

Judge David L.

**BAZELON CENTER**  
for Mental Health Law

**NEWS**

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**New Study Shows Alarming Rates of Serious Mental Illnesses  
Among Inmates, Particularly Women, in Jail**

Washington, DC, June 1, 2009 – A new study confirms what jail and prison administrators have long emphasized— an extraordinary number of those who are incarcerated have serious mental illnesses. The report shows evidence of three to six times the rate of serious mental illnesses (SMI) in jails compared to the rest of the population. The Bazelon Center believes that most of these individuals can be better served, safely, with access to effective mental health treatment.

The report, released at a congressional briefing by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, co-sponsored by the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, will be featured in the June issue of *Psychiatric Services*. The data is the most reliable information on the rate of SMI in jails in 20 years.

Highlights of the report point to an overwhelming problem:

- 14.5 percent of men and 31 percent of women entering the jails studied were found to have serious mental illnesses. These rates are three to six times higher than those found in the general population.
- Female inmates are twice as likely as male inmates to have a serious mental illness. The gender difference is particularly important given the rising number of women in U.S. jails.
- If applied to the 13 million jail admissions reported in 2007, the findings suggest that more than 2 million bookings of people with serious mental illnesses may occur annually.

“While this report should raise alarm among members, it is critical to note that we have proven solutions ready for implementation,” said Laurel Stine, director of federal relations at the Bazelon Center. “These programs divert people with serious mental illnesses from jail and prison or help them re-enter society after they have served a sentence by providing evidence-based services for their mental health care. Funding to assist states and localities with these initiatives is imperative. The Bazelon Center calls for full funding for the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA) to address this inequity.”

The report defines SMI as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia spectrum disorders and major depression and does not address the many adults in jail with other mental health diagnoses. Instead, the study focuses on the population most in need of continuity of mental health care, during and after incarceration.

“At a time when cost-effectiveness and quality are absolutely necessary, we know that the programs funded by MIOTCRA achieve both, helping approximately two million Americans with serious mental illnesses to return as productive, healthy members of our society,” said Stine.

See a summary of the report at <http://ps.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/abstract/ps.60/6/761>