



## “Behind Locked Doors: Unveiling the Roles and Responsibilities of Forensic Psychiatric Nurses”

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Date of Publication: 18/07/2025

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.16071381

**Abstract:** Forensic psychiatric nursing is a highly specialized and critical area within mental health nursing that blends the disciplines of mental health care and legal systems. These nurses provide care to individuals with mental illnesses who are involved in the criminal justice system—either as suspects, convicts, or individuals undergoing legal procedures. The complexity of this role stems from the dual obligation to the patient and the legal system, which requires balancing ethical principles of care with security measures and legal accountability. This article aims to explore the historical evolution, scope, key roles, and emerging trends in forensic psychiatric nursing. Emphasis is placed on the competencies required to perform in this challenging field, the therapeutic and legal responsibilities assumed, and the ethical dilemmas faced in practice. It also examines educational preparation, the psychological toll of forensic settings, and the importance of integrating trauma-informed, recovery-oriented practices. As societies recognize the link between crime and mental illness, forensic psychiatric nurses are increasingly becoming essential agents of rehabilitation and public safety. This article serves as a comprehensive reference for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to better understand and support the field of forensic psychiatric nursing.

**Keywords:** Forensic psychiatric nursing, criminal justice, therapeutic security, legal psychiatry, mental illness and crime, psychiatric rehabilitation, ethics in forensic nursing.

### 1. Introduction

Forensic psychiatric nursing stands at the confluence of mental health care and the criminal justice system, presenting a distinctive, demanding, and often misunderstood field of nursing. These professionals work with individuals whose lives are marked by both mental illness and legal conflict—people who may have committed crimes under the influence of psychosis, or whose psychiatric conditions place them at risk of offending behavior. The practice encompasses not only clinical psychiatric nursing but also legal and custodial responsibilities, requiring an intricate balance between therapeutic engagement and maintaining security. Unlike general psychiatric nurses, forensic nurses must adhere to

legal processes, prepare patients for court appearances, and often provide expert testimony. Their practice reflects the need for human rights-based, evidence-informed, and ethically grounded care within restrictive, often intimidating environments like prisons, forensic hospitals, and detention centers. With increasing awareness of mental health issues among incarcerated populations, the relevance of forensic psychiatric nurses continues to grow in global health discourse.

### 2. Historical Background of Forensic Psychiatric Nursing



The roots of forensic psychiatric nursing can be traced to the early 19th century when individuals accused of crimes but found to be mentally ill were often housed in asylums rather than traditional prisons. This practice was based on the growing belief that mental illness could influence behavior and that treatment, rather than punishment, was more appropriate for such individuals. One of the earliest and most well-known institutions, Broadmoor Hospital in the United Kingdom, established in 1863, became a model for secure psychiatric facilities globally. Similarly, the United States developed forensic units in psychiatric hospitals to accommodate mentally ill offenders. Over time, the recognition of forensic nursing as a specialized domain gained momentum, especially in the late 20th century, with the formation of professional bodies like the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN). These organizations developed scope-of-practice guidelines and educational frameworks, acknowledging the unique challenges of providing mental health care within legal environments. Today, forensic psychiatric nursing is taught in universities, practiced in a range of settings, and researched for its contributions to criminal justice reform and therapeutic jurisprudence.

### 3. Defining Forensic Psychiatric Nursing

Forensic psychiatric nursing is defined as the specialized application of psychiatric nursing principles to populations involved in legal proceedings, correctional settings, or court-mandated treatments. It involves the assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of individuals with mental health disorders who are either convicted or awaiting trial for criminal offenses. Unlike conventional psychiatric care, forensic nursing integrates legal mandates, ethical frameworks, and security protocols into clinical decision-making. Nurses in this domain must be competent in forensic evaluations, courtroom procedures, and risk assessments. They often collaborate with psychiatrists, psychologists, attorneys, law enforcement officers, and parole officers. Their work is guided by legal frameworks such as the Mental Health Act (in various

countries) and criminal justice regulations. They must be capable of testifying in court, interpreting forensic evidence, and managing individuals who may present violent, manipulative, or unpredictable behaviors. Forensic psychiatric nursing is thus not merely about care—it is about care delivered under scrutiny, with precision, accountability, and ethical rigor.

### 4. Settings of Practice

Forensic psychiatric nurses practice in a wide range of environments, each with specific roles and challenges. The most prominent settings include forensic psychiatric hospitals, which are high-security facilities designated for individuals who are found not guilty by reason of insanity (NGRI) or deemed unfit to stand trial. These hospitals offer intensive psychiatric care within secure parameters and often serve long-term patients. Another key setting is correctional institutions such as jails and prisons, where nurses manage acute psychiatric crises, chronic mental illnesses, and suicidality among inmates. Community-based forensic services are also gaining prominence, focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration after discharge from institutional care. Some nurses work directly in courts, conducting evaluations and preparing mental health reports. Others are employed in forensic outreach teams or probation services. Juvenile justice systems, secure residential units, and detention centers also rely on forensic nurses to address the mental health needs of young offenders. Across all settings, the unifying element is the presence of both mental health pathology and legal oversight, necessitating specialized care that is both therapeutic and secure.

