

Criminal justice contact and health amongst people who inject drugs in Greater Brisbane, Queensland: Findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System

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Key findings



Participants who reported having been arrested in the last 12 months reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress in the past 4 weeks than those not arrested.

Queensland



Participants who had been arrested in the past 12 months, and those with a lifetime history of imprisonment, were more likely to have poorer social determinants of health, including unemployment and unstable housing.

Background

- People who inject drugs are more likely to experience criminal justice contact over their lifetime, and are over-represented in the criminal justice system (1,2). In Australia, 46% of people who were entering prison reported injecting drugs at some point during their lives (1). Criminal justice contact can adversely affect health and wellbeing (3,4).
- This bulletin looks at self-reported contact with the criminal justice system among a sample of people who inject drugs in Greater Brisbane, Queensland, and the associations between past-year criminal justice contact, prison history, and self-reported physical and mental health, measures of psychological distress and indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage (unemployment, receipt of a government pension or benefit, and unstable housing) that are also social determinants of health.

Method

- Data were drawn from the surveys of people who regularly inject drugs conducted in Greater Brisbane as part of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) between 2003 and 2021.

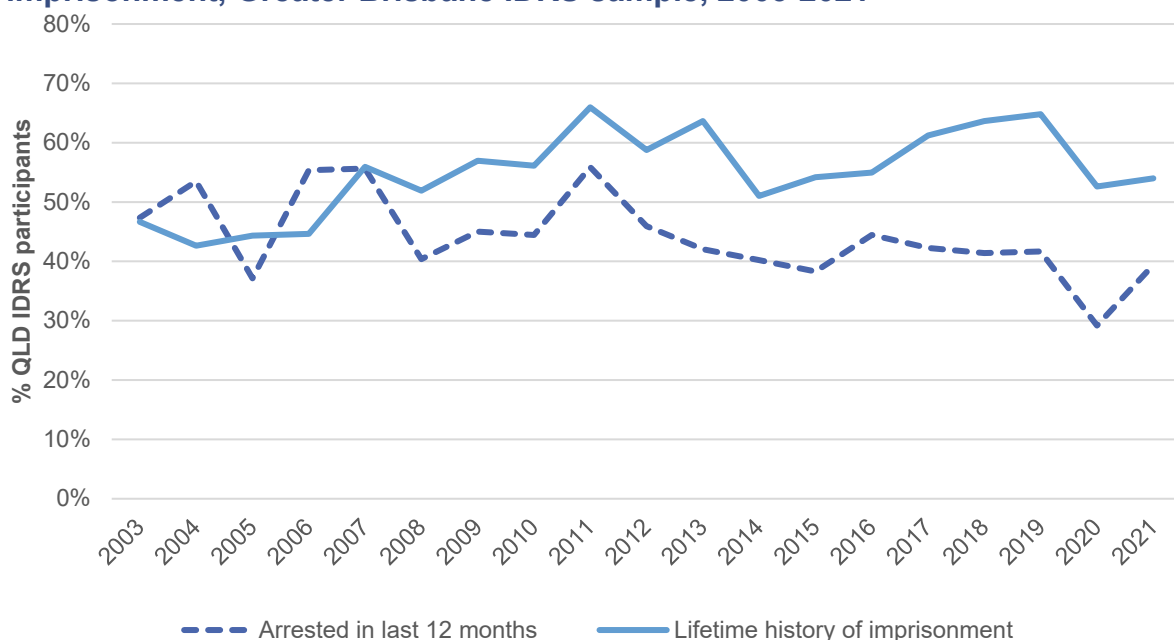
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- The IDRS is an annual cross-sectional survey of people who regularly inject drugs recruited from all capital cities of Australian states and territories. Participants were administered a one-hour face-to-face interview and reimbursed \$40 for their time, with the exception of 2020 and 2021 when interviews were also conducted via telephone or video-conference due to COVID-19. Please refer to the [IDRS Background and Methods document](#) for further details.
- Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used to determine associations between past-month psychological distress (measured using the Kessler-10 scale), and self-reported arrest (last 12 months) and history of imprisonment (lifetime). Chi-square tests of association were used to analyse the relationship between history of contact with criminal justice system, and self-reported general health (fair/poor versus good-excellent) in the past month and experience of mental health problems in the past 6 months.
- Chi-square tests of association and bivariate logistic regression were used to analyse the relationship between participants self-reported recent arrest, history of imprisonment and selected social determinants of health (current unemployment, receipt of a government pension or benefit as main source of income in the past month, and unstable housing [couch surfing or no fixed address]).
- Associations were considered significant at $p < 0.05$.

