

Offender Mental Health: helping to break the cycle of reoffending



Julian (peer researcher):

“There is no help for prisoners with mental health problems. Prison didn’t fix my mental health issues and did nothing to help them. That’s why I’m involved in this project – there needs to be a better understanding of where and how people can get help. There needs to be better sharing of information between prisons and outside agencies – no more ‘out the door and see you later’. We need places where we feel safe. Doing this makes you feel good.”

Between 50% to 90% of the prison population experience mental health problems, which are often a complex mix of depression, anxiety, substance misuse and problematic personality traits. Those leaving prison often experience difficulties with family relationships, employment, long-term illness, self-harm and re-offending. The risk of suicide for male prison leavers is eight times the national average, and over a quarter of fatal suicide attempts happen within a month of release.

Our previous research has found that distrust of medical professionals, and other authority figures, contributes to prisoners not seeking help when experiencing problems. The aim of our current project is to find ways to support offenders, both before and after release from prison, to help them to rebuild their lives in a meaningful way, become part of society and break the cycle of mental illness and re-offending.

What Happened Next?

We worked with eight local men with experience of serving prison sentences to develop a care package for prison leavers. Our 'peer researchers' were able to use their experiences of being in prison, and the challenges they faced when released, to make sure that the package of care is suitable for other people leaving prison. It has been delivered to 40 prison leavers with mental health problems across the North West and South West of England and includes therapy, medication, housing, training and links with employers.

Care begins before leaving prison and continues after release. Those receiving the care package have been overwhelmingly positive and, so far, 28 of the 40 who have been released have remained involved with the programme.

We are confident that we are developing a revolutionary new way to support prisoners with mental health issues that will benefit them, their families and, ultimately, society as a whole.

For further information visit:

www.clahrc-peninsula.nihr.ac.uk



References:

Howerton A, Byng R, Campbell J, Hess D, Owens C , Aitken P: Understanding help seeking behaviour among male offenders: qualitative interview study. *BMJ* 2007; 334:303. Accessible via: www.bmj.com/content/334/7588/303

Byng, R., Howerton, A., Owens, C. V. and Campbell, J. (2015), Pathways to suicide attempts among male offenders: the role of agency. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 2015. Accessible via: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9566.12259/full

Useful Links:

COCOA: clahrc-peninsula.nihr.ac.uk/research/care-for-offenders-continuity-of-access-cocoa

Engager: plymouth.ac.uk/research/engager
clahrc-peninsula.nihr.ac.uk/research/engager

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