

Understanding drug-related mortality in released prisoners: A review of national coronial records

Andrews JY, Kinner SA (Australia)

BMC Public Health 12, 270, 2012

Background: The prisoner population is characterised by a high burden of disease and social disadvantage, and ex-prisoners are at increased risk of death following release. Much of the excess mortality can be attributed to an increased risk of unnatural death, particularly from drug overdose; however, relatively few studies have investigated the circumstances surrounding drug-related deaths among released prisoners. This study aimed to explore and compare the circumstances of death for those who died from accidental drug-related causes to those who died from all other reportable causes.

Methods: A nationwide search of the Australian National Coroners Information System (NCIS) was conducted to identify reportable deaths among ex-prisoners from 2000 to 2007. Using a structured coding form, NCIS records for these cases were interrogated to explore causes and circumstances of death.

Results: Coronial records for 388 deceased ex-prisoners were identified. Almost half of these deaths were a result of accidental drug-related causes (45%). The majority of accidental drug-related deaths occurred in a home environment, and poly-substance use at or around the time of death was common, recorded in 72% of drug-related deaths. Ex-prisoners who died of accidental drug-related causes were on average younger and less likely to be Indigenous, born in Australia, married, or living alone at or around the time of death, compared with those who died from all other reportable causes. Evidence of mental illness or self-harm was less common among accidental drug-related deaths, whereas evidence of previous drug overdose, injecting drug use, history of heroin use and history of drug withdrawal in the previous six months were more common.

Conclusions: Drug-related deaths are common among ex-prisoners and often occur in a home (vs. public) setting. They are often associated with use of multiple substances at or around the time of death, risky drug-use patterns, and even among this markedly disadvantaged group, extreme social disadvantage. These findings reflect the complex challenges facing prisoners upon release from custody and indicate a need to consider drug overdose within the wider framework of ex-prisoner experiences, so that preventive programmes can be appropriately structured and targeted.

Comment

Main findings: Prisoners face many challenges upon release from prison, including stigmatisation, failure to obtain employment or housing, and the loss of close personal relationships. Studies in Australia have shown that prisoners have an increased risk of mortality, with the majority of deaths being caused by alcohol and drug abuse¹. However, previous Australian studies analysing risk factors for

death in released prisoners have used data linkage methods, matching correctional records with death registers. The authors of the current study note that this method means results are limited to basic demographic and criminogenic factors, limiting the ability to explore broader risk factors for mortality. To resolve this, the current study used information from the National Coroner's Information System (NCIS), including demographic information, a police narrative, autopsy, and coronial findings, to explore the causes and circumstances of drug-related mortality among ex-prisoners in Australia. As expected, the major cause of death was accidental drug overdose (45% of the 388 ex-prisoners). The remaining 213 deaths (55%) were most frequently suicides (30%), followed by injury deaths due to external causes (12%), and deaths by chronic/infectious diseases (9%). Other characteristics of ex-prisoners prior to death were unemployment, poor health profiles, and limited utilisation of health services.

Implications: While suicide is a major problem within Australian prisons, research has shown that the majority (86%) of suicides by offenders occur once the person has been released, particularly within the first 2 weeks². While it is widely believed that drug deaths after release from prison are due to decreased tolerance during imprisonment, the current study showed that 55% of deaths in prisoners were from causes other than accidental drug overdoses, with suicide comprising 30% of these other causes of death. This indicates that, while it is important to offer drug and alcohol assistance to prisoners on release, these individuals should also be monitored for suicidal tendencies and behaviours. This is particularly important considering that the findings from this study underscore the fact that the majority of ex-prisoners suffered from poor health and limited health service contact. Initiatives to increase the rates of employment and improve the socioeconomic status of ex-prisoners may also aid in reducing death by suicide in this population.

Endnotes

1. Stewart LM, Henderson CJ, Hobbs MS, Ridout SC, Knuiman MW (2004). Risk of death in prisoners after release from jail. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 28, 32-36.
2. Kariminia A, Matthew GL, Butler TG, Levy MH, Corben SP, Kaldor JM, Grant L (2007). Suicide risk among recently released prisoners in New South Wales, Australia. *Medical Journal of Australia* 187, 387-390.