**Introduction**

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world (Walmsley, 2008), in 2008, 2.3 million individuals were held in state or federal prisons and local jails (Weis & Sabol, 2009). Individuals living with HIV/AIDS are one group disproportionately represented in the U.S. incarcerated population, with the rate of HIV/AIDS over 2 times higher in prisons than in the general population (Manlove, 1997, 2000). Although research with incarcerated persons, particularly those with HIV/AIDS, is essential for understanding the unique circumstances and identifying the most effective treatments and interventions, the conduct of research in correctional settings is limited by regulatory, ethical, population vulnerability, policy, and structural challenges (Brewer-Smyth, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2006; Lazzarini & Altice, 2000; Seal, Eldridge, Zach, & Sisson, 2010). The disproportionate rate of individuals with or at risk for HIV/AIDS in correctional settings coupled with the added vulnerability of this population has created a particular need for the development of empirically-based recommendations on the conduct of HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings. To help meet this need, the current study presents recommendations on how to facilitate correctional HIV/AIDS research based on interviews with professionals who have relevant experience and/or knowledge.

**Method**

**Participants**

A national sample of 92 professionals (15 prison administrators, 16 IBW members, 16 IBW prisoner representatives, 15 research ethicists, and 30 researchers) with experience in and/or knowledge of the conduct of HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings was interviewed for this study.

**Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed that consisted of 18 questions related to HIV/AIDS research within correctional settings. The topics included questions related to the correctional system, application of ethical principles, and regulatory oversight. Additional questions focused on vulnerable populations, top ethical challenges, and recommendations for other working in the field.

**Procedure**

Potential interviewees were identified through literature reviews, internet searches, and snowball sampling. Semi-structured telephone interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted with participants, and who were compensated $100 for their time. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo 8.0 for qualitative data analyses.

**Data Analyses**

Qualitative interview data were coded using NVivo 8.0 with procedures designed to ensure thoroughness and reliability. For initial coding, a sub-sample of five interviews was selected to ensure the conduct of HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings was being fully represented in our sample. Once initial coding was completed, responses to the question of interest were double-checked and verified using NVivo 8.0. Although research with incarcerated persons, particularly those with HIV/AIDS, is essential for understanding the unique circumstances and identifying the most effective treatments and interventions, the conduct of research in correctional settings is limited by regulatory, ethical, population vulnerability, policy, and structural challenges (Brewer-Smyth, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2006; Lazzarini & Altice, 2000; Seal, Eldridge, Zach, & Sisson, 2010). The disproportionate rate of individuals with or at risk for HIV/AIDS in correctional settings coupled with the added vulnerability of this population has created a particular need for the development of empirically-based recommendations on the conduct of HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings. To help meet this need, the current study presents recommendations on how to facilitate correctional HIV/AIDS research based on interviews with professionals who have relevant experience and/or knowledge.

**Findings: Top Three Recommendations**

1. **Collaboration**

- Build and maintain relationships with correctional staff.
- Get all correctional staff members on board with the research.
- Early and frequent communication.
- Establish trust.
- Educational in both directions.
- Be patient.
- Have a good working relationship with your IRB.
- Be persistent.
- Gain expert and ‘insider’ input.
- Researchers can provide mentoring.
- Input from advocates, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people.

2. **Knowledge**

- Understand the correctional environment and their procedures.
- Know and respect the rules of the institution.
- Understand limitations of the institution.
- Understand and follow all IRB and federal guidelines.
- Keep up-to-date on requirements.
- Have a real, applicable understanding of ethics (not just textbook).
- Understand participants’ social and physical environments.
- Have general experience with the incarcerated population.
- Understand (and be mindful of) prison culture.

3. **Ethical Principles**

- Ensure informed consent.
- Ensure respect for persons.
- Ensure principles of beneficence and justice.

**Discussion**

Findings of this study highlight the importance of collaborating with all stakeholders involved in each stage of research, including the correctional system staff, participants, regulatory oversight bodies, and experts in the field. Another key recommendation was to be knowledgeable about the stakeholders you are working with, along with the rules and regulations of the systems in which the research is being conducted. Lastly, when working with participants, researchers should always ensure voluntary informed consent, respect for persons, and the principle of beneficence and justice. While adherence to these standards is important in any human subjects research, it is crucial and can be especially challenging when the participants are part of a vulnerable population, such as individuals who are incarcerated.

The inclusion of various professional groups as respondents in this study allowed for diversity in opinions and representation of both the individuals involved in conducting HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings. However, the sample did not include one group of individuals considered to be of great importance in discussions regarding corrections research - individuals who are currently or formerly incarcerated. Additionally, while the sample represented a range of professional groups, the participants were recruited using convenience sampling. This method may limit the generalizability of the findings.

More research is needed to help generalize and further expand these areas of recommendations. Future research on the challenges and recommendations of conducting HIV/AIDS research with correctional populations should include a wider range of respondents with experience in HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings and should include currently or formerly incarcerated people as participants. Despite these limitations, this study is an important step towards addressing the challenges of HIV/AIDS research in correctional settings and developing criteria to continue the growth of this important area of research. The next step in this research project is a quantitative survey that will be administered to a national sample of IBW members and HIV/AIDS researchers.

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**For More Information**

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**Literature cited**


