Comparative Analysis of the Prevalence of Mental Illness Among Older Adults in Maricopa County Jails Compared to Older Adults Among the General Population

Mary Storll

Graduate Student, Department of Social Work
Mentor: Dr. Erica Lizano

Despite the body of research that indicates that individuals “age of crime” the proportion of older adults in jail has increased compared to other cohorts. In fact, even though the arrest rate among adults ages 18–54 fell by 11% from 2002 to 2012, it rose 27% among adults aged 55 or older (Humphreys et al., 2018). Additionally, research indicates that at least one in four people who go to jail will be arrested again within the same year, often those dealing with poverty, mental illness, and substance use disorders, whose problems only worsen with incarceration (Jones & Sawyer, 2019). The purpose is to examine differences in mental illness prevalence rates between incarcerated and non-incarcerated older adults. This study utilizes secondary data from a sample of 787 adults 50 years and older in jail in Maricopa County Arizona taken from the 2010 wave of the Arizona Arrestee Reporting Information Network (AARIN) compared to a sample of 13,101 adults 50 years and older from the 2010 Core Wave of the Health and Retirement Study. This study examined the prevalence of mental illness diagnosis, mental illness prescription medication utilization, and mental illness treatment between the two populations. Findings from this study indicate a statistically significant difference in proportion of older adults receiving mental health treatment in the jail population when compared to overall population over older adults. Conclusions from this study support the vast amount of research indicating that the criminal justice system is the largest provider of mental health services in the United States. Future studies are needed to determine the precise causality of the relationship between mental health treatment and criminal justice involved older adults. Policy makers should consider increasing the number of mental health providers working with the police force to provide appropriate interventions for individuals in crisis.