

# 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.

**BY: SHERI L. PARKS, PH.D.**  
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The reasons may have more to do with the public imagination than with what is best for people with mental illness. Historically, there are two populations that receive institutionalization: those convicted of crimes and those deemed to be mentally ill. The mentally ill and the criminal were thought to be more alike than different. Both were perceived as deviant—people we would now consider to be mentally ill were once perceived as possessed by evil, or evil themselves. (And African Americans have a history of **being demonized and dehumanized** as inherently bad or prone to violence.) The treatments also have been the same—to isolate them from the general population—rather than to help them.

The long historical connection made between evil and mental illness lives on in the popular imagination, with a long history of movie villains **who are mentally ill**, from Norman Bates in *Psycho* to *Batman*'s Joker. It passes along to everything from the way we view mass killings like in Newtown, Conn., and Aurora, Colo.—diagnosing the killers in the press as if their disease is always associated with such crimes, when the vast majority of mentally ill people are nonviolent—to even the National Rifle Association's efforts to shift the debate away from gun control by using the mentally ill as a useful scapegoat, creating an image of “lunatics” and “monsters” and **grossly exaggerating** the amount of violent crime they commit.

Despite the developing conceptualization of mental illness as illness, the cultural stereotype has prevailed, and mental illness is seen in the press as less a medical designation and more a sign of **violent threat**.

But even if one proceeds with the ill-founded logic of the “ill as evil,” it should also logically lead to more treatment instead of less—unless we are more interested in punishment and isolation than in treatment.

Most mental illness can be treated on an outpatient basis, and there was a gradual move away from mass involuntary institutionalization of mentally ill patients in the 1960s and 1970s, placing many of them back into the communities. Now, though, the pendulum may have swung too far. There are not enough beds to fit the need. In 2013 there were 43,000 psychiatric beds in the United States, or about 14 beds per 100,000 people—the same **ratio as in 1850**.

But change may again be on the horizon. Recently the National Association of Counties, the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Foundation collaborated to form **Stepping Up**, “a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails.” The initiative appeals to the cost-saving incentives of the governments that pay the for-profit prisons. Its message—that treatment is less expensive and better than incarceration—is an effort to stop this tragedy by appealing to the lowest common denominator: not our humanity, but our wallets. If governments can’t see that the penal system is structured incorrectly in regards to mental health, they can at least see that it’s a waste of money.

They can see that the most humane strategy is also, by far, the cheapest.

*Sheri L. Parks, Ph.D., is associate professor of American studies and associate dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she directs the Arts and Humanities Center for Synergy. She is also the author of **Fierce Angels: Living With a Legacy From the Sacred Dark Feminine to the Strong Black Woman**. Follow her on **Twitter***

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