

Using Simulation to Engage Police in Learning about Mental Illness: The Impact of Realism on the Learning Process

Police officers are often the first responders to situations in the community involving mentally ill persons. Police contacts with individuals who have a mental illness have risen dramatically over the past few years, and police services are becoming increasingly aware of the need to provide officers with training beyond what is currently offered to new recruits in terms of mental illness and strategies for effectively engaging individuals who are presumed to have a mental illness. The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of using simulation to educate police officers about mental illness and how to respond effectively to common critical incidents involving mentally ill persons they encounter in the community, using a mixed qualitative-quantitative design which included focus groups, surveys, and use of the Opinions about Mental Illness (OMI) scale.

Four simulations, developed with funding from an Inukshuk grant, provided the basis for this research study. A product of a collaborative effort among Durham Regional Police Services, Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences (previously Whitby Mental Health Centre), Durham College, and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, the simulations depicting critical incidents involving mentally ill persons (suicidal behaviour, delusional thinking, experiencing a hallucination, and self harming behaviour) were developed to promote a better understanding of some of the challenges experienced by individuals with a mental illness. Each of the four simulations includes interactive video clips with response options, learning activities, detailed feedback provided on both the response choice and the answers selected on the learning activities, and a library containing additional learning resources.

The findings of this study indicate that simulations are an effective tool for educating officers about mental illness. Police participants showed a high level of engagement and appreciation for the learning objects. They found the simulations to be realistic and easy to use and several of the participants suggested that this type of education should be mandatory for all frontline officers as well as members of the police leadership. However, rooted in a strong oral culture, the majority of the police officers did indicate a preference for face-to-face education sessions, citing the ability to dialogue, share ideas and stories, as well as seek clarification when necessary, as key components of the learning process. They did see the simulations as providing a good foundation for their learning; they also believed a follow up discussion group or seminar would further add to benefits of the simulations as educational resources. This would suggest that a hybrid teaching methodology would be the most effective.

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