

Mental Health Needs in Missouri Jails

September 2025

Introduction

Sheriffs, Jail Administrators, and staff report that jails across Missouri are stretched beyond the limit, caring for individuals struggling with severe mental health and substance abuse issues. Jails are obligated to provide healthcare services, but their budgets don't cover the expensive care required to manage severe mental illness. These conditions are unsustainable and cruel for both jail staff and detained individuals.



Methodology

Missouri Appleseed developed a survey with the Missouri Sheriffs' Association and the Missouri Association of Counties. The survey asked about mental health needs and capacity in Missouri jails. It was emailed to all sheriffs and jail administrators in the state.

Findings

Findings reveal county jail systems with greater medical and mental health needs than they can provide. Almost all jails reported holding individuals awaiting assessments & transfer by the Department of Mental Health.

- **42%** of jail leadership reported that **at least three out of every four jail residents faced mental health challenges**, a higher percentage than national estimates.
- Jails most often reported the **total average wait time for residents to be transferred to an appropriate mental health facility as 1.5-2.8 years**.
- When asked how jails would use additional funds, jail leadership most frequently referenced **improving physical facilities for resident and staff safety, increasing medical staffing, and staff training**.
- The findings reveal **opportunities** for jails to **increase detainee Medicaid enrollment** prior to release, and improve re-entry outcomes.



Mental Health Holds are Up



Limited Staff and Mental Health Training



Safety Concerns for Everyone at Jail



Inconsistent Care for Jail Residents

Conclusion

Jail leadership report their facilities are overwhelmed with mental health needs. This report highlights the high cost of mental health needs in Missouri's jails, including delays in mental health assessments and transfers, strains on jail capacity, and critical systemic gaps. Policy reforms must focus on state-wide capacity building for mental health services and collective advocacy to implement policy change.