

A systematic review of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of peer-based interventions to maintain and improve offender health in prison settings

Jane South,^{1*} Anne-Marie Bagnall,¹ Claire Hulme,²
James Woodall,¹ Roberta Longo,² Rachael Dixey,¹
Karina Kinsella,¹ Gary Raine,¹ Karen Vinall-Collier²
and Judy Wright²

¹Institute for Health and Wellbeing, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

²Academic Unit of Health Economics, Leeds Institute of Health Sciences,
University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

*Corresponding author

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Plain English summary

Peer-based interventions on offender health in prison

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Plain English summary

Offenders have higher levels of ill health than the general population and are more likely to engage in risky health behaviours. One of the ways of improving health in prisons is through peer-based interventions, in which prisoners provide education, support or advice to their fellow prisoners. This study aimed to review previous research to find out whether or not peer interventions work to improve and maintain health in prisons and young offender institutions. We also wanted to find out what types of intervention exist, how they work in a prison setting and what the balance is between costs and benefits.

The findings have come from a systematic review in which we gathered the results of studies across the world to provide a comprehensive and unbiased summary of whether or not peer interventions work in prison and whether or not they are cost-effective. We also held a mini-conference at which we invited experts in this area to share their opinions of how these approaches work in prisons, and held some listening exercises at which we consulted about the study with serving prisoners.

The study conclusions were that there is good evidence that becoming a peer helper is linked to feeling more confident and having better health. Peer helpers can offer a valuable source of support within prisons, particularly for prisoners with mental health needs. Overall, there is not much research on costs but our analysis showed that involving prisoners in education about HIV infection may be more cost-effective than education by staff. The study has highlighted the importance of peer helpers working within the prison environment and has identified areas for future research.

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Editorial contact: nihredit@southampton.ac.uk

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