

REFERENCE GUIDE

A practical tool to navigate and work with the recommendations of the action plan



Mental Health Commission of Canada Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Finding New Pathways

An action plan for criminal justice and mental health in Canada

In 2026, the Mental Health Commission of Canada published a detailed action plan for improving interactions between people experiencing mental health challenges and the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems.

That plan was many years in the making, informed by a range of research and engagement activities involving hundreds of voices, perspectives, and contributions.

This guide was developed as a companion to help readers navigate the action plan and start thinking about how to implement its recommended actions.

The full plan, *Finding New Pathways: An Action Plan for Criminal Justice and Mental Health in Canada*, is free to download at <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/justicenap/>





Contents

- 4** Why an action plan?
- 6** A principles-based approach
- 7** The action plan at a glance
- 13** Thinking about implementation
- 15** What's next



[The action plan] prioritizes prevention, diversion, end-to-end supports, and continuity of care, and it calls for critical legislative and system-level reforms – both to improve existing systems and to develop viable alternatives, paving the way for meaningful and sustainable transformation.

— Excerpt from the action plan

Why an action plan?

People experiencing mental health challenges and mental illnesses are overrepresented in Canada’s criminal justice system. More than 70% of federally incarcerated men and women have at least one mental health diagnosis.

There are many reasons for this. People living with mental health challenges often lack access to social determinants of health and well-being such as housing, employment, and food security. Many people are not able to access mental health support early on, when care or treatment might help prevent their involvement with criminal justice altogether. There are also biases and inequities embedded in the justice system itself.

The tragic fact is that incarceration can have harmful and even fatal consequences for people living with mental health challenges.

Finding New Pathways: An Action Plan for Criminal Justice and Mental Health in Canada was developed to establish a more supportive, rehabilitation-focused

justice system that prevents such tragic consequences. It pays particular attention to the needs and realities of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples; African, Caribbean, and Black communities; 2SLGBTQ+ people; women; and others who experience especially high risks.

Rooting a deeper understanding of mental health throughout the justice system will improve conditions not only for justice-involved individuals but also for people who work in the system, victims of crime and their families, and society as a whole. Appropriate care, treatment, and support can reduce a person’s likelihood of repeat involvement with the justice system, contributing to greater public safety.

A tale of two systems

Canada's criminal justice system includes police and courts; federal, provincial, and territorial prisons and correctional facilities; and professionals responsible for overseeing individuals accused or convicted of crimes. Alongside that system is the forensic mental health system, which assesses the mental health of justice-involved individuals and provides treatment as required.

While ideally the two systems would work together, today they tend to lack integration and coordination, resulting in gaps and inefficiencies. By accounting for both criminal justice and forensic mental health, the action plan aims to help close some of those gaps.

Focused on system change

Many factors that contribute to people's justice involvement originate outside the system itself, such as access to safe, affordable housing, employment opportunities, education, and health care. The action plan, while recognizing these important factors, focuses specifically on recommending changes to the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems as they exist today.

As well, the action plan does not address the unique circumstances surrounding youth criminal justice, the broader civilian mental health system (except in a few specific cases), or substance use on its own.

No single answer

While the need for change in Canada's criminal justice and health systems is widely recognized, there are many different views on what should be done. This is partly because the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems are incredibly complex, and partly because different people have different visions of what the ultimate outcome of change could be.

This action plan has been several years in the making, informed by numerous research reports and engagements with hundreds of individuals involved in or impacted by Canada's criminal justice system.

Respecting a variety of perspectives, the action plan brings forward their concerns and aspirations for improved criminal justice and forensic mental health systems. It includes recommended actions for immediate changes to the system as well as longer-term actions that could be more deeply transformational. In all cases, the starting point is the current state of things.





A core premise of [the] action plan is that wherever someone makes contact with the criminal justice or forensic mental health system they should receive the best possible treatment, care, services, and supports.

