

Incarceration inequities and health

NARRATIVES AND HEALTH EQUITY: EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION

Although prisons and jails play a role in public safety, incarceration also disrupts families and communities, with serious impacts on well-being, especially for children. Inequities in rates of incarceration play a role in perpetuating inequality, community fragmentation, and generational trauma across populations of color. Minnesota incarcerates African-American men at a rate of nearly ten times that of white men. A diverse group of community stakeholders helped create the emerging narrative, which reveals the many health consequences of these incarceration inequities for families and communities, and points a way forward.

1. Incarceration disproportionately affects the health of populations of color and American Indians, reducing the health of everyone in the state. To be healthy, we need to assure the health of all persons, including those who are incarcerated.
2. Inequities exist in Minnesota in the disproportionate incarceration rates between whites and African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos. Structural racism in the criminal justice system (policing policies, sentencing policy, etc.) has contributed to these disparities.
 - a. Disparities/differences in all elements of the criminal justice system (arrest, pre-sentencing, sentencing, etc.) create disparities in health outcomes.
 - b. Awareness of racial inequities should influence and help change our structures and systems, our approach and contribution to incarceration and health, by thinking and taking racial equity to our work of transforming structures and systems.
 - c. Incarceration should not be used to protect the interests of some (i.e., the white population) and lead to lack of health for others (i.e., populations of color and American Indians).
3. Incarceration as a means of assuring community safety should be a path to wholeness, restoration and reconnection to the community and not the source of exclusion and disenfranchisement, which only contribute to poor health across the community.
 - a. Criminal justice should be about rehabilitation not retribution; retribution creates less public safety, not more.
 - b. Health is just as or more important for the community than criminal justice; health *is* public safety.
4. All persons deserve the opportunity to be healthy, including incarcerated persons, formerly incarcerated persons, and their families and communities.
 - a. Conditions that create the opportunity for all people to be healthy are essential for creating community safety. All systems/structures in the community (educational economic, businesses, housing, voting, etc.) have a role to play in creating the opportunity for health for current and formerly incarcerated persons. Criminal justice reform requires community reform.

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- b. Incarceration should not eliminate economic opportunity for formerly incarcerated persons or their families. The negative impact of incarceration on economic opportunity contributes to reduced health for incarcerated persons, their families and the community.
 - c. All people, including formerly incarcerated persons and their families, deserve a safe and healthy place to live. A lack of stability in housing contributes to recidivism, family instability and poor health outcomes.
5. Personal agency is fundamental to health equity and healthy communities. Incarceration should not remove a person’s ability to determine or create a healthy future for themselves, their family, and their community.
- a. The permanent loss of voting rights keeps formerly incarcerated persons from being part of the “whole” community and reduces a sense of responsibility to share in the future of the community.
 - b. Limited economic opportunity and discrimination in hiring practices removes the ability of incarcerated persons to contribute to the economic stability of their families.
6. Incarcerated parents should be supported in their parenting role to assure the health of their children and themselves.
- a. Children need the loving support of their parents throughout the incarceration period, for their lifetime health and well-being. Mothers need to be able to breastfeed their babies to assure the lifetime health of the child. Not allowing parents and children to develop and continue healthy relationships has the effect of punishing the children while their parents are incarcerated.
 - b. Family connection and support contribute to the successful reintegration in the community of incarcerated persons.
7. Our loved ones who are incarcerated are still part of our communities. We need new ways of connecting and supporting all people to improve the health and safety of our communities.
- a. No one should be “thrown away;” there is no “away.” All people have human potential, and we have a deep interconnectedness with those persons who are incarcerated.
 - b. Individuals are part of the community before, during and after incarceration. We are all accountable for the safety and supportive environment of our community, to assure that everyone can be healthy.
8. Health means more than physical health; it also includes mental health. Prison systems should not be our way of resolving substance abuse, chemical dependency, or the mental health challenges of people in our communities. We need to work together to find better solutions to support positive mental health.
- a. Mental health and substance abuse are health issues, not criminal justice issues.
 - b. Incarceration is an inefficient and ineffective tool for addressing mental health and substance abuse issues.
 - c. The underlying issues of mental health challenges, such as chemical dependence, should be treated with alternatives to incarceration.

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9. Staying in school is essential for lifetime health. School discipline policies should support and enhance the educational opportunities of children and increase their opportunity to be healthy.
 - a. Schools should be places that protect and care for all children of all racial and ethnic groups.
 - b. Racism and structural racism in school discipline must be exposed and eliminated; discipline policies must be applied equitably to all students and not targeted toward some.
 - c. Schools should serve as a pathway to lifetime success, and not serve as a “pipeline” to prison.
 - d. Officers in schools should not be involved in making diagnoses of students or determining their need for treatment.
10. People and communities, no matter what their race or circumstances, intuitively know what they need to be safe and healthy. Community wisdom should have a voice in the criminal justice system to assure that people are restored rather than punished in perpetuity.

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