

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Boarding Homes for the Mentally Ill:  
The Impact on Law Enforcement**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The issue of boarding homes that house persons with mental illness is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the high volume of police calls for service involving these locations. The purpose of this research is to define what a boarding home for the mentally ill is and to explore the history of boarding homes in the community. In addition, this research will attempt to identify the issues that require a law enforcement response to boarding homes. The ultimate goal of this research is to identify problematic issues surrounding boarding homes for the mentally ill and to propose solutions for lessening the burden placed upon law enforcement agencies. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, Internet sites, journals, personal interviews, and a survey distributed to 250 participants.

The researcher discovered that the problems associated with boarding homes housing persons with mental illness detrimentally effects all police departments across Texas, as well as nationally. The survey instrument findings indicated that a majority of the officers surveyed have responded to a boarding home during their career. The researcher's conclusion is that boarding homes for persons with mental illness is relevant to contemporary law enforcement, and legislative enactment of local codes and ordinances along with their enforcement would significantly reduce the law enforcement response to these locations.

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## INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not boarding homes housing persons with mental illness require significant resources from law enforcement agencies. The relevance of boarding homes to law enforcement is a result of deinstitutionalization that has taken place in the United States over the last three decades. Deinstitutionalization was the policy to move psychiatric patients out of public mental health hospitals and into the community. A large portion of these psychiatric patients were moved into boarding homes in the community. Without proper supervision, care, and regulations, most of the burden of regulating activities at these locations has fallen upon the shoulders of law enforcement (Torrey, 2008).

The purpose of this research is to examine the depth of the problem with boarding homes in today's society. This research will also take an in-depth look at the significance of the problem in the city of Houston. Solutions will be proposed for reducing the frequency in which law enforcement officers are requested to respond to boarding homes that house persons with serious mental illness. The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not boarding homes housing persons with mental illness place a significant burden on law enforcement and whether or not improved ordinances, licensing requirements, or new legislation can play a role on lessening the burden on law enforcement agencies. The intended method of inquiry includes a review of articles, Internet sites, personal interviews, a survey distributed to 250 survey participants, and an analysis of statistical data.

The anticipated findings of the research is that law enforcement officers are responding to a large number of calls for service at boarding homes housing persons

with mental illness. The anticipated outcome of the survey instrument is that a large percentage of law enforcement officers surveyed will state that they have responded to boarding homes at some point during their career. It is also anticipated that the survey results will show that the respondents believe the majority of these locations to be poorly managed, provide a low standard of care for their residents, and they will indicate that stronger regulation is needed at these boarding homes. It is anticipated that the vast majority of survey respondents will support legislative action to allow for local regulation of boarding homes which house persons with mental illness.

The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because it examines the negative impact that boarding homes housing persons with mental illness are having upon the quality of life in communities. This research will also examine the human costs of ineffective and/or no regulation of these locations. Using statistical data, the researcher will provide a snapshot of the financial burden placed upon the Houston Police Department over a two-year period of responding to boarding homes. Using the information provided by this research, it is expected that guidance can be provided to other law enforcement agencies and municipalities for addressing problematic boarding homes in their jurisdictions.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Deinstitutionalization was a policy to move psychiatric patients out of the nation's public mental health hospitals and into the community. According to Torrey (2008), there were approximately 558,000 mentally ill individuals in public mental health hospitals in America in 1955. At that time, the United States had a population of 164 million people. In 2006, the United States had a population of approximately 300

million; if in 2006 there were the same number of individuals in public mental health hospitals as there were in 1955 in proportion to the population, the number of hospitalized patients would have been just over one million. However, in 2006 there were only approximately 40,000 individuals in public mental health hospitals.

