

Developing Solutions to the Mass Incarceration of Mentally Ill



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Almost 1.5 million inmates have a substance abuse disorder, and more than 375,000 people with a serious mental illness are incarcerated every day, according to research from Washington University in St. Louis. Research shows that prisons and jails are often unable to adequately treat these people, and the communities they return to are likewise unable to meet their needs.

UChicago's Matthew Epperson, PhD, along with Washington University's Carrie Pettus-Davis, PhD, are working to help keep the mentally ill out of the criminal justice system in Chicago and St. Louis. Their project will build a social capacity framework, or a model that allows these cities to develop collaborative, practical, sustainable solutions to their local problems.

Communities often lack the coordination and resources for successful behavioral health interventions, according to Pettus-Davis. This project's system will bring together the expertise of local community health, behavioral health, and criminal justice professionals to create holistic programs, rather than having each entity working independently on less-comprehensive interventions.

Using focus groups to gather observations and data about the city's policies, practices, resources, and needs, Epperson and Pettus-Davis will customize a model that enables communities to effectively treat people with behavioral health problems. They will measure how this reduces the rates of the mentally ill and substance abusers in the criminal justice system.

Project Title: Promoting Behavioral Health within Communities to Reduce Criminal Justice Contact

Learn more and connect with Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis at mepperson@uchicago.edu and cpettusdavis@wustl.edu.