### 5. Roles and Responsibilities of Forensic Psychiatric Nurses

The roles and responsibilities of forensic psychiatric nurses are vast, diverse, and multifaceted. At the core of their work is mental health assessment and diagnosis. They conduct



detailed psychiatric evaluations to determine the presence of mental illness, its severity, and its relevance to legal accountability. They also assess risk—evaluating whether a person is likely to harm themselves, others, or reoffend. These assessments are used to inform court decisions on competency, sentencing, or diversion programs. Another critical role is treatment provision, which includes administering medications, conducting psychotherapeutic interventions, and monitoring treatment adherence. Nurses provide care for a spectrum of conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and substance-induced psychosis.

In forensic settings, safety and security are paramount. Nurses are responsible for maintaining a secure therapeutic environment, managing aggression or escape risks, and collaborating with security staff. They also engage in extensive documentation and report writing, which can be used in legal proceedings. Many serve as expert witnesses in court, offering opinions on the mental state of defendants and explaining clinical findings to judges or juries. Rehabilitation and reintegration support is another domain, where nurses help patients build life skills, reconnect with families, and plan for community living. Above all, forensic psychiatric nurses act as ethical practitioners—balancing the rights of the individual with the safety of society.

## 6. Competencies Required for Forensic Psychiatric Nurses

Practicing in forensic settings demands a specialized set of competencies. Clinical expertise in psychiatric nursing is fundamental—nurses must understand complex psychopathologies, psychopharmacology, and therapeutic interventions. However, this knowledge must be supplemented by legal literacy. Nurses must be well-versed in mental health laws, criminal responsibility statutes, and civil rights protections. They must also master forensic tools and procedures, such as structured professional judgment tools like the HCR-20 (Historical Clinical Risk) for violence

risk assessment, or the START (Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability). Communication skills are vital for interviewing resistant clients, presenting findings in court, and liaising with multidisciplinary teams. Security awareness, including the ability to de-escalate violent situations and maintain situational awareness, is crucial in high-risk environments. Ethical reasoning is another essential competency—nurses frequently navigate dilemmas involving confidentiality, coercion, and patient autonomy. To meet these demands, formal education programs, continuing professional development, and clinical supervision are essential for maintaining high standards of practice.

## 7. Ethical and Legal Challenges

Ethical challenges are inherent in forensic psychiatric nursing due to the dual obligation toward the patient and the legal system. One common dilemma is involuntary treatment. Nurses may be required to administer medications or enforce hospitalization without patient consent when legally mandated, raising questions about autonomy and dignity. Confidentiality is another complex area. Nurses must often disclose sensitive information to legal authorities, particularly when public safety is at risk. The principle of “dual loyalty”—the tension between being a caregiver and a legal agent—frequently leads to moral distress. For example, a nurse may empathize with a patient’s trauma history while simultaneously preparing reports that could lead to long-term incarceration. The use of restraints and seclusion also presents ethical quandaries. While sometimes necessary for safety, these interventions must be monitored to prevent abuse or psychological harm. Ethical decision-making frameworks, adherence to codes of conduct, and access to ethics committees are vital in helping nurses navigate these challenges while upholding professional integrity.

## 8. Challenges and Stressors in Practice

The practice of forensic psychiatric nursing is not without significant psychological and professional challenges.





Nurses working in forensic settings are frequently exposed to violence, verbal threats, manipulative behavior, and emotionally charged environments. The need to maintain constant vigilance in high-security settings can be mentally exhausting, contributing to chronic stress. Furthermore, the complexity of managing individuals with dual diagnoses—mental illness and substance use disorders—adds to the workload and demands specialized intervention strategies. Role ambiguity is another concern, as nurses must often navigate between caregiving and custodial responsibilities, which may not always align. Compassion fatigue and burnout are prevalent among forensic psychiatric nurses, fueled by emotional labor and limited opportunities for emotional release in a secure setting.

Support from management, regular debriefing, access to mental health support for staff, and manageable nurse-patient ratios are crucial interventions that can mitigate these stressors. Institutional recognition of the risks inherent in forensic practice and policies aimed at protecting the mental well-being of nurses are essential for sustaining a committed and competent workforce.

