CONFERENCÉ ABSTRACT

The perceived importance of social support for prisoners' mental health

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Introduction: Research shows that people in prison often have poor mental health (1). Prisoners often lack access to sufficient and integrated mental health services (1). Social support can be defined as the perceived availability or actual provision of social resources in the context of relationships. It is an important determinant for mental health and has been found to be relevant in a range of settings (2-4). Imprisonment is a stressful experience. In line with the stress-buffering hypothesis, social support in prison could increase the ability to cope, which in turn would promote mental well-being.

Objectives and methods: The study draws on elements from constructivist grounded theory to explore prisoners’ perceptions of social support, its significance for mental health, and the factors influencing the availability and acceptability of seeking social support from different sources in a prison setting. Drawing on collaboration with a prisoner support organization, we conducted in-depth interviews with eight prisoners from a prison in Northern Norway. They were asked about their mental health knowledge and about the factors that influenced their mental health during imprisonment.

Key findings: The participants viewed the support of fellow prisoners as important for their mental health, while support from friends, family and prison officers were not granted the same significance. Limited and expensive phone hours and security measures were among the barriers for support from people on the outside. Some of the prison officers were perceived to be supportive while others were labelled uncaring, and the participants claimed that they would have to make calculated choices of whom they turned to for support. The prison's electronic records were a prominent barrier for confiding in prison officers, as the prisoners feared information could be recorded and used against them. Although fellow prisoners were the most accessible and acceptable source of support, the participants claimed that fewer activities and more time in lock-up along with unwanted criminal talk in the prison wing and trust issues were barriers to social support from peers.

Conclusions: The perceived significance of social support from fellow prisoners was amplified by the barriers to support from people on the outside, and from officers. Shared activities with peers could be important both for coping with prison life, and for reducing criminal influence that seemed to be associated with unstructured spare-time.

Implications: Facilitating social support may help prevent or alleviate mental health challenges among prisoners.
References


