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Law Enforcement and Mental Health: Police Practices in Managing Mentally Challenged Offenders

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Abstract. This study investigates a critical procedural gap in police interactions with mentally challenged offenders, an area often marked by inconsistent practices, inadequate training, and uncertainty between care and control functions. The research aimed to identify empirically grounded best practices that guide police officers when dealing with mentally challenged individuals in the community. Employing a qualitative narrative-inquiry design, the study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected officers from the Baguio City Police Office. Data were transcribed, memoed, and analyzed through descriptive thematic analysis until thematic saturation was achieved. The findings revealed four interrelated domains of effective practice: adopting a cautious yet compassionate approach that emphasizes de-escalation; exercising leniency and diversion in non-violent incidents; fostering collaboration with mental health professionals and social welfare agencies; and engaging community-based support networks to ensure sustained care. Collectively, these practices embody a relational-policing model that integrates public safety with empathy and human rights. The study concludes that formalizing these practices through specialized training, interagency protocols, and community diversion programs can strengthen institutional responses to mental health-related incidents. Such measures would not only minimize unnecessary criminalization but also advance a more humane, evidence-informed policing framework aligned with mental health and human rights policies.

Keywords: Diversion; Mental health; Mentally challenged offenders; Police practices; Relational policing

1.0 Introduction

Persons with mental illness who come into conflict with the law occupy a complex intersection between the criminal justice and healthcare systems. In most societies, the lack of clear procedures for managing such individuals creates uncertainty over whether they should be treated, controlled, or punished. Law enforcement officers often face difficult decisions about balancing public safety with human rights and compassion. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health in policing, many jurisdictions still lack standardized protocols and clear operational guidelines for handling mentally challenged offenders. This gap often results in inconsistent practices, misinformed interventions, and, at times, the criminalization of behaviors associated with mental illness.

Globally, approaches to handling offenders with mental illness vary widely. In the United States, studies have shown that individuals with mental disorders are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, often due to the lack of pre-arrest diversion mechanisms and insufficient training among police officers (Reising, 2021; Metzl et al., 2021). While diversion programs and mental health courts have been established in some communities to redirect non-violent offenders toward treatment, many individuals with mental illness continue

to be detained for minor offenses such as loitering or public disturbance, mainly as a consequence of unaddressed psychiatric symptoms. The false public perception of a direct link between mental illness and criminality continues to influence policy and policing decisions (Morse, 2018).

In Iran, offenders with mental disorders are categorized based on the severity of their condition. Those deemed completely insane are exempt from criminal liability, while those with less severe mental illnesses face diminished but not eliminated responsibility (Rahmdel, 2017). However, challenges persist in cases where offenders develop mental illness after committing a crime or suffer from conditions that are not legally recognized as insanity, resulting in inconsistent applications of justice. This illustrates the ongoing global effort to balance legal accountability with mental health considerations.

In the Philippine context, the management of offenders generally falls under the mandates of the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). While reforms such as community-based alternatives to incarceration have been introduced, most laws and programs focus on juvenile and female offenders rather than persons with mental illness. The Philippine Mental Health Act of 2017 was a significant step toward institutionalizing mental healthcare and safeguarding patient rights (Lally, 2019). However, its provisions primarily address workplace and clinical contexts, leaving a considerable gap regarding how law enforcement officers should respond to mentally challenged individuals who violate the law (De Los Santos et al., 2018). As a result, police officers are often left without formal guidance or training on how to safely and humanely manage such encounters.