In theory, deinstitutionalization was to be supported with hundreds of millions of dollars that would go towards community mental health centers. Ideally, persons with serious mental illness would be released from mental institutions and placed in the community with family members or care homes and seek their mental health treatment at these community mental health centers. Tragically, this is not what occurred. The first major failure was that the promised funding did not occur. There were many reasons that were attributed to the lack of funding; however, the foremost was the belief that most of the promised funding went towards the Vietnam War (Earley, 2006). According to Earley (2006), the second major failure that occurred with deinstitutionalization was the unexpected resistance of many persons with mental illness to comply with medications in a community setting. Without the oversight and supervision that was provided in an institutional setting, a large majority of persons with serious mental illness refused to take medications and quickly regressed.

Without adequate funding for mental health care or proper supervision to ensure that needed medications were taken, many of the persons with serious mental illness who had previously resided in institutions now found themselves homeless, in jail, or on probation. According to Teplin (2000), "the Bureau of Justice indicated that by mid-1998, 283,800 of the Nation's jail inmates were mentally ill. In addition, there were another 547,000 mentally ill persons that were on probation" (p. 14). In addition, law

enforcement officers across the country began to feel the effect of deinstitutionalization almost immediately. Police departments around the nation began experiencing an increase in calls regarding mentally ill persons creating disturbances in public locations and were faced with a public that expected the police to do something about these individuals who were often exhibiting bizarre behavior. So many persons with serious mental illness are now housed in the nation's jails and prisons that they are now often referred to as the new asylums (Teplin, 2000).

A large number of persons with serious mental illness were released to the community without the proper resources to ensure for their care. Many of these individuals were relocated from mental institutions and are now residing in boarding homes located throughout communities across the nation. Public mental health facilities that used to be staffed with mental health professionals, medical staff, and psychiatric assistants or technicians are now mostly closed. In place of these institutions, there are now boarding homes hidden throughout neighborhoods all across this nation.

According to Hancock (2007), boarding homes have replaced state hospitals as homes for the mentally ill, and as a result, "police officers and medics have become today's psychiatric ward attendants and 911 is the poor man's call button" (p. 1). Law enforcement officers in the city of Dallas have been tasked with basically managing unruly behavior among the residents of board and care homes for persons with mental illness. Most often these locations are unlicensed, located in high crime areas, and are staffed with poorly trained individuals, if they are staffed at all. According to Hancock (2007), a check of 911 calls from just 16 frequent caller boarding homes in the city of

Dallas during January 2005 through March 2007 showed that police had responded 701 times to these 16 locations. Due to the poor regulations in place for these locations, Dallas, like most other cities that have attempted to address this issue, have found that they have no true idea of how many of these locations exist in their community.

During the two-year period of December 2006 to December 2008, records showed that the Houston Police Department responded 7,787 times to boarding homes housing persons with mental illness. These calls-for-service totaled 11,680 on-the-job hours and an approximate cost of \$1,752,075.00 to the department (see Appendices 2 & 3). This issue has become a significant cost to taxpayers. Most cities and counties do not specifically track the number of times their police officers and medical personnel respond to boarding homes with mentally ill residents and, therefore, cannot accurately calculate how much their jurisdiction spends on fire, medical, and police personnel. When the residents require transport to hospitals, jail, or mental health facilities, the costs are even greater.

According to Hancock (2007), Dallas Police Lieutenant Kimberly Stratman stated that officers in Dallas are frustrated with having to respond to problematic personal care and boarding homes. According to Lieutenant Stratman, officers mostly complain about having to respond so often to the same locations. Stratman stated, "After you leave these locations, you realize you haven't fixed anything. You often wonder if you've even helped anybody, and these are people who can't help themselves. You feel like you've become part of the problem" (as cited in Hancock, 2007, p. 2). Officers routinely respond to boarding homes to quell a disturbance only to be called back again two or three days later, often for the same issues. Officers in Dallas believe that the situations



with boarding homes housing persons with mental illness is definitely getting worse and that police involvement continues to increase.

