The Costs of Healthcare in Prison and Custody: Systematic Review of Current Estimates and Proposed Guidelines for Future Reporting

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Aims: We aimed to review prison healthcare expenditure internationally.

Objectives: To systematically review healthcare spending on prisoners worldwide, examine comparability between countries, and develop guidelines to improve reporting.

Methods: Five bibliographic indexes (International Monetary Fund, ProQuest: Statistical Abstracts of the World, PubMed, Google Scholar, and JSTOR) were searched for the costs of prison and prison healthcare, supplemented with country-specific searches for the 20 countries with the highest prison populations. Information on overall healthcare costs, their breakdown by categories, and their proportion to overall prison expenditure was extracted. PRISMA guidelines were followed.

Results: Prison healthcare expenditure data was identified for 10 countries, and overall operating costs were reported for 12 countries. The most commonly reported healthcare cost was for primary medical care. Healthcare costs reporting varied widely, and few countries were comparable. We developed a set of guidelines for consistent and transparent reporting of healthcare costs.

Conclusions: Few countries report the costs of healthcare services in prison. When reported, there is a lack of clarity and consistency as to what is included. Using the proposed reporting guidelines would enable national trends and international comparisons to be investigated, and any recommended benchmarks to be monitored.

Keywords: prison, custody, detention, costs, expenditure, guidelines, healthcare services

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare in prison varies widely across countries, and differences in service provision contribute to morbidity and mortality outcomes inside custody (1) and on release (2). Many studies have examined disease prevalence rates, and prevention, care, and treatment in prison (3, 4), but the current evidence base lacks information on the costs of healthcare services. Combined with information on the prevalence of healthcare problems, international comparisons of prison health expenditure could better inform decisions on the levels of appropriate funding, enable benchmarks to be monitored, and allow for planning of service provision.
Information on the costs of operating prisons has been published since the 1950s (5), including a 2004 report of international costs (6). However, no review of prison healthcare costs across countries currently exists. Government and other reports of healthcare costs in prisons have been published, but it is not clear in reporting what particular services are included, which examine variously “medical care” (7), “prison hospitals” (8), or “prisoner health” (9). Furthermore, what is included within these categories is not clear. Scotland, for instance, lists mental health and dental care as prison healthcare expenditures (10), while Australia provides only a single overarching figure for prisoner health (9).

In this systematic review, we have aimed to provide an international overview of the annual costs of prisoner healthcare, what healthcare services are included in the identified reports, and calculate the proportion of overall prison operating budgets allocated to health. In addition, we develop and propose reporting guidelines.

**METHODS**

**Search Strategy**

We searched IMF, ProQuest: Statistical Abstracts of the World, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed databases. We performed non-country specific searches, with a combination of keywords: “prison” OR “justice,” AND “expenditure,” “spending,” OR “costs” (Table 1 for details). Then, additional targeted searches on Google Web and government databases (e.g., Statistics Canada) were conducted for the 20 countries with the largest prison population (11) and countries included in a previous review of recidivism rates (12), with a combination of keywords: country name AND “prison healthcare cost,” country name AND “ministry of justice,” country name AND “prison” AND “expenditure” OR “service.” No language or publication date restrictions were set, and the most recent and relevant cost report was identified. When necessary, correctional services were contacted to clarify data. A review protocol [CRD42018102534] was submitted and published on the PROSPERO register of systematic review during data extraction.

Per-prisoner estimates for each country were calculated as follows:

1) Identifying total expenditures from the included reports (excluding the US and Germany, which reported per-prisoner expenditure based on all state prison populations)

2) Calculation of per-prisoner cost (using the prison population from World Prison Brief statistics) (13). If the prison population was not available for the same year as the cost report, the following year’s prison population was used;

3) Conversion of per-prisoner cost estimate into inflation-adjusted 2016 International US dollars (using “CCEMG-EPPI-Center Cost Converter” external database). Stage 1 and 2 computational values (GDP deflator and PPP) of the validated conversion tool were obtained from IMF World Economic Outlook Database. Costs were first adjusted for inflation within original economy using GDP deflator values, and then to purchasing power parity/price level between countries (14).

| Database       | Search terms                                                                 | Additional criteria                                                                 |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| IMF datasets  | “prison” AND “expenditure” OR “prison” AND “costs”                         | Time series datasets (no Filters used)                                               |
|               | (classified as “Budgetary Central Government” OR “Extrabudgetary Central Government” OR “General Government” OR “Local Governments” OR “Social Security Funds” OR “State Governments” OR “Central Government” |
|               | + in “Domestic Currency” OR “Percent of GDP” + “Expenditure on Prisons”     | No Applied Filters                                                                   |
| ProQuest:     | “prison” AND “expenditure” OR “prison” AND “health”                         | No restrictions                                                                     |
| Statistical   | “prison” AND “expenditure” OR “prison” AND “justice”                         | No restrictions                                                                     |
| Abstracts of  | “prison” AND “health”                                                        | No restrictions                                                                     |
| The World     | “prison spending” OR “prison expenditure” OR “prison costs”                 | No restrictions                                                                     |
| JSTOR         | “prison expenditure” OR “prison service spending”                             | No restrictions                                                                     |
| Google Scholar| (“prisons”[MeSH Terms] OR “prisons”[All Fields] OR “prison”[All Fields] AND (“health expenditures”[MeSH Terms] OR “health”[All Fields] AND “expenditures”[All Fields] OR “health expenditures”[All Fields] OR “health”[All Fields] OR “expenditure”[All Fields]) | No restrictions                                                                     |
| PubMed        | (“prisons”[MeSH Terms] OR “prisons”[All Fields] OR “prison”[All Fields] AND (“health expenditures”[MeSH Terms] OR “health”[All Fields] AND “expenditures”[All Fields] OR “health expenditures”[All Fields] OR “health”[All Fields] OR “expenditure”[All Fields]) | No restrictions                                                                     |

The cost conversions in this review may be limited by using purchasing power parities for Gross Domestic Product, which cover a broader array of goods and services than context-specific purchasing power parities (e.g., healthcare or technology purchasing power parities). However, based on the heterogeneity of costs and inventories reported by countries, purchasing power parities for Gross Domestic Product appeared to be more fitting for this review than context-specific conversion factors (14).

**Study Design**

**Geographical**

Official national and regional data were extracted from search engines. Unofficial regional data was found for one country (15), but was not included.

**Data Items**

The measurements and descriptions of economic costs were limited