

Common forms of mental illness may affect up to 1 in 6 people in the United Kingdom at any given time.¹ Such illness is enduring for many.² It has been estimated that mental illness costs the UK economy over £77 billion each year.³ Levels of mental illness are higher among groups facing social exclusion.⁴ The civil law provides a framework for the resolution of many life problems that disproportionately affect socially excluded groups.⁵ These are often the types of stressful life events that the mental health charity MIND has observed “are more common in socially disadvantaged groups and contribute to the raised prevalence of stress-related mental and physical illness.”⁶

Findings from the Civil and Social Justice Survey, 2006-2009

Using a validated measure of mental health (GHQ-12), it is evident that:

- People with poorer mental health are more likely to report ‘difficult to solve’ civil law problems. They are also more likely to report multiple problems.
- Poor mental health is associated with almost all civil law problem types included in the Civil and Social Justice Survey; particularly problems concerning discrimination, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, homelessness, debt, benefits, employment, children.
- People with poorer mental health are less likely to act to resolve civil law problems, or try to resolve problems on their own. However, if they do attempt to resolve problems, they are more likely to obtain help.
- People with poorer mental health more often seek a combination of legal advice and general support/advice.

When people are asked about the impact of civil law problems:

- 27% of civil law problems are reported to lead to stress-related ill-health.
- Reports of stress-related ill health are particularly common for problems concerning becoming homeless (72%), mortgage/rent arrears (61%), domestic violence (58%) and relationship breakdown (47%).
- Stress-related ill-health is more common for recession related problems (39%)
- Of those who report stress-related ill-health, 53% obtain medical help. Over 90% obtain help from their GP, 10% from a counsellor and 5% from a psychiatric nurse.

In bringing about stress-related ill-health, and other negative life circumstances, civil law problems act to increase vulnerability to further problems. This is one of the mechanisms lying behind civil law problem clustering.⁷ In the context of mental health, the importance has been stressed of preventing problems brought about by mental illness that can feed a downward spiral of problems.⁸

In service delivery terms, the value of integrated services, both within law and between law and health, is evident. Legal services provide one method of early intervention to address problems that appear to both bring about mental illness and exacerbate spirals of problems. Early intervention can “significantly reduce” the costs of mental illness.⁹ The most cost-effective means to provide integrated legal and health services is yet to be determined. Already, though, in the legal services field, increasing evidence of problem clustering and the transformative role of legal advice is leading to major change in the way public funded social welfare related legal services are procured and provided.¹⁰ Examples of integrated legal and health services are also becoming established.¹¹

FURTHER READING

- P. Pleasence and N.J. Balmer (2009) "Mental Health and the Experience of Social Problems Involving Rights: Findings from the United Kingdom and New Zealand," in *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, Volume 16, Number 1.
- P. Pleasence, N.J. Balmer, A. Buck, M. Smith and A. Patel (2007) "Mounting Problems: Further Evidence of the Social, Economic and Health Consequences of Civil Justice Problems," in P. Pleasence, A. Buck and N.J. Balmer (eds.) *Transforming Lives: Law and Social Process*. Norwich: TSO.
- P. Pleasence, N.J. Balmer, A. Buck, A. O'Grady and H. Genn (2004) "Civil Law Problems and Morbidity," in *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, Volume 58, Number 7.

FORTHCOMING

- N.J. Balmer, P. Pleasence and A. Buck, *Psychiatric Morbidity and People's Experience of and Response to Social Problems Involving Rights*
- P. Pleasence and N.J. Balmer, *Recession Related Life Problems and Self-Reported Stress: A Legal Services Perspective*.

NOTES

- ¹ N. Singleton, R. Bumpstead, M. O'Brian, A. Lee and H. Meltzer (2001) *Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living in Private Households*.
- ² N. Singleton and G. Lewis (2003) *Better or Worse: A Longitudinal Study of the Mental Health of Adults Living in Private Households in Great Britain*.
- ³ Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health (2003) *Policy Paper 3: The Economic and Social Costs of Mental Illness*.
- ⁴ For example, T. Fryers, D., Melzer, R., Jenkins and T. Brugha (2005) *The Distribution of Common Mental Disorders: Social Inequalities in Europe*.
- ⁵ A. Buck, P. Pleasence and N.J. Balmer (2005) "Social Exclusion and Civil Law: Experience of Civil Justice Problems Among Vulnerable Groups," in *Social Policy and Administration*, Volume 39, Number 3.
- ⁶ MIND (2002) *Factsheet: The Social Context of Mental Distress*.
- ⁷ P. Pleasence, N.J. Balmer, A. Buck, A. O'Grady and H. Genn (2004) *Multiple Justiciable Problems: Common Clusters, Problem Order and Social and Demographic Indicators*; R. Moorhead, M., Robinson and Matrix Research and Consultancy (2006) *A Trouble Shared: Legal Problems Clusters in Solicitors' and Advice Agencies*.
- ⁸ Davis (2003) *Mental Health and Personal Finances: A Literature Review*.
- ⁹ Social Exclusion Unit (2004) *Action on Mental Health: A Guide to Promoting Social Inclusion*.
- ¹⁰ Legal Services Commission (2006) *Making Legal Rights a Reality*.
- ¹¹ P. Pleasence and N.J. Balmer (2009) *Mental Health and the Experience of Social Problems Involving Rights: Findings from the United Kingdom and New Zealand*; M.A. Noone (2007) "They All Come in One Door" – *The Transformative Potential of an Integrated Service Model: A Study of the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service*.

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