

MONTANA CAN DO MORE TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS AND KEEP PEOPLE OUT OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Studying the Availability and Quality of Services to Treat Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders is a Step Forward for Montana

THE ISSUE

Too many Montanans with substance use or mental health disorders do not receive treatment:

- A study by the Montana Department of Justice found that 90 percent of Montanans with a substance use disorder do not receive treatment.¹ Mental health services are also limited. More than 42,000 Montanans have a mental health illness, but the state has been ranked poorly for its mental health care access.²
- This lack of treatment is even starker for Indigenous people who live on reservations and others who live in rural areas of the state.

Montana Can Do More to Reduce Homelessness and Keep People out of the Criminal Justice System

TOO MANY PEOPLE WITH UNTREATED MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS ARE INCARCERATED OR OTHERWISE CAUGHT UP IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM:

- About 1.2 million people with mental illnesses sit in jails or prison each year.³ Roughly 15 percent of people in state and federal prisons and 26 percent of people in jails report having a mental disorder.⁴ States with less access to mental health care have more adults who are in the criminal justice system.⁵ *Jails and prisons should not serve as warehouses for people with mental health or substance use disorders.*
- Of the 94 people on probation or parole that we interviewed for our report, [Set Up to Fail: Montana's probation & Parole System](#), 45 percent said they had a history of mental health issues, and 61 percent reported issues with substance abuse. Many cited mental illness or a substance use disorder as an underlying reason for entering the criminal justice system in the first place. Many people we interviewed noted that lack of access to treatment was an obstacle to staying out of jail or completing their probation or parole requirements.

UNTREATED MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS HARM COMMUNITIES:

- For those with experience in the criminal justice system, the dearth of services in Montana (especially on reservations and other rural areas) leaves people re-entering their communities without adequate support. Getting adequate treatment is a precondition to success because when you have an untreated mental health or substance use disorder, meeting the rest of re-entry

¹ <https://media.dojmt.gov/wp-content/uploads/Substance-Use-in-Montana-DOJ-FINAL-September-19th.pdf>

² <https://www.hcn.org/issues/50.13/the-montana-gap-montana-is-losing-essential-mental-health-services>

³ <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/access-mental-health-care-and-incarceration>

⁴ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/imhprpji1112pr.cfm>

⁵ <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/access-mental-health-care-and-incarceration>

obligations (getting a job, finding a place to live, showing up on time to check-ins) is more difficult.

- Access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment would likely improve public safety and lower the number of people who experience homelessness in Montana. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, access to supportive services is part of a cost-effective solution to end homelessness for those with the most severe health, mental health, and substance use disorders.⁶

MONTANA WOULD LIKELY SAVE MONEY BY INCREASING THE PROVISION OF TREATMENT FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS:

- National studies have shown that offering community-based treatment programs can reduce crime rates and save the criminal justice system billions of dollars.⁷

THE SOLUTION

As a first step, Montana should study the current system of services for treatment of substance use and mental health disorders. The study should determine whether additional or alternative services are needed to reduce homelessness and untreated mental health and substance use disorders as an alternative to detention and criminal sanctions.

The study should review the methods and costs for expanding access to treatment for underserved populations, including people who are homeless, incarcerated, on probation or parole, or live in rural areas of the state including Indian reservations.

The study should include the costs that communities and the state would continue to incur (including healthcare and law enforcement costs) if Montana does not expand access to treatment services.

⁶ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/health/>

⁷ <https://www.newswise.com/articles/study-replacing-prison-terms-with-drug-abuse-treatment-could-save-billions-in-criminal-justice-costs>