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7 Reasons Why Mental Health Advocates Should Fight Prison and Jail Expansion

People with Mental Illness are Disproportionately Criminalized

More than 50% of people in jail or prison have a history or symptoms of mental illness, compared with 6% in the general population.

- Over 450,000 Americans with mental illness are incarcerated.
- Local jails have the highest symptom levels, with about 24% of prisoners displaying psychosis, 54% exhibiting mania, and 30% with major depression.ⁱ
- 65% of incarcerated individuals meet criteria for a substance abuse disorder.ⁱⁱ
- Suicide is the number one cause of death in local jails and in the top five for prisons.ⁱⁱⁱ

Incarceration Further Damages Mental Health

People with mental illness do not get better behind bars, they get worse!^{iv} Being locked up means they are trapped without control or safety, often creating conditions for violence, hypervigilance, and hopelessness.

- Imprisonment exposes people to threats of violence, rape, and trauma; disconnection from loved ones; loss of purpose and dignity; and extreme racism. All of these factors exacerbate, and sometimes entirely cause, mental illness.^v
- Solitary confinement is used with greater frequency in the US than in any other country in the world. Experts suggest that it fits the “cruel and unusual punishment” conditions required for an Eighth Amendment violation.^{vi}
- Locking people up cuts off their access to benefits; when they get out, they don’t have proper medications and may end up with costly emergency room visits, homeless, unemployed, and at high risk for recidivism and/or deterioration.^{vii} They also have a criminal record, causing more barriers and then symptom exacerbation.

Jails and Prisons are Ill-Equipped to Treat Mental Illness

People with mental illness receive inadequate treatment or none at all behind bars, yet politicians use treatment to justify increasing spending for mental health services in prisons and jails. People should not have to get locked up to get treatment!

- Only approximately 1 in 3 state prisoners, 1 in 4 federal prisoners, and 1 in 6 people in local jails who had a mental health problem received any treatment behind bars.^{viii}
- People with mental illness are too often incarcerated while awaiting trial before even being convicted, rather than referred to hospitals or treatment centers.^{ix}
- Treating mental illness in prison is not cost effective. One report in Michigan found that the annual cost of community case management for mentally ill people is \$2,165 per person and a more intensive program costs the state \$9,029 per person per year. In contrast, the average Michigan inmate cost the state over \$34,000.^x

Jails are Becoming de Facto Mental Health Providers

The nation's penal system has become the largest provider of mental health services, and their treatment protocols are neither effective nor humane. People need treatment, not punishment!

- The deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals in the 1950s, originally designed to expand community mental health, has instead resulted in thousands of people with mental illness being locked up through prison and jail expansion.^{xi} Now people with mental illness are three times more likely to be incarcerated than hospitalized.
- Los Angeles Sheriff is proposing to build a \$1.74 to \$2.32 billion Integrated Inmate Treatment Center, or a “mental health jail.” This facility would have 4,860-5,860 beds for people with mental illness.^{xii} This project promotes false solutions that the penal system can and should be responsible for mental health services. Research shows that even with “good” treatment, people with mental illness don’t get better while locked up.^{xiii}

We Need to Increase Community Programs, Not Incarceration

- Community treatment, unlike imprisonment, helps people maintain social supports known to be essential to recovery.^{xiv} These agencies work from a prevention model and address issues that lead to crime, such as homelessness and unemployment.
- Fewer than half of incarcerated people with mental illness ever received treatment prior to their arrest, showing that we need to improve meeting community needs.^{xv}
- The new Affordable Care Act requires parity for mental health and substance use disorder treatment in all insurance plans. We have no excuse for restricting these services to people in need.^{xvi}

There are Alternatives to Incarceration

Thousands of successful community alternative programs exist. Two California examples:

- San Francisco’s Behavioral Health Court, started in 2002, aims to divert individuals with mental illness from incarceration by connecting them to outside treatment and wraparound services.^{xvii}
- The Integrated Recovery Network in Los Angeles, which aims to help homeless people with co-occurring disorders find housing, treatment and income, has shown that their services cost \$12,000 one time per client versus \$96,000/year in public costs to re-incarcerate repeatedly.^{xviii}

People with Mental Illness Deserve Better

Mental illness is not a choice. Its symptoms can lead people to engage in behaviors they otherwise would not do. Violent crimes are not excusable, but our society needs a better system for treating mental illness than simply locking people up.

- The Social Work Code of Ethics states that social workers, “should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.” The Marriage and Family Therapy code also mandates public advocacy.^{xix}

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ⁱ NAMI -

<http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Criminalization&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=156499>

ⁱⁱ The Nation’s Health - <http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/40/3/E11.full>

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- iii Bureau of Justice - <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/mhppjpr.cfm>
- iv Huffington Post - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/04/mental-illness-prisons-jails-inmates_n_2610062.html
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- vii NAMI - <http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=CIT&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=5746>
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- x Horowitz, A. (2013). Mental illness soars in prisons, jails while inmates suffer.
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- xv National Institute on Mental Health - <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1DOJ.shtml>; Hatton et al (2008).
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- xvii <http://www.sfsuperiorcourt.org/divisions/collaborative/behavioral>
- xviii Integrated Recovery Network - <http://www.integratedrecoverynetwork.org/results.html>
- xix https://www.aamft.org/imis15/content/legal_ethics/code_of_ethics.aspx;
<http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>