

CRIMINALLY INSANE

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October 14, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *CRIMINALLY INSANE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=46904>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Forensic Law, Criminology, Clinical Psychology

1. Core Definition and Scope

The term **criminally insane** refers to a historical and legal status used to describe an accused individual who, at the time of committing an unlawful act, was deemed to be suffering from a severe cognitive illness or fault that fundamentally impaired their ability to understand the nature, quality, or wrongfulness of their actions. This impairment negated the necessary criminal intent, or *mens rea*, required for conviction, thereby freeing them from legal accountability for the unlawful behaviors they supposedly engaged in. It represents the historical manifestation of the concept of the legal insanity defense, distinguishing those whose actions arise from uncontrollable mental disease rather than willful malice.

While the concept remains central to the principle that the law should not punish those incapable of rational choice, the specific terminology of "criminally insane" is now used infrequently within modern legal and psychological discourse. The phrase carries significant social stigma and lacks the precision required by contemporary jurisprudence. Modern systems prefer defined legal standards, such as being found **Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity (NGRI)**, or the determination of competency to stand trial. The core function of this defense, regardless of the terminology used, is to recognize that justice requires punishment to be reserved for blameworthy agents, and a person suffering from profound mental impairment cannot be considered fully blameworthy in the traditional sense.

The determination of whether an individual meets the criteria historically associated with being **criminally insane** is complex, requiring extensive evaluation by forensic experts. The finding does not result in immediate release; rather, it typically triggers a separate legal process known as civil commitment, designed to provide mandatory psychiatric treatment in a secure environment. This mechanism ensures that while the individual is not held criminally accountable, public safety is maintained, and the individual receives the necessary therapeutic intervention for their underlying cognitive or mental illness. The scope is strictly limited to cases where the mental fault was so severe that it destroyed the capacity for rational moral judgment regarding the criminal act itself.

2. Historical Evolution and Legal Precursors

The concept that mental illness should mitigate or negate criminal responsibility has roots dating back to ancient philosophical and legal traditions, but the modern application of the insanity defense crystallized in 19th-century English common law. Prior to codified standards, determinations were often based on vague and arbitrary criteria, such as the "wild beast" test,

which demanded that an individual be so devoid of reason as to be no more culpable than a brute animal. This early history reflects a foundational struggle to reconcile the retributive nature of criminal justice with the humanitarian recognition of severe psychological impairment.

The most significant legal precursor to modern standards, and the set of rules that defined the legal meaning of "insanity" for over a century, is the 1843 M'Naghten Rule, established following the acquittal of Daniel M'Naghten in England. The M'Naghten standard established a strict cognitive test: to be found legally insane, the defendant must have been laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing, or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong. This rule essentially defined legal insanity as an inability to distinguish right from wrong, placing a heavy emphasis on cognitive capacity over volitional control.

Subsequent legal evolution introduced tests designed to broaden the defense beyond purely cognitive failure. The "irresistible impulse" test emerged in some jurisdictions to address cases where the defendant knew the act was wrong but could not resist the urge due to mental disease-- a significant step toward recognizing volitional impairment. Later, the more encompassing American Law Institute (ALI) Model Penal Code test sought to modernize the standard, holding that a person is not responsible for criminal conduct if, at the time of such conduct, as a result of mental disease or defect, he lacks substantial capacity either to appreciate the criminality (wrongfulness) of his conduct or to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law. While the ALI test represented a departure from the strict M'Naghten standard, the controversies surrounding high-profile insanity acquittals often led legislative bodies to revert to or impose stricter standards, sometimes even adopting the Guilty but Mentally Ill (GBMI) verdict as a compromise.

3. Distinction from Modern Legal Terms

The archaic nature of the phrase **criminally insane** stems primarily from its failure to differentiate between clinical diagnosis and legal adjudication, a necessary separation in modern forensic practice. Contemporary law and psychiatry emphasize precise terminology to avoid confusing a medical status with a legal finding. The most common modern legal finding that replaces the concept of "criminally insane" is the verdict of **Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity (NGRI)**.

The NGRI verdict is crucial because it confirms that the defendant committed the prohibited act (the *actus reus*) but lacked the requisite criminal state of mind (*mens rea*) due to mental disease at the time of the offense. Unlike the historical blanket term, NGRI is a specific legal judgment that triggers an immediate, mandatory process for commitment and treatment, rather than simply releasing the individual. This finding acknowledges the reality of the harm caused while upholding the constitutional principle that intent is necessary for true criminal culpability. The finding of NGRI is statistically rare, being successfully invoked in less than one percent of felony cases,

contradicting public perception of its widespread use.

Furthermore, it is essential to distinguish the concept of insanity (related to the mental state *at the time of the crime*) from **competency to stand trial** (related to the mental state *at the time of the trial proceedings*). A defendant is deemed incompetent if they lack the ability to understand the charges against them and assist rationally in their own defense. If found incompetent, the trial is paused, and the defendant is institutionalized for treatment until competency is restored, a process entirely separate from the historical finding of being **criminally insane**. The clarity offered by modern terms like NGRI and competency allows legal systems to address the diverse challenges presented by mental illness within the criminal justice context without resorting to vague, stigmatizing labels.

4. Legal and Psychological Assessment Criteria

The determination of whether a defendant meets the standard of legal insanity requires a rigorous multi-faceted assessment process involving legal analysis, clinical interviewing, and psychological testing. The primary goal of forensic evaluators is to reconstruct the defendant's mental state at the precise moment the crime occurred, a complex retrospective analysis that differs significantly from standard clinical practice which focuses on current mental status and future prognosis.

