

# Mandatory drug testing in prisons is ineffective and harmful, says researcher

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In Australia, nearly 2 in 5 incarcerated individuals report using illicit drugs, with about 40% of those who injected drugs before imprisonment continuing to do so while in prison.

Despite its widespread implementation, there is no clear evidence that mandatory [drug testing](#) in Australian prisons is effective at deterring drug use. Instead, it contributes to poor social, health, and criminal justice outcomes for individuals incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

Penalties for failing or refusing a drug test can range from cautions to loss of visitation rights and other privileges. Burnet public health physician and epidemiologist, Dr. Jocelyn Chan, has written in a [commentary](#) in the *Drug and Alcohol Review*, that these penalties cause more harm than good.

"The use of sanctions to deter drug use is an abstinence-based approach that conflicts with the national framework of harm minimization," Dr. Chan said.

"Qualitative data shows the fear of being targeted for drug testing and increased surveillance makes people reluctant to seek [drug treatment](#) or rehabilitation.

"Maintaining [social ties](#) promotes positive post-release transitions, and penalties such as limiting visitation rights can severely impact people's transition upon release."

Additionally, drug testing programs can incentivize people to change their drug use patterns from detectable drugs long after use, such as cannabis, to stronger substances with shorter excretion times, such as opioids.

There are alternatives to mandatory drug testing for monitoring drug use in prison, including waste-water analysis or questionnaires, which have been successfully implemented in some Australian prisons.

"By broadening the focus from simply monitoring [drug use](#), to include

monitoring drug-related health outcomes such as overdoses, injecting-related infections, or engagement in drug treatment, we can ensure drug programs or strategies improve health instead of creating more barriers and causing more harm," Dr. Chan said.

**More information:** Jocelyn Chan et al, Re-examining mandatory drug testing in Australian prisons, *Drug and Alcohol Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/dar.13894](https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13894)

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