

# **Bridging Care and Justice: The Role of Forensic Nurse in Mental Health Crisis Intervention**

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## **Abstract**

The rising incidence of mental health crises has led to more frequent interactions between affected individuals and law enforcement, often resulting in inadequate or inappropriate responses due to limited mental health training among officers. Forensic nurses, with their dual expertise in healthcare and the legal system, are uniquely positioned to address this gap. They play a vital role in assessing, treating, and advocating for individuals in crisis while also supporting law enforcement and judicial processes. Forensic nursing interventions have been shown to improve patient outcomes, enhance safety for all parties involved, and streamline legal proceedings by providing expert documentation, testimony, and continuity of care.

**Keywords:** Forensic nursing, mental health crisis, crisis intervention, care and justice, trauma-informed care, law enforcement collaboration

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a notable surge in mental health crises that require emergency intervention. Emergency responders, including police, paramedics, and crisis intervention teams, are increasingly called upon to handle situations involving severe psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and substance-induced psychosis. While growing awareness has helped reduce stigma and encouraged more individuals to seek help, it has also revealed the true extent of unmet mental health needs in communities. Many individuals facing mental health challenges are unable to access timely, community-based services, often resulting in conditions escalating to crisis levels that require emergency response. Emergency departments and law enforcement are often unequipped or undertrained to provide appropriate psychiatric care. Responders must balance safety with de-escalation techniques, particularly when individuals are experiencing delusions or are suicidal. Without long-term solutions or follow-up care, many individuals cycle through emergency services repeatedly. The gap between mental health care and the justice system is a significant and persistent challenge in many countries. This disconnects often leads to individuals with mental health conditions being inadequately supported and disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system. Explore and highlight the role of forensic nurses as key agents in bridging care and justice.

## **2. Background / Literature Review**

Forensic Nursing is a specialized field of nursing that merges the principles of healthcare and law. It involves the application of nursing science to public or legal proceedings, as well as the care of victims and perpetrators of trauma and violence. Forensic nurses are trained to identify, evaluate, and document

injuries, collect and preserve evidence, and provide expert testimony in court. Their role bridges the gap between the medical and legal systems, ensuring proper care for patients while maintaining the integrity of legal investigations.

## **2.1. Subspecialties of Forensic Nursing**

Responsibilities include risk assessment, providing therapy, evaluating competency to stand trial, and offering expert testimony on mental health issues.

### **2.1.1. Legal Nurse Consulting**

Involves reviewing the medical records and providing expertise to attorneys in legal cases involving healthcare issues. Legal nurse consultants may work on cases related to personal injury, medical malpractice, workers' compensation, or criminal investigations. They may act as expert witnesses, prepare case reports, and assist with case strategy.

### **2.1.2. Correctional Nursing**

Provides healthcare to individuals incarcerated in jails, prisons, or juvenile detention centers. Responsibilities include managing chronic diseases, providing mental health care, handling acute injuries, and addressing public health issues like infectious disease control. Correctional nurses may also deal with trauma resulting from violence within the facility and coordinate with legal authorities when needed.

### **2.1.3. Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE)**

Specialize in the care of sexual assault victims. Trained to perform forensic examinations, collect evidence (e.g., rape kits), and testify in court. SANEs work in hospitals, crisis centers, and law enforcement settings.

### **2.1.4. Forensic Nurse Death Investigator**

This may work with medical examiners or coroners to determine the causes of death. Sometimes involve in death scene investigations, autopsy support, and evidence collection. They help determine whether a death was natural, accidental, or a result of foul play.

### **2.1.5. Pediatric Forensic Nursing**

Specialize in evaluating and treating children who are victims of abuse or neglect. That involves documentation, court testimony, and collaboration with child protection services.

## **2.2. Existing Literature on crisis intervention models**

Crisis intervention refers to the methods used to offer immediate, short-term help to individuals who experience an event that produces emotional, mental, physical, and behavioral distress or problems.