Forensic psychologists and psychiatrists utilize established assessment protocols tailored to the specific legal standard adopted by the jurisdiction (e.g., M'Naghten, ALI, or a state variant). These evaluations typically involve extensive interviews with the defendant, review of collateral data (police reports, medical records, prior psychiatric history), and specialized psychological testing. Key criteria explored include the defendant's capacity to plan, their ability to appreciate the moral or legal wrongfulness of the act, and, in some jurisdictions, whether they possessed volitional control over their actions despite knowing them to be wrong. The expert's role is not to offer a legal conclusion (whether the defendant is "insane") but to provide the court with objective data regarding the presence, severity, and functional impairment caused by a mental disease or defect at the time of the offense.

The legal framework also dictates the burden of proof. Historically, the burden often rested on the prosecution to prove the defendant was sane beyond a reasonable doubt. However, following significant legal reforms, many jurisdictions now place the burden of proof on the defense to prove the defendant's insanity, usually by a preponderance of the evidence, or sometimes by clear and convincing evidence. This shift reflects a societal tightening of the insanity defense standards, ensuring that it is reserved for only the most compelling cases of severe mental impairment. The assessment process is therefore meticulously scrutinized, as the findings have profound implications for the defendant's liberty and the security of the public.

5. Commitment and Institutionalization

A finding of NGRI, the modern equivalent of the historical finding of **criminally insane**, does not equate to freedom. Instead, it initiates a mandatory commitment process to a secure psychiatric facility. This process, known as civil commitment, is distinct from punitive incarceration and is justified on two primary grounds: the individual's need for treatment and the state's obligation to protect the public from individuals who, due to their untreated mental illness, pose a continuing threat.

These specialized institutions, often termed forensic hospitals, function under a unique set of administrative and clinical mandates. They must provide the necessary psychiatric and psychological treatment required for recovery while maintaining security protocols comparable to correctional facilities, given the patient population often includes individuals who have committed violent acts. A prominent example cited in the history of the term is the **Bridgewater State Hospital** in Massachusetts, which historically boards those people deemed by a court of law to be criminally insane. Such facilities are tasked with rehabilitating patients to the point where they are no longer deemed dangerous to themselves or others, a standard often more difficult to meet than the requirements for parole from a correctional sentence.

The duration of commitment for individuals found NGRI is indeterminate, tied directly to their dangerousness and mental status, rather than the length of the sentence they might have received if convicted. Patients are subject to regular reviews by institutional staff and state courts to determine if they meet the criteria for conditional release or discharge. Release is granted only when the patient demonstrates sufficient stability and lack of dangerousness. In many instances, commitment periods for those found NGRI far exceed the maximum sentence for the crime committed, raising complex ethical questions regarding indefinite confinement and therapeutic integrity versus security concerns.

6. Ethical and Societal Debates Surrounding Treatment

The application of the insanity defense, and the subsequent commitment of the **criminally insane**, generates significant ethical and societal tension. A core debate revolves around balancing the patient's right to humane and effective treatment with the community's legitimate demand for protection. Critics often argue that forensic hospitals sometimes prioritize security over genuine therapeutic intervention, leading to environments that resemble prisons more than healing facilities, thereby potentially violating the rights of the committed individuals.

Another major ethical dilemma concerns the use of involuntary treatment within these secure settings. While treatment is the justification for commitment, the extent to which the state can compel a patient to take psychotropic medication or participate in therapy, particularly when the patient lacks insight into their condition, is a perpetual source of legal challenges. Court decisions

generally permit involuntary medication when necessary to maintain competency or prevent dangerous behavior, but the therapeutic purpose of commitment must remain paramount, ensuring that confinement is not simply punishment under the guise of treatment.

Furthermore, the public perception of the insanity defense often fuels societal debate. There is a common misconception that the defense is a loophole for dangerous criminals, leading to premature release. In reality, the stringent commitment and review processes generally ensure that released individuals are carefully monitored. The debate often centers on whether society is adequately served by a system that prioritizes treatment for severe mental illness over retribution, highlighting the philosophical conflict between therapeutic justice and punitive justice.

7. Criticism of the Term and Modern Usage

The primary criticism leveraged against the term **criminally insane** is its inherent imprecision and its fusion of legal and medical concepts. Modern psychiatry recognizes a vast spectrum of mental illnesses, none of which are accurately described by the singular, outdated designation of "insanity." Using the term promotes the harmful stereotype that all individuals with serious mental illness are inherently dangerous or criminal, thereby contributing to pervasive social stigma and hindering help-seeking behavior among those in need of psychiatric care.

Legally, the term fails to reflect the nuanced standards of criminal responsibility currently in use. As noted, the shift to NGRI allows for specific findings based on jurisdiction-defined criteria (cognitive capacity, volitional control). The general application of "criminally insane" obscures these necessary legal distinctions. Its informal usage often persists in media and general conversation, reinforcing the public's confusion about the rigorous nature and rare success of the legal insanity defense.

The infrequency of modern usage is a testament to the success of legislative reforms aimed at achieving greater clarity and fairness within the criminal justice system. The move away from vague terms toward explicit legal standards (like NGRI or the introduction of the GBMI verdict in some states) reflects an ongoing effort to ensure that the law accurately addresses the intersection of crime and psychopathology. While the principle of excusing non-culpable individuals remains, the methodology and vocabulary have been fundamentally modernized to adhere to higher standards of medical and legal rigor.

Further Reading

[M'Naghten Rules \(Britannica\)](#)

[American Law Institute \(ALI\) Test \(Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute\)](#)

[Bridgewater State Hospital Official Site \(Massachusetts Government\)](#)

A History of the Insanity Defense (American Psychological Association)

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