

4 Deaths

This chapter contains information on the number of deaths in custody and deaths following release from prison. Data for this section come from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) Deaths in Custody report (AIC 2009). Information is disaggregated (where possible) by Indigenous status and cause of death.

4.1 Deaths in custody

A Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) was established in 1989 following concern over the deaths of 99 Aboriginal people in police custody and prisons between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989. The RCIADIC made 339 recommendations. The RCIADIC found, amongst other things, that:

- the high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody was due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody
- Indigenous persons were no more likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous persons
- Aboriginality was a significant factor in the person's placement and eventual death in custody.

Recommendations to reduce the number of deaths in custody included the removal of hanging points from cells, increasing awareness of custodial and medical staff of issues concerning the proper treatment of prisoners and a greater commitment to cross-cultural training for criminal justice staff (Cunneen 2006).

The RCIADIC also recommended an ongoing program be established to monitor both Indigenous and non-Indigenous deaths in prison, police custody and juvenile detention, to gauge the impact of the recommendations regarding the rates of death in custody. The AIC, through the National Deaths in Custody Program (NDICP), monitors deaths in custody. This is the main data source in Australia on deaths in custody, including prison, police and juvenile detention.

Since 1989, 1,206 deaths have been recorded in prison custody (Curnow & Larsen 2009). From 1999 the death rates for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous prisoners have followed similar trends, with both trending downward until 2007 when slight increases occurred in death rates for both. Since 1980, 17% of deaths in prison custody have been of Indigenous prisoners. Each year, male deaths have outnumbered female deaths. Death rates for those aged 55 and over have been higher than for other age groups since 1982.

The most common causes of death in prison between 1980 and 2007 have been hanging, followed by natural causes, drugs/alcohol and external/multiple trauma (Curnow & Larsen 2009).

INDICATOR: Number of deaths in custody.

According to the NDICP, there were 45 deaths in prison custody during 2007, and 5 of these were Indigenous prisoners. This is a rate of 0.8 per 1,000 Indigenous prisoners and 2.0 per 1,000 non-Indigenous prisoners. Most of the deaths (32) were due to natural causes, 9 were self-inflicted (including 7 due to hanging) and 1 death was considered an accident. For 3 deaths, the cause has not yet been determined (AIC 2009).

4.2 Deaths following release from prison

Prisoners are at markedly increased risk of death following release from custody, especially in the weeks immediately following release. The risk of mortality decreases exponentially with increasing time in the community (Kariminia et al. 2007a, Stewart et al. 2004, Graham 2003). The main causes of death among ex-prisoners, particularly in the first few weeks, are related to drug and alcohol use, suicide and injury (Hobbs et al. 2006a, Kariminia et al. 2007d). The risk of suicide among recently released prisoners has been found to be close to that of discharged psychiatric patients (Pratt et al. 2006) and, in the weeks immediately following release, the majority of deaths are drug related (Farrell & Marsden 2008).

A study of 85,203 adults imprisoned in New South Wales between 1988 and 2002 found higher mortality among those hospitalised for mental health problems during imprisonment, those with a larger number of imprisonment episodes and for those in the first year of their sentence. Among women, increased mortality was also observed in those aged under 25 years. Mortality risk was lower for both men and women of non-English speaking backgrounds, while Aboriginal status was associated with lower drug-related mortality and suicide (Kariminia et al. 2007c).

INDICATOR: Number of deaths post-release.

In Australia there is very limited information available regarding mortality among recently released prisoners. While coroners' reports often mention a recent release from prison where it is seen as relevant to the circumstances surrounding death, there is a lack of consistency in both police and coronial reports in this area rendering coronial data inadequate for monitoring post-release mortality. Current national data on the mortality of ex-prisoners are therefore unavailable at this time, and require data development.



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Health behaviours