

Women Health Care in Correctional Settings Op-Ed

By Mariana Mejia-Benitez

How important is it to acknowledge the care women need in general, but mainly when they are behind bars? In the United States, the number of women in prison has risen and yet prison healthcare has not kept up with the needs of residents in general, nor the needs of women residents specifically. Many facilities do not have the proper resources or know the different care women need. The lack of attention women receive in a correctional setting is disturbing because it all begins with their living conditions and how unsanitary many facilities are. Outside of prison, individuals may go to the doctors for yearly check-ups or when they are not feeling good, they can search for a doctor with a particular specialty, and shop around to find the medical provider that best meets their needs. The same is not true for people who are in prison and yet incarcerated women have some of the highest needs for medical and mental health care. They are indeed a population ignored and forgotten. Women in prison have very few resources for healthcare and very little recourse if healthcare is not provided.

The Diseases Women in Prison Experience

Before women are admitted into prisons and jails, they must go through some medical exams for any signs of illness and to offer them the services they might need while they are serving their time. Women entering correctional facilities have high rates of STIs. For example, a Rhode Island study found that 33% of women tested positive for an STI at admission, including 26% with trichomoniasis (Willers et al., 2008). Rates of gonorrhea as high as 3% (Javanbakht et al., 2014) and chlamydia as high as 14% (Willers et al., 2008) have been reported. The prevalence of HIV among incarcerated women was 1.3% in 2015 (Maruschak & Bronson, 2017) (NCCHC 2021). Most of these diseases are nonsexually transmitted and can occur via poor personal hygiene or living conditions within the prisons if maintaining a clean setting is not a priority for the facilities in which women are staying at. There are other illnesses like cancers that make it difficult for affected residents to get the right treatment they need or handle their symptoms. Incarcerated women tend to have complicated and high-risk pregnancies due to their past medical histories, lack of prenatal care, and drug/alcohol use. Reproductive health is jeopardized by increased sexually transmitted diseases, pelvic inflammatory disease, and poor hygiene. Inadequate attention to female-specific screenings such as breast exams and Pap smears can lead to undetected cancers. (Schoenly 28AD) To that extent, women of an older age need more attention and need the proper health care to cover what they are going through to prevent any other complications.

Negligence in Prisons

In 2017, a resident at HMP Peterborough by the name Annabelle Landsberg passed away in her cell from Type 2 diabetes. In prison, Annabella was seen as difficult. She was segregated, restrained, and her pain was ignored and disbelieved. Before her death, Annabella collapsed in her cell, complaining of symptoms that anyone with knowledge of diabetes would immediately recognize. Yet none of the prison healthcare professionals or officers carried out medical checks. Instead, they said she was faking it. After 21 long hours lying on the floor of her cell, a senior nurse saw Annabella and recognized she was in a medical crisis. By then it was too late (Coles

2019). Due to Annabella's regular behavior, officials did not take her condition seriously and failed to provide her the health care she needed to survive. Not only does this happen in the U.K., but also in every country where female residents are not treated for chronic diseases and are being left to die or suffer.

Prison residents should not get denied any healthcare because incidents like these occur in many places and it is unfair to treat a carceral resident less than a non-resident. Think of it being your mother, sister, aunt, grandma, or wife. These women have families and for their family members to come and find out that due to poor healthcare and attention they lost their loved ones.

Better System and Solution

Women prison residents deserve to get the health care they need. It helps them, but it also helps their families and whole communities because most will eventually be released. We all want healthy women coming home. Serving time in prison should not ever become a death sentence due to improper healthcare inside. The lack of attention to this critical issue is causing many deaths within prisons and there are more contagious diseases spreading to staff and other residents because the environment in which they are in is not sanitary as it should be; especially now with COVID-19. There is a foundation that acknowledges the rights these women in prison deserve when it comes to their health. It's the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC). If this issue resonates, reach out to them to see how you can help. Together, a change is possible by spreading the word and requesting better healthcare for women prison residents and building an organization where no residents health suffers and no voice is unheard.

Citations

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