Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://eji.org/news/more-incarcerated-women-report-mental-health-problems/

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07.10.17

A new study by the Justice Departments Bureau of Justice Statistics found that women in prisons and jails report having mental health problems at a much higher rate than incarcerated men.

As reported by the Marshall Project, asurvey conducted from February 2011 to March 2012 asked more than 100,000 men and women in hundreds of American jails and prisons whether they had ever been diagnosed with a psychological disorder, such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, or anxiety, and about their mental health over the previous 30 days.

Overall, 39 percent of those surveyed said they had been diagnosed with a mental illness, and about 19 percent said they had experienced serious psychological distress in the previous month.

But although women make up only 7 percent of the prison population, 66 percent of women in prison reported having a history of mental illness, almost twice the percentage of men. One in five women said they had recently experienced psychological distress in prison, compared to one in seven men.

Similarly, 68 percent of women in jail reported a history of mental illness, compared to 41 percent of men.

The study does not address the reasons for this gender disparity. Ron Honberg, senior policy adviser at the National Alliance for Mental Illness, told the Marshall Project that one possible factor is that incarcerated women have experienced sexual trauma before their imprisonment at a much higher rate than men. They are also likely more inclined to report psychological distress to the prison mental health services than maleinmates.

Justice Department researchers also found that more than half ofwhite men and womenin prison reported a diagnosis of a mental disorder, which was nearly double the rate for Hispanics and more than 1.6 times higher than for Black people. Dr. Robert Cohen, a member of the New York City Board of Correction, cited a recent study on jail mental health services at Rikers Island that found that older white men were directed towards mental health services, while younger Black and Hispanic men were directed to solitary confinement, and self harm. He told the Marshall Project, I dont think that factreflects different rates of mental illness, I think it demonstrates racial bias.

A new study found that incarcerated women report mental health problems at a much higher rate than incarcerated men.

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