### **2.2.1. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)**

CISM is a structured program designed to help individuals cope with traumatic events, aiming to reduce stress and prevent long-term mental health issues like PTSD. It includes interventions such as education, prevention, crisis management briefings, critical incident stress debriefing, Rest Information Transition Services (RITS), and individual support. While widely used, some studies have questioned its efficacy, suggesting that it may not effectively prevent PTSD and could potentially exacerbate stress for some individuals.

### **2.2.2. Seven-Stage Crisis Intervention Model (SSCIM)**

The SSCIM provides a framework for assessing and stabilizing individuals in crisis, focusing on immediate support and intervention to restore equilibrium. It emphasizes a trauma-informed perspective

to prevent re-traumatization and is commonly used by counselors and mental health professionals.

### **2.2.3. Crisis Resolution Teams (CRTs)**

CRTs are multidisciplinary teams that offer emergency healthcare services and short-term treatment to patients in the community, serving as an alternative to inpatient admission. They operate 24/7 and have been implemented in various countries, including Greece, to manage acute mental health episodes. Studies suggest that CRTs can reduce psychiatric symptoms and improve overall functioning, though more research is needed to confirm their effectiveness compared to standard care.

### **2.2.4. Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)**

SFBT is a goal-oriented therapeutic approach that emphasizes clients' strengths and focuses on finding solutions rather than delving into problems. It has been applied in various settings, including emergency rooms, to increase hope and reduce suicidal ideation among individuals in crisis.

### **2.2.5. Assertive Community Treatment (ACT)**

ACT is an intensive, team-based approach to community mental health service delivery, designed to provide comprehensive, personalized care to individuals with severe mental illnesses. Research indicates that ACT can reduce psychiatric symptoms, hospital stays, and emergency department visits among people with mental illness and substance use diagnoses.

### **2.2.6. The Sanctuary Model**

The Sanctuary Model is a trauma-informed approach that promotes safety and recovery through the creation of a therapeutic community. It has been employed in various settings, including child and adolescent residential treatment programs, to address the needs of individuals who have experienced trauma.

### **2.2.7. Crisis Intervention in Social Work**

Social work literature emphasizes the importance of crisis intervention in providing immediate support to individuals experiencing acute psychosocial crises. Various models and approaches have been developed to guide social workers in effectively responding to crises and promoting the well-being of individuals and communities.

## **3. Role of the Forensic Nurse**

The role of a forensic nurse bridges the gap between healthcare and the legal system. Forensic nurses provide specialized care for patients who are experiencing trauma—often as a result of violence or abuse—while also collecting and preserving evidence for potential legal proceedings. Their work is crucial in ensuring both the physical and psychological care of victims and the integrity of the judicial process.

### **3.1. Patient Care and Advocacy**

Provide compassionate, trauma-informed care to victims of violence, abuse, or trauma (e.g., sexual assault, domestic violence, child or elder abuse). Assess and treat injuries, conduct health evaluations, and offer emotional support.

### **3.2. Evidence Collection and Documentation**

This may collect, preserve, and document physical evidence (e.g., sexual assault kits, photographs of injuries). Maintain chain of custody and accurate records to ensure evidence is admissible in court.

### **3.3. Legal Interface and Testimony**

Collaborate with law enforcement, legal professionals, and social services. Also May be called to testify in court as expert witnesses on injuries, evidence collection, or patient conditions.

### **3.4. Education and Prevention**

Educate patients, families, and communities about violence prevention and health resources. Provide training to other healthcare professionals on identifying and responding to signs of abuse.

### **3.5. Specialized Areas of Practice**

**Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs):** Specialize in caring for sexual assault victims. **Forensic Psychiatric Nurses:** Work with individuals with mental health needs who are involved in the legal system. **Correctional Nursing:** Deliver care to inmates and detainees in prisons or jails.

### **3.6 Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

Work alongside law enforcement, attorneys, social workers, and healthcare teams to ensure holistic care and accurate forensic outcomes.

## **4. Impact and Outcomes**

Bridging Care and Justice the Role of the Forensic Nurse in Mental Health Crisis Intervention may come yield an outcome and impact as mentioned below.

