

More than a quarter of Chicago county jail inmates suffer severe mental illness

By George Marlowe
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Recent reports have highlighted the fact that at least a quarter of the prison population at Chicago's Cook County Jail suffer from serious mental illnesses.

Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, the new head of the jail noted that out of the jail's approximately 8,000 detainees, some 1,900 have been identified as suffering from mental illness. Dr. Nneka Jones, a 37-year-old clinical psychologist now in charge of the jail, told the press it is becoming a "social epidemic."

In a previous interview with *ThinkProgress*, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart admitted, "Conservative numbers are 25, but we think it's closer to 30 or 35 percent of our jail population that has a mental illness... so we've effectively become the largest mental health hospital in the country."

Located in the highly impoverished West Side of Chicago, the dilapidated and sprawling jail is the largest single-site prison in the country. Conditions have long been dangerous and brutal for inmates, particularly the mentally ill, and are unlikely to change for the better. In a chiefly cosmetic move the Cook County sheriff appointed Dr. Nneka Jones as executive director of the facility on May 26, the first time a mental health professional has been hired to run a major US jail.

The conditions in the jail have previously been deemed so hazardous and inhumane that they were considered a violation of prisoners' constitutional rights by federal authorities in 2008. In the last five years alone, with the deepening of the economic and social crisis, the number of inmates with mental illnesses has more than doubled.

Cermak Health Services, the on-site hospital at the jail run by the county, suffers from extreme overcrowding and poor quality care. Most detainees with severe mental health issues are treated in an

emergency triage fashion to temporarily ameliorate mental health issues with medications or to subdue detainees who have outbursts. The highly overcrowded jail and its hospital have effectively become a dumping ground for the mentally ill with no proper alternatives.

Alongside the decimation of social safety nets and the deterioration of the social conditions in Chicago, there has been a sharp increase in mental health problems. Those suffering from severe mental illnesses—including schizophrenia, severe depression, bipolar disorders and trauma—are caught up in devastating cycles of poverty and homelessness.

Instead of providing adequate mental health services to those who need it the most, Cook County and Illinois officials have carried out severe cuts to such programs. The increasing number of people held in jail is a direct result of the bipartisan assault on access to mental health care for the indigent. With diminishing access to psychiatric beds in hospitals and community mental health centers, many of the most vulnerable are thrown into the criminal justice system and subjected to brutal treatment, which make matters worse.

According to the National Alliance of Mental Health, between 2009 and 2012 the state of Illinois made the fourth-largest cuts to such programs of any state in the country, cutting spending by 32 percent. The draconian cuts imperiled tens of thousands in need of psychiatric services, assistive community treatment, housing or crisis services.

In 2012, Chicago's Democratic mayor, Rahm Emanuel, closed six of the city's 12 mental health facilities. The same year Illinois Democratic Governor Pat Quinn closed the nearby Tinley Park Mental Health Center. The shuttered facility was subsequently used for urban warfare training exercises.

Current Republican Governor Bruce Rauner's budget

for fiscal year 2016, which starts in June, targets providers of community-based health care centers for savage cuts. Rauner is calling for an \$82 million reduction in funding for the Department of Human Service's mental health division. This is a cut of 15 percent of the department's current funding. Rauner claims this is necessary to close a \$6 billion shortfall in his proposed state budget.

The cuts will eliminate funding for psychiatry, housing programs for the homeless and care coordinators who direct the mentally ill to appropriate care. Care providers have been outraged by the budget proposals and point out that many of those who desperately need care will be driven to the streets, hospital emergency rooms and prisons.

Such cuts only exacerbate the homeless crisis. An analysis by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimates that over 138,575 Chicagoans were homeless in the course of the 2013-14 school year, a staggering 19.4 percent increase from the previous year. That number is a direct result of the 2013 school closures, with nearly 22,144 students now considered homeless in Chicago Public Schools.

According to a report by the US Conference of Mayors, over 25 to 30 percent of those who are homeless suffer from severe mental health problems including schizophrenia and bipolar disorders. Lacking affordable housing and care, those who end up on the streets inevitably find themselves locked up in the overcrowded and brutal conditions of Cook County Jail.

One national expert on jail operations has recently testified that detainees at Cook County Jail face an "extremely high risk" of harm, making it one of the most dangerous jails in the country. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, during a hearing of a civil lawsuit brought by the MacArthur Justice Center at Northwestern University, Jeffrey A. Schwartz testified that a culture of brutality exists within the prison due to "serious failures" of staff leadership exacerbating the problem.

However, US District Judge Virginia Kendall denied Schwartz's motion to require Sheriff Dart to stem the alleged "crisis of violence" in the jail. In an attempt to cover up for abuse under his watch, Dart has dismissed the allegations as a "fictitious novel" and suggested the lawsuit is unnecessary.

Far from such conditions being "fictitious," the violent treatment of mentally disabled prisoners across the country has come under scrutiny with a recent report from Human Rights Watch. The report highlights that violent and deadly abuse is rampant in US jails and prisons all across the country.

In many respects, the clock has been turned back centuries. There are now ten times more mentally ill people in prisons than in hospitals. The availability of psychiatric beds per capita has decreased to levels before 1850—before the American Civil War—when efforts were made to treat the mentally ill in hospital settings instead of imprisoning them. In the 1800's, efforts were made by figures such as Dorothea Dix and more far-sighted layers within the ruling class to stop the imprisonment and cruel and inhumane treatment of the mentally ill.

The growing number of detainees suffering from mental illness in Cook County jail reveals the enormous regression American society has undergone. With no answer to the vast social problems it has caused, the ruling elite and the Democratic Party political establishment that has long run America's third largest city have no answer outside of criminalizing the poor.

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