

## **First Responders and the Mentally Impaired**

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### **Introduction**

Providing proper training to first responders could potentially save lives. Training first responders how to properly manage situations with mental illness and/or disorders could provide a safer environment for everyone involved. *Police Officers as First Line Responders: Improving Mental Health Training to Effectively Serve the Mentally Ill Population* states that “Studies have shown that police officers and other criminal justice agencies lack adequate training specialized to deal effectively with mental illness and/or other disabilities.” (Barillas 58). Very little research has been done to find out if the current training and mental health approaches has been working to better serve the mentally impaired population.

### **Research Question**

Does the mental health training first responders receive translate into professional and effective contacts in the field?

### **Background and Literature Review**

- Punis et al. (2018) is a review of literature assessing the effectiveness of street triage by police officers. The main focus of the authors was to identify and

describe different co-response models of police mental health street triage, to identify demographic and clinical characteristics of service users, and to evaluate the evidence for the effectiveness of co-response police mental health triage.

The study found that there is a lack of evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of street triage and a large variation of how street triage is implemented.

- Watson et al. (2008) is a review of the effectiveness of CIT in Akron, Ohio. The main focus of these researchers is improving the safety and outcomes for both people with mental illness and the officers encountering them. The literature shows that CIT can be an effective tool to de-escalate contacts with people with mental illness.
- Rodriguez et al. (2016) is a research is a group dissertation about the effectiveness of PERT training. The main focus of the study is to examine the impact of PERT (Psychiatric Emergency Response Team) training when law enforcement officers respond to a mental health related and suicide 911 calls. The study suggests that PERT is an effective program that often ends in a better outcome for people with mental illness.
- Barillas (2013) is a doctoral dissertation by Miriam Barillas. This researcher met three field consultants who had either research knowledge or clinical experience working with people in law enforcement. From her research she used the

information gathered in law enforcement. From her research she used the information gathered to create a booklet that could be used to train officers.

## **Methods**

### **Participants:**

The participants would be first responders (police officers, fire fighters, EMS). At this time, the number of participants is unknown, as it will be determined on how many agencies allow me to ride along, how many ride alongs are allowed, and the number of calls that occur during any given ride along.

### **Materials:**

Observation check-list, first responder survey questions, phone/tablet for record keeping.

The check-list and survey questions are in development. Some example check-list items may include: Is the civilian yelling upon arrival on scene? Is the civilian holding a weapon arrival on scene? Does the civilian seem agitated upon arrival on scene? Does the first responder use a neutral tone to communicate with the civilian? Does the first responder use a non-threatening body posture upon arrival on scene? The first responder survey question items may include: How long have you been a first responder? How do you normally handle situations with the average civilian? How do

you handle situations with mentally impaired civilians? How do handle situations with violent civilians?

**Procedure:**

1. Obtain permission for ride along from the agency.
2. Ask for the amount of hours training first responders receive overall, regarding mentally impaired people, regarding physically impaired people, and weapons training. (I am not disclosing to the agency that I am studying encounters with mentally impaired people as this would skew my results).
3. Attend ride along. Record first responder survey information.
4. Attend ride along. Record observations.
5. Repeat.
6. Compile data.

**Expected Conclusions**

I expect to see first responders utilizing the training they do have for contacts with mentally impaired individuals. However, I also believe that mental health training is minimal. Therefore I expect for my research to support my hypothesis that first responders will communicate using non-politically correct terms, and unintentionally offend people.

I also expect that most agencies will be utilizing a first-responder-only style of response. CIT and PERT are newer styles of mental health response, and do not have enough studies done following them to justify the change in methodology, the cost of new training, and the additional personnel required to implement them.

Finally, I expect that based on what research exists, first responders contacts with people who have mental impairments will more frequently result in arrest than contacts with people without mental impairments.

### **Significance**

There is a need for a controlled study investigating the type and quality of mental health training first responders receive and how it affects the encounters they have with people who have mental impairments. Too much of the current literature is analyzing other literature. My research data could help fire, police, EMS, and other first responder agencies improve their pre-service and continuing education.

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