

# Identifying population of mentally ill 'frequent fliers' first step to reducing police contact

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Identifying the population of people with mental illness who have frequent contact with police could help law enforcement officials and community agencies allocate limited resources to those with the highest needs, new research from Oregon State University indicates.

These individuals, often referred to as "frequent fliers" because of their repeated interaction with [law enforcement](#), can consume a large amount of police time and resources, according to researchers in the School of Public Policy in OSU's College of Liberal Arts.

Identifying and understanding the population can aid policymakers as they work to reduce the frequent and time-consuming interactions, sociologists Scott Akins and Brett Burkhardt said.

"This contact is rarely criminal in nature at the outset," said Burkhardt, an assistant professor of sociology. "It's usually a peace officer custody arrest, which is a type of arrest that occurs because a person is believed to be a danger to themselves or others due to a suspected mental illness. But there's a limited amount of resources, so if we identify people with the highest needs, we can focus resources on those folks."

Once a local region has identified its population of frequent fliers, community agencies and policy-makers can use the information to change or implement policies to assist those with the highest needs, the

researchers said.

"It's a strategic way to create a more cost-effective and humane way to assist the mentally ill," said Akins, an associate professor of sociology.

For example, some communities may benefit from the use of mental health courts to address criminal charges for people with mental health needs, he said. Typically in such courts, a collaborative team that includes attorneys, parole and probation representatives and mental health agency representatives work together to address the individual's needs. That may include a referral for counseling or substance abuse treatment.

Burkhardt and Akins began researching frequent fliers in 2012 in collaboration with law enforcement officials in Corvallis and Benton County. Law enforcement officials had noticed what they believed was an increase in calls related to suspected mental health issues.

They asked Akins, Burkhardt and a team of graduate students to determine if that was in fact the case and, if so, to assist with some potential responses to the trend. The researchers' findings and recommendations were published recently in the journal "Criminal Justice Policy Review."

The study was co-authored by Charles Lanfear, who worked on the project as a graduate student at OSU. The research was supported by OSU as well as by the Benton County Sheriff's office, which provided funding for a graduate student internship related to the research.

Akins and Burkhardt reviewed six years of records, from 2007 through 2012, from the Corvallis Police Department and Benton County Sheriff's Office and found that peace officer custody arrests increased dramatically from 2011 to 2012, jumping from 144 to 245.

They also found that time spent on mental-health related calls – those where the subject was believed to have a mental illness or mental health crisis – nearly doubled during the six-year period, going from 248 hours annually to 489 hours.

In addition, the researchers determined that of the 697 people placed in peace officer custody for mental health issues, about 17 percent were taken into custody multiple times. A smaller group of 38 frequent fliers had multiple mental health-related arrests in a 14-day span.

"This study validated our perspective that law enforcement contacts with community members having a mental health crisis have significantly risen over the past few years," Corvallis Police Chief Jon Sassaman said. "It also showed how important it is that we work with all community assets to support individuals in need to prevent situations from generating a law enforcement response."

While the research focused on Corvallis and Benton County, the method used to identify the frequent fliers is easily replicable by other agencies, the researchers said. That's important because the rise in police contact with the mentally ill is not unique to Corvallis and Benton County. People with mental illness are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system across the country, Burkhardt said.

Police interaction with individuals with mental health issues can be time-consuming and frustrating for law enforcement officials, who may have some crisis intervention training but are not experts in working with the mentally ill, the researchers said. In addition, the contact can have the potential to become volatile.

The researchers' findings highlight the need for ongoing collaboration and communication between law enforcement officials and health agencies that are likely to encounter the frequent flier population, the

researchers said. In Benton County, local agencies are now exploring the feasibility of a [mental health](#) court and are looking at ways to maximize existing systems that have been under-used in the past, Sassaman said.

Akins and Burkhardt said agencies may want to make the monitoring of their frequent flier population part of their regular data collection. They also recommend studying any policy changes made based on the data, to see if the changes have a positive effect in reducing police contact with the mentally ill.

**More information:** "Law Enforcement Response to "Frequent Fliers": An Examination of High-Frequency Contacts Between Police and Justice-Involved Persons With Mental Illness."  
[cjp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 03414559268.abstract](http://cjp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../03414559268.abstract)

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