

Enhancing Psychological Well-being: Addressing Mental Health Issues among Prison Inmates

Social awareness on the significance of mental health has risen significantly in the past few years, more precisely in the aftermath of COVID-19, which brought the issue to the fore. Additionally, attitudinal shifts like stigma reduction, willingness for open discourse on the issue, and efforts to improve services are positive changes in the larger mental health sphere. Notably, these changes elude vulnerable populations like prison inmates, in whom mental health issues are reportedly pervasive.

The "Prison Statistics India" report 2021 estimates that 9,180 inmates suffer from mental illness, which accounts for 1.7% of the total prison population. The figure was 7,524 a year before. The estimated number may be less, considering the limited facilities available in prisons to assess mental health conditions, and a much higher number of inmates may be in urgent need of mental health care and support. Prison populations face several psychological challenges owing to the nature of incarceration and its impact on their mental health. The prison confines, its environment, and duration of stay while awaiting the verdict add further to their mental health woes. Available studies and reports show a high prevalence of mental illnesses in prisoners, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance use and psychotic disorders, anxiety, sleep-related problems, and more. The increase in the incidences of suicides in prisons points to the magnitude of stress they face and ultimately succumb to it.

CARVING A PATHWAY FOR MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT IN PRISON

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, World Health Partners (WHP) has collaborated with the Government of Punjab to implement a pilot focusing on providing mental health services to the inmates in two central jails of Amritsar and Ludhiana. This unique initiative aims to screen all 6,700 odd inmates in these two institutions and give counseling support to those with mild issues through professional Counselors. Inmates with moderate or severe mental health problems get referred to specialized institutions for appropriate treatment.

The Punjab State AIDS Control Society (PSACS) is playing an instrumental role in taking this initiative forward. Central to this initiative are Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST)/HIV Counselors assigned by PSACS, who are set to play a pivotal role. These Counselors are being engaged in an intensive shadowing program where they closely observe and learn from WHP's experienced Counselors. The primary objective is to impart them practical experience during the pilot phase so that they can successfully adapt this model in Gurdaspur and Ludhiana prisons. Their involvement in this project is a testament to the collaborative effort to address mental health issues in special settings like prisons, with a focus on learning, practicing, and ultimately delivering effective mental health care to the prison population.

The pilot also aims to generate evidence about barriers and strategies for mental health intervention in prisons. The scientific approach adopted in this intervention involving formative research, followed by mental health interventions and evaluation for feasibility and acceptability of strategies, will pave the way for addressing mental health issues among inmates of other prisons. The larger objective of this initiative is to create a standard program for replication in other prison complexes state-wide.



Psychologist-cum-Counselor placed in Amritsar Prison is sharing the report with the Welfare Officer with data on the number of inmates screened and found with mental health issues, and action taken to address their problem.

World Health Partners (WHP) is a non-profit Indian society that sets up programs to bring sustainable healthcare within easy access to underserved and vulnerable communities. It innovatively harnesses already available resources more efficiently by using evidence-based management and technological solutions. WHP is best known for its programs focused on early detection and treatment of tuberculosis in urban and rural settings supported by community-based activities to ensure prevention. The organization uses all available resources--both in the public and private sectors to ensure that people living in any part of the country will have access to high-quality treatment.

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