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Saint John police use less force when mental health workers come along to crisis calls

People in mental distress are less triggered when they see a clinician with a cop, says staff sergeant



Mental health crisis calls to 911 are up 40 per cent in Saint John since 2018, police say. (Rachel Cave/CBC)



Rachel Cave

Saint John police used less force responding to people in mental distress in recent years if officers were joined by a mental health-care provider on crisis calls, a study by a University of New Brunswick Saint John professor found.

Psychology professor Mary Ann Campbell evaluated more than 300 crisis calls and interviewed 30 officers over a three-year period starting in February 2020.

That's when the Department of Social Development launched a pilot project in Saint John with \$900,000 to support what it called "integrated mobile crisis response teams." The teams included people with specialized training to assess mental health conditions when and where police needed them.

Campbell said sending along a health-care provider, whether a trained nurse or social worker, also resulted in fewer people being taken involuntarily to hospital, fewer people being being held in police custody and better use of community resources.



Mary Ann Campbell, director of the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the University of New Brunswick Saint John, says she's developing mental health crisis response training for police across New Brunswick. (Graham Thompson/CBC)

"It leads to safer outcomes for the clients being served by the officers but also for the officers," said Campbell, who is developing training for police across New Brunswick.

The training will give officers more skills to de-escalate tense situations involving people in severe mental distress.

WATCH | Mental health care providers prove critical in crisis response:



What happens when mental health care providers attend crisis calls? Support, say Saint John police
Duration 1:38

An examination of more than 300 crisis calls over the past few years has shown that police use less force when accompanied by a clinician — and fewer people are taken to hospital involuntarily.

The 2020 deaths of Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi during police interventions led to strong recommendations from two New Brunswick coroner's juries, calling for better police training and better use of mobile crisis teams.

Moore, 26, was shot and killed by an Edmundston police officer who went to her apartment on June 4 to conduct a wellness check.

On June 12, Rodney Levi, of the Metepenagiag Mi'kmaq Nation, was shot twice in the chest by an RCMP officer at a home about 15 kilometres west of Miramichi.

"It behooves us to make sure we have the best possible response options available to mitigate dangerous life-impacting outcomes," said Campbell.

"When you have crisis response clinicians or officers that are well-trained in crisis, responding to a call, you do have safer outcomes."

Mental health care provider on call 7 days a week

The pilot project in Saint John started with a service model that paired one police officer with one nurse as a specialized team that went to calls where a person's behaviour indicated they were in mental distress.

One of the most common occurrences among the 306 calls studied was talk of suicide. Some people showed signs of paranoia and aggression.

"Or even being agitated or potentially psychotic and experiencing symptoms where they're hallucinating or delusional," Campbell said.

The model changed in 2021 so that the mental health care provider, either a trained nurse or social worker, would be available at the station from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week.



Chantel Moore, 26, and Rodney Levi, 48, were shot and killed by police in New Brunswick eight days apart. CBC has permission from Moore's family to use this photo. (CBC)

They could support any officer who felt their skills were needed.

An outreach worker attached to the team also works Monday to Friday, starting at 8:30 a.m., and they can be called to see people upon request from the police.

Staff Sgt. Dwayne Hussey said it has a calming effect when a non-uniformed person with specialized training is present.

He said that's especially true for people who have already been apprehended by the police.

"When they see a police officer responding, they know they're in crisis," Hussey said. "And that can trigger very negative emotions and it can heighten the situation."

"It's very useful to have mental-health clinicians who are trained to recognize what kind of situation the person is dealing with. They have better skills in bringing that person down, and they're also going to have a different relationship with these individuals so they can decrease the tension."



BEI Quebec investigators outside Chantel Moore's Edmundston apartment on June 5. (Bernard LeBel/Radio-Canada)

The people in the role of mental health care provider are all employed by Horizon Health in addiction and mental health services or emergency services and can help the person access health, community and mental health resources that may be relevant for followup care.

Campbell said no weapons were used in any of the 306 calls she examined.

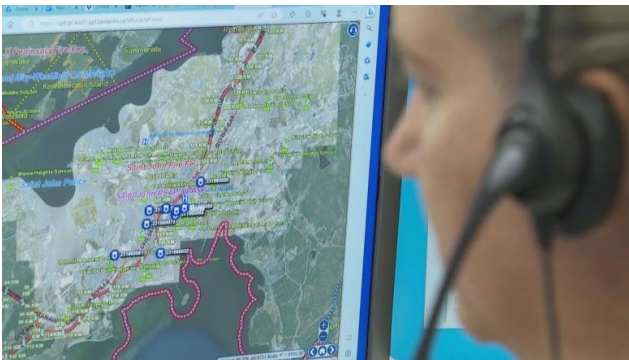
"Use of force was very uncommon," she said. "But when it did happen, it was more likely to happen in a police-only condition."

"And at that threshold, it was just usually handcuffs or using some kind of physical movement on the person you're putting your hands on, to direct them."

Fewer people detained

Under New Brunswick's Mental Health Act, people whose mental illness puts them or others at substantial risk of imminent physical or psychological harm, after being evaluated by a physician, can be detained in hospital involuntarily for 72 hours.

"When police respond to people in crisis, the crisis can be so elevated that we're forced to take some action," Hussey said. "Sometimes that means we're taking a person into custody against their will and taking them to a place where they can be evaluated."



Campbell's report says one of the most common concerns identified in crisis calls to police is a person talking about suicide. (Graham Thompson/CBC)

"That process can be very lengthy. They go into hospital and they have to be seen by a physician to be cleared medically before being seen by a psychiatrist, and our officers would be tied up for a significant amount of time."

With the crisis team approach, people can be seen in the field, without being taken into the station or into the hospital, Hussey said.

"That frees up police resources and makes it less bothersome for the clients who are seeking services."

The study of crisis teams found people who were arrested were less likely to be detained in police custody.

"When a clinician was present, [the police] were less likely to keep them in cells until their court hearing, and so they were able to release them under their own care and reconnaissance," Campbell said.

Campbell said her report has been shared with the Health Department and the program in Saint John is expected to continue.

She said police are now being trained in how to recognize a person is in a mental health crisis. They're also learning communication and response options that will help them respond to calls effectively and as safely as possible for themselves and the people in distress.

Campbell said this will help the officers even when a clinician is not present.

All new officers coming out of the Atlantic Police Academy have been getting similar training.

"Eventually over the next year or so, it will be rolled out across the province," she said.

Saint John mental health calls up 40% since 2018

Of the 306 crisis calls that Campbell examined, talk of suicide was a factor in half of them. Suspected intoxication was also a factor in about one call in every four.

About 75 per cent of the calls involved people who had prior contact with the police or addictions and mental health services.

Hussey said Saint John police have been dealing with an increase in mental health crisis calls since before the pandemic.

"Between 2018 and 2019 there was an increase of about 20 per cent," he said. "Since 2018 and today it's about a 40 per cent increase in mental health related calls, which is quite significant."

Being able to call upon people with more specialized training has been a step in the right direction, he said.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/saint-john-police-less-force-mental-health-1.6928142>