

Mullen, Paul (2001) A Review of the Relationship Between Mental Disorders and Offending Behaviours and on the Management of Mentally Abnormal Offenders in the Health and Criminal Justice Services, Criminology Research Council, 79 pp.

This report was prepared by Professor Paul Mullen for the Criminology Research Council. The copy received for review was a photocopy with several of the appendices missing. The main part of the report is a summary and review of the studies that have been done to date (up to and including the year 2001) on the relationship between schizophrenia and offending behaviour. There is also a more limited discussion of the relationship between other psychoses, intellectual disability, and brain damage and offending behaviour. What the review demonstrates is that no matter how the problem is approached there will always be methodological difficulties, including definitional and diagnostic problems, sampling difficulties, the establishment of suitable control groups, problems associated with statistical analysis of the data, and researcher bias. Even painstakingly constructed, large scale studies, carried out with funding that Australian researchers can only dream about, such as the MacArthur study in the United States, are not free from such problems.

Meta-analyses have fundamental problems of their own and Mullen avoids undertaking one, being content to briefly summarise, in both the text and in accompanying tables, the findings of the various studies. Mullen also provides an important critique of some of the statistical findings in relation to schizophrenia and crime. For example statistics are often cited that suggest people with schizophrenia have conviction rates two to three times higher than the population at large; higher conviction rates still for some offences, especially violent offences; and that these rates increase quite considerably when substance abuse and/or personality disorder are also present. However Mullen points out that there are a number of dangers in taking such statistics at their face value.

Next, Mullen goes on to look at the problems of moving from the statistical data provided by the studies described to the assessment of risk. He notes that while short to medium predictions (days to weeks) have some validity and practical usefulness, long-term predictions do not have the same degree of reliability, being based on different sets of factors. Some experts see yet-to-be developed actuarial tools as possible aids to long-term prediction. Others are less enthusiastic and consider such tools to be fraught with danger. Mullen himself is in the latter group and gives cogent reasons for being wary of such approaches.

Finally, Mullen demolishes the claim that deinstitutionalisation and community care 'have contributed to higher rates of offending among the mentally ill' and lists a number of alternative reasons for the apparent increase in the numbers of mentally disordered in the prison population.

The review ends with a recommendation that each State in Australia should aim at developing a comprehensive service for the mentally disordered 'at every stage in the criminal justice process', using as a basis for this the paper entitled 'Forensic Mental Health Services in Australia', contained in the missing Appendix V.

Overall the report contains an up-to-date summary of the findings of the major studies. For anybody with no previous knowledge of the topic it would provide a helpful introduction. Anyone requiring an in-depth understanding of the topic would best be advised to turn to the original studies listed in the extensive reference list.

One of the major problems of the type of methodological approach contained in most, but not all, of the studies in the review is that they look at the relationship between diagnostic labels (syndromes) and offending behaviours. In practice it is the relationship between symptoms and offending behaviours that would be a more fruitful focus of study, as it is the way that the particular symptoms of each syndrome manifest themselves and influence behaviour, and whether or not they can be controlled in some way, that is of greatest importance, especially within the context of risk assessment. A more detailed discussion of the causative, as opposed to the co-relational, relationship between mental disorder and offending behaviour would also have been helpful. And the section on the management of mentally disordered offenders is rather brief and sketchy. Not knowing exactly why the review was prepared for the Criminology Research Council makes it difficult to know whether it achieved its purpose or not. If it is going to be more widely disseminated, a brief note on the background to the review would be helpful as would a more extensive commentary by Mullen himself and some development along the lines suggested above. Mullen is one of the most perceptive, intelligent and original writers on forensic psychiatry in Australia. This report, however, has the air of being something cobbled together for a particular purpose, rather than being the thought-provoking and ground-breaking material that one normally associates with Mullen's name.

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