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PSYCHIATRIC CHALLENGES OF INCARCERATED ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

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More than 2,300,000 men and women are incarcerated in America's jails and prisons. The citizenship status of many offenders is unknown, since it is often not checked for a variety of budgetary and political reasons. The undocumented citizenship status of offenders commonly becomes known only after a felony conviction. They then serve their prison time in America, all the while facing ultimate deportation to their country of origin. During the past two years there has been a political intensification of the alleged need to rid America of "illegals," with well-publicized arrests of fully-employed "illegals" in Iowa and Mississippi.

Many of these prisoners have lived in the states for years, often with wives, children, and siblings living here as well. Obviously, incarceration and deportation become an incredible emotional and economic challenge for the entire family. The War on Illegals mirrors politically the War on Drugs and is probably doomed to an equal degree of failure.

The presenter works in a prison with convicted felons from more than twenty countries. Many of these prisoners face deportation to their country of origin, yet they may have no family or other support systems in that country. Some are from nations that have no deportation agreements with the USA! The mental health team needs to respond to the effects of this political process on the inmate-patients.

It is important to understand the international challenges of human migration in our time. Deepening our understanding of the driving forces of the politics of punishment is essential.