Prison Breaks

New research looks at HIV behind bars.

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U.S. prison and jail systems may hold the key to HIV prevention. To unlock this potential, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has invested in 12 different grants, each lasting up to five years, to explore efforts to seek, test and treat inmates living with HIV. About one of every seven people living with the virus passes through a correctional facility according to the NIH.

Grants are allocated at jails and prisons across the country, plus one in Vietnam. Much of the research looks at ways to provide aggressive and voluntary testing for inmates, to get the positive ones on meds and then to identify the best methods to keep them on treatment upon release.

This last aspect is vital, says Lynda Erinoff, PhD, the associate director of the AIDS Research Program at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which is funding 10 of the grants. “Data show that when people [given] antiretroviral therapy [in jail] go back to their community, they [often] don’t get hooked up with continued care. So their therapy will stop and their viral load will go back up.”

One grant in Los Angeles County focuses exclusively on jail inmates, a group that’s incarcerated for shorter periods of time and thus is understudied. Other research targets people who use injection drugs, notably heroin.

“Treating people for their drug abuse is more likely to make them adherent to their antiretroviral treatment,” Erinoff says. The hope behind these grants, she explains, “is that if you get high-risk people on treatment, you can reduce the community viral load and [positively] impact the community’s [health] in general.”

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