

HEALTHCARE WORRIES:

An Aging Population on Community Supervision



A major factor in the rise of mass incarceration in the United States is the increase in longer sentences. **More than half of people in prison are serving terms of more than ten years, and one in seven are in for life.**¹

Extended prison sentences have led to an aging incarcerated population. From 1991 to 2021, the percentage of people in prison aged 55 or older grew from 3 percent to 15 percent.² In Minnesota in 2019, 992 people in prison, or 10 percent of the total population, were over age 55.³ The costs of imprisoning older people are skyrocketing because they are twice as expensive to incarcerate due to health care expenses.⁴

To reduce incarceration rates, many have urged the release of older adults, citing research that most people age out of crime.⁵ Releasing older incarcerated adults would also reduce soaring healthcare costs behind bars. However, this will add significant pressures on community supervision systems. Older adults on community supervision often have complex health issues, especially after years of substandard medical services in penal institutions.

After serving thirty years in prison, **Roger is on supervised release for the remainder of his life.** Finding steady employment has been challenging due to his criminal history and age: when he underwent a knee replacement, he lost his job and had to go on public assistance. Roger needs another major surgery soon. His challenge is he earns too much for state-provided insurance but not enough to pay for a private plan.

For the past decade, the percentage of people in prison older than 55 grew from

3% to 15%

In Minnesota in 2019,

10% of the total prison population, was older than 55

“I'm older, I got older [with] thirty years of prison, and I'm supposed to somehow have the resources of someone who's been out here, working for thirty years”.

Supervision agents stress finding employment, but people like Roger are especially vulnerable to the “benefits cliff” – the decrease in public benefits after a small earnings increase.

1. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/how-many-people-are-spending-over-a-decade-in-prison/>

2. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/p21st.pdf>

3. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/data/aging_1999_2019.html

4. <https://www.vera.org/publications/compassionate-release-aging-infirm-prison-populations>

5. Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P. (2014). Age-Crime Curve. In: Bruinsma, G., Weisburd, D. (eds) Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5690-2_474

In the 2023 session, Minnesota State legislators passed the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act (MRRA) with the aim of preparing incarcerated people to successfully return to their communities by tailoring release plans to each individual's specific needs. To improve the quality-of-life, these plans should include special attention to healthcare issues such as diabetes, cancer, and Hepatitis C. State correctional facilities are required to provide healthcare applications prior to an inmate's release. The federal government has also authorized states to use Medicaid to cover the cost of some services prior to releasing individuals from prison.⁶

Ensuring that individuals have access to insurance will improve outcomes and smooth transitions. Being insured upon exiting prison is critical, but it is also necessary to assist the formerly-incarcerated population navigate the patchwork of bureaucratic entities and programs to make ends meet.

While many Americans agree that a step toward easing mass incarceration and reducing prison costs involves releasing older inmates, this will also shift the burden to community supervision systems and service providers. For example, an opinion piece in *The Hill* argues that older people released from prison "see their own doctors" and "bear the costs themselves, saving taxpayers millions."⁷ However, the article does not discuss how people like Roger who have served long terms behind bars will be able to "bear the costs" of expensive treatments and basic health maintenance.

How will people like Roger who have served long terms behind bars be able to "bear the costs" of expensive treatments and basic health maintenance



New reentry policies at the state and federal levels present vital opportunities to improve the fraught transition from prisons to communities. **Truly compassionate release and supervised release programs will need to make sure those returning home are connected to health and wellness programs that allow them not just to survive but thrive.**

In 2023, the **Minnesota Justice Research Center** initiated the "Transforming Community Supervision" project to improve public safety, promote better outcomes for people on probation and supervised release, and decrease the cycles of revoking people to prison and jail. As part of this effort, community engagement manager Zeke Caligiuri interviewed individuals currently on supervision and discussed the hurdles they are facing to successfully completing their terms.

6. <https://policy.doc.mn.gov/DOCPolicy/PolicyDoc.aspx?name=203.012.pdf>;
<https://www.medicaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/smd23003.pdf>.

7. <https://thehill.com/opinion/criminal-justice/4223158-moving-elderly-people-in-prison-home-saves-taxpayer-dollars-without-sacrificing-safety/>



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