

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-bill-aims-to-enhance-public-safety-through-stronger-mental-health-services>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Congress recently introduced the Comprehensive Justice and Mental Health Act (CJMHA), a bipartisan bill that improves the accessibility of mental health services for people involved in the criminal justice system, while at the same time increasing public safety. Introduced by [Senators Al Franken \(D-MN\)](#) and John Cornyn (R-TX) in the Senate and Representatives [Doug Collins \(R-GA\)](#) and Bobby Scott (D-VA) in the House, this legislation reauthorizes but also improves and expands the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA). Enacted in 2004, the MIOTCRA supported innovative programs such as juvenile diversion programs and prison-based interventions that provided a critical link by bringing together criminal justice and mental health agencies to address the needs of people suffering from mental health disorders. CJMHA would further this by improving the ability of local and state governments to address the unique issues of people living with mental health issues in all justice system interactions, including:

The CJMHA's impact could be considerable, as evidenced by two recent Vera reports that highlight the harsh realities faced by incarcerated people with mental health and substance use issues. As discussed in [Incarcerations Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America](#), jail is a gateway into deeper and more lasting involvement in the criminal justice system at considerable cost to both incarcerated people and society at large. The report also addresses the rate at which people with mental health and substance use issues are disproportionately incarcerated and the consequent increase in their rate of recidivism. [On Life Support: Public Health in the Age of Mass Incarceration](#), the first report from Vera's Justice Reform for Healthy Communities initiative, highlights the impact that mass incarceration has on the health of both incarcerated individuals and the communities from which they come, and to which they will most likely return. In particular, the report focuses on the health disparities in communities of color as related to mass incarceration and how the Affordable Care Act has created opportunities to combat these disparities. As for the CJMHA, progress is being made: the Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously passed the bill and as soon as the coming week this legislation is likely to be debated on the Senate floor and considered in the House Judiciary Committee.

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