Given these realities, the relationship between mental illness and criminal behavior remains complex and misunderstood. While certain psychiatric conditions may increase vulnerability to offending, the absence of standardized procedures and appropriate interventions continues to exacerbate the problem. There remains an urgent need to identify and document practical, humane, and effective strategies that law enforcement can employ when interacting with persons with mental illness. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by identifying and analyzing the best practices of police officers in handling mentally challenged offenders, with a focus on the approaches implemented by the Baguio City Police Office. Through this inquiry, the research aims to contribute to the development of evidence-based frameworks that promote compassionate, rights-based, and community-oriented policing in cases involving mental health crises.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the best practices observed by police officers in handling individuals with mental health challenges. Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables the researcher to capture and interpret participants' lived experiences through their personal stories and reflections. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is grounded in the understanding that humans experience and make sense of their lives through stories, making it a practical approach for examining experiences situated in specific social and professional contexts. This design was suitable for addressing the research question, as it enables a deeper understanding of the officers' thought processes, emotions, and decision-making patterns in real-life encounters. By employing this approach, the study aimed to document not only the procedures followed by the police but also the human elements of empathy, judgment, and discretion that influence their practices.

2.2 Participants

The study participants were 15 police officers assigned to the Baguio City Police Office (BCPO) who had direct experience handling mentally challenged offenders during their official duties. The study utilized purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique that selects participants based on their relevance and direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were: (1) police officers with at least one documented experience handling mentally challenged offenders; and (2) officers currently assigned to operational or investigative units. Exclusion criteria included administrative personnel or officers without direct field experience. The sample size was determined by data saturation, meaning interviews continued until no new significant insights emerged. BCPO was chosen as the study locale due to its accessibility, the willingness of its personnel to participate, and the frequency of mental health-related police encounters within its jurisdiction.

2.3 Research Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide, developed based on relevant literature on police interaction with mentally challenged offenders and relational policing frameworks (e.g., Thomas, Watson, & Compton, 2022; Metzl et al., 2021). The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding officers' actual experiences, strategies, and reflections. The instrument underwent expert validation by three professionals in criminology and psychology to ensure content validity and alignment with the study's objectives. The instrument's reliability was enhanced through pilot testing with two police officers from a different jurisdiction, which allowed refinement of question clarity and flow. During interviews, memoing (field notes) was used to document nonverbal cues and contextual details, while audio recording—with participants' consent—ensured accuracy and completeness of data.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted face-to-face over a four-week period at designated BCPO offices and police stations. Before data collection, the researcher submitted formal request letters to the BCPO administration and obtained the necessary ethical clearances. Informed consent forms were provided to all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Each interview was scheduled at the participants' convenience and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The researcher used the validated interview guide to ensure consistency, while also allowing flexibility for probing follow-up questions. All sessions were audio-recorded (with permission) and supported by memoing to capture contextual insights. Transcriptions were returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to review and verify the accuracy of their statements before final analysis. This process enhanced both ethical integrity and data trustworthiness.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework of Creswell and Poth (2018). This involved transcribing interviews verbatim, coding significant statements, and clustering them into themes that reflected shared experiences and best practices in handling mentally challenged offenders. Thematic patterns were then interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied four qualitative validation criteria: credibility (through member checking and triangulation with memoing), transferability (by providing rich contextual descriptions), dependability (by maintaining an audit trail of coding and decisions), and confirmability (through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing). This rigorous process ensured that the findings accurately represented the participants' lived experiences and provided a reliable foundation for policy and practice recommendations.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews, all participants were fully informed of the nature, objectives, and procedures of the study through a written Informed Consent Form. The consent form explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and that respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. The researcher ensured that the language used in the consent form was clear and understandable to all participants.

To uphold participant protection, the study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participants were guaranteed that no physical, emotional, or psychological harm would result from their participation. Interviews were conducted at a time and location that were convenient and safe for the respondents, to minimize stress or discomfort. Data confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were omitted or coded to protect participants' identities. Digital audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored in a password-protected digital folder accessible only to the researcher. All gathered data will be destroyed upon completion of the study and publication of its findings.

Additionally, participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic and research purposes, and aggregate data, rather than individual accounts, would be presented in the final report. The researcher is also committed to sharing a summary of the study results with interested participants to promote transparency and reciprocity. The research protocol underwent ethical review and approval to ensure compliance with standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This presents the results and discussion of the study on best practices in handling mentally challenged individuals, based on the experiences of police officers from the Baguio City Police Office. Key themes were identified through qualitative analysis of interview data, highlighting effective strategies, common challenges, and practical insights in managing such encounters during police operations.