— Excerpt from the action plan

A principles-based approach

Finding New Pathways: An Action Plan for Criminal Justice and Mental Health in Canada aims to result in better integrated, better aligned criminal justice and forensic mental health systems that do the following:

- divert people living with mental illnesses from the criminal justice system whenever possible
- support the mental health of people no matter where or how they come into contact with the criminal justice and/or forensic mental health systems
- provide continuity of care and support for people after they are released from either system
- support the psychological health and safety of professionals who work within these two systems.
- enact legislative and other system-level changes that are needed for reform and to implement the other recommendations of the action plan

To pursue those goals, every aspect of the action plan is guided by a set of complementary and interrelated principles—specifically, to be:

- Grounded in lived experience
- Respectful of human and legal rights
- Respectful and reflective of the individual and collective rights of Indigenous people
- Anti-racist and anti-oppressive
- Culturally appropriate, safe, and meaningful
- Equitable
- Access oriented
- Informed by evidence-based practices
- Holistic
- Integrated
- Accountable and transparent
- Collaborative and intersectoral
- Feasible and implementable

The action plan at a glance

The action plan has three strategic pillars:

1

Care, not criminalization

All people in Canada should have access to health and mental health services and supports that help prevent their involvement with the criminal justice system. People living with mental illnesses should be diverted from the criminal justice system whenever and wherever possible.

2

Care during criminal justice involvement

People who do become involved with the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems should have access to high-quality, evidence-based care and supports (health, mental health, substance use, and social supports) where and when they need them. Services should be trauma informed and culturally safe. Where evidence-based care is not available, evidence-informed care should be prioritized.

3

Care after criminal justice involvement

People leaving the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems who still require treatment deserve continuity of care after their release, along with access to seamless, integrated mental health, substance use, and social services in the community.

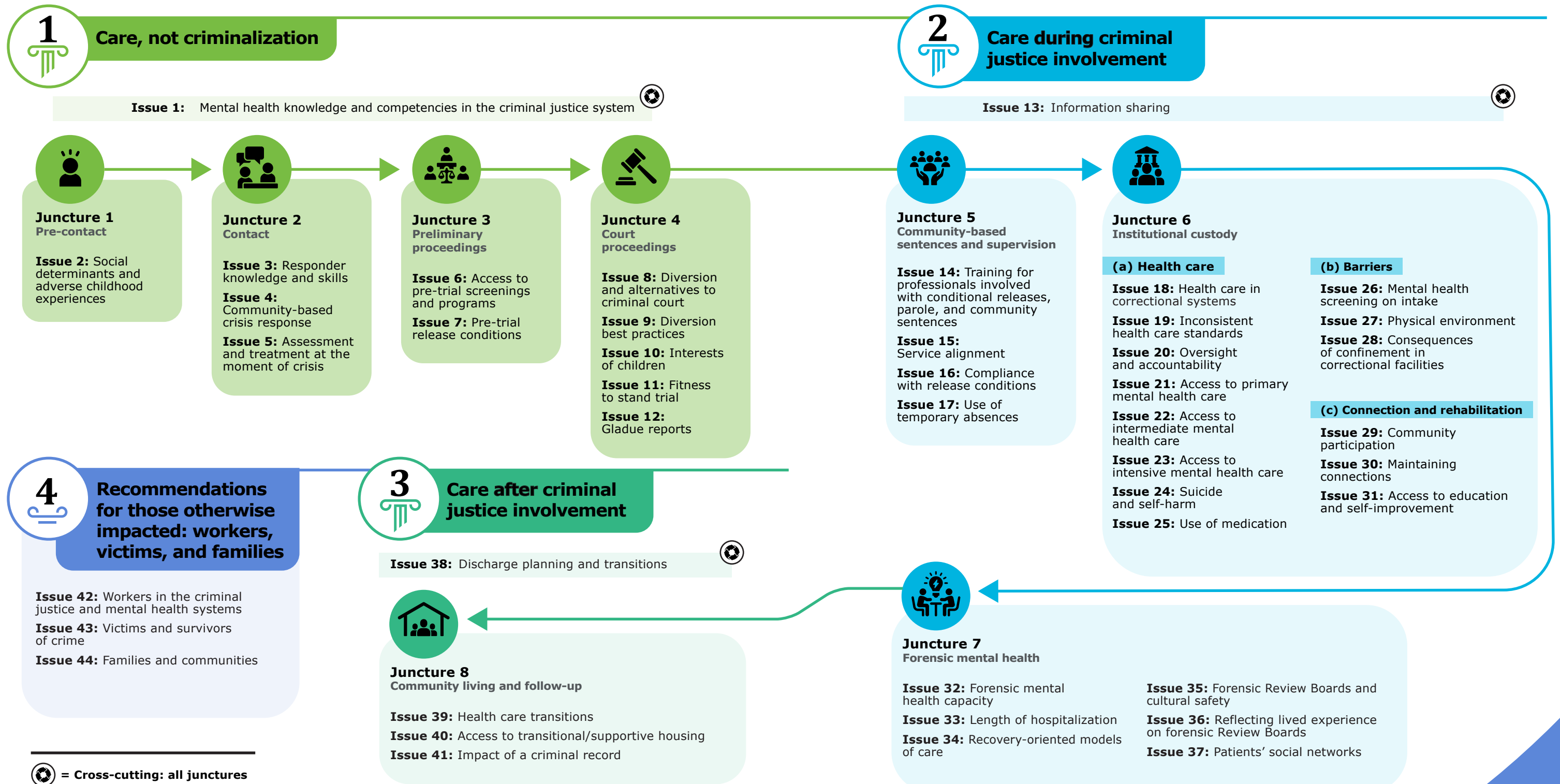
Each pillar is associated with a set of **junctures**—points of contact between people and the criminal justice or forensic mental health systems. Different **issues** arise at each of these junctures. The plan's **68 recommended actions** address those issues.

