

# How Many Individuals with Serious Mental Illness are in Jails and Prisons?

(updated November 2014)

**SUMMARY:** Approximately 20 percent of inmates in jails and 15 percent of inmates in state prisons have a serious mental illness. Based on the total number of inmates, this means that there are approximately 356,000 inmates with serious mental illness in jails and state prisons. This is 10 times more than the approximately 35,000 individuals with serious mental illness remaining in state hospitals.

Torrey EF, Zdanowicz MT, Kennard AD et al. The treatment of persons with mental illness in prisons and jails: A state survey. Arlington, VA, Treatment Advocacy Center, April 8, 2014.

- *How many individuals with serious mental illness are in jails?*  
A study published in 2009, based on inmate interviews in jails in Maryland and New York, reported that 16.7 percent of the inmates (14.5 percent of males and 31 percent of females) had symptoms of a serious mental illness (schizophrenia, schizo-affective, bipolar disorder, major depression, brief psychotic disorder) within the previous month. However, another 31 percent of the inmates who were asked to participate in the study refused; this group almost certainly included many individuals with paranoid schizophrenia. Since the situation has gotten worse since the interviews in this study were done between 2002 and 2006, and given the high rate of refusers, it seems reasonable to estimate that at this time approximately 20 percent of jail inmates have a serious mental illness.

Steadman, HJ, Osher, FC, Robbins, PC et al., Prevalence of serious mental illness among jail inmates. *Psychiatric Services*. 2009; 60: 761-765.

- *How many individuals with serious mental illness are in state prisons?*  
A 2006 survey carried out by the U.S. Department of Justice reported that “an estimated 10 percent of State prisoners...reported symptoms that met criteria for a psychotic disorder.” This survey was based on 2004 data and the situation has gotten worse since then. Thus, 15 percent would appear a conservative estimate.

James, DJ, Glaze, LE. Mental health problems of prison and jail inmates. Special Report, Bureau of Justice Statistics. September 2006. NCJ 213600.

- In 2012 there were 744,524 inmates in county and city jails. If 20 percent of them had a serious mental illness, that would make a total of approximately 149,000 jail inmates with a serious mental illness.
- In 2011 there were 1,382,418 inmates in state prisons. If 15 percent of them had a serious mental illness, that would make a total of approximately 207,000 state prison inmates with a serious mental illness.

- If the number of jail and state prison inmates with a serious mental illness were added together, they total approximately 356,000 inmates. Since there are only approximately 35,000 individuals with serious mental illness remaining in state mental hospitals, *there are now 10 times more individuals with serious mental illness in jails and state prisons than there are in state mental hospitals.*

Torrey, EF, Zdanowicz, MT, Kennard, AD et al. The treatment of persons with mental illness in prisons and jails: a state survey. Treatment Advocacy Center and National Sheriff's Association, April 8, 2014.

- The nation's jails and prisons have replaced hospitals as the primary facility for mentally ill individuals.

There are more seriously mentally ill individuals in the Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago's Cook County Jail, or New York's Riker's Island Jail than in any psychiatric hospital in the United States. In fact, in every county in the US that has both a county jail and a county psychiatric facility, the jail has more seriously mentally ill individuals. A 2004–2005 survey reported that there were “more than three times more seriously mentally ill persons in jails and prisons than in hospitals.”

Torrey EF, Kennard AD, Eslinger D et al. *More Mentally Ill Persons Are in Jails and Prisons than Hospitals: A Survey of the States* (Arlington, Va.: Treatment Advocacy Center, 2010).

- The average stay for mentally ill inmates in jail is longer than for non-mentally ill inmates. In Florida's Orange County Jail, the average stay for all inmates is 26 days; for mentally ill inmates, it is 51 days. In New York's Riker's Island Jail, the average stay for all inmates is 42 days; for mentally ill inmates, it is 215 days. The main reason mentally ill inmates stay longer is that many find it difficult to understand and follow jail and prison rules. In one study, jail inmates were twice as likely (19 percent versus 9 percent) to be charged with facility rule violations. In another study in the Washington State prisons, mentally ill inmates accounted for 41 percent of infractions even though they constituted only 19 percent of the prison population. Another reason mentally ill inmates stay longer is that they are often held for months awaiting the availability of a bed in a psychiatric hospital.

Jails and mental illness, Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project, [http://consensusproject.org/infocenter/factsheets/fafct\\_jails](http://consensusproject.org/infocenter/factsheets/fafct_jails), last accessed April 3, 2006.

Turner C, Ethical issues in criminal justice administration, *American Jails*, January/February 2007.

Butterfield F. Study finds hundreds of thousands of inmates mentally ill, *New York Times*, October 22, 2003.

- Mentally ill inmates cost more. Mentally ill inmates cost more than non-mentally ill inmates for a variety of reasons, including increased staffing needs. In Broward County, Florida, it costs \$80 a day to house a regular inmate but \$130 a day for an inmate with mental illness. In Texas prisons “the average prisoner costs the state about \$22,000 a year,” but “prisoners with mental illness range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year.” Psychiatric medications are a significant part of the increased costs; in July of 2002 at Ohio's Clark County Jail, prescription drugs costs for inmates exceeded the costs of feeding inmates. Finally, there is the cost of an increasing number of lawsuits, such as the suit brought in New Jersey in 2006 by the family of a “65-year-old mentally ill stockbroker [who was] stomped to death in the Camden County Jail.”

Miller CM, Fantz A. Special “psych” jails planned, *Miami Herald*, November 15, 2007.

Bender E. Community treatment more humane, reduces criminal-justice costs, *Psychiatric News* 2003;38:28.

Gottschlich AJ, Cetnar G. Drug bills at jail top food costs, *Springfield [OH] News Sun*, August 20, 2002.

Guenther A. Family sues Camco over prisoner’s death, *[NJ] Courier Post*, June 14, 2006.

- Mentally ill inmates are often major management problems. Because of their impaired thinking, many inmates with serious mental illnesses are major management problems. For example, in 2005 in Mississippi’s Hinds County Jail, one inmate was described as having “tore up a damn padded cell that’s indestructible, and he ate the cover of the damn padded cell. We took his clothes and gave him a paper suit to wear, and he ate that. When they fed him food in a styrofoam container, he ate that. We had his stomach pumped six times, and he’s been operated on twice.” In Wisconsin a 2010 audit of three state prisons reported that “between 55 percent and 76 percent of inmates in segregation [isolation] are mentally ill.”

Mitchell J. Treatment, not jail, urged for mentally ill in Miss., *Jackson [MS] Clarion Ledger*, January 25, 2009.

Ridgeway J, Casella J. Locking down the mentally ill, The Real Cost of Prisons Weblog, February 24, 2010, [http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2010/02/locking\\_down\\_th.html](http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2010/02/locking_down_th.html), last accessed April 28, 2011.

- Mentally ill inmates are more likely to commit suicide. Multiple studies have shown that approximately half of all inmate suicides are committed by inmates who are seriously mentally ill. A 2002 study in Washington State reported that “the prevalence of mental illness among inmates who attempted suicide was 77 percent, compared with 15 percent [among inmates] in the general jail population.” In California in 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* headlined: “Jail Suicides Reach Record Pace in State,” and added: “Some experts blame the recent surge on forcing more of the mentally ill behind bars.”

Goss JR, Peterson K, Smith LW et al. Characteristics of suicide attempts in a large urban jail system with an established suicide prevention program, *Psychiatric Services* 2002;53:574–579.

Johnson J. Jail suicides reach record pace in state, *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2002.