

Study: A majority of older adults in jail have distressing health symptoms

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More than 550,000 adults 55-years-old and older are arrested and detained every year—and that number is increasing rapidly. Yet we know very little about the special health burdens in this population. In a first of its kind study, researchers report that two-thirds of incarcerated older adults experience at least one health-related distressing symptom, such as a chronic disease, physical pain, or emotional suffering.

In the study, published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, researchers from the University of California, San Francisco, interviewed 125 inmates age 55 and older from an urban county jail. Typically, researchers consider people aged 65 and older to be "[older adults](#)." But for this study, younger people were included because it is common for prisoners to experience "accelerated aging" due to lifelong stressful events, including homelessness and lack of health care, said the researchers.

The participants ranged in age from 55- to 87-years-old. A majority of participants (86 percent) reported incomes far below the federal poverty line (a measure of income used to help identify people who are living in poverty).

Of the participants, a significant majority of respondents said they had at least one symptom of physical distress (44 percent), psychological distress (56 percent), extreme loneliness (45 percent), and/or concerns about their personal dignity (54 percent).

Furthermore, participants also reported that they faced difficult social challenges, including being homeless and worrying about physical safety.

The researchers reported that, of the participants:

- 61 percent had two or more [chronic conditions](#), such as Hepatitis C, [diabetes](#), [heart disease](#), or congestive heart failure.

- 28 percent experienced severe chronic pain.
- 26 percent had symptoms of [depression](#).
- 30 percent had symptoms of [anxiety](#).

According to the study, of the older inmates, 49 percent said they experience poor or fair health, 20 percent have [chronic lung disease](#), and 54 percent have trouble performing daily activities such as bathing, eating, using the toilet, and walking around the house. The researchers said that these rates are similar to those reported by lower income older adults who are not incarcerated.

Given that poorly managed conditions are a leading factor in emergency room use, the researchers suggest the need to develop comprehensive programs that focus on assessing, treating, and managing geriatric conditions to help older adults while they are in jail and during their transition back into the community.

More information: Marielle Bolano et al, Detained and Distressed: Persistent Distressing Symptoms in a Population of Older Jail Inmates, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.14310](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.14310)

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