



## Serious Mental Illness (SMI) Prevalence in Jails and Prisons

### SUMMARY

Serious mental illness has become so prevalent in the US corrections system that jails and prisons are now commonly called “the new asylums.” In point of fact, the Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago’s Cook County Jail, or the New York’s Riker’s Island Jail Complex each hold more mentally ill inmates than any remaining psychiatric hospital in the United States. Overall, approximately 20% of inmates in jails and 15% of inmates in state prisons are now estimated to have a serious mental illness. Based on the total inmate population, this means approximately 383,000 individuals with severe psychiatric disease were behind bars in the United States in 2014 or nearly 10 times the number of patients remaining in the nation’s state hospitals.

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### BACKGROUND

In 44 states, a jail or prison holds more mentally ill individuals than the largest remaining state psychiatric hospital; in every county in the United States with both a county jail and a county psychiatric facility, more seriously mentally ill individuals are incarcerated than hospitalized. A 2004–2005 survey found there were “more than three times more seriously mentally ill persons in jails and prisons than in hospitals.”

Torrey, E.F., Zdanowicz, M.T., Kennard, A.D., Lamb, H.R., Eslinger, D.F., Biasotti, M.I., Fuller, D.A. (2014). The treatment of persons with mental illness in prisons and jails: A state survey. Arlington, VA: Treatment Advocacy Center.

Torrey, E.F., Kennard, A.D., Eslinger, D.F., Lamb, H.R., Pavle, J. (2010). More mentally ill persons are in jails and prisons than hospitals: A survey of the states. Arlington, VA: Treatment Advocacy Center.

### SMI IN JAILS

A 2009 study based on inmate interviews conducted in Maryland and New York jails reported that within the month previous to the survey, 16.7% of the inmates (14.5% of males and 31% of females) had symptoms of a serious mental illness (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depression or brief psychotic disorder). However, 31% of the inmates who were asked to participate in the study refused, a subset that almost certainly included many individuals with paranoid schizophrenia. The interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2006. Given the continued growth of mental illness in the criminal justice system since that time and the high rate of refusers in the survey, it is reasonable to estimate that approximately 20% of jail inmates today have a serious mental illness.

Steadman, H.J., Osher, F.C., Robbins, P.C., Case, B., Samuels, S. (2009). Prevalence of serious mental illness among jail inmates. *Psychiatric Services*, 60(6), 761–765.



### SMI IN STATE PRISONS

The US Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2006 found that “an estimated 10% of state prisoners . . . reported symptoms that met criteria for a psychotic disorder.” Given the continued growth of mental illness in the criminal justice system since the DOJ data was collected in 2004, a prevalence rate 15% would appear to be conservative at this time.

James, D.J., Glaze, L.E. (2006). Mental health problems of prison and jail inmates. *Bureau of Justice Statistics*.

### SMI POPULATION ESTIMATES

- In 2014, there were 744,600 inmates in county and city jails. If 20% of them had a serious mental illness, jail inmates with severe psychiatric disease in US jails numbered approximately 149,000 that year. The number has grown since then.
- In 2014, there were 1,561,500 inmates in state prisons. If 15% of them had a serious mental illness, state prison inmates with severe psychiatric disease in state prisons numbered approximately 234,200 that year. The number has grown since then.
- Combining the estimated populations of jail and state prison inmates with serious mental illness produces an estimated population of 383,200 inmates with mental illness. Since there are only approximately 38,000 individuals with serious mental illness remaining in state mental hospitals, *this means 10 times more individuals with serious mental illness are in jails and state prisons than in the remaining state mental hospitals.*

Torrey, E.F., Zdanowicz, M.T., Kennard, A.D., Lamb, H.R., Eslinger, D.F., Biasotti, M.I., Fuller, D.A. (2014). The treatment of persons with mental illness in prisons and jails: A state survey. Arlington, VA: Treatment Advocacy Center.

Kaeble, D., Glaze, L., Tsoutis, A., Minton, T. (2016). Correctional populations in the United States, 2014. *Bureau of Justice Statistics*.

### MENTAL ILLNESS BEHIND BARS

- **Mentally ill inmates remain in jail longer than other inmates.**

In Florida’s Orange County Jail, the average stay for all inmates is 26 days; for mentally ill inmates, it is 51 days. In New York’s Riker’s Island, the average stay for all inmates is 42 days; for mentally ill inmates, it is 215 days.