Beyond the junctures, part 4 outlines recommendations for people otherwise impacted by the justice system, namely **workers in the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems, victims and survivors of crime, and families and communities.**

The next two pages present a diagram that illustrates the structure of the Action Plan.

Action Plan Structure at a glance

The following diagram provides a high-level structural overview of the action plan, illustrating its components up to the issue level. For the associated recommended actions, please refer to the full action plan.



Find where you fit

No single organization, institution, or group is expected to implement the action plan alone. Different actors have their own areas of opportunity and influence where they can begin to make change happen — in collaboration with partners to advance real system change.

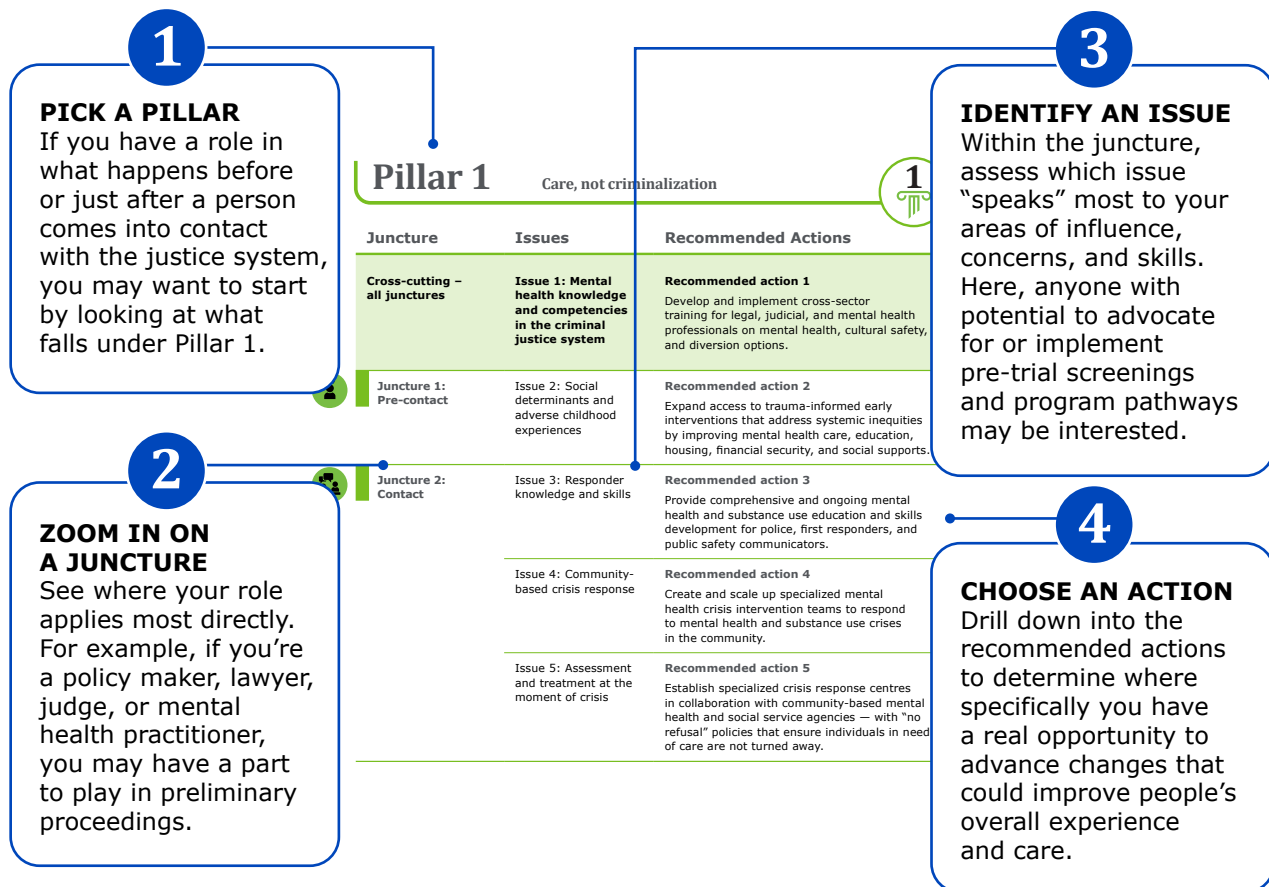
At the same time, it is important to be mindful that all the recommended actions are ultimately needed to bring about the transformative vision of the action plan. Some recommended actions, taken on their own, may not fully reflect the broader needs, complexities, and goals

involved. The action plan was designed to support collaboration and coordination, breaking down siloes and combining isolated efforts into harmonized actions.