The issue of problematic boarding homes for persons with mental illness is not just affecting law enforcement in Texas; it is affecting law enforcement agencies all across the United States. Chediak (2005) stated in an article in the Oakland Tribune that police officials reported that the boarding homes in their community are often magnets for police response. Neighbors of the boarding homes lodge numerous complaints to police about problems such as excessive noise, panhandling, drinking, public urination, and drug use. Many operators or caretakers of these locations openly admit to using the police to assist in handling the residents. According to Ben Tugbenyoh, homeowner and operator, "he or his staff calls Oakland police 7-8 times a year to handle unruly residents" (as cited in Chediak, 2008, p. 1). Tugbenyoh went on to say, "our job is to protect the clients and many times they become combative, begin pounding on each other, and we call the police" (as cited in Chediak, 2008, p. 1). Some of the problems associated with boarding homes were captured on a police video during a 2003 Oakland police raid. At this particular location, police found nine residents packed into two rooms with little or no bedding. The toilet was broken, and the home had no fire detectors. Police officials said the owner was dispensing medication without a license and had a gun in his bedroom, which is illegal for a licensed home. According to Oakland Police Sergeant Robert Crawford, "many of these boarding homes are not discovered until neighbors complain or police stumble upon them, usually while searching for illegal drugs" (as cited in Chediak, 2005, p. 3).

In an interview with Dallas Police Corporal Herb Cottner, Coordinator of the Dallas Police Crisis Intervention Team, Cottner reported that officers in their department usually have no idea where boarding homes are located and unfortunately only find out when responding to these locations. According to Cottner, it would make more sense if these boarding homes were forced to be registered with the city, regardless of licensing status with the state, and could then be identified by the police department as locations where persons with mental illness reside. Cottner went on to explain that the Dallas Police Department has invested a lot of time and money in providing mental health training to its police officers. It only makes sense to know where these boarding homes are located so when police are summoned to these locations, they can send the officers with this specialized training (H. Cottner, personal communication, August 16, 2008).

In an article dated March 2006 in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Milwaukee police officials were quoted as saying, “we know of dozens and dozens of boarding homes for the mentally ill, many of them being operated illegally, so many that we can’t begin to count them all” (as cited in Kissinger, 2006, p. 3). It is not uncommon for officers in Milwaukee to respond to calls at boarding homes that are occupied with mentally ill persons living in horrid conditions. Many of these locations are rat infested, have no running water, no heat, multiple safety hazards, and poor supervision. Officers have also discovered mentally ill tenants in these boarding homes who have been beaten, sexually abused, and are victims of financial abuse and fraud. Officers in Milwaukee have also encountered persons with mental illness who are living under bridges or on the street, begging for food and money because they were kicked out of their boarding home by the caretaker. When caretakers eject the mentally ill out of the

boarding homes, they almost always refuse to refund any of the disability payment for the rent, which leaves the mentally ill person with next to nothing in their name and no way to provide food or shelter for themselves (Kissinger, 2006).

In December 2008, local Houston television reporter Robert Arnold launched an investigative television report into the number of problematic boarding homes in the city of Houston. Arnold's report focused specifically on boarding homes housing persons with mental illness that had a high number of police calls for service. Arnold contacted the state agency responsible for monitoring and regulating these locations, the Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS), and requested a list of all licensed and unlicensed boarding homes in Houston. To be included in this list would be the total number of complaints filed against the facility, the number of investigations conducted by DADS, and the total number of times law enforcement had been called to the location. Arnold's investigation met stiff resistance from the state, and he was informed that a court order would be required before DADS would release the requested information. Arnold pursued the court order, which was issued several weeks later, and he was ultimately provided with a very incomplete listing of boarding homes. In his investigation, the agency representative from DADS admitted that the state has a very difficult time keeping track of where boarding homes are located (Sasser, 2009).

In an interview with Houston Chronicle reporter Terri Langford, she stated that she had previously conducted investigative stories on personal care homes, and during these investigations, she found that there are numerous boarding homes all across Houston that no one even has record of. In addition, Langford found that many of the

homes are poorly operated and are often managed or owned by convicted felons. It is not uncommon to find that persons living in these boarding homes are often taken advantage of and are often being abused mentally, financially, and sexually. Langford believes that stricter monitoring of these locations is needed to protect some of the most vulnerable persons in society (T. Langford, personal communication, March 6, 2009).