Best Practices in Handling Mentally Challenged Offenders

Cautious and Compassionate Approach

From the perspective of officers who prioritize a cautious approach, handling mentally challenged offenders requires utmost care, patience, and empathy. This approach focuses on de-escalation, non-judgmental interaction, and ensuring the safety and dignity of all involved.

Participant 1 emphasized that *"Typically, individuals brought to the office are agitated and violent. My initial approach is to de-escalate the situation, calming them down to ensure their safety and the safety of others. Some become calm when we give them food or water." Likewise, Participant 2 shared that "We exhaust all efforts to assist them in their needs, like medicine and food. We will also be the ones to look at or contact their nearest kin." Similarly, Participant 4 stated that "We handle mentally challenged offenders with extreme caution."*

These responses demonstrate how the officers integrate compassion, collaboration, and practical care into their professional conduct. Their strategies—providing basic needs, emotional reassurance, and family contact—reflect not only procedural correctness but also a humanistic approach to policing rooted in empathy. This aligns with the holistic care model, which views offenders as whole individuals rather than subjects of control.

The findings support the concept of relational policing, introduced by Thomas, Watson, and Compton (2022), which advocates for building rapport and trust with individuals in crisis through active listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence. The officers' narratives illustrate how relational policing principles are operationalized in real-world law enforcement, underscoring that successful intervention requires not just procedural adherence but compassionate engagement.

The implications of these findings are twofold. In practice, they suggest institutionalizing mental health and empathy training in police curricula. Theoretically, they contribute to the evolving framework of trauma-informed and relational policing by demonstrating that compassion-based engagement fosters trust, safety, and cooperation in crises. This approach promotes human rights–aligned law enforcement and enhances the public's perception of the police as agents of care rather than coercion.

Lenient Approach

Another pattern observed among officers was a lenient and rehabilitative orientation in handling mentally challenged individuals. This reflects a shift from punitive to therapeutic and restorative policing practices.

Participant 2 mentioned that "*Sometimes if he behaves, he does not cause chaos, or he is still a child, usually we no longer confine him in a custodial facility. More likely, we put him in the WCPD. Sometimes, if we observe that he has a mental problem, we ask the complainant not to file a case." Similarly, Participant 3 shared that "When handling mentally challenged offenders, best practices were helping them realize their offense and its negative effect on him or her and on other people instead of punishing them*."

This lenient approach reflects an emerging paradigm of therapeutic jurisprudence—a framework emphasizing healing and behavioral understanding rather than punishment. Officers' decisions to avoid confinement and to redirect individuals toward support systems demonstrate an intuitive experience that mental health conditions should be managed through care and rehabilitation, not criminalization.

This finding corroborates the observations of Metzl et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of mental health screenings and specialized court programs that divert individuals with psychiatric conditions away from incarceration and toward treatment. Likewise, Teplin (2000) advocates for compassionate diversion strategies, encouraging law enforcement to partner with mental health agencies to facilitate appropriate care pathways. This indicates a gradual but meaningful transformation in police culture—from control-based enforcement to restorative engagement. It highlights the potential of discretionary policing in upholding social justice and human

rights. Future policies should formalize these practices through mental health diversion programs, reinforcing rehabilitation over criminal processing.

Collaboration with Mental Health Experts
A central theme across participants' responses was the emphasis on inter-agency collaboration with mental health professionals and social welfare institutions.

Participant 1 explained, "*Depending on the situation, mostly I try to contact their relatives and request a psychiatrist to check or assess the mentally challenged individual." Participant 3 added, "In partnership with the City Social Welfare and Development Office (CSWDO), we address the care and rehabilitation of individuals with mental disabilities involved in legal matters. The focus is on support, rehabilitation, and protection of their rights." Similarly, Participant 2 shared, "If during arrest there is no document from the family proving his mental illness, we seek assistance from the DSWD and have him assessed by a psychiatrist from BGH*."

