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Medical Causes of Death in State Prisons, 2001–2004

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DEATH RATES LOWER IN STATE PRISONS THAN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

Nine in Ten Deaths Due to Illness

WASHINGTON - The nation's state prison officials reported that 12,129 inmates died while in custody from 2001 through 2004, the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) announced today. The deaths over this four-year period constituted an annual mortality rate of 250 deaths per 100,000 inmates, which was 19 percent lower than the adult mortality rate in the U.S. general population.

Overall, 89 percent of all state prisoner deaths were attributed to medical conditions and 8 percent were due to suicide or homicide. The remainder of deaths were due to alcohol/drug intoxication or accidental injury (1 percent each). A definitive cause of death could not be determined for an additional 1 percent. Two-thirds of inmate deaths from medical conditions involved a problem that was present at the time of admission to prison.

Half of all inmate deaths during this period resulted from heart disease (27 percent) or cancer (23 percent). Liver diseases, including cirrhosis, accounted for 10 percent of deaths, followed by AIDS-related causes (7 percent).

Among cancer deaths, lung cancer was the most common, accounting for 910 deaths from 2001 through 2004, followed by liver (276), colon (171), pancreatic (124) and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (114). Deaths due to gender-specific cancer sites varied. Breast, ovarian, cervical and uterine cancer accounted for 24 percent of female cancer deaths. By comparison, prostate and testicular cancer caused 4 percent of male cancer deaths.

State prisoner mortality rates increased steadily with age. The mortality rate of inmates age 18-24 was lowest, at 34 deaths per 100,000 inmates. Among inmates age 55 or older, the rate was 1,973 deaths per 100,000 inmates. Inmates age 45 or older represented 14 percent of state prisoners, but 67 percent of the prisoner deaths from 2001 through 2004.

More than half (59 percent) of inmates age 65 or older who died in state prisons were at least 55 or older when admitted to prison. Only 15 percent of elderly inmates who died were younger than 45 at the time of their admission to prison.

While the leading causes of death, heart disease, cancer and liver disease, were the same for both male and female inmates in state prisons, the death rate of males was 72 percent higher. The only cause of death with a higher mortality rate for females than males was septicemia (e.g. streptococcal and staphylococcal infections).

White and Hispanic prisoners both had death rates slightly above their counterparts in the resident population, while the death rate of black inmates was 57 percent lower than that of black U.S. residents.

The BJS report included the first national statistics on the medical treatments provided in state prisons for fatal medical conditions. Correctional authorities reported that 94 percent of inmates who died from an illness were evaluated by a medical professional for that illness. Nearly all (93 percent) of illness fatalities were provided medications for the fatal illness. Diagnostic tests, such as x-rays, MRI exams and blood tests, were performed on 89 percent of these inmates.

The report, *Medical Causes of Death in State Prisons, 2001-2004* (*NCJ-216340*), was written by BJS policy analyst Christopher J. Mumola. Following publication, the report can be found at http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=776

For additional information about the Bureau of Justice Statistics statistical reports programs, please visit the BJS Web site at http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/.

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