Findings

- In 2021, 39% of the Greater Brisbane IDRS sample reported that they had been arrested in the previous 12 months, and 54% of the sample reported having ever been in prison.

Figure 1. Self-reported arrest in last 12 months, and lifetime history of imprisonment, Greater Brisbane IDRS sample, 2003-2021



Note. X Axis reduced to 80% to improve visibility of trends.

- In 2021, there was no significant difference in self-reported poor to fair general health between those who reported arrest in the last 12 months and those who did not ($p=0.989$), and between those who had ever been in prison and those who had not ($p=0.053$) (Table 1). Of the entire sample, nearly three out of ten (29%) described their health as poor to fair.
- Participants who reported having been in prison were significantly less likely to report having had a mental health problem in the last 6 months (46%) than those who had not (51%; $p=0.024$) but there was no significant difference in current psychological distress (K10 scores; $p=0.301$) between the two groups (Table 1).
- There was no significant difference in self-reported mental health problems between participants who had been arrested in the last 12 months and those who had not ($p=0.293$), but those who had been arrested showed significantly higher levels of current psychological distress (mean K10 score=25.71, SD=10.29) than those who had not (mean K10 score=22.04, SD=9.27; $p<0.001$) (Table 1).

Table 1. General health and mental health for Greater Brisbane IDRS participants, by history of arrest or imprisonment

Mental health outcomes	Survey years	Arrested (last 12 months)			Prison history (lifetime)		
		Yes	No	<i>p</i> value	Yes	No	<i>p</i> value
Mean k10 score	2018-2021	25.71	22.04	<0.001	23.26	23.71	0.655
% described their health as poor to fair	2021	29	29	0.989	21	39	0.053
% report having had a mental health problem in the last 6 months	2004-2021	50	47	0.293	46	51	0.024

Note. Repeat participants were not removed.

- Participants who reported having been arrested in the last 12 months were more likely to report that they were currently unemployed ($p<0.001$) than those who had not; participants who reported a prison history were also more likely to report being currently unemployed ($p<0.001$; Table 2).
- Participants who had been arrested in the past 12 months and those with a lifetime history of imprisonment were both more likely to report receiving a government pension and/or benefit in the past month ($p<0.01$).
- Participants who had been arrested in the past 12 months and those with a history of imprisonment were both more likely to report current unstable accommodation ($p<0.001$).

Table 2. Selected social determinants of health for Greater Brisbane IDRS participants, by history of arrest or imprisonment (2003-2021)

Selected social determinants of health	Arrested (last 12 months)				Prison history (lifetime)			
	Yes	No	OR (95%CI)	p value	Yes	No	OR (95%CI)	p value
Mean k10 score	84	73	1.96 (1.56-2.46)	<0.001	85	70	2.50 (1.99-3.11)	<0.001
% described their health as poor to fair	90	83	1.74 (1.33-2.28)	<0.001	90	82	1.86 (1.44-2.42)	<0.001
% report having had a mental health problem in the last 6 months	19	7	2.87 (2.16-3.82)	<0.001	15	9	1.70 (1.28-2.50)	<0.001

Note. OR-unadjusted odds ratio; 95%CI-95% confidence interval. Repeat participants not removed.

Conclusion

- Participants who reported arrest in the past 12 months had significantly higher psychological distress than those who had not. These findings are consistent with other literature that shows high levels of psychological distress amongst people who inject drugs who have had contact with the criminal justice system.
- Participants who reported arrest in the last 12 months, and those who reported a prison history, also had poorer selected social determinants of health including unemployment and unstable housing, which can also negatively impact physical and mental health outcomes. Our analysis of the direction of this relationship is limited, and it does not consider participants' social determinants of health at point of criminal justice contact.
- Services for people who inject drugs should consider the additional health and wellbeing burdens for people who have had contact with the criminal justice system.

References

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