

Police perceptions of the percentage of contacts in Albuquerque, NM that involve people living with mental illness.

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There is no consensus of the percentage of police calls that involve people living with mental illnesses. This lack of information is due to various reasons. 1) It is hard to define mental illness, especially when trying to tease apart mental illness and substance abuse. 2) Law enforcement agencies historically focus their data collection on crime and crime prevention, not mental illness. 3) Calls that clearly involve mental illnesses are often not coded as mental illness calls.

Despite limited information and difficulty with data collection, some estimates show that in the United States, between 3 - 10% of all police calls involve people living with significant mental illnesses (1-3).

Albuquerque has approximately 560,000 residents. The police department has approximately 400 uniformed patrol officers who actively take calls for service. The Albuquerque Police Department (APD) took over 400,000 calls in 2014 (4). If we estimate that 5% of those calls had mental health as a driving component, there would have been over 20,000 mental health contacts.

The Albuquerque Police Department (APD) is not often dispatched for calls that are coded solely as “mental illness” because not enough information is known before a call is taken, or there may be a criminal matter that trumps a code of mental illness. Additionally, APD routinely conducts welfare checks, investigates suspicious persons, and deals with disturbances; unfortunately, people living with mental illnesses sometimes cause these types of calls.

A one page survey was given to over 15% of field officers before they participated in a crisis intervention class. The results of this survey show very high levels of estimated contact between themselves and people living with mental illness.

APD field officer survey of perceived contacts with people living with mental illness.

(Average years of service of survey respondents is 11 years.)

In your estimate, what percentage of your calls involves mental illness as the primary factor for causing the situation?

33%

In your opinion, if a call involves mental illness, but is not classified as a 10-40 or 43-1 call, what is the most common dispatch?

Suspicious Person: 20%

Disturbance: 75%

Domestic Dispute: 2%

Other 3%

The numbers reported appear much higher than expected, and almost certainly higher than what may actually exist. These numbers may be inflated for many reasons - mental health calls are often time consuming, difficult to manage, and outside the realm of traditional policing. Nearly a third of those surveyed believed that 50% or more of all their calls were generated because of a person living with mental illness. Whether these numbers are inflated or not, clearly mental illness calls consume a lot of police time and energy. These perceptions reinforce the notion that communities may want to allocate more resources to help divert mental illness away from police and towards health care.

References:

- 1. Franz, S., & Borum, R. (n.d.). Crisis Intervention Teams may prevent arrests of people with mental illnesses. Police Practice and Research.*

2. Panzarella, Robert , Alicea Justin O. *Police tactics in incidents with mentally disturbed persons. Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*
3. Engel, R., & Silver, E. (2001). *Policing mentally disordered suspects: a reexamination of the criminalization hypothesis. Criminology.*
4. City of Albuquerque. (2015) *Albuquerque Police Department Annual Report* retrieved from <http://www.cabq.gov/police/internal-reports>