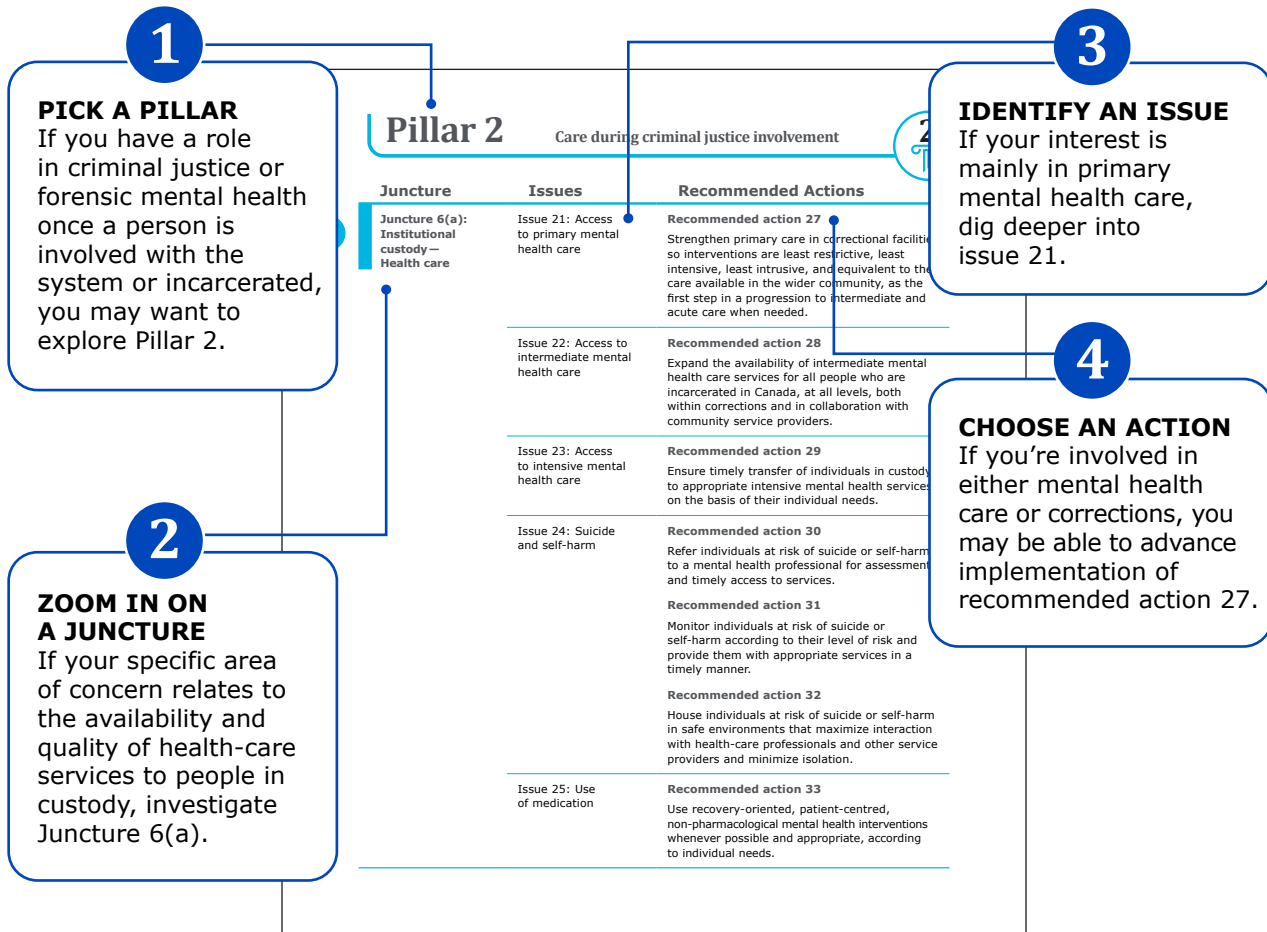
That said, what is most important is to start *somewhere*. Choose a pillar where you are likely to have a role, then consider which junctures are most relevant to you. Review the associated issues and recommended actions to see where your role may be most direct or have the greatest potential for impact.

To see this example in the National Action Plan, please refer to page 8.

Example 1



Example 2



Tracing pathways from the junctures to issues and recommended actions should reveal opportunities for everyone involved in criminal justice and forensic mental health—from judges

and lawyers to psychologists, psychiatrists, government policy makers, health officials, people involved with the justice system, peer supporters, and more.

Consider interdependencies

While the divisions of junctures, issues, and recommended actions are meant to make the action plan navigable and clear, many issues and recommended actions overlap or depend on others. For example, if progress is made around Pillar 1 to prevent justice involvement, there may be reduced need to improve certain capacities and services within correctional facilities as highlighted in Pillar 2.

In choosing recommended actions to start implementing, identify any interdependencies that might affect progress or require involvement from specific groups or interest holders. Those that are relevant to you and your partners will likely reveal themselves naturally as you read the action plan.

The action plan also calls out a number of issues that are cross-cutting, meaning they apply to more than one juncture within a single pillar. These cross-cutting issues also naturally come with interdependencies of their own.

Cross-cutting considerations

In addition to cross-cutting *issues*, the action plan also includes cross-cutting *considerations*—even higher-level themes that occur throughout the plan, not limited to any one pillar or juncture. These are:

- Social determinants and justice involvement
- Access to care and support
- Lack of standardized practices and training
- Needs of priority populations
- Stigma and discrimination
- Poor information sharing
- System-related trauma
- Workforce considerations
- Victims and survivors of crime



How to read the recommended actions

All 68 recommended actions in the plan follow the same structure for easy use.

