

Title: A critical realist analysis of digital health screening for older people in prison

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General abstract

Background: The growing cohort of older people (50+) in Australian prisons have high rates of physical, psychosocial and cognitive conditions, with evidence that many of these remain underdiagnosed or undetected. It is necessary to better identify the priority health and social needs of older people in prison to ensure a safe, equitable and cost-effective prison health system. Increased digital health screening in prison is seen as one promising approach to achieve this end.

Aim: This study aims to complement a growing literature on health promotion in prison by exploring the underlying mechanisms that may impact future adoption of more holistic digital health screening of older people in prison.

Methods: This is a qualitative analysis underpinned by a critical realist philosophy and explanatory model of science, as outlined by Danermark's five-stage approach (Danermark et al., 2019). We followed this approach during our qualitative transcribing, coding, synthesis and final explanatory analysis. The key steps associated with each stage will be discussed during the presentation. Primary data were collected through seven focus groups in prisons across New South Wales, Australia. Participants included a diverse sample of older people in prison (n=20), as well as nurses and psychologists working in justice healthcare and the correctional system (n=13).

Results: Two global themes were generated from our analysis - constraint and conflict. Constraint, focusing on structural factors, reveals organisational reluctance towards major change and an interrelated operational focus on efficiency by staff. We claim that this is, at least in part, caused by public attitudes about the role of prison that shape political funding priorities. It is argued that these engrained attitudes make salutogenic health promotion in prison difficult. The other theme, conflict, examines the decisions of older people in prison, and specifically inter-and-intrapersonal challenges that impact their help-seeking behaviour. This theme attempts to explain how the difficult social realities of prison, as well as previous life experiences, interact with individual decision-making, in turn, impacting the likelihood of successful digital screening. We claim that conflicts in help-seeking by older people in prison are often caused, at least in part, by traumatic stress and emotional pain, as well as the

pressure to conform to prevailing social norms within the prison environment. The final section of this analysis looks at the interactions between the causal mechanisms identified through both themes, and how these might impact future proactive digital health screening practices in Australian correctional settings.

Conclusions: These structural and individual factors, and their interplay, require further attention before widespread digital health screening can be successfully implemented in Australian prisons.

Highlights

- This study progresses recent efforts in the health and social sciences to apply critical realist philosophy to inform a rigorous explanatory methodology.
- By attempting to uncover causal mechanisms, and their interactions, this study identifies practical barriers and drivers to the adoption of digital health screening at both the levels of individuals and structures. These factors are critical to understand to ensure future health promoting activities in prison are designed and implemented for success.
- By analysing how prevailing cultural attitudes towards prisons, political priorities (i.e. funding allocations) and justice system operations interact, this research offers a nuanced picture of the structural factors impeding health promoting prison transformations in Australia, and beyond.