During the 2009 Texas legislative session, members of law enforcement from the Houston Police Department's Mental Health Unit met with representatives to express their concern over the issue surrounding unregulated boarding homes housing persons with mental illness. As a result, two legislators authored bills that would provide much stricter regulation and monitoring of boarding homes. State Representative Riddle authored H.B. 510, and State Representative Menendez authored H.B. 216. H.B. 216 turned out to be the stronger of the two bills. H.B. 510 would have only attempted, once again, to force the state to tighten up the regulations and oversight of boarding homes. H.B. 216 took the position that local jurisdictions could do a better job of identifying and regulating problematic boarding homes.

On May 11, 2009, H.B. 216 was passed by the Texas State House and Senate and then signed into law by Governor Rick Perry. Local jurisdictions across the state now have a tool that will allow for identifying, monitoring, and inspecting boarding homes housing persons with mental illness. In Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston, committees have already been formed and are working with their various city officials to come up with and enact new city ordinances that will allow for inspections, fines, and penalties for the most problematic boarding homes in their jurisdictions. Law enforcement can and should play a significant role in this process in order to identify

problem locations and to ultimately reduce the burden placed upon police services in the community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question to be examined considers whether or not surveyed officers will respond affirmatively when asked whether or not they believe boarding homes housing persons with mental illness are a major issue affecting contemporary law enforcement. The researcher hypothesizes that officers will answer affirmatively when surveyed about whether or not these boarding homes locations have placed a large burden on contemporary law enforcement

The method of inquiry will include: a review of articles, Internet sites, personal interviews, and a survey distributed to 250 survey participants. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of law enforcement response to boarding homes housing persons with mental illness will consist of an eight question survey that allows for a response of yes, no, or unsure. The survey instrument will be distributed to 250 law enforcement officers from various agencies in the Houston area who will be attending mental health training at the Houston Police Academy.

The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 117 completed surveys returned out of 250 surveys distributed, resulting in a 48% participation rate. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by a University of Houston-Clear Lake graduate student in the school of Psychology who is assigned as an intern to the Houston Police Department's Mental Health Unit.

## **FINDINGS**

In question 1, survey participants were asked if they had responded to a call at a boarding home housing persons with mental illness at some point during their career. Of the 117 respondents, 84 indicated that they had responded to one of these locations, and 33 indicated that they had not. In question 2, survey participants were asked if they believed the issue of boarding homes housing persons with mental illness was relevant to contemporary law enforcement. Ninety-five of the respondents stated yes, and 22 respondents did not believe this was relevant to contemporary law enforcement.

In survey question 3, of the 117 participants responding, 84 stated that they had responded to police calls at a boarding home for persons with mental illness. Of this 84, 53 responded that the locations were believed to be unlicensed, eight believed the locations were licensed, and 23 indicated that they were unsure of the licensing status of the personal care home they responded to. In survey question 4, 80 survey respondents indicated that they were aware of problematic boarding homes in their jurisdiction, and 37 responded that they were not aware of any problematic personal cares. Survey question 5 indicated that of the 117 surveys completed, all 117 indicated they did not believe that boarding homes for persons with mental illness were properly managed.

In question 6, survey participants were asked if they believed that local jurisdictions should be given the authority to regulate boarding homes housing persons with mental illness. One hundred and fifteen respondents indicated yes, and two respondents indicated no. In survey question 7, participants were asked if they believed that improved regulation of boarding homes for the mentally ill was needed. Of the 117

respondents, all of them indicated that improved regulation is needed. In question 8, survey participants were asked if they had received any mental health training prior to attending training at the Houston Police Department. Ninety-one respondents indicated that they had received prior mental health training, and 26 indicated that they had not.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not boarding homes housing persons with mental illness posed a significant burden on contemporary law enforcement. The purpose of this research was to show that as a result of deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill over the last few decades, a significant number of mentally ill persons were placed into poorly regulated boarding homes in the community, which resulted in problems requiring significant attention from law enforcement in the United States. The research question that was examined focused on the issue of boarding homes for the mentally ill in communities, the significant burden these locations are placing on law enforcement agencies across the United States, and the solutions needed to correct the situation so there can be a reduction in the burden placed on law enforcement. The researcher hypothesized that the majority of law enforcement officers surveyed would indicate that boarding homes for persons with mental illness did require significant law enforcement attention.