Recommended Action 4 *Create and scale up specialized mental health crisis intervention teams to respond to mental health and substance use crises in the community.*

What's needed to succeed

New models and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritized use of mental health professionals as first responders to connect individuals to community services, either independently or in collaboration with law enforcement when appropriate – with clearly defined roles for police and mental health professionals.
Funding and investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment in community-based alternatives to police responses for mental health and substance use crises – reallocating provincial, territorial, and municipal funds to community-based organizations.
Training and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training police in de-escalation, anti-racism, and anti-discrimination.
Clear pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear pathways to mental health facilities and wraparound community services, with a “no refusal” policy.
Equitable and safe approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration with Indigenous Elders, community leaders, communities, and others to develop culturally specific mental health crisis intervention teams that address community needs.
Real-world practices and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate Neighbourhood Crisis Response (ANCHOR) (Ottawa, Ontario): Non-police community-based response teams for residents experiencing mental health and/or substance use crises. Crisis Assistance Helping out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) (Eugene, Oregon, U.S.): Two-person teams consisting of a crisis worker and medic respond to 911 and non-emergency calls involving people in behavioural health crisis. Units deliver voluntary crisis intervention, counselling, mediation, information, and referral services as well as basic emergency medical care and other services. Police are engaged if a crime is in progress or a situation is life-threatening. Client-specific Intervention Team, Delta Police Department and Tsawwassen First Nation Community: Pairing of a police officer and an Indigenous counsellor to support individuals experiencing substance use issues. Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Model (international): Program staffed by officers with 40 hours of special training in mental health and de-escalation.

Each recommended action is numbered and starts with a concise statement of the change being called for.

Every recommended action requires certain conditions or enablers. These are listed under “What’s needed to succeed” and grouped categorically (e.g., “new models and tools”). These categories repeat throughout the plan, so someone interested in seeing all the places where funding is required can easily scan for them.

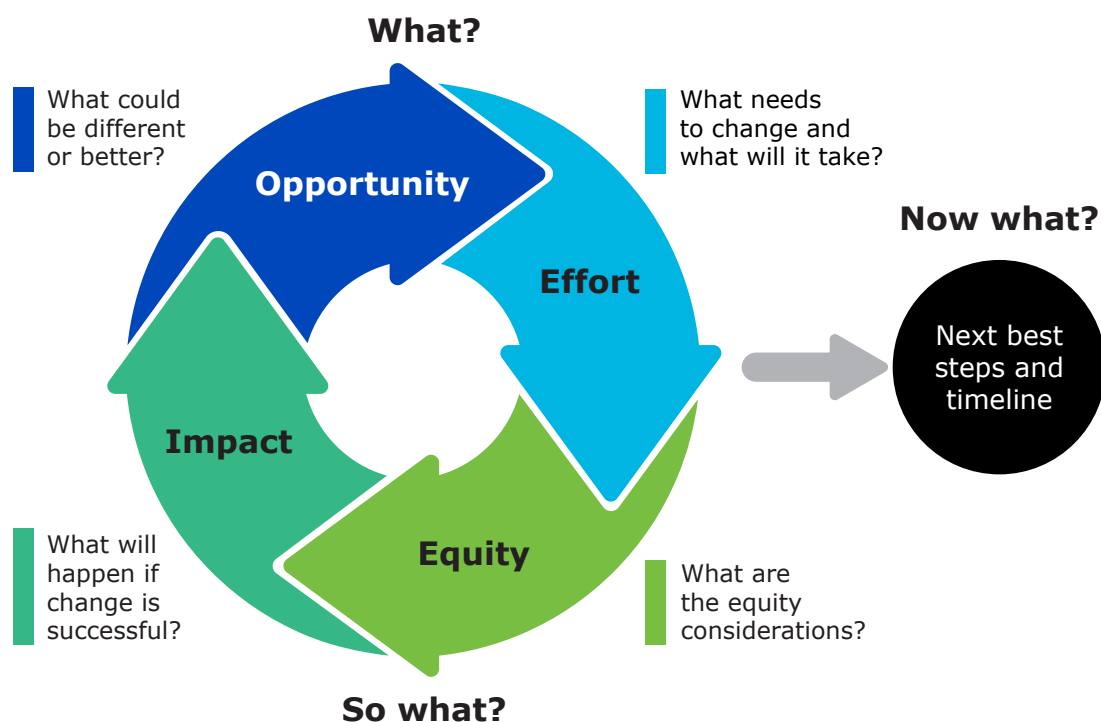
To support thinking about what implementation looks like, most recommended actions give real-world practices and resources as references. These are by no means comprehensive or complete listings but are meant to show how other groups or jurisdictions have taken similar steps or laid the foundation for further action.

