

Ex-offenders not using mental health services

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"These services may also be less available because of the stigma associated with being a mentally ill criminal," Dr Sodhi-Berry says. Credit: Emma O'Brien

Ex-offenders in Western Australia may not be seeking out or receiving the mental health services they need, research suggests.

The finding comes from a University of Western Australia study that looked at 23,661 first-time adult offenders to determine their use of mental health services post-sentence completion.

Overall, the study estimates that only about 15 per cent of ex-offenders used such services in the five years after completing their sentences.

For those who had contact with a [mental health service](#) prior to conviction, this rises to 42 per cent, while a mere 12 per cent of offenders who had never accessed these services sought or received help.

"Untreated mental illness impacts negatively on both offenders and the wider society," says Dr Nita Sodhi-Berry from UWA's Centre for Health Services Research.

"[These impacts] can include poor health—including a high risk of premature death—reduced economic opportunities and increased reoffending."

The study found that Indigenous women, followed by Indigenous men, have a higher likelihood than their non-Indigenous counterparts of using mental health services after sentence, especially for substance use disorders.

For ex-offenders who had previously used mental health services, those who were sentenced to prison time were less likely to seek help upon release than those who were sentenced to community penalties.

Mental health 'not critical for survival'

Researchers say low uptake can be attributed to a variety of personal, socio-economic and environmental challenges, including offenders needing to take care of 'the basics,' such as employment and shelter, or a lack of convenient services, or even social pressures.

"Mental health services may be perceived as not being critical for survival. These services may also be less available because of the stigma

associated with being a mentally ill criminal," Dr Sodhi-Berry says.

"The fact that 60 per cent of first-time offenders who used mental [health services](#) before their sentence did not access these after their release highlights possible gaps in the continuity of mental healthcare."

Another area of improvement could be better recognition of offenders with [mental health issues](#) as they enter the correctional system.

Dr Sodhi-Berry says identification of chronic physical health conditions upon sentencing could serve as a prompt for conducting structured mental health evaluations, since pre-sentence hospitalisation for physical ailments is strongly associated with post-sentence mental health service use.

"These findings have important implications for improving the uptake of [mental health](#) services by ex-[offenders](#), considering the high occurrence of [mental disorders](#) in this marginalised section of our population," she says.

More information: "Predictors of post-sentence mental health service use in a population cohort of first-time adult offenders in Western Australia." *Crim Behav Ment Health*. 2014 Aug 25. [DOI: 10.1002/cbm.1927](#). [Epub ahead of print] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25156966

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