



RESEARCH

INFORMATION

RELEASE: Health service contacts for mental health and substance use on release from prison, compared to a matched general population sample

AIMS

Substance use related deaths and suicides are high in people released from prison. There is little UK evidence for health service use in this population to inform early intervention. The RELEASE study aimed to:

- Compare rates of mental health and substance use related contact with health services between people released from prison and similar people who had not recently been in prison (matched [1:5] from the general population based on sex, age, postcode and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation)
- Among people released from prison, identify differences in rates of mental health and substance use related contact with health services based on demographic, health related and criminal justice related characteristics (e.g. time in prison, type of release)

KEY FINDINGS

- People released from prison have higher contact rates with all services for mental health and substance use, compared to similar people who have not recently been in prison
- Differences in contact rates are large for emergency and unscheduled care services
- Among people released from prison, women, people with a reported disability, and people with more comorbidities, have higher rates of contact across services
- People supervised on release (e.g. parole) have lower contact rates than people with no release conditions. More time in prison and more prison episodes are associated with higher contact rates



WHAT DID THE STUDY INVOLVE?

- Linking prison, health and deaths records (2010-2020) for everyone released from prison in 2015, and a comparison group of similar people who had not recently been in prison (matched 1:5 from the general population on sex, age, postcode and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation). We included the following services: community (contact with community prescribers), outpatient (outpatient appointments, drug and alcohol services), inpatient (general and psychiatric admissions), unscheduled (NHS24 and out-of-hours general practice) and emergency (accident and emergency [A&E], ambulance) services
- Statistical analysis of contact rates with services for mental health and substance use over a four year follow up, comparing people released from prison to the comparison group, and different groups of people released from prison. Analyses controlled for reimprisonment, comorbidities and prior mental health and substance use related contact with health services.
- Consultation with an advisory group of men and women who had been in prison in Scotland, including four in-person meetings, led by a co-investigator with experience of imprisonment



WHAT WERE THE RESULTS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

AIM 1 – comparing people released to a matched comparison group

- The main results are published in BMJ Open (doi: [10.1136/bmjopen-2025-107586](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2025-107586))
- People released from prison have higher rates of contact with all services for mental health and substance use compared to similar people who have not recently been in prison
- 21% of people released had one or more mental health or substance use related A&E contact over four years, and 24% had a mental health or substance use related ambulance contact, compared to only 2% in the comparison group
- The size of differences vary by condition and service, but tended to be larger for substance use, and for services responding to acute, unscheduled and emergency care needs

AIM 2 – comparing differences between subgroups of people released

- Further results are under peer review
- Different contact patterns were seen based on demographic, health related and criminal justice factors. Women, people with disability, and people with more co-morbidities had higher rates of contact across services
- People supervised on release had lower contact rates than those without supervision. More time in prison and more prison episodes were associated with higher contact rates



WHAT WERE THE RESULTS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

- ❖ Many people released from prison need to use emergency and unscheduled care for mental health and substance use related issues. This means they may not be receiving community and outpatient care that meets their needs
- ❖ Improving transitional and post-release mental health and substance use support for people who have been in prison should be an urgent public health priority
- ❖ Support should be tailored to different groups based on demographic characteristics and the way they are released from prison
- ❖ Research is needed to establish the best way to provide this support

This is the first research linking prison, health service and death records in Scotland (and the UK). It focused on post-release health service contact for mental health and substance use across a range of services and using a matched comparison group, giving **the first holistic picture internationally of the challenges experienced by people released from prison, and by health services trying to meet their needs.**

Research is needed to understand how to optimise access to early and effective mental health and substance use support.





WHAT IMPACT COULD THE FINDINGS HAVE?

- Results can **underpin health and justice policy** at all levels, by demonstrating the need for improved mental health and substance use support for people who have been in prison. The results provide evidence for tailoring support for different groups
- Results emphasise the importance for **practitioners to be aware** of imprisonment history and the potential need for mental health and substance use support
- Improving service availability, accessibility, and quality for people who have been in prison requires adequate resourcing. This **will benefit individual patients and wider public health** by reducing costly emergency and unscheduled care use



HOW WILL THE OUTCOMES BE DISSEMINATED?

We published our [main results](#) and [protocol](#), presented at international conferences, and made infographics showing results for [mental health](#) and [substance use](#). We keep engaging with stakeholders in health, public health and justice, in policy and practice. We have more outputs pending peer review. We will use this webpage to share developments: www.release.stir.ac.uk



CONCLUSION

People released from prison have higher rates of contact with all health services for mental health and substance use, compared to similar people who haven't been in prison. Differences in contact rates are large for emergency care. This suggests that people released are not receiving adequate community or outpatient support, which has substantial individual and health service costs. Improving post-release support must be an urgent public health priority. Future research must understand *how* care can be optimised for this population. The RELEASE dataset is a valuable resource for future research, and we welcome enquiries.



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