Thinking about implementation

Implementing recommended actions from the plan may be straightforward or complex depending on what's recommended, the success factors required, regulatory or legal considerations, the need for consultation and consensus, and other issues. While it is beyond the scope of this guide to provide detailed implementation road maps for all 68 recommended actions, below is a simple framework to start the process.

■ Four building blocks

As the diagram below shows, thinking about implementation follows a four-part cycle:



1. Get clear on the **opportunity**— what can be changed?
2. Begin to think through the **effort** involved— what will it take to make the change happen?
3. Consider who will be affected by the change— how can **equity** be achieved?
4. Think about the potential **impact** of that change— what will be different if implementation succeeds?

This process should result in a clear identification of the best next steps and a sense of the timing required to implement them.



Question prompts

In each case, as the graphic shows, a few questions can kickstart the thinking process:

Opportunity

- Does this recommended action support system change or mainly target local improvements?
- To what extent is the system ready to implement this recommended action based on current capacity, leadership, and momentum?
- Are there existing pilot projects, programs, policies, or service models to build on, and can lessons from those be applied to scale this recommended action?

Effort

- What human, financial, technological, and infrastructural resources are needed to implement this recommended action?
- Who needs to be involved and is there clarity and alignment about roles, leadership, and values? What coalitions or collaborations are needed to advance implementation?

- Are legislative or policy changes required or are significant governance shifts needed to support implementation?
- What is the estimated timeline for implementation: short, medium, or long term?

Equity

- How will implementation of this recommended action reduce disparities and promote inclusion for the priority populations named in the action plan, especially those with intersecting identities?

Impact

- What is the potential short-, medium-, and long-term impact of this recommended action on public safety, health, and other outcomes?



Change is needed urgently and must proceed swiftly but can do so only with the cooperation and mutual participation of parties at all levels... [including] individuals involved with the criminal justice system, their families and loved ones, victims and survivors of crime, and other people with lived and living experience.

— Excerpts from the action plan

What's next

Publishing *Finding New Pathways: An Action Plan for Criminal Justice and Mental Health in Canada* was an important step forward in gathering together and setting down in practical terms the actions needed to make the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems better for people. But it was just one step.

Putting the recommended actions into action will be a years-long, collective process requiring effort from governments at all levels, correctional authorities, forensic mental health providers, criminal justice professionals, community organizations, and many others.

For its part, the Mental Health Commission of Canada continues to explore opportunities and partnerships to strengthen collaboration and drive collective momentum for implementation.

For more information about the action plan, associated resources, or ways to get involved, please contact:

justice@mentalhealthcommission.ca



Mental Health Commission of Canada
Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Financial contribution from



Health Canada
Santé Canada

Mental Health Commission of Canada

Suite 1210, 350 Albert Street
Ottawa, ON K1R 1A4

Tel: 613 683-3755
Fax: 613 798-2989

@MHCC_ /theMHCC
 /1MHCC @theMHCC @theMHCC
 /Mental Health Commission of Canada

mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca

www.mentalhealthcommission.ca

The views represented herein solely represent the views of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Production of this material is made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada.

ISBN: 978-1-77318-358-9