HIV transmission risk differs for men and women in prison

Chicago (May 15, 2009) — The risk of transmitting HIV in prison differs significantly between men and women, according to a new study published in the “Journal of Women’s Health.” Researchers at Chicago State University found that among incarcerated women, 18.8 percent engage in sexual intercourse as their riskiest behavior, while nearly 29 percent of incarcerated men engage in tattooing, their riskiest behavior.

The researchers surveyed 526 women and 1,293 men incarcerated in Illinois prisons about their HIV risk behaviors, including sexual intercourse, injected drug use, needle sharing, tattooing and body piercing.

The report, “Gender Differences in HIV Risk Behaviors of Inmates,” said HIV risk factors are more problematic in prisons because the agents for prevention, such as condoms and clean needles, are not permitted in Illinois correctional facilities. The report also said tattoos may be an indicator of other risky behavior: “…it appears that persons who get tattoos in prison exhibit multiple risk-taking behaviors. Hence, getting a tattoo in prison may be used as a marker for identifying inmates who may engage in behaviors that would put them at risk.”

The report examined HIV risk in prisons because infection rates have been estimated to be between four and ten times higher than in the general population. Identifying risky behaviors is critical to stopping the spread of HIV within prison because it could spread to the general population upon inmates’ release from prison.

Because the length of incarceration appears to be associated with risk behaviors, the report recommended that interventions begin as early as possible for newly incarcerated inmates. It also recommended that interventions be developed for younger, unmarried women, given that they are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse in prison.

The study was co-authored by Dr. Titilayo Abiona and Dr. Adedeji Adefuye of Chicago State’s HIV/AIDS Research and Policy Institute; Dr. Joseph A. Balogun, dean of the College of Health Sciences; and Dr. Patricia Sloan, former assistant dean, College of Health Sciences.