The researcher concluded from the findings that although not all respondents indicated that they had responded to boarding homes, all did respond affirmatively when asked if improved regulation was needed at these locations. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the specialized mental health training the survey

respondents had received on this topic prior to completing the survey instrument.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because research on this topic is extremely limited. Few books have been published on this topic, with most information coming from local newspapers, investigative reporters, and anecdotal stories from law enforcement officers and mental health consumers who have or still do reside in these boarding homes. In addition, few law enforcement agencies capture the data necessary to properly evaluate the amount of departmental resources utilized in responding to boarding homes.

The study of law enforcement response to boarding homes for persons with mental illness is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because law enforcement has increasingly become the ones tasked with providing safety, oversight, and unofficial regulation for these locations. This task has resulted in high numbers of police calls for service, unfortunate and sometimes deadly encounters between police officers and the mentally ill, and a huge cost to taxpayers. Law enforcement agencies, local municipalities, taxpayers, and, most importantly, the persons with mental illness residing in boarding homes, stand to benefit from the results of this research. This research identified problematic issues that are consistent among all law enforcement agencies. It also highlighted the burden being placed upon taxpayers for law enforcement response to these problematic boarding homes. Most importantly, this research has assisted in developing state-wide legislation that will ultimately result in improved regulation of boarding homes that house mentally ill individuals. These regulations will decrease the number of police responses to boarding homes and reduce the odds of a tragic incident occurring between the police and the mentally ill. Regulations will also improve the



living standards of persons with mental illness who reside in boarding homes and improve the overall quality of life in the communities in which problematic boarding homes were located.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX 1

### Survey of Boarding Homes for Persons with Mental Illness

Please complete and mail to the Houston Police Mental Health Unit using the attached envelope.  
Thank you for your participation.

Police Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you responded to a call for service at a boarding home for the mentally ill during your career?
  - Yes
  - No
  
2. If you answered yes to #1, did you find the majority of the locations to be licensed or unlicensed?
  - Licensed
  - Unlicensed
  - Not Sure
  
3. Are you aware of any problematic boarding homes in your agency's jurisdiction that have resulted in a large number of police calls for service?
  - Yes
  - No
  
4. If you answered yes to #1, do you believe that these boarding homes are managed properly?
  - Yes
  - No
  
5. Do you believe that stricter regulation is needed for boarding homes?
  - Yes
  - No

6. Do you believe that local jurisdictions should be given the authority to regulate boarding homes for the mentally ill?
  - Yes
  - No
  
7. Do you believe that boarding homes for the mentally ill are relevant to contemporary law enforcement?
  - Yes
  - No
  
8. Have you received any mental health training prior to attending this course today?
  - Yes
  - No

## APPENDIX 2

### Source of Houston Police Cost Estimates:

- a. Costs were estimated at an average of 1.5 hours of manpower allocated to respond to and clear each call for service.
- b. Houston Police manpower cost is estimated at \$100 an hour. This figure includes all personnel and equipment costs.
- c. During the 2-year period of study, HPD responded to 7,787 calls for service at group homes averaging 1.5 hours on each call.
- d. Costs were estimated as a function of actual time involved from time of call being answered in dispatch to call being cleared by the officer.

### **APPENDIX 3**

Source of Houston Police Department Dispatch Records:

- a. Since 2006, the Houston Police Department's Mental Health Unit has been identifying all known boarding homes that house persons with mental illness.
- b. The Houston Police Department's Mental Health Unit conducted a computerized search of the department's Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system to identify the number of calls for police service occurring over a two-year period. The date range of this search was December 2006 – December 2008. Departmental records indicate that officers were dispatched 7,787 times to boarding homes housing persons with mental illness.