

Connecticut Sentencing Commission 2022 Study on Mental Illness in the Incarcerated Population

Background

On September 4, 2019, Senator Cathy Osten requested the Sentencing Commission undertake a study on mental illness in Connecticut's incarcerated population. The Commission formed a subcommittee on mental health and in July 2020, the group published a [Memorandum on Mental Health Care Need Classifications in Connecticut's Incarcerated Population](#). The publication detailed the Department of Correction's (DOC) intake, classification, and treatment processes regarding mental illness.

The memorandum also analyzed the distributions of the DOC's five-point mental health needs classification scale. Using this classification data, the memo found that in 2020, over 28% of the incarcerated population had a mental illness requiring active treatment. An additional 40% of incarcerated people were classified as having a history of mental illness but not requiring active treatment. Larger portions of those unsentenced were documented as having a mental illness requiring treatment compared to the portion of sentenced population.

The memorandum also identified potential avenues for future research. In particular, the report noted that, in order to answer the first prong of Senator Osten's request, the Commission would require data on the specific mental health diagnoses prevalent in the incarcerated population. Over the following year and a half, the Commission worked with the DOC to obtain this diagnostic data from the DOC electronic medical record (EMR) system. Earlier this year, the DOC provided the Commission with anonymized diagnosis data paired with classification variables from the DOC's administrative database. The Commission is now working on the 2022 study.

Research Objectives

1. Describe the mental health care system at the Department of Correction.
2. Synthesize existing research on the prevalence of mental health diagnoses in carceral settings in Connecticut and nationally.
3. Analyze the distribution of mental health need classifications in Connecticut's incarcerated population as of 2022 and how they vary across gender, race, and legal status.
4. Analyze the incidence and distribution of different types of mental health diagnoses in Connecticut's incarcerated population and how they vary across gender, race, and legal status.
5. Analyze how the DOC's mental health need classifications interact with specific diagnosis types.

6. To the degree possible, analyze the correlation between mental health diagnoses and offense severity, sentence length, and/or parole eligibility.
7. Analyze interactions between the mental health of incarceration individuals and substance abuse treatment needs.
8. Outline next steps for further study of mental illness among the incarcerated population and among the supervised population on probation and parole.

Methodology

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the Connecticut Sentencing Commission will partner with mental health experts to conduct a 2022 study. The first parts of the study will achieve objective one and two through a literature review of related research on the mental health disorders in incarcerated populations in Connecticut and nationally.

The remaining parts of the project will involve various quantitative analyzes of the data provided by the Department of Correction. These statistical analyses will be primarily descriptive, looking to identify patterns and correlations in the data. Cross-tabulations will also be used to identify how different variables, such as mental health diagnosis and crime severity, interact.

Part 1: Description of the Mental Healthcare System at the Department of Correction

This part of the report will describe the mental health services and treatment for the incarcerated population in Connecticut.

Part 2: Literature Review

To contextualize the Commission's research in this area, the committee will consult existing literature on mental illness in carceral settings. Literature to be consulted may include prior studies on the incidence of certain mental health disorders in prisons and studies on the relationship among mental illness, sentence length, time served, release eligibility, race, gender, crime severity, legal status (sentenced v. unsentenced), and/or substance abuse disorders.

Part 3: Mental Health Needs Classification

This portion of the report will reconduct the analysis from Part II of the Commission's 2020 study with the new 2022 data. This section will evaluate the distribution of the DOC's mental health classifications across the current incarcerated population, and cross-tabulate those scores along gender, race, and legal status (unsentenced, sentenced, "other"). Statistical tests, such as t and chi-square tests, will be used to measure the statistical significance of any

observed differences. This section will also identify any changes in the distribution of these scores since the 2020 report, but any explanations about shifts in these scores over time will necessarily be speculative.

Parts 4-6: Mental Health Diagnoses

This portion will analyze mental health diagnoses in the incarcerated population. Specifically, Commission staff, aided by committee members experienced in clinical psychiatry, will classify the various diagnosis codes and descriptions in the DOC data into a workable number of diagnosis categories. The Commission will then perform various statistical analyses on the distribution of various diagnosis categories across the incarcerated population. Diagnosis categories¹ will then be cross-tabulated against race, gender, and legal status. After this, the Commission will cross-tabulate diagnosis categories against the five-point mental health need classification scores to identify which diagnoses drive the most severe mental health treatment needs in the population.

The Commission will next analyze relationships between mental health needs classifications or diagnoses categories and various sentencing-related trends. The Commission will analyze whether there are differences in mental health diagnoses or needs scores for individuals who are (1) convicted of more serious crimes, (2) ineligible/85%-eligible for parole, (3) serving longer sentences, or (4) further along in their sentence.

Parts 7: Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment Needs

The Commission will compare the population's mental health and substance abuse treatment needs. The Commission will measure what percentage of the population has been identified as requiring both mental health and substance abuse treatment and will cross-tabulate the DOC's five-point mental health needs score against its five-point substance abuse treatment score. The Commission may further analyze the substance abuse treatment score across race, gender, and legal status.

Part 8: Next Steps

Lastly, the report will clearly outline the next steps for further analysis of mental illness in incarcerated population, and mental health of people involved in the criminal justice system out in the community.

Deliverables

Commission staff, in conjunction with various academic and community-based partners, will draft and publish a report on the above study. This report will be published on the Commission

¹ As needed, the Commission might choose to perform these subsequent cross-tab analyses with a few of the most-prevalent diagnoses categories, rather than all diagnosis categories generally.

website and sent to Senator Osten. Those supporting this project might further submit a version of this study for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

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