

Media release

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Continuing mental healthcare critical for smooth reintegration after prison and less crime

New research finds that improved connections with health services for people leaving prison and their families is a critical first step in addressing mental distress and ensuring smooth reintegration into the community.

Unlocking Care, a new report from The Australia Institute, finds that the incidence of moderate and severe mental health issues increases after release from prison.

The chance to build a continuous mental health care system, known as throughcare, is possible now following steps taken in recent years to integrate health services in many states.

Expanding support to include the families of prisoners and those people recently released from prison would maximise the effectiveness of throughcare programs.

“There are a variety of challenges facing prisoners and their families in the transition back to the community and, for many, mental healthcare can play a key role in the reintegration process,” said David Baker, Adjunct Research Fellow at the Australia Institute and author of the report.

“Some 40 per cent of prisoners experience high to very high levels of psychological distress within the first year of their release from prison. Mental healthcare at this stage is critical.”

“It costs about \$300 a day to keep someone incarcerated, yet less than a dollar a day – just over \$300 per person per year - goes toward mental health services in Australia,” he said.

“The difference in cost for community mental health services and incarceration provides a budget window for more investment in mental health.”

Liana Buchanan of the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) Inc. says the findings are especially poignant in light of rising rates of imprisonment across Australia, and the massive number of prisoners with mental health problems.

“This is important research that highlights the need for effective, properly resourced services to support people as they leave prison and return to the community,” Ms Buchanan said.

“If we really hope to tackle reoffending and support people to live crime free, we must invest far more in transition support and throughcare.”

David Baker, author of *Unlocking Care*, is available for comment on 0403 057 520.

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