

SSPARC

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Presentation

Dangerousness and vulnerability: Police use of Section 136 of the Mental Health Act in Sussex

Speaker

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Abstract

This study has a focus on the controversial powers that police in England and Wales have to detain individuals to a Place of Safety who are thought to be a danger to themselves or to others under Section 136 (s136) of the Mental Health Act 1983. S136 has been under increased governmental and media scrutiny over the last five years, as the rate of detentions has risen significantly since 2009, and previous pilot research suggested that outside of London and other large cities, police use s136 overwhelmingly as a means of suicide prevention, largely due to lack of access to out-of-hours emergency mental health care (Menkes and Bendelow 2014). Despite the nationwide introduction of NHS Places of Safety since 2007, the large number of highly distressed individuals (including children under 18) who are taken into custody despite not committing any crime, remain a source of both public and Home Office concern.

Sussex has some of the highest rates of s136 detentions across the UK, with two thirds consistently taken to custody, and a feasibility study initially funded by a British Academy Senior Research Fellowship for 2012-13, in collaboration with Sussex Police and Sussex Partnership Foundation Mental Health Trust has been addressing this high priority issue. A multi-method programme of research has since been adopted onto the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) portfolio and is currently resourced through Mental Health Research Network.

Using secondary analysis of existing data, in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations with police and other emergency services, mental health professionals and members of the public who have been detained under s136, this presentation has a focus on the ways in which 'vulnerability' and risk are perceived and acted upon by the various agencies in emergency mental health settings.