

Incarcerated Women and Healthcare: Exploring Disparities and Solutions through Qualitative Insights

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Introduction. The proportion of incarcerated women has been increasing, with a higher prevalence of preventable diseases, particularly among women of color. Previous research, primarily survey-based, has highlighted these disparities. However, interviews with open-ended questions can provide deeper insights and help identify root causes. This project aimed to follow up on data from the S(H)E Women’s survey to assess the experiences and perspectives of women who utilized health services in jails and prisons.

Methods. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study incorporated data from Dr. Megha Ramaswamy's annual S(H)E Women survey. A subgroup of women who reported suboptimal care during incarceration participated in semi-structured interviews. Thirteen women were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their healthcare experiences while incarcerated.

Results. Interviews revealed significant challenges, including financial strain related to medical care, limited medication options, and pervasive distrust and frustration with medical staff. Additionally, extended wait times for medical attention highlighted critical flaws in the delivery of timely healthcare within correctional facilities.

Conclusions. The findings highlight the urgent need to address the unique healthcare requirements of incarcerated women using a trauma-informed approach. A one-size-fits-all healthcare model is inadequate and risks retraumatizing individuals. Implementing a tailored approach is crucial to fostering a healthcare environment that meets the specific needs of incarcerated women, contributing to a more equitable and compassionate system.