

Prison issues



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While prisons house a number a social outcast, misfits and some all around dangerous people, they face a number of problems as well. The prison agencies are taking steps to deal with health threats from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The Justice Department reported that twenty-two thousand four hundred eighty state and federal inmates were infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS. Another issue prisons are facing is dealing with geriatric offenders; the significant expansion of America's retiree population has led to an increase in the number of elderly people who are behind bars.

Mentally ill inmates make up another group with social needs; some are neurotic or have personality problems, which increase tensions in prison. Prisons provide a part of the answer to the question of crime control; they also face problems of their own. The incidence of HIV infection among the general population stands at one hundred-forty cases per one hundred thousand, according to a great report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among inmates, estimates place the reported HIV-infection rate at five hundred-ten cases per one hundred thousand—more than three times as great.

At one point, AIDS was the leading cause of death among prison inmates. Presently, the number of inmates who die from AID (or AIDS-related complications like pneumonia or Kaposi's sarcoma) is much lower. The introduction of drugs like protease inhibitors and useful combinations of antiretroviral therapies has reduced inmate deaths from AIDS by seventy-five percent since 1995. Most infected inmates brought the HIV virus into

prison with them; fewer than ten percent of HIV-positive acquired the virus into prison.

The virus can be spread behind bars through homosexual activity (including rape), intravenous drug use, and the sharing of tainted tattoo and hypodermic needles. Inmates who were infected before entering prison are likely to have had histories of high-risk behavior, especially intravenous drug use. Crimes committed by the elderly, especially violent crimes, have recently been on the decline. However, crimes of violence are what bring most older people into the correctional system. Fifty-two percent of inmates who were over the age of fifty when they entered prison had committed violent crimes, compared with forty-one of younger inmates.

On January 1, 2007, seventy-six thousand-five hundred inmates age fifty-five or older were housed in state and federal prisons. The rate of incarceration for inmates age fifty-five and over now stands at two hundred thirty-one per one hundred thousand residents of like age, until very recently had steadily increased. Not all of today's elderly inmates were old when they entered prison. Because of harsh sentencing laws passed throughout the country in the 1990's, a small but growing number of inmates will serve twenty years or more in prison, and five percent will never be released.

Meaning many inmates who enter prison when they are young will grow old behind bars. Inmates suffering from significant mental illness account for a substantial number of those imprisoned. Some inmates have serious psychological disorders that may have escaped diagnosis at trial or that did not provide a legal basis for the reduction of criminal responsibility. A good

number of offenders develop psychiatric symptoms while in prison. Few state-run correctional institutions have any substantial capacity for the in-depth psychiatric treatment of inmates who are seriously mentally disturbed.

A number of states do operate facilities that specialize in psychiatric confinement of convicted criminals. Some studies estimate the proportion of mentally deficient inmates at about ten percent. Inmates with low IQs are less likely than others to complete training and rehabilitative programs successfully. They also exceed the averages in proportion of served. Only seven states report special facilities or programs for related inmates. Other states systems "mainstream" such inmates, making them participate in regular activities with other inmates.