

Assessing Mental Health and Substance Use Needs and Service Disruptions for People Released from Custody during COVID-19

Summary

People who are released from correctional facilities face significant mental health and addiction challenges – in addition to poverty, homelessness, poor physical health and discrimination – as they return to the community. These issues have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, as resources have been more difficult to access, and Indigenous, Black and 2SLGBTQ+ persons have been particularly affected as they are over-represented in the prison system. Through qualitative interviews, this study will examine the challenges related to mental health and substance use for people released from custody during the pandemic.

Within the Greater Toronto Area, we will explore how this population is adapting to disruptions to mental health and addiction services and how service agencies are adapting their practices to support the population despite physical distancing and other public health safety measures. We will conduct a rapid 3-cycle evaluation of service disruptions/adaptations and releasees' needs and responses to service changes, followed by in-depth qualitative analysis.

The study is a collaboration between researchers, community service providers and knowledge users who support people released from incarceration. The findings will inform government responses to pandemics to ensure people who have incarceration histories are adequately supported. In addition, the findings will document innovative adaptations within the mental health and addiction sectors that can inform present and future pandemic plans, preparations and responses to better address the needs of this population.

Objectives

- 1) **Needs assessment** – Assess mental health and substance use (MHSU) needs among people released from correctional facilities during the pandemic.
- 2) **Understand releasees' service use** – Examine releasees' responses to the new and shifting service environment, as reflected in patterns of service access, experience and avoidance.
- 3) **Identify service disruptions and adaptations** – Evaluate the disruptions, adaptations and innovations in MHSU services among community agencies that support releasees' reentry and care.
- 4) **Recommendations** – Provide real-time, evidence-based agency- and system-level recommendations to achieve more efficient and equitable matching of mental health and substance use responses with the needs of this population as the pandemic continues, when new waves emerge and during future health crises.

Significance and impact

- Findings from this study will help us better understand the lived experience of the pandemic for Indigenous, Black and 2SLGBTQ populations who are released from incarceration, and will assist community organizations with recommendations to improve access to services going forward.
 - There are three cycles in this study – after each one, we will make recommendations in collaboration with partner organizations about potential changes to mental health and substance use (MHSU) services.
 - Our final report will be shared with MHSU organizations like public health, shelter/housing, health and social services, as well as government to better understand how to support releasees during the pandemic.
- Our study will only be successful with the perspectives of service providers and service users.

Timeline

