The health-justice nexus: crime and justice as social determinants of health in Scotland

A five-year research programme examining work to reduce Scotland's health inequalities, focusing on justice and health system interactions, including Scotland's commitment to public health policing.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Strathclyde
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Police region	Scotland
Collaboration and partnership	- Edinburgh Napier University - University of Glasgow - Police Scotland - Scottish Prisons Service - Scottish Government - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) - Public Health Scotland - Community Justice Scotland
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	May 2024
Date due for completion	April 2029

Research context

The Scottish Government is focusing on enhancing the health and wellbeing of individuals involved with the justice system, recognising that many of these individuals have significant health needs that often go unmet by current healthcare systems.

This issue is particularly acute for people in custody, on supervision, or post-release licenses, who frequently face barriers to accessing necessary healthcare, such as difficulties registering with a GP due to the lack of a fixed address. The government is concerned that these gaps in care contribute to poorer health outcomes, particularly among those from Scotland's most disadvantaged communities.

Evidence indicates that people living in the poorest areas of Scotland experience higher rates of health problems, are more likely to be incarcerated, and have shorter life expectancies compared to those in wealthier communities. Despite efforts to address these issues, recent data show that health inequalities are worsening, with an increase in avoidable deaths among men and women in the five most deprived areas since 2014.

To tackle these issues, this new Chief Scientist Office (CSO) funded research programme aims to bridge the gap between research on health inequalities and the impacts of the justice system on health. By bringing together experts in public health, policing, crime and justice, we are aiming to identify options for reducing the negative health impacts of the justice system and improving wellbeing in disadvantaged communities.

The initiative will involve collaboration with community members, including those who have been in contact with the justice system, to identify effective approaches to health improvement. This includes exploring how Police Scotland's commitments to public health policing and promoting community wellbeing are being interpreted, operationalised and experienced. The programme will also ensure that the voices of justice experienced communities and those in areas with poor health and justice outcomes are heard in Scottish policy debates.

Research methodology

The programme is using a mixture of methods, including:

- literature reviewing and evidence synthesis to assess what is already known about the topics we are focusing on, including public health policing type initiatives
- data mapping to identify key health and justice data sources in Scotland and to create accessible versions (for lay audiences)
- stakeholder interviews to explore a range of professional views across policy, practice and third sector communities (across health, justice and social work)
- a witness seminar to explore the origins and ambitions of Scotland's shift to public health policing
- focus groups with frontline police to explore their perspectives on the shift to public health policing
- focus groups and co-inquiry groups to explore community perspectives on health-justice intersections (this will include work with justice experienced communities)
- peer-research in Scottish prisons to explore the (actual and potential) impacts of digital and phone based technologies on health experiences for people in Scottish prisons

Find out more about the project