years after release, 54% had not recidivated.

Just as significantly, the authors found that those participants who were re-arrested were picked up usually for much lesser offenses than those which originally landed them in trouble with the law.

The authors claimed the study provided additional evidence that the targeted community-based treatment mandated by the mental health court helped participating individuals develop the skills and confidence to overcome their illness to the extent they could avoid repeated involvement with the justice system.

A Bureau of Justice Statistics study cited by the authors found that 55% percent of male inmates and 73 % of female inmates in the U.S. were mentally ill, with 23% of those mentally troubled individuals experiencing incarceration three or more times.

With the phase-out of many mandated mental health commitments to state hospitals and similar facilities for the justice-involved over the last decades, criminal justice experts say jails and prisons are now effectively the largest treatment facilities for mental health in the U.S.

Mental health courts are among several court-based innovations aimed at providing alternatives to imprisonment for first-time or nonviolent offenders. The first mental health court was established in Broward County, Florida in 1997. But their numbers still remain comparatively low; as of 2016, there were some 300 such courts around the country, many of them funded under the 2002 federal Law Enforcement and Mental Health Project.

The FIT authors say their study should add more weight to arguments that alternative treatment for mentally ill offenders is cost-effective, and benefits both individuals and public safety.

“Jail doesn’t stop crimes by the mentally ill,” Costopoulos said in [an interview published](https://m.medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-mental-health-court-curbs-recidivism.html) (<https://m.medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-mental-health-court-curbs-recidivism.html>) soon after the study.

“Treatment does.”

The complete study, “The Effectiveness of One Mental Health Court: Overcoming Criminal History,” was published June 21 online in the *Psychological Injury and Law* journal. It is available [for purchase here](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318170228) (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318170228> [The Effectiveness of One Mental Health Court Overcoming Criminal History](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318170228)), but journalists who would like a copy should contact TCR Deputy Editor Victoria Mckenzie at Victoria@thecrimereport.org (<mailto:Victoria@thecrimereport.org>)

Readers' comments are welcome.