The main reason mentally ill inmates are incarcerated longer than other prisoners is that many find it difficult to understand and follow jail and prison rules. In one study, jail inmates were twice as likely (19% versus 9%) to be charged with facility rule violations. In another study, in Washington State prisons, mentally ill inmates accounted for 41% of infractions even though they constituted only 19% of the prison population.



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Additionally, pretrial inmates with serious mental illness experience longer incarcerations than other inmates in many states if they require an evaluation or restoration of competency to stand trial. A survey of state hospital officials in 2015 found that 78% of the 40 responding states were wait-listing pretrial inmates for hospital services. The waits were “in the 30-day range” in most states, but three states reported forensic bed waits of six months to one year. Mentally ill inmates in some states are reported to spend more time waiting for competency restoration so they can be tried than they would spend behind bars convicted of the offense for which they have been charged.

Council of State Governments (2002). *Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project*.

Butterfield, F. (2003, October 22). Study finds hundreds of thousands of inmates mentally ill. *New York Times*.

Fuller, D.A., Sinclair, E., Geller, J., Quanbeck, C., Snook, J. (2016). *Going, going, gone: Trends and consequences of eliminating state psychiatric beds, 2016*. Arlington, VA: Treatment Advocacy Center.

- **Incarcerating mentally ill inmates is costly.**

Mentally ill inmates cost more than other prisoners for a variety of reasons, including increased staffing needs. In Broward County, Florida in 2007, it cost \$80 a day to house a regular inmate but \$130 a day for an inmate with mental illness. In Texas prisons in 2003, a study reports, “the average prisoner costs the state about \$22,000 a year,” but “prisoners with mental illness range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year.” Psychiatric medications are a significant part of the increased costs. The cost of settling or losing lawsuits stemming from the treatment of mentally ill inmates also can add to the costs.

Miller, C.M., Fantz, A. (2007, November 15). Special “psych” jails planned, *Miami Herald*.

Bender, E. (2003). Community treatment more humane, reduces criminal-justice costs, *Psychiatric News*, 38, 28.

Gottschlich, A.J., Cetnar, G. (2002, August 20). Drug bills at jail top food costs. *Springfield News Sun*.

- **Mentally ill inmates create behavioral management problems.**

Because of their impaired thinking, many inmates with serious mental illnesses present behavioral management problems. This is a contributing factor to their heavy over-representation in the subset of prisoners in solitary confinement. In Wisconsin, for example, a 2010 audit of three state prisons reported that “between 55% and 76% of inmates in segregation [isolation] are mentally ill.

News reports often focus a spotlight the resulting problems. In Mississippi’s Hinds County Jail in 2005, one inmate was described as having “tore up a damn padded cell that’s indestructible, and he ate the cover of the damn padded cell. We took his clothes and gave him a paper suit to wear, and he ate that. When they fed him food in a Styrofoam container, he ate that. We had his stomach pumped six times, and he’s been operated on twice.”

Mitchell, J. (2009, January 25). Treatment, not jail, urged for mentally ill in Miss. *Jackson Clarion Ledger*.



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Ridgeway, J., Casella, J. (2010, February 24). Locking down the mentally ill. The Real Cost of Prisons Weblog.

AbuDagga, A., Wolfe, S., Carome, M., Phatdouang, A., Torrey, E.F. (2016). Individuals with serious mental illnesses in county jails: A survey of jail staff's perspectives. Public Citizen and the Treatment Advocacy Center.

- **Mentally ill inmates are more likely to commit suicide.**

Suicide is the leading cause of death in correctional facilities, and multiple studies indicate as many as half of all inmate suicides are committed by the estimated 15 % to 20% of inmates with serious mental illness. A 2002 study in the state of Washington found that “the prevalence of mental illness among inmates who attempted suicide was 77%, compared with 15% [among inmates] in the general jail population.” In California in 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* headlined: “Jail Suicides Reach Record Pace in State,” and added: “Some experts blame the recent surge on forcing more of the mentally ill behind bars.”

Goss, J.R., Peterson, K., Smith, L.W., Kalb, K., Brodey, B.B. (2002). Characteristics of suicide attempts in a large urban jail system with an established suicide prevention program. *Psychiatric Services*, 53, 574–579.

Johnson, J. (2002, June 16). Jail suicides reach record pace in state. *Los Angeles Times*.