

Contagious Inmates are Threat to Public Health

Despite the fact that prisons have the ability to exert substantial control over the lives of inmates, they have failed to provide the level of health care necessary to protect the public against such deadly infectious diseases as hepatitis, HIV, and tuberculosis. Furthermore they have failed to adequately address mental illnesses and chronic diseases, potential sources of social problems once inmates suffering from these disorders are released.

According to a report commissioned by Congress and produced as a joint project of the National Institute of Justice and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC), many state prisons and jails are not following Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations to screen for infectious diseases, nor are they complying with “nationally accepted guidelines for chronic disease and mental illness.” Although “more than 90 percent of State and Federal prisons, and about half of jails, routinely screen at intake for latent TB infection and active TB disease,” screening for other contagious or chronic diseases is spotty at best. In 1982 the CDC advised that “all long-term inmates” be vaccinated against hepatitis B; “few state systems have implemented vaccination programs. Few states have comprehensive HIV prevention programs in place, even though AIDS is estimated to be five times as prevalent in correctional facilities as in the general population in the U.S.

NCCHC estimates that hundred of thousands of inmates in U.S. correctional systems suffer from chronic diseases and mental illnesses. Asthma, diabetes, and hypertension affect as many as a half-million inmates. Between 2 and 4 percent of prison inmates suffer from psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia. “Over 18 percent have major depression and between 22 and 30 percent have an anxiety disorder.” The state correctional systems are not adequately addressing these health problems. Roughly one-half of the state correctional systems reported having protocols in place for diabetes, hypertension, or asthma. NCCHC found a number of the existing protocols out-dated or inadequate.

More than 11.5 million inmates were released in 1998. The potential for bringing serious health problems into the community should be obvious. Failure to diagnose and treat inmates can threaten the public health.

Source: PR Newswire (US), “Poor Health Status of Prison Inmates A Threat to Public Health,” January 28, 2003.

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