The Health Status of Soon-To-Be-Released Inmates

A Report to Congress
Volume 1
The Health Status of
Soon-To-Be-Released
Inmates

Volume 1

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This report fulfills the reporting requirements of Public Law 104–208 as set forth in the Conference Reports for HR 3610 and HR 3814.
Preface

Through the mid-1990s, a number of studies, limited in scope, found a higher prevalence of certain infectious diseases, chronic diseases, and mental illness among prison and jail inmates. Further, each year the Nation’s prisons and jails release more than 11.5 million inmates. The potential that ex-offenders may be contributing to the spread of infectious disease in the community became of increasing concern. In addition, as these ex-offenders’ diseases get worse, society may have to pay substantially more to treat them than if these conditions had been treated at an earlier stage—or prevented altogether—while these individuals were still incarcerated.

In 1997 Congress instructed the U.S. Department of Justice to determine whether these concerns were well founded and, if so, to recommend solutions. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research arm of the Department of Justice, entered into a cooperative agreement with the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) to study the problem. The Health Status of Soon-To-Be-Released Inmates report is the result of that research.

The NCCHC commissioned a series of papers (summarized in volume 1 of this report and provided in full in volume 2) that documents indisputably that tens of thousands of inmates are being released into the community every year with undiagnosed or untreated communicable disease, chronic disease, and mental illness. Another set of commissioned papers clearly shows that it not only would be cost effective to treat several of these diseases, but in several instances, it would even save money in the long run.

The report concludes with policy recommendations designed to improve disease prevention, screening, and treatment programs in prisons and jails. The recommendations have been carefully crafted. First, they are based on a consensus among a number of the Nation’s leading experts in correctional health care and public health. Second, they propose interventions for which there is strong, and in many cases overwhelming, scientific evidence of therapeutic effectiveness. Third, they reflect a realistic consideration of what correctional systems can reasonably be expected to accomplish.

There are serious political, logistical, and financial barriers to improving health services in prisons and jails. As documented in this report, however, a number of jurisdictions have found ways to overcome some of these barriers, often through collaborations with public health departments and national or community-based organizations.

Prisons and jails offer a unique opportunity to establish better disease control in the community by providing improved health care and disease prevention to inmates before they are released. Implementing the recommendations in this carefully researched report will go a long way toward taking advantage of this opportunity and contribute significantly to improving the health of both inmates and the larger community.

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A steering committee coordinated the work and provided expert guidance to this project.

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# Contents

Preface .................................................................................................................................................. iii

Executive Summary .............................................................................................................................. ix
  Introduction ................................................................................................................................. ix
  History of the Project ................................................................................................................... ix
  Prevalence of Communicable Disease, Chronic Disease, and Mental Illness .................................. x
  Improving Correctional Health Care: A Unique Opportunity to Protect Public Health ....................... xii
  Corrections’ Mixed Record of Compliance With National Clinical Guidelines .................................... xii
  Cost-Effectiveness of Prevention, Screening, and Treatment of Disease Among Inmates ...................... xiii
  Barriers to Effective Prevention, Screening, and Treatment—and Overcoming Them .......................... xiv
  Policy Recommendations ............................................................................................................ xv
  Notes ........................................................................................................................................... xix

1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 1
  Organization of the Report ............................................................................................................ 1
  Problem of Untreated Prison and Jail Inmates .................................................................................. 2
  Window of Opportunity ................................................................................................................ 4
  Preventing and Treating Disease in Prisons and Jails Are Cost Effective ........................................... 4
  Need for Scientific Data on Inmate Health ........................................................................................... 5
  Notes .............................................................................................................................................. 5

2. History of the Project ...................................................................................................................... 9
  Steering Committee ....................................................................................................................... 9
  Expert Panels .................................................................................................................................. 9
  Prison Survey .................................................................................................................................. 10
  Commissioned Papers ................................................................................................................... 11
  Need for Further Research .............................................................................................................. 12
  Notes .............................................................................................................................................. 12

3. Prevalence of Communicable Disease, Chronic Disease, and Mental Illness Among the Inmate Population ................................................................................................................................. 15
  Communicable Disease ................................................................................................................... 15
  Chronic Disease ............................................................................................................................. 20
  Mental Illness ................................................................................................................................ 22
  Notes .............................................................................................................................................. 26

4. Improving Correctional Health Care: A Unique Opportunity to Protect Public Health ....................... 29
  Current State of Correctional Prevention, Screening, and Treatment Programs ................................. 29
  Corrections’ Mixed Record of Compliance With National Guidelines .................................................. 31
  Implications: A Significant Opportunity to Intervene ......................................................................... 32
  Notes .............................................................................................................................................. 33
5. Cost-Effectiveness of Prevention, Screening, and Treatment of Disease Among Inmates

Cost-Effectiveness of Prevention, Screening, and Treatment
Communicable Disease
Chronic Disease
Moving Beyond Cost-Effectiveness
Conclusion
Notes

6. Barriers to Prevention, Screening, and Treatment—and Overcoming Them

Barriers to Improved Prevention, Screening, and Treatment
Solutions
Conclusion
Notes

7. Policy Recommendations

Background to the Policy Recommendations
Policy Recommendations
Recommended Actions by Government Agencies
Bibliography
Notes

Appendixes

Appendix A NCCHC/NIJ Project Participants, Author/Experts, Consultants
Appendix B Biographies of Contributors
Appendix C Prevalence of Chronic Diseases and Chronic Mental Disorders in Prisons: NCCHC/NIJ Survey Instrument
Appendix D Sample Draft Clinical Guidelines
Appendix E Information About the National Commission on Correctional Health Care and Its Position Statements

List of Tables

Table 3–1 National Estimates of Selected Infectious Diseases Among Inmates and Releasees and Prevalence in U.S. Population
Table 3–2 National Estimates of Prevalence of Three Chronic Diseases Among Inmates in Prisons and Jails and in the Total U.S. Population, 1995
Table 3–3 National Estimates of Six Psychiatric Disorders Among Prison and Jail Inmates and Prevalence in U.S. Population, 1995
Table 4–1 States Reporting Systemwide Treatment Protocols for Chronic Disease \((n = 41)\)
List of Figures

Figure 3–1 Releasees With Selected Infectious Diseases as a Proportion of the Total U.S. Population With Each Disease, 1996

Figure 3–2 National Estimates of Prevalence of Three Chronic Diseases Among Inmates in Prisons and Jails and in the Total U.S. Population, 1995

Figure 3–3 Jails: Estimated Prevalence of Six Mental Illnesses Among Inmates in 1995 Compared With Prevalence Rates for the Total U.S. Population in the Early 1990s

Figure 3–4 State Prisons: Estimated Prevalence of Six Mental Illnesses Among Inmates in 1995 Compared With Lifetime Prevalence Rates for the Total U.S. Population in the Early 1990s

Figure 3–5 Federal Prisons: Estimated Prevalence of Six Mental Illnesses Among Inmates in 1995 Compared With Lifetime Prevalence Rates for the Total U.S. Population in the Early 1990s