diverting mentally ill offenders

L.A. County can safely release and treat thousands of inmates with mental ailments. So do it already.

by Rhys Salz

A study by the National Institute of Justice released last week confirmed what most people would have expected: people arrested on suspicion of committing serious violent crimes are not mentally ill. They are, however, very likely to have mental or behavioral problems.

The study, which interviewed 10 California counties, showed that 90% of people arrested for violent crimes had at least one mental health problem. The same was true for prisoners who had been in jail for more than a year. Two-thirds of the jail’s mental health population could be diverted to out-of-jail treatment and housing.

The board responded by creating an Office of Diversion and Reentry, which since 2016 has successfully diverted about 1,000 offenders to mid-level mental health and treatment facilities.

But until recently, all participants went through downtown Los Angeles courtrooms. But now we have an answer. On Monday, the court is opening a second hub for the program, which will allow Los Angeles County to safely release and treat thousands of inmates with mental issues.

For example, mental illness was found in 78% of prison inmates in the San Francisco Bay Area. Last year, a study by the National Academy of Sciences estimated that 30% to 50% of people in state prisons have at least one mental health problem.

This is not a new problem. For decades, several states, like California, have been trying to address it with community-based psychiatric treatment programs. But these programs have been underfunded and understaffed.

They were right. In 2011, Dole, Allen Albright, and the LA County Board of Supervisors faced with a tremendous number of mentally ill inmates. They created the Office of Diversion and Reentry, which was tasked with reducing the number of mentally ill people in jail.

This office was on track to replace the Consolidated Correctional Treatment Facility, which since 2016 has successfully diverted about 1,000 offenders to mid-level mental health and treatment facilities.

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