## 9. Advancements and Innovations in the Field

Forensic psychiatric nursing is gradually embracing innovations that enhance both care quality and institutional safety. One such advancement is the implementation of trauma-informed care, which shifts the focus from “what is wrong with this person?” to “what has this person been through?” This approach fosters more empathetic and personalized care for individuals who often have histories of severe trauma, abuse, or neglect. Another major innovation is the integration of telepsychiatry, especially in remote or understaffed facilities. Telepsychiatry allows specialists to consult on difficult cases and helps deliver timely interventions in correctional settings.

Technological tools such as electronic risk assessment software, body-worn cameras, and secure communication systems have improved accountability and responsiveness. Some institutions have adopted recovery-

oriented models, even within secure forensic environments, focusing on patient empowerment, goal-setting, and dignity. Moreover, virtual reality training is being used to prepare forensic nurses for crisis scenarios. These advancements not only improve patient outcomes but also foster a safer and more resilient working environment for nursing professionals.

## 10. The Role of Forensic Nurses in Public Mental Health

Forensic psychiatric nurses also contribute significantly to public mental health beyond the confines of forensic facilities. Their expertise is valuable in **community-based diversion programs**, where individuals with mental illness are directed away from the criminal justice system toward therapeutic treatment. By assessing mental status at the point of arrest or trial, nurses can recommend alternatives such as mental health courts, thereby reducing incarceration rates for people with mental illness. In the community, forensic nurses provide follow-up care, medication monitoring, and crisis intervention for patients on parole or probation.

They also educate families, coordinate with social workers, and liaise with community mental health services to ensure continuity of care. Their advocacy efforts contribute to destigmatizing mental illness and pushing for policy reforms that prioritize treatment over punishment. In disaster or mass trauma situations, forensic psychiatric nurses may assist in crisis debriefing and psychosocial first aid. Their cross-sectoral knowledge makes them vital assets in improving population mental health and preventing criminal recidivism linked to untreated mental illness.

## 11. Education and Training in Forensic Psychiatric Nursing

Education and training are critical to preparing nurses for the rigors of forensic psychiatric care. While general nursing and psychiatric nursing curricula may include some



exposure to legal and forensic concepts, specialized postgraduate programs offer more focused training. Many countries offer **certification courses in forensic nursing**, with modules covering criminal justice systems, mental health law, forensic science, and ethics. Clinical placements in forensic units are crucial for hands-on experience.

Simulations and role-plays help nurses develop interview skills, courtroom communication, and de-escalation techniques. Continuing education programs are essential to keep pace with evolving legal standards, emerging psychiatric disorders, and best practices in secure environments. Interprofessional training, involving psychologists, law enforcement, and legal experts, enriches the nurse's ability to work in multidisciplinary teams. Research literacy is also emphasized to foster evidence-based practice. Given the emotional and legal complexities of the field, mentoring and reflective practice are important components of training that prepare nurses for real-world ethical and psychological challenges.

## 12. Future Directions

The future of forensic psychiatric nursing lies in expanding its recognition, refining its scope, and integrating it more deeply into both healthcare and legal systems. There is a growing call to standardize training and certification globally so that nurses can meet a consistent level of competency and ethical conduct. Specialization within forensic psychiatric nursing—such as focusing on adolescent offenders, sex offenders, or neurodivergent populations—is another potential growth area. The use of predictive analytics and artificial intelligence in risk assessment may also transform how nurses evaluate and manage behavioral risk, although this comes with ethical considerations.

There is increasing emphasis on human rights-based care within forensic systems, calling for reforms in the use of seclusion, involuntary treatment, and solitary confinement. Nurses will likely play a central role in advocating for these

reforms. Additionally, research on forensic nursing outcomes, patient recovery trajectories, and institutional safety will help advance the profession. Global health organizations are also beginning to acknowledge the importance of forensic mental health, which may lead to more funding, policy development, and public education campaigns involving forensic nurses. As mental illness continues to intersect with issues of violence, poverty, and incarceration, the role of forensic psychiatric nurses will only become more crucial.

## 13. Conclusion

Forensic psychiatric nursing is a dynamic, complex, and deeply impactful field that addresses the needs of some of the most vulnerable and misunderstood individuals in society. By bridging mental health and legal systems, forensic nurses ensure that mentally ill offenders receive not only justice but also compassionate and competent care. Their roles extend from risk assessment and therapy to advocacy and rehabilitation, all performed within environments that demand constant vigilance, ethical clarity, and interdisciplinary collaboration. As the world recognizes the profound connections between crime, trauma, and mental illness, forensic psychiatric nurses are uniquely positioned to influence both clinical outcomes and justice reform. Investing in their education, well-being, and professional development is not just beneficial for individual patients—it is essential for public health and social equity. With adequate support and recognition, forensic psychiatric nurses can continue to serve as catalysts for healing, justice, and societal transformation.

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