

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-health-of-the-nation-affects-everyone>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Increasingly, public discussion about policy intersects with questions of public health whether the social and economic costs of obesity, the inequalities in the nation's health care services, or the high rates of suicide among veterans. A recent public health briefing on Capitol Hill offered some promising recommendations for policy changes that could close the care gap as well as an assessment of existing challenges.

On June 20, the Coalition for Health Funding hosted a congressional briefing titled Public Health 101: Health Is All Around You. The aim was to brief Hill staffers and others on the threats posed by poor mental and physical health. The panel included Dr. Ryung Suh, CEO of Atlas Research, David Johnson, senior vice president of RCM&D, Naomi Adler, president and CEO of United Way of Westchester and Putnam (New York), and [Jim Parsons](#), director of Vera's [Substance Use and Mental Health Program](#). Judy Sherman, president of the Coalition for Health Funding, moderated the discussion.

The panelists agreed that extensive research shows that public health outcomes influence all facets of American society, from education to justice and defense. It is estimated that health problems cost businesses approximately \$600 billion a year. Add to this number the societal costs of untreated mental illness of veterans, obese children failing and not attending school, and recidivism among people with behavioral health problems, and it is clear that improving the health of the nation makes fiscal and public policy sense.

How can it be done? According to the panelists, people must understand that public health is not an isolated issue: it concerns everyone. Addressing the problem effectively requires a holistic approach involving cross-sector communication. Some employers have begun to accept this notion and have started tackling their employees' health problems through wellness programs and company gyms. Although a good start, it is not enough. Other areas such as criminal justice must follow suit and continue to seek innovative, effective solutions.

Along with being ineffective at reducing crime and being very expensive, mass incarceration in the United States, which is six times higher than the world average, has a huge impact on public health. Among the prison population there are disproportionate numbers of people with mental and physical illness. When released, these people return to their communities with untreated conditions, both physical and mental. In the case of the latter, men and women return to their families without the therapeutic services that they need to achieve stability. They frequently wind up back in the justice system. However, as Jim Parsons explained in his remarks, Vera's research has identified some promising solutions to the underlying problems that prevent the delivery of adequate treatment to this population.

In 2012, the Substance Use and Mental Health Program completed [a study](#) of how criminal justice and public health agencies handle people arrested in Washington, DC. The study found that interagency cooperation and information sharing can produce more efficient and accurate assessments of people in the criminal justice system who need behavioral health services. For example, by sharing information, agencies were able to determine that 33 percent of those arrested in DC had indications of mental illness. Without interagency cooperation, this critical piece of information would have been impossible to find.

To help jurisdictions around the country develop a culture of information sharing, Vera has recently launched the [Justice and Health Connect website](#), an online resource for justice and health agencies seeking to improve coordination in a confidential, legal, and ethical way. The goal is to better serve people with behavioral and other health needs who come into contact with justice systems.

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