

Released prisoners are more likely to suffer early death

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Men who have been incarcerated and released are more than twice as likely to die prematurely as those who have not been imprisoned, according to a new study published by Georgia State University criminologist William Alex Pridemore.

Former prisoners are more likely to die early from infectious and [respiratory diseases](#), drug overdoses and homicides. Causes of this "mortality penalty" include increased exposure to diseases like TB and HIV, the prolonged stress of the prison environment, the disruption of important social bonds and, upon release, the struggle to reintegrate into society and employment.

"We know that stress can weaken immune systems," Pridemore said. "And in a very unpleasant twist of events, at the precise moment when these men are most vulnerable to a compromised immune system due to stress – that is, when they are incarcerated – they are most exposed to a host of [communicable diseases](#) whose rates are much higher in the [prison population](#)."

Pridemore's empirical analysis of the Izhevsk (Russia) Family Study, was published online this month in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. Titled "The Mortality Penalty of Incarceration: Evidence from a Population-based Case-control Study of Working Age Males," it is among the first sociological studies to look at the short- and long-term impacts of [incarceration](#) on the mortality of prisoners after their release.

More than 2.5 million people are incarcerated in the United States – 95 percent of whom will eventually be released. Incarceration rates in the United States and Russia, at 730 and 519 per 100,000 residents, are among the highest in the world.

"Earlier research looked at the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment that started in the 1970s, when the U.S. went on an incarceration binge. Most focused on incarceration's limits on job prospects and earnings, marriages and its impact on communities," he said. "Now research is turning to its impact on health.

"Ironically, prisons provide an opportunity to screen and treat a population that may be unlikely or unable to take advantage of community-based health care," he continued. "Prisons should work with inmates, prior to their release, and provide health screenings and treatment and help them plan for their short-term and long-term health care needs. This investment will benefit not only the individual health of current and former prisoners, but also taxpayers and the broader community by way of improved population health.

Pridemore's findings are timely given the recent release of the National Research Council's report, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States*, which has politicians and the public reconsidering mass incarceration.

"Careful research shows that many of the consequences of contact with the penal system – especially the mortality penalty of incarceration – go well beyond what we consider just punishment," he said.

Provided by Georgia State University

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