

System failing to prevent deaths post-detention

Poor access to health care and confusion over post-detention care may have contributed to more than 400 deaths following police custody and prison detention since 2009, a new report has claimed.

The report, commissioned by the ECHR and conducted by Jake Phillips, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the Sheffield Hallam University (and former student at the Institute of Criminology), Loraine Gelsthorpe, Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice and Fellow of Pembroke College, Nicola Padfield, Reader in Criminal and Penal Justice, at the University of Cambridge and Master of Fitzwilliam College, and Sarah Buckingham, Research Assistant, Sheffield Hallam University, reveals a worrying picture of serious gaps in post-detention care caused by a lack of accountability and inadequate record-keeping by different agencies. The report contains an in-depth analysis of existing data and working practices across police and prison agencies from April 2009 to March 2016.

In 2015-16, there were 60 apparent suicides within two days following police custody, 18 of which occurred on the day of release, 24 one day after release and 16 two days after release. These deaths are linked to high levels of shame and problems in coming back into the community.

The number of suicides is thought to be higher than 60 as the police are often not aware of a death, meaning the link between the death and police custody will not be made. The findings also reveal that from 2010-2015 there were 66 non-natural deaths following release from prison, most of which were from a drug overdose and within ten days of release. Drug use is a significant factor in post-prison deaths. Research has found that drug-using ex-prisoners are up to eight times more likely to die in the first two weeks of release when compared to non-drug using ex-prisoners.

Mental health is another significant factor in both post-police custody and prison deaths. Of the 60 people who took their own lives following police custody, 33 had known mental health conditions including depression, schizophrenia, or previous suicide attempts.

Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, David Isaac, said: "When the state detains people it also has a very high level of responsibility to ensure they are rehabilitated back into the community safely, particularly for people who may be vulnerable....the report reveals serious cracks in our state detention system of care that is potentially leading to hundreds of deaths".

The evidence from the report highlights failures in following procedures with poor communication between staff and relevant agencies leading to crucial information such as risk assessments of former prisoners not being passed on. Moreover, even where good communication exists, providers' ability to deliver effective services were hampered by budget cuts.

The researchers had previously given this topic attention in research commissioned by the Howard League for Penal Reform: <http://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Deaths-on-probation.pdf>. This new report published by the EHRC builds on the earlier research, highlighting that there has been little improvement since

To read the full report see: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/system-failing-prevent-deaths-post-detention>

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