



# A Complex Legal and Ethical Dilemma in Insanity Defense

Yuliya Zabyelina\*

Department of Criminology, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom

## DESCRIPTION

The insanity defense is a legal doctrine allowing defendants to avoid criminal liability if, at the time of the crime, they were suffering from severe mental illness, rendering them incapable of understanding the nature or wrongfulness of their actions. This defense, rooted in centuries of legal tradition, remains one of the most contentious aspects of criminal law, intertwining legal, ethical, and medical considerations.

### Historical context

The concept of the insanity defense dates back to ancient times. In Roman law, the principle of "non compos mentis" (not of sound mind) acknowledged that individuals unable to reason should not be held fully accountable for their actions. This principle evolved through English common law, most notably with the M'Naghten Rule established in 1843. This rule arose from the case of Daniel M'Naghten, who assassinated the British Prime Minister's secretary, believing he was under divine instruction. The M'Naghten Rule set a precedent requiring that, for an insanity defense to be valid, it must be shown that the defendant either did not understand what they were doing or did not understand that what they were doing was wrong.

### Legal standards and applications

Today, various jurisdictions employ different standards to determine insanity. The M'Naghten Rule remains influential, but alternatives like the Irresistible Impulse Test and the Model Penal Code's guidelines have emerged. The Irresistible Impulse Test considers whether the defendant could control their actions, acknowledging cases where an individual might understand their actions but cannot control them due to mental illness. The Model Penal Code, adopted by many U.S. states, combines elements of both the M'Naghten Rule and the Irresistible Impulse Test, allowing for a broader understanding of mental illness's impact on behavior.

In the United States, the use of the insanity defense varies significantly by state. Some states, such as Idaho, Montana, and

Utah, have abolished it altogether, arguing that it allows dangerous individuals to avoid justice. Other states have tightened the criteria, making it increasingly difficult to mount a successful insanity defense.

### Ethical and medical perspectives

The insanity defense raises profound ethical questions. On one hand, it recognizes that mental illness can profoundly impair an individual's ability to make rational decisions, aligning with principles of compassion and justice. On the other hand, it can be seen as a loophole that allows dangerous individuals to evade responsibility, potentially posing a risk to society.

From a medical standpoint, the insanity defense highlights the complex interplay between law and psychiatry. Mental health professionals play a important role in evaluating defendants, often providing expert testimony to ascertain the severity of the defendant's condition and its impact on their actions. However, psychiatric evaluations are not infallible, and the subjective nature of mental illness can lead to disagreements among experts, complicating the legal process.

### High-profile cases and public perception

High-profile cases involving the insanity defense often capture public attention and shape societal attitudes. The trial of John Hinckley Jr., who attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1971, is a notable example. Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity, sparking widespread debate and leading to significant changes in the application of the insanity defense in the United States.

Public perception of the insanity defense is often influenced by media portrayals, which can sometimes sensationalize or misrepresent the complexities involved. This can lead to misconceptions about the frequency and success rate of the defense. In reality, the insanity defense is used in less than 1% of felony cases and is successful only about 25% of the time.

**Correspondence to:** Yuliya Zabyelina, Department of Criminology, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom, E-mail: Yuliya@Zabyelina.uk

**Received:** 03-Jun-2024, Manuscript No. JFPY-24-26284; **Editor Assigned:** 05-Jun-2024, PreQC No. JFPY-24-26284 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 19-Jun-2024, QC No. JFPY-24-26284; **Revised:** 26-Jun-2024, Manuscript No. JFPY-24-26284 (R); **Published:** 03-Jul-2024, DOI: 10.35248/2475-319X.24.9.342.

**Citation:** Zabyelina Y (2024) A Complex Legal and Ethical Dilemma in Insanity Defense J Foren Psy. 9:342.

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## CONCLUSION

The insanity defense remains an important yet contentious part of the legal system, balancing the need for justice with an understanding of human psychology. As our understanding of mental illness evolves, so too must our legal frameworks,

ensuring that they reflect contemporary medical knowledge while safeguarding societal interests. The challenge lies in maintaining this balance, recognizing that mental illness is a significant factor in some criminal behaviors while ensuring that justice is served both for the defendant and for society as a whole.