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Inmates Report Mental Illness at High Levels

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

More than half the inmates in the country's prisons and jails reported mental health problems within the last year, according to a Justice Department survey released yesterday.

The findings, based on a sample of about 25,000 inmates, were drawn from personal interviews and prisoners' own reports of symptoms, psychiatric treatments or medications.

The figures are higher than reported in past studies because inmates describing any symptoms of problems like major depression or mania were counted along with those with diagnosed psychiatric disorders, said Fred Osher, director of health systems at the Council on State Governments. Further evaluations would be required to make an official diagnosis of a mental illness.

Still, Dr. Osher said, the findings "underscore what every prison administrator knows — that large numbers of individuals with mental health problems are cycling through their facilities." Correctional institutions have given increased attention to mental health treatment in recent years, he said, but the new findings highlight the need for intensive screening.

The findings also suggest the need to connect released prisoners with mental health treatment in the community, a goal of the emerging "re-entry" movement that tries to prevent ex-convicts from returning to prison. Prisoners with mental health problems were more likely to have had repeated incarcerations and substance abuse problems and to have been homeless, the study found.

Separate findings were reported for state prisons, where 56 percent of inmates were found to have mental health problems; federal prisons, where the figure was 45 percent; and jails, where it was 64 percent. The figure may be higher for jails, the report said, because they often hold mentally ill prisoners temporarily before they are moved to psychiatric facilities.

Women reported higher rates of mental health problems than men, and whites had higher rates than black and Hispanic inmates.

One in three state prisoners, one in four federal prisoners and one in six jail prisoners had received some form of mental health treatment, often medication, during their current incarceration, the study said.

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