

Original article

Socio-demographic, psychiatric and legal characterisation of Colombian unimputable patients, 2000–2013^{☆,☆☆}



Juliana Escobar-Echavarría^{a,*}, Sergio Ignacio Molina-Osorio^{a,b},
Diana Patricia Restrepo-Bernal^a

^a CES University, Medellín, Colombia

^b San Juan de Dios Clinic, La Ceja, Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Mental illness has been associated with violent behaviour. Criminal behaviour in the mentally ill population in Colombia has not been well studied.

Methods: This is a retrospective, descriptive study, from a secondary source. An analysis was made of the sociodemographic, clinical, and legal variables of 127 unfit to plead patients. A descriptive analysis of quantitative variables was performed by measures of central tendency, and frequencies and percentages were calculated for the qualitative variables. The software SPSS[®] version 21.0 was used to analyse the data, and the study was approved by the Research Committee of the CES University.

Results: The median age was 34 years, interquartile range 19 years, and 92.1% were men. The primary diagnosis was schizophrenia in 63%, 66.9% consumed alcohol, and 58.3% other drugs at the time they committed the crime. Almost one-third (29.1%) had a criminal record, and the most common type of crime was murder in 44.1% of cases. Around half (50.3%) of the victims had some degree of consanguinity with the patient.

Discussion: The study subjects had higher illiteracy and lower educational levels than the Colombian prison population. Schizophrenia was the main diagnosis, and homicide the most prevalent crime, which agrees with the literature where non-indictable patients are responsible for 5–20% of murder cases worldwide.

Conclusions: To reduce the gap between the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, especially schizophrenia, should be within the specific actions to prevent violence and criminal behaviour associated with mental illness.

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^{☆☆} This study was registered under the research project category at the Congress of the Latin American Psychiatric Association (APAL), which took place in the city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, on 26 November 2014. It was also registered under the poster category at the same event.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Juli.oja85@yahoo.es (J. Escobar-Echavarría).

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Caracterización sociodemográfica, psiquiátrica y legal de pacientes inimputables de Colombia, 2000-2013

R E S U M E N

Palabras clave:

Crimen
Trastornos mentales
Comportamiento
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Defensa por insanía

Introducción: La enfermedad mental se ha asociado con comportamientos violentos. En Colombia poco se ha estudiado la población de enfermos mentales con comportamiento criminal.

Métodos: Estudio descriptivo retrospectivo a partir de fuente secundaria. Se analizaron variables sociodemográficas, clínicas y legales de 127 pacientes inimputables. Se realizó análisis descriptivo de las variables cuantitativas a través de medidas de tendencia central, y para las variables cualitativas se obtuvieron frecuencias y porcentajes. La información se analizó con el software SPSS® versión 21.0. La investigación fue aprobada por el Comité de Investigación de la Universidad CES.

Resultados: La mediana de edad fue 34 [intervalo intercuartílico, 19] años; el 92,1% eran varones. El diagnóstico principal fue esquizofrenia en el 63%. En el momento de cometer el crimen, el 66,9% consumía alcohol y el 58,3%, drogas. El 29,1% tenía antecedentes delictivos y el tipo de delito más frecuente (44,1%) fue el homicidio. El 50,3% de las víctimas tenían algún grado de consanguinidad con el paciente.

Discusión: En los sujetos del estudio había más analfabetismo y menor nivel educativo que en la población general carcelaria colombiana. La esquizofrenia fue el principal diagnóstico y el homicidio, el delito más prevalente, lo cual coincide con la literatura que refleja que los inimputables son responsables de un 5-20% de los casos de homicidio en el mundo.

Conclusiones: Disminuir la brecha para el diagnóstico y el tratamiento de los trastornos mentales, especialmente la esquizofrenia, estaría entre las acciones concretas para prevenir la violencia y la conducta criminal asociada a enfermedad mental.

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Introduction

Violent behaviour perpetrated by individuals with severe mental illnesses has been recognised since ancient times^{1,2} and is a focus of attention for both the general public and academic community. However, although mental illness, and in particular schizophrenia, have been associated with a greater risk of violent behaviour compared to the general population, most individuals suffering from mental illness are not dangerous.³⁻⁵

In Colombia, the 2003 National Study of Mental Health showed a lifetime prevalence of mental illness of 36.4%, with a prevalence of 27% in Medellín.⁶ Besides violence,⁷ mental illness has been associated with various negative outcomes, such as higher rates of mortality due to general disease, suicide, poverty, marginalisation and stigmatisation.⁸⁻¹⁰ The risk of violent behaviour in mentally-ill patients has been associated with substance abuse, psychotic symptoms, lack of treatment adherence and poor mental illness awareness.^{11,12} When a crime is committed in a mental illness context that nullifies the perpetrator's capacity to understand the nature and consequences of his/her actions, he or she is deemed unfit to plead.^{13,14} Under the Colombian criminal code, criminal liability does not apply to those who are unfit to plead due to mental illness, but it does propose custodial and non-custodial measures for these patients. Internment in a suitable mental health institution or clinic is one such custodial measure, where patients receive psychiatric treatment and support.^{15,16}

In Colombia, few studies have been conducted on mentally-ill patients who commit crimes.¹⁷ The objective of this study is the socio-demographic, clinical and legal characterisation of a group of patients deemed unfit to plead and institutionalised at a secure psychiatric institution.

Methods

A retrospective, descriptive, observational study, with a secondary information source. The reference population constituted 117,528 inmates who in 2013 were detained at 138 detention facilities in Colombia. Of these, 0.3% were unfit to plead.¹⁸ The sample comprised all patients admitted to the Psychiatry Department of the San Juan de Dios Clinic in La Ceja, Antioquia who were deemed unfit to plead between December 2000 and December 2013. Many of these patients are no longer interned at the institution because they either served the sentence imposed, ran away or died. These percentages are clarified in the descriptive analysis.

The San Juan de Dios Clinic is a private institution located in the Antioquia department in northern Colombia that provides psychiatry services to the Colombian Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) in order to provide treatment to patients deemed unfit to plead due to mental illness. The impunity of the patients admitted during the study period was determined by a judge from the Colombian legal system and the psychiatric diagnoses were obtained through an unstructured

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