

When Extreme Beliefs Wreak Havoc: Managing Sovereign Citizen Ideology with Forensic Mental Health and Legal Settings

Sharon Howard, PhD

Level

Intermediate

Room

Track

Legal *Bias

CE

CPA/BBS/CJER/MCLE

Bio

Sharon Howard, PhD is a clinical and forensic psychologist in the Sacramento region who conducts forensic psychological evaluations for criminal, juvenile, and immigration courts. In addition to her assessment work, she enjoys training and mentoring other professionals regarding serious mental illness, extreme religious and political beliefs, psychological evaluations for immigration cases, and juvenile justice.

Narrative

Sovereign Citizen ideology is one form of extreme belief that presents within forensic mental health settings and is particularly problematic because adherents believe courts have no jurisdiction over them. This presentation begins with an explanation as to what Sovereign Citizens believe and how such beliefs have arisen from prior and current political movements and continue to morph and spread through online spaces and real-life adjacent social spaces. Clinicians will learn to distinguish Sovereign Citizen ideology (and other extreme beliefs) from delusional thinking, especially within the context of competency to stand trial evaluations. A case study will be presented and discussed in small groups. Since most Sovereign Citizens are found competent to stand trial and defense attorneys are required to represent them despite irrational and hostile thinking, some suggestions regarding building trust and cooperation with such defendants will be discussed, with accompanying opportunities to role-play difficult scenarios.

Learning Objectives

- Identify three key beliefs of the Sovereign Citizen ideology
- Describe the origins of Sovereign Citizen beliefs from prior political movements (Posse Comitatus, Common Law, Patriot) and how such beliefs continue to morph and spread within Christian Identity, vaccine protest, and QAnon spaces
- Differentiate Sovereign Citizen beliefs from delusional thinking, especially within the context of competency to stand trial evaluations

Identify three tactics for building trust and cooperation with Sovereign Citizen