

KEY MESSAGES

SPRINT: Primary health care services better meeting the health needs of Aboriginal Australians transitioning from prison to the community

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Policy context

The health and social support needs of Aboriginal inmates released from custody are high and reconnecting with family, community and culture are key needs for Aboriginal people post release. Aboriginal Australians are overrepresented in prison and face additional disadvantage compared with other inmates because they are more likely to be placed on remand or serve recurrent short sentences. Appropriate post release support – including access to appropriate health care - has the potential to disrupt the cycle of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people in contact with the criminal justice system. However, high rates of incarceration and recidivism and poor health outcomes among Aboriginal Australians released from prison suggest that mainstream post release services are not meeting the needs of Aboriginal people who have been in custody. This report describes the factors influencing Aboriginal Australians' access to primary health care on release from custody and suggests ways to increase access to effective primary health care for Aboriginal people within and on release from the criminal justice system.

Key messages

Throughcare is the main policy approach to post release care in Australia. It is intended to provide continuous management of prisoners' needs from reception to release in order to support their successful reintegration into the community. However there is inadequate continuity of comprehensive health care in the context of Aboriginal inmates' complex needs and significant emotional distress and anxiety. This contributes to the higher risk of injury and illness experienced by Aboriginal former inmates post release, and to the institutionalisation of Aboriginal people within and outside the criminal justice system.

To ensure continuity of health care for Aboriginal people in custody and post release, policy makers need to develop relevant governance and infrastructure to support effective throughcare programs for Aboriginal people. This should include:

- > evaluating the effectiveness of existing throughcare programs for Aboriginal people in custody and post release; expanding the duty of care of corrective services or support community agencies to run transition programs for Aboriginal people; commencing discharge planning as soon as a person enters custody and involving community service providers and family members in the development of that plan where possible; expanding the role of culturally appropriate primary health care to provide in-reach services into prisons; enable the use of Medicare items for Aboriginal people in custody; and investing in workforce - particularly case managers and practitioners specialising in mental health - and training and employing more Aboriginal case managers and mental health workers.