These narratives reveal a deeply rooted collaborative model of care in which law enforcement serves as a bridge between the justice system and mental health services. This cooperation ensures that mentally challenged offenders are assessed, treated, and rehabilitated appropriately. The practice aligns with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (Tokyo Rules), which promote community-based alternatives to incarceration (Herradura, n.d.).

Moreover, the Philippine Mental Health Act of 2017 institutionalizes such coordination, mandating access to psychiatric assessment and protecting patients' rights (Lally, 2019). The officers' reliance on professional assessment reinforces due process and reduces wrongful incarceration, contributing to a rights-based justice framework.

This finding highlights the importance to strengthening cross-sectoral partnerships among the police, healthcare institutions, and social welfare agencies. Formal inter-agency protocols can enhance efficiency, accountability, and humane treatment. Such collaborations also reduce the incidence of police-related harm during crisis interventions and promote sustainable reintegration of mentally challenged individuals.

Community-Driven Support and Partnership
Participants also highlighted the role of community involvement and partnerships in supporting the rehabilitation and well-being of individuals with mental disabilities.

Participant 2 shared that "*There are times where through our Community Affairs Section and Strategic Management Section, we include them in our community-based projects – that is why there are those who give sponsors for their wellness programs and their medications*."

This statement reflects a community-oriented policing model that emphasizes shared responsibility and collective care. By involving local organizations, sponsors, and social groups, the police extend mental health care beyond institutional walls into the community sphere. This embodies the public health approach to policing, wherein social determinants of behavior—such as poverty, trauma, and isolation—are addressed through multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Teplin (2000) also notes that effective crisis intervention depends heavily on the collaboration of law enforcement, mental health experts, and community-based resources. This model enhances preventive intervention and reduces recidivism by strengthening community networks of care. The integration of police, community, and health resources marks a shift toward sustainable and inclusive mental health response systems. Such approaches not only humanize policing but also enhance social resilience and trust. Institutionalizing these partnerships can transform police stations into hubs of community wellness, bridging the gap between enforcement and social services.

4.0 Conclusion
The study highlights that police officers often adopt a compassionate and collaborative approach when dealing with mentally challenged individuals. Rather than resorting to punitive measures, they demonstrate empathy, patience, and understanding—prioritizing assessment, support, and rehabilitation over punishment. By working

closely with social workers, psychiatrists, and family members, officers ensure that interventions are both humane and effective. This shift from a punitive to a restorative model underscores a critical evolution in policing—one that places equal value on justice, care, and human dignity.

Such compassion-based policing enhances community safety by fostering trust, reducing recidivism, and ensuring that vulnerable individuals receive the necessary support. When law enforcement embraces empathy alongside enforcement, it reinforces the principle that proper public safety is achieved not merely through control, but through connection and care. This approach embodies a more inclusive and rehabilitative vision of justice, balancing protection with respect for individual rights.

To further advance humane and effective policing practices, the study recommends several key strategies:

(1) Training and Capacity Building: Equip law enforcement officers with specialized mental health crisis intervention and de-escalation training rooted in empathy and respect.
(2) Interagency Collaboration: Institutionalize partnerships between police units, mental health professionals, and social welfare offices for coordinated case management and referral systems.
(3) Policy and Legal Support: Develop standardized protocols and local ordinances that safeguard the rights of mentally challenged individuals while offering alternatives to incarceration.
(4) Community Rehabilitation and Awareness: Strengthen community-based diversion and rehabilitation programs, and conduct public education campaigns to reduce stigma and promote reintegration.

Ultimately, future research should investigate the long-term effects of compassion-based policing, including its impact on officer well-being, recidivism rates, and community trust. Comparative studies across regions may also reveal how contextual factors influence the success of humane policing strategies. In essence, this study affirms that compassion in policing is not a sign of weakness—it is a strategy for sustainable peace, social inclusion, and genuine public safety.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: proposal writing, data gathering
Author 2: conceptualization, data analysis

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the conduct and publication of this research.

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