

# Is Being Mentally Ill in America a Crime?

In the debate on mass incarceration, there's a story to be told about how our prisons are becoming the new asylums where the mentally ill are misunderstood and locked away, punished for their illness as if they were criminals.

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*Generic image*  
THINKSTOCK

In March, Dallas police were called to the house of a black family where a man, a member of the family, had a screwdriver. Police were told that the man was mentally ill, yet the police did

not act in accordance with the established protocol of talking and calming. Instead **they shot him dead.**

While the family and community have decried the actions of the officers that day, there is another disturbing picture that emerges. Even if the officers had subdued him, even if they had ushered him away, would he have ever received help? Police are often not trained in the treatment of mentally ill suspects and inmates, after all. It's more likely that he would have simply wound up in a system not meant to treat the mentally ill but, rather, one meant to treat all arrestees as criminals, regardless of how they end up in an officer's hands.

Of the **more than 2 million people currently incarcerated** in the U.S., nearly **500,000 are estimated to have serious mental illnesses**—including bipolar disease, schizophrenia and deep depression. Approximately three-fourths of the incarcerated mentally ill also have drug- or alcohol-use problems. Once incarcerated, they spend more time in jail and are more likely to return than other inmates. Inmate treatment, when it is available, is rarely informed by the best psychological methods. All of these trends disproportionately affect African Americans, who are overrepresented in jails and prisons.

When people with mental illnesses are sent to prisons, they enter a system that is tragically ill equipped to address their needs. Those who enter the penal system don't find enough treatment there. Jails and prisons are often understaffed and overcrowded. But even if the penal system were magically gifted with more beds and staff, that might not solve the problem because many prisons are philosophically in opposition to treatment models.

Once you are in prison, the point is to punish. There was a relatively brief trend toward rehabilitation in the 20th century, but with what has been called the “punitive turn,” prisons have turned away from modern attempts at rehabilitation and gone back to simply punishment. Incarceration is meant to be awful. The methods of punishment—of stripping away self-control, social isolation, even solitary confinement—worsen, **rather than help**, the problem.

And the trend is deepening. In 2007 fewer than 400,000 people with mental illness were incarcerated—less than a quarter of the number today. The jump coincides with the growth of privately owned prisons, raising the question of whether the higher number is a result of for-profit jails and the need to fill them.

We have effectively returned the mentally ill to the asylums.

For centuries, before the advent of modern psychology, the mentally ill were shut away, out of sight, and often treated as less than human. Society did not know any better. The human brain was poorly understood, and treatments were often misguided and brutal.

Now we know better, or at least we should. The field of psychology has developed an elaborate and medicalized view of the human psyche, and we know that many illnesses are caused by biochemical imbalances, like many other illnesses of the body.

Yet the reality for many people with mental illness looks less like medical science and more like the very bad old days of the insane asylums.

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