

Repeat offenders' lifestyles may put them at higher risk of coronavirus

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The "impulsive and risk-taking" lifestyles of repeat offenders means they are likely to be at higher risk of catching—and spreading—coronavirus, a leading criminologist suggests.

Working with criminologists at Cambridge University, Professor Jonathan Shepherd, a surgeon and Cardiff University criminologist, found clear links between anti-social lifestyles and poor health.

Their research, published this month in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*—part of a program of research led by Professor Shepherd in this area—shows that offenders have a greater risk of health problems than non-offenders.

As they get older they suffer more illness, hospitalization, and by age 48 their death and disability rates are higher, this research shows. This means that policies which reduce offending are very likely to improve health, the research suggests.

Professor Shepherd believes the findings could be important to help understand the risks offenders present to themselves—and the public—in the midst of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

"As the coronavirus outbreak grips Britain, those in prison and persistent offenders may be more likely than non-offenders to be vectors for transmission. This would increase risks to prison visitors and offenders' older relatives in the community," says Professor Shepherd.

"Offending is often part of a constellation of social disorders, from substance and alcohol abuse to truancy and violence, theft and vandalism. This reflects such factors as impulsive and risk-taking behavior and poor parenting which increase the risk of [poor health](#) as well as offending.

"In the context of the coronavirus outbreak, these characteristics are likely to mean lower compliance with guidance on hand washing or social distancing. Their lifestyles mean they may well be more likely to pick up coronavirus and pass it on to others. In a pandemic, this presents

a real concern."

Professor Shepherd is part of Cardiff University's Violence Research Group and pioneered national violence measurement using data collected in A&Es in England and Wales. The group, which is part of the University's Crime and Security Research Institute, publishes authoritative annual reports of national violence trends.

"It is hard to say what impact the coronavirus crisis could have on offending but close supervision of offenders across the justice system and in the community may be key in the coming weeks and months to protect citizens," says Professor Shepherd.

Professor Shepherd's latest research looked further at the links between offending and health outcomes.

It analyzed injury and illness data on 411 men who have been followed since the age of eight in 1962 as part of the longitudinal *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, which was designed to gain insight into how criminal behavior develops from a young age.

It concluded that by age 48 incidence of illness, hospitalizations and injuries is higher for all types of offenders, whether they are lifetime criminals or those who started offending later in life.

This research indicates that [early interventions](#), such as preschool education, early family support and child skills training, are likely to reduce illness and injury as well as offending, adds Professor Shepherd.

More information: Guy CM Skinner et al. Offender trajectories, health and hospital admissions: relationships and risk factors in the longitudinal Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0141076820905319](https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076820905319)

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