

How should we react to the unruly?

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There was a time when the mentally ill were placed in horrific mental institutions and, if they could not be controlled, they were electroshocked into drooling submission.

Today, we have shut down the asylums, releasing the mentally ill onto the streets without support and, when they act bizarrely, police are dispatched to subdue them with 50,000 volts from a taser.

This is progress?

The case of Robert Dziekanski, the 40-year-old Polish immigrant who died after an encounter with RCMP officers at the Vancouver International Airport in the early morning hours of Oct. 14, has attracted a lot of media attention.

But let's face it: These incidents occur every day and, invariably, they involve the mentally ill - people who are experiencing psychosis for all manner of reasons, such as stress, sleep deprivation, nicotine withdrawal, side effects of drugs (legal and illegal) or underlying chemical imbalances.

The minute details of Mr. Dziekanski's case will be examined in a public inquiry and we still don't know all the details. But, at this point, we can all agree that he was acting a bit weird.

In other words, he was behaving like thousands upon thousands of people do every day. Screaming, pacing, ranting, muttering, uttering threats are anti-social acts that many of us witness daily.

They are the severely mentally ill and the intravenous drug users who have become part of the urban landscape. They are rarely violent, but often off-putting with antics that can include public urination, persistent begging or loud declarations that they are the Messiah.

The perfectly sane (if such a condition exists) can also blow a gasket when stuck in traffic, frustrated in an interminable Air Canada check-in line or after one too many drinks.

The question that needs to be asked - and answered - in society is: How do we respond? And how should we respond?

This is a major public-health challenge, not merely an issue of law and order. Yet, the reflex we have developed, when somebody acts strange, is to call police.

People suffering from mental illness - be it depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or temporary psychosis - almost always come out losers in this equation.

In dealing with anti-social behaviours, police have an unenviable task. How do you distinguish the vexed from the violent? The harmless from the hysterical? The criminal from the kook? The one who is a danger to others from the one who is a danger only to himself?

When police intervene and the person ignores orders, or fails to comprehend them, and gets more agitated, banal situations can quickly escalate into confrontation and tragedy.

The batons come out; so does the pepper spray, the taser and sometimes even the service revolver.

The unco-operative, irrational and unruly are assumed to be violent. In reality, people with mental illness tend to harm themselves, not others.

Instead of reaching for the taser, police should, in their jargon, try to "de-escalate" situations with words rather than brute force. Talk. Wait. Talk some more.

But we live in a world in a hurry. A post 9/11 world where law enforcement is the new religion, and everyone is a potential threat.

There is no need to wait. To negotiate. To understand. When police had only guns, they tended to keep them in the holster when dealing with the mentally ill, though there were tragic deaths then, too.

Tasers are considered a more humane alternative because they are not lethal weapons. Some mental-health groups have even endorsed their use.

In the real world, tasers have proved to be a failed technological fix, a horrible step backward in community policing.

The challenge of mental illness cannot simply be zapped away.

Still, it is a mistake to issue a blanket condemnation of police. They are merely using the tools at their disposal: the Criminal Code, the power, the weapons.

The troubling video footage of Mr. Dziekanski being shocked by a taser have forced us to begin discussing these issues.

Yet, let's not forget that confrontations with the disorderly and unruly in public places are but the tip of the iceberg.

Once arrested, people with mental illness often end up in jail where they quickly spiral downward: being loud and belligerent, refusing orders, committing anti-social acts and self-mutilation make them disciplinary problems.

One in eight prisoners in federal institutions has a severe, diagnosed mental illness, making our prisons de facto asylums of old. Behind bars, the mentally ill are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, beginning with sexual abuse.

When these "criminals" are released, without counselling or assistance, they are virtually doomed to reoffend, creating a vicious cycle.

It is time for us to break that cycle, to invest in care and support for the mentally ill in the community instead of investing in weaponry.

A just, democratic society has rules of law. But it also affords rights to its citizens - *all* of its citizens.

Compassion and community care is a lot more difficult and expensive to dole out than 50,000-volt jolts of electricity.

But people who suffer from mental illness are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, even when they are acting "crazy."

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