



Exploring health and wellbeing in prison through a peer research approach

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Project background

The high health needs of prisoners and the implications of this for health service delivery are well documented. However, no UK prison health research study has involved full prisoner collaboration from start to finish. This project therefore stemmed from the desire to improve delivery of health services within a male prison in Wales, working with prisoners as peer researchers, to ensure that services are in line with prisoners' self-identified health needs, enabling them to have a voice in shaping the delivery of healthcare practice.

Aim

The aim of the project was to explore the wider aspects of health and wellbeing in prison, such as living and working conditions, lifestyle factors, family, friends and community within the prison environment, from the perspective of those in prison. Through adopting a participatory approach, the project also sought to offer those in prison the opportunity to conduct the research. The project additionally aimed to pinpoint areas to improve health in prison. To achieve these, the objectives identified were to:

- Determine the feasibility of engaging men who are imprisoned as peer researchers
- Identify with the men the health concerns that need to be addressed
- Suggest with the men ways to address the identified health concerns that would be useful to prison management, healthcare providers and policymakers

Implications for practice

- Those in prison are known to have poorer health than their counterparts in the community
- The impact of prison on health is complicated and poorly understood. It may protect health (through improved access to health and education) or negatively impact on health (through social and cultural isolation)
- Those in prison are the experts in their experience and best placed to advise how living in prison impacts on their health
- The peer-research approach worked well and could be considered for use in other prison settings

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Online

Further information about the project can be accessed from: fons.org/library/report-details?nstd=73140

Key activities and outcomes

• Establishing the project team

Job descriptions for the peer-researcher positions were written in collaboration with the prison education department. It was agreed recruitment would be among existing peer mentors as they had already undergone training in skills such as communication, ethical issues, personal boundaries, values and confidentiality, and had been cleared to work with other men in the prison. Two groups of men were recruited as paid peer researchers. One group of six men was resident in the main prison, and one group of seven men in the vulnerable persons unit. Each group underwent a week's intensive training in research techniques, including methods, ethics, data collection and analysis, how to share results and make a positive change. Each was tasked with exploring health and wellbeing in prison among peers.

• Undertaking the research

The groups undertook provisional focus groups, interviews and questionnaires to establish the main issues affecting health and wellbeing in prison. These issues were then considered further in follow-up questionnaires. The main prison group undertook six focus groups across nine wings and 50 pilot questionnaires, followed by a further questionnaire sent out to 350 men across 14 wings, of whom 263 responded. The vulnerable person group undertook four focus groups, 10 one-to-one interviews and 50 pilot questionnaires followed by a further questionnaire to 330 men, of whom 154 responded.

• Key findings

Data analysis revealed several themes, such as communication, bereavement, safety, dignity, family connections and healthcare. The main prison group focused on what men understood by the term 'rehabilitation' and how prisons can support the process. It concluded the prison provided for basic needs very well but that wider needs, such as belongingness and self-esteem, were not met. The vulnerable person group focused on communication and emotional wellbeing and identified areas for improvement. Each group has written its own final report. All the men involved valued the project, stating it gave them the opportunity to learn new skills, a voice to promote positive change and a sense of 'giving back' to others in the prison.

• Dissemination

A presentation day was held at the end of the project, attended by around 50 people representing the prison senior management team, stakeholders from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, local universities, Public Health Wales and local charities. Both groups presented their research process and findings. Implementation of recommendations from the project to improve wellbeing in prison are being followed up with the prison management team. Further dissemination by the groups is planned, including a conference poster presentation and academic publication. Discussions are ongoing with the prison around adopting a peer-researcher approach more widely.