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HIV/AIDS
in
Prisons

2001/2002

HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C in Prisons: The Facts

This info sheet reviews what is known about HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C in prisons.

This is one of a series of 13 info sheets on HIV/AIDS in prisons.

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HIV Seroprevalence in Prisons

Canadian federal prisons

In Canada's federal prison system (where offenders sentenced to prison terms of two years or more serve their terms), the number of reported cases of HIV/AIDS rose from 14 in January 1989 to 159 in March 1996 and 217 in December 2000. This means that 1.66 percent of all federal prison inmates are *known* to be HIV-positive. The actual numbers may be even higher: the reported cases, provided by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), include only cases of HIV infection and AIDS *known* to CSC, but many inmates may not have disclosed their HIV status to CSC, or may not know themselves that they are HIV-positive.

Canadian provincial prisons

In provincial prisons (where offenders sentenced to prison terms of less than two years serve their terms), rates of HIV infection are also high. Studies undertaken in prisons in British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec have all shown that HIV seroprevalence rates in prisons are over 10 times higher than in the general population, ranging from 1.0 to 7.7 percent. For example:

- A 1989 study of 248 women in a medium-security provincial prison in Québec found an HIV seroprevalence rate of 7.7 percent.
- A 1993 study carried out among over 12,000 people entering Ontario prisons found HIV seroprevalence rates of 1.0 percent among adult men and 1.2 percent among adult women.

As in federal prisons, the number of prisoners with HIV or AIDS in provincial prisons is on the rise. For example:

- In British Columbia, a study conducted in all adult BC provincial prisons in 1993 found an HIV seroprevalence rate of 1.1 percent. The study has not been repeated, but in 1996 a review of known cases alone revealed rates ranging from 2 to 20 percent in various prisons.

Worldwide

As in Canada, rates of HIV-infection in inmate populations worldwide are much higher than in the general population. They are, in general, closely related to two factors: the proportion of prisoners who injected drugs prior to imprisonment, and the rate of HIV infection among injection drug users in the community.

Many of those who are HIV-positive in prison were already living with the virus on the outside.

HIV/AIDS AND HEPATITIS C IN PRISONS: THE FACTS

Indeed, the highest rates of HIV infection in prisons can be found in areas where rates of HIV infection are high among injection drug users in the community. Commenting on the situation in the United States, the US National Commission on AIDS stated that “by choosing mass imprisonment as the ... governments’ response to the use of drugs, we have created a de facto policy of incarcerating more and more individuals with HIV infection.”

HIV infection rates are high in many European prisons. One study carried out in 25 European prisons reported particularly high rates in Portuguese (20 percent) and Spanish prisons (13 percent); rates are also high in other countries, including Switzerland (4 to 12 percent) and Italy (7 percent). In Eastern Europe, 6 percent of prisoners in the Ukraine are HIV-positive.

In contrast, relatively low rates of HIV prevalence have been reported from Australia. In the United States, the geographic distribution of cases of HIV infection and AIDS is remarkably uneven. Many systems continue to have rates under one percent, while in a few rates approach or exceed 20 percent.

Hepatitis C Seroprevalence

Canada

Hepatitis C (HCV) prevalence rates in prisons are even higher than HIV prevalence rates: studies undertaken in the early and mid 1990s in Canadian prisons revealed rates of between 28 and 40 percent.

Rates continue to rise. In one federal prison, 33 percent of study participants tested positive in 1998, compared to 27.9 percent in 1995; and at the Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women in British Columbia, over 78 percent of 69 inmates tested for HCV between 1 January 1996 and 8 August 1996 were seropositive.

Worldwide

Similar figures are reported from other countries: 39 percent in prisons in Victoria, Australia, and 50

percent in New South Wales, Australia; 30 to 41 percent among US prisoners in California, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, Virginia and Washington; and 74.8 percent among injection drug users in a prison for women in Vechta, Lower Saxony, Germany.

Potential for further spread

Most HCV-positive inmates come to prison already infected, but the potential for further spread is high: HCV is much more easily transmitted than HIV, and transmission has been documented in prisons in several countries, including Canada.

Additional Reading

R Elliott. Prisoners’ Constitutional Right to Sterile Needles and Bleach. Appendix 2 of R Jürgens. *HIV/AIDS in Prisons: Final Report*. Montréal: Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network & Canadian AIDS Society, 1996, at 3-4. Provides a summary of Canadian seroprevalence studies in prisons. Available at www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/issues/prisons/APP2.html.

C Hankins et al. HIV-1 infection in a medium security prison for women—Quebec. *Canada Diseases Weekly Report* 1989; 15(33): 168-170. The first HIV seroprevalence study in a Canadian prison.

PM Ford et al. HIV and hep C seroprevalence and associated risk behaviours in a Canadian prison. *Canadian HIV/AIDS Policy & Law Newsletter* 1999; 4(2/3): 52-54. The most recent study in a Canadian prison. Available at www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/otherdocs/Newsletter/spring99/prisons.htm.

S Gore, G Bird. HIV, Hepatitis and Drugs Epidemiology in Prisons. In: D Shewan, JB Davies (eds). *Drug Use and Prisons: An International Perspective*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1999. A useful review.

Second, revised and updated version, 2001. Copies of this info sheet are available on the Network website at www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/issues/prisons.htm and through the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse (email: aids/sida@cpha.ca). Reproduction of the info sheet is encouraged, but copies may not be sold, and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network must be cited as the source of this information. For further information, contact the Network (tel: 514 397-6828; fax: 514 397-8570; email: info@aidslaw.ca). **Ce feuillet d’information est également disponible en français.**

Funded by The Center on Crime, Communities & Culture of the Open Society Institute; and by Health Canada under the Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of The Center or Health Canada.

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