Introduction

Each year, more than 10 million people enter US jails and this population is increasing each year. The prevalence of serious mental illness in the jail population is 7%. Over the last two decades, Texas has experienced an eightfold increase in the number of prisoners. More than 20% of Harris County (Texas) residents who are in the jail county have a history of severe mental illness. As a remedy for the problem the federal government funds mental health programs for this vulnerable population called “Diversion Programs”.

Study site:

Four Harris County jails in Houston with well-established Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County (MHMRA) services for inmates called Harris County Jail-based programs (HCJBP). Similarly there are four facilities in the community where mental health services are available to MIOs who are referred called Harris County Jail Diversion Programs (HCJDP).

Methodology

We compared the characteristics of inmates in the Harris County Jail Diversion Plan (HCJDP) with those in the Harris County Jail-based program (HCJBP). MHMRA is responsible for provision of mental health services for both of these programs. The study cohort includes 3,414 individuals with at least one booking found in the Harris County Justice Information System (JIMS) database. These individuals accumulated 22,090 bookings over the 36-month period between January 2004 and December 2006, for an average of 6.5 bookings per person. The individuals and their booking history were obtained by matching all consumers served by MHMRA between September 1999 and December 2006 with JIMS booking records between January 2004 and December 2006. The consumers were residents of Harris County, 18 years and older MIO, who had been treated by MHMRA.

Results

65% of the offenders were diverted, 34% were females, 46% African American. Age, gender, employment, homelessness, clinical history and nature of offense were associated with diversion. Younger and homeless inmates are more likely to be diverted (P < 0.000). Similarly female offenders were 20% more likely to get jail diversion than their male counterpart. MIOs with employment “unknowns” were 53% less likely to be diverted. Compared to schizophrenic offenders those with a deferred diagnosis were 63% less likely to be diverted. Felons were 51% less likely to be sent to the community compared to those charged with misdemeanors (P < 0.000).

Conclusion

These findings will enable mental health care researchers, judicial personnel, and policy makers to understand the factors responsible and the role they play in the complex mechanism of jail diversion for this vulnerable population.