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## **The health status of Spanish gypsy delinquent youths.**

**Spanish gypsy delinquent youths come to correctional facility with a substantial existence of physical, psychological and behavior problems.**

During an 6-year period (1995-2000) 160 gypsy youths (92.5% boys) with an average age of 15.2 years (age range 13-17 years) were admitted to a juvenile correctional center in Zaragoza City (Community of Aragón), Spain. All adolescents were in custody because of a legal offense- including property offenses (52.5%), offenses against persons (30%), offenses related to the use of alcohol and drugs (12.5%), probation violations (2.5%), and other offenses (2.5%).

An initial medical screening on arrival was performed to assess the health and nutritional status and to identify acute or chronic illness. According to health care published guidelines for juvenile correctional institutions [2,6], the health status was assessed through medical and social history, by a complete physical examination, and a laboratory assessment with those tests indicated by historical or physical findings. Nutritional status was assessed using the anthropometric method. Weight, height, head and upper arm circumferences, body-mass index and nutritional index were established and compared with national normal standards of reference.

Most frequent health problems were smoking habit (98.7%), dental illness (52.5%), drug/alcohol abuse (48.1%), high-risk sexual behaviors (35%), incomplete immunization status (21.9%), infectious diseases associated with intravenous drug use and/or risk sexual behaviors (16.9%) [hepatitis C (7.5%), hepatitis B (5.6%), AIDS (3.1%), syphilis (0.6%)], and psychological disorders (15.6%). Less prevalent health problems were visual (10%), dermatologic (6.2%), respiratory (5.6%), nutritional deficiencies (5.6%), growth delay (4.4%), obesity (4.4%), otic (3.7%), digestive (2.5%), orthopedic (1.9%), and cardiovascular (1.2%).

This study indicates that Spanish gypsy delinquent youths come to correctional facility with a substantial existence of physical, psychological and behavior problems. The current and prior health problems of Spanish gypsy youths in custody were consistent with those documented in previous reports concerning to gypsy people [1,4,5] and concerning to non-gypsy delinquent youths [3]. This population is

especially in need of dental, psychiatric, immunization, and infectious services. These are probably caused by a variety of factors, including past physical or psychosocial abuses, lifestyle habits, gypsy ideas about health and illness, lack of prior health care, and poorer access to health services and uptake of preventative care.

The time in custody presents a unique opportunity to address the basic health concerns of this high-risk population, especially regarding their mental health, and also to provide health education that includes general health and nutrition, substance abuse, and sex education (sexuality, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis B and C, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). Moreover, while gypsy youths are confined in correctional facilities, they should be protected as much as possible from developing physical and emotional problems as a result of incarceration.

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