

More than 70% of B.C. inmates with substance use disorders are reincarcerated, finds study

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Former prisoners with substance use and co-occurring disorders are at an alarmingly high risk of reincarceration, according to a new Simon Fraser University-led study.

The study found that 72% of people with co-occurring [mental health](#) and substance use disorders, and 70% of people with substance use disorders alone, returned to prison within three years of release.

"Our findings highlight the urgency for correctional, health, and [social services](#) to work synergistically to reduce reincarceration and other adverse outcomes, particularly among people with substance use and co-occurring disorders," says SFU criminologist Amanda Butler, lead author of the report.

Butler's research, [published in the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*](#), examined the impact of mental health and substance use needs on reincarceration using a population-based sample that accounted for all 13,109 adults released from B.C. provincial correctional facilities to the community between October 1, 2012, and September 30, 2014.

Reincarceration rates for people with substance use or co-occurring disorders were much higher compared to people with no reported disorder (49%) and [mental illness](#) only (54%). Not only were people with substance use and co-occurring disorders more likely to be reincarcerated, but they also spent fewer days in the community before being reincarcerated.

Butler says mental health and substance use disorders intersect with many other socioeconomic needs (such as low education,

unemployment, unstable housing and a lack of social support) that can exacerbate the risk of reincarceration.

"Despite the high prevalence of mental health and substance use-related needs in this setting, disorders are frequently undertreated among people who experience incarceration," says Butler.

Butler's findings suggest that [substance use disorders](#) are the single strongest predictor of reincarceration and challenge the perception that non-substance related mental disorders cause criminal behavior.

"Now more than ever, it is crucial for correctional, health, and social services to come together and ensure that people are accessing timely, appropriate, and evidence-based care," Butler says. "Ensuring that people have their [basic needs](#) met, such as housing and income support, is central to reducing reincarceration."

More information: Amanda Butler et al, Mental Health Needs, Substance Use, and Reincarceration: Population-Level Findings From a Released Prison Cohort, *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00938548241238327](https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548241238327)

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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