### **4.1. Enhanced Crisis Response**

Forensic nurses trained in mental health and trauma provides immediate, compassionate, and evidence-informed care during crises. Their presence helps de-escalate volatile situations, reducing the need for physical restraint or law enforcement force.

### **4.2. Improved Continuity of Care**

Forensic nurses act as liaisons between healthcare, legal, and community systems. They ensure that individuals experiencing mental health crises receive timely referrals to psychiatric care, substance use treatment, or social services.

### **4.3. Reduction in Criminalization of Mental Illness**

By intervening early, forensic nurse's help divert individuals from jail to treatment. Their assessments can inform decisions that lead to mental health court referrals or crisis stabilization rather than incarceration.

### **4.4. Increased Access to Trauma-Informed Care**

Forensic nurses are trained to recognize signs of trauma, abuse, and psychiatric disorders. Their approach supports recovery while respecting the dignity and rights of individuals in crisis.

### **4.5. Data-Driven Justice and Health Policy Improvements**

Forensic nurses collect data on crisis incidents, outcomes, and gaps in care. This information informs policy and system changes, promoting a more integrated and humane response to mental health crises.

### **4.6. Enhanced Legal and Ethical Oversight**

Through thorough documentation and expert testimony, forensic nurses support ethical accountability in cases of excessive force, neglect, or systemic failure. Their role strengthens both clinical and legal responses.

### **4.7. Strengthened Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

By working across emergency departments, law enforcement, courts, and mental health systems, forensic nurses foster collaborative interventions. This approach enhances both individual outcomes and system efficiency.

## **5. Challenges and Ethical Consideration**

Forensic nurses face numerous challenges and ethical dilemmas in bridging the gap between healthcare

and the justice system during mental health crisis interventions. One of the primary challenges is balancing patient care with legal obligations, especially when patients are involved in criminal investigations or are under custodial care. These professionals must navigate complex issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to refuse treatment, while also ensuring public safety and fulfilling legal reporting duties. Additionally, forensic nurses often encounter systemic barriers, including inadequate mental health infrastructure, lack of inter-agency coordination, and stigma associated with mental illness. Ethically, they must advocate for the dignity, rights, and autonomy of individuals experiencing crises, ensuring nonjudgmental, trauma-informed care even when patients exhibit aggressive or erratic behavior. Maintaining neutrality in highly charged environments—where law enforcement and healthcare priorities may conflict—requires careful ethical judgment and strong professional integrity. Thus, the role of forensic nurses demands not only clinical expertise but also a deep understanding of ethical principles and legal frameworks to effectively serve vulnerable populations in crisis.

## **6. Future Directions**

The future of bridging care and justice through forensic nursing in mental health crisis intervention lies in expanding interdisciplinary collaboration, policy advocacy, and specialized training. Forensic nurses are uniquely positioned to address the complex intersection of mental health and the criminal justice system by offering trauma-informed, patient-centered care during crises. As first responders to mental health emergencies, they can help de-escalate situations, reduce unnecessary incarcerations, and connect individuals with appropriate psychiatric services. Moving forward, the integration of forensic nurses into crisis intervention teams, the development of standardized protocols, and the use of data-driven approaches to measure outcomes will be critical. Additionally, ongoing education in mental health law, cultural competence, and ethical decision-making will enhance their capacity to act as liaisons between healthcare and legal systems. With these advancements, forensic nurses will play a vital role in creating a more humane, responsive, and just approach to mental health crisis care.

## **7. Conclusion**

Forensic nurses are uniquely positioned to bridge care and justice during mental health crises. However, they must navigate a complex web of ethical, legal, and practical challenges. A commitment to ethical practice, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration is essential to ensure that individuals in crisis are treated with dignity, respect, and appropriate care. As we continue to recognize the importance of forensic nursing in addressing the complex needs of survivors, let us strive to strengthen and expand its reach, thereby building a more compassionate and equitable society for all.

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