

THE HEALTH STATUS OF SOON-TO-BE-RELEASED INMATES

A Report to Congress
Volume 2

National Commission on
Correctional Health Care



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

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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	vii
Survey	
Health Care for Soon-To-Be-Released Inmates: A Survey of State Prison Systems	1
<i>Carlton A. Hornung, B. Jaye Anno, Robert B. Greifinger, and Soniya Gadre</i>	
Prevalence Studies	
The Burden of Infectious Disease Among Inmates and Releasees From Correctional Facilities	13
<i>Theodore M. Hammett, Patricia Harmon, and William Rhodes</i>	
A Projection Model of the Prevalence of Selected Chronic Diseases in the Inmate Population	39
<i>Carlton A. Hornung, Robert B. Greifinger, and Soniya Gadre</i>	
Prevalence Estimates of Psychiatric Disorders in Correctional Settings	57
<i>Bonita M. Veysey and Gisela Bichler-Robertson</i>	
Cost-Effectiveness Studies	
Cost-Effectiveness of Routine Screening for Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among Inmates in United States Prisons and Jails	81
<i>Julie R. Kraut, Anne C. Haddix, Vilma Carande-Kulis, and Robert B. Greifinger</i>	
Cost-Effectiveness of Preventing Tuberculosis in Prison Populations (overhead slides)	109
<i>Zachary Taylor and Cristy Nguyen</i>	
Cost-Effectiveness of HIV Counseling and Testing in U.S. Prisons	125
<i>Beena Varghese and Thomas A. Peterman</i>	
What Is the Value of Immunizing Prison Inmates Against Hepatitis B? (overhead slides)	135
<i>Robert Lyerla</i>	
Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of Annual Screening and Intensive Treatment for Hypertension and Diabetes Mellitus Among Prisoners in the United States	141
<i>Donna M. Tomlinson and Clyde B. Schechter</i>	
Providing Psychiatric Services in Correctional Settings	157
<i>Bonita M. Veysey and Gisela Bichler-Robertson</i>	

Other Commissioned Paper

Communicable Diseases in Inmates: Public Health Opportunities 167
Jonathan Shuter

Appendixes

Appendix A: NCCHC/NIJ Project Participants, Author/Experts, Consultants 203
Appendix B: Biographies of Contributors 207
Appendix C: Information About the National Commission on Correctional Health Care and
Its Position Statements 221