

## Addressing the Challenge of Community Reentry Among Released Inmates with Serious Mental Illness

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**Abstract** The purpose of the paper is to discuss the formidable challenges to community reentry and reintegration faced by U.S. prison inmates with serious mental illness and to describe various strategies for improving transitional services for these individuals. We review epidemiologic data supporting the high prevalence of severe mental illness in U.S. prisons as well as the historical factors underlying the criminalization of the mentally ill. The importance and challenges of providing adequate psychiatric care for mentally ill prisoners during their incarceration are discussed. We also review the numerous psychosocial and economic challenges confronting these individuals upon their release from prison, such as unemployment and vulnerability to homelessness, as well as specific barriers they may encounter in attempting to access community-based mental health services. We follow with a discussion of some of the more promising strategies for improving the transition of the mentally ill from prison to the community. In the final sections, we review the evidence for a relationship between serious mental illness and

recidivism and briefly discuss emerging alternatives to incarceration of the mentally ill.

**Keywords** Community reentry · Criminal recidivism · Deinstitutionalization · Mental illness · Prisons · Transition planning

During 2007 alone, more than 725,000 inmates were released from U.S. state and federal prisons (West and Sabol 2008). The majority of newly released inmates must overcome major challenges in order to achieve a successful transition from prison to community. Two of the most immediate challenges are finding affordable and stable housing and securing and maintaining employment (Travis et al. 2001). Attaining these basic components of reintegration is often contingent on the ability of the returning inmate to obtain support from both family members and social networks (Mallik-Kane and Visser 2008). Unfortunately, most prisoners are released with little more than a bus ticket and a minimal amount of spending money. They typically return with no health insurance or government benefits, limited employment prospects, and insufficient financial resources to secure housing in the private market (Travis et al. 2001).

Successful community reentry is particularly difficult for returning inmates with serious mental illness (SMI). They are more likely to experience homelessness and less likely to find employment than other released inmates (Roman and Travis 2004; Solomon et al. 2004). The challenges of obtaining appropriate community-based mental health services can also be formidable, often resulting in fragmented, episodic care (Hoge 2007; Mallik-Kane and Visser 2008). These challenges are often exacerbated by the presence of comorbid substance abuse, a

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