The prison careers of offenders with mental disorders (R-33, 1994)

This study follows a sample of federally incarcerated offenders diagnosed as having experienced a serious mental disorder.

There is general agreement, both within the research literature and among practitioners, that individuals with mental disorders are increasingly, and often unintentionally, caught in the ambit of the criminal justice system, vulnerable to arrest for minor offences and spending disproportionately more time on remand and awaiting a sentence disposition. Furthermore, many of these individuals are caught in a cyclical pattern of recurrent and brief encounters with both the mental health and criminal justice systems.

Comparatively little research has been conducted on those offenders diagnosed as having a mental illness but found legally sane, who commit relatively serious crimes and receive lengthy terms of imprisonment. What remains unanswered regarding offenders with disorders serving lengthy prison terms is whether their criminal and prison careers differ from the careers of their counterparts without disorders.

This study examines aspects of the prison careers of these offenders with mental disorders, as well as pre-imprisonment criminal histories and postrelease outcomes. A matched sample of similarly situated offenders without diagnosed mental disorders was used as a comparative reference to examine possible differences in the correctional system's response to offenders with mental illness.

The results of this study suggest that there is a distinguishable and differential correctional response in the management of offenders with mental disorders who are convicted of serious offences.