



Global Mental Health: Prisoners and Mental Health

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An inmate with mental health conditions in the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in Los Angeles, California.

It is estimated that 9 million people are imprisoned worldwide (Fazel & Danesh, 2002). Seena Fazel and John Danesh examined 62 surveys from 12 Western countries that examined mental disorders in 22,790 prisoners. They found that prisoners in comparison with the general population were several times more likely to have a psychotic disorder and major depression and 10 times more likely to have an antisocial personality disorder. Specifically, they found that 3.7% of the men had a psychotic illness, 10% had major depression, and 65% had a personality disorder. Among female prisoners, they found that 4% had a psychotic illness, 10% had major depression, and 42% had a personality disorder. Overall, this suggests that 1 in 7 prisoners in Western countries

have psychotic illness or major depression. About 1 in 2 male prisoners and 1 in 5 female prisoners have antisocial personality disorder. Unfortunately, mental health data in prisons in many countries such as those of Latin America are underestimated for lack of scientific studies (Almanzar, Katz, & Harry, 2015).

In the United States, there are now more than 3 times more seriously mentally ill individuals in jails and prisons than in hospitals (Torrey et al., 2010). This varies by state, with Arizona and Nevada having almost 10 times more mentally ill individuals in jails and prisons than hospitals, whereas North Dakota has a nearly equal number.

Placing individuals who commit crimes in jail does serve a societal function. Particular mental disorders, such as psychopathy, are strongly associated with a high risk for criminal and violent behavior. However, there are individuals with a mental disorder who are jailed merely because a particular community does not want them on their streets, or as a means of protecting those individuals with a mental disorder from becoming victims of crime themselves. Many believe that society is not being served well by using jails and prisons as a place to put individuals with mental disorders who have not committed a crime.

Thought Question: What are possible alternatives that a society might consider rather than using prisons as a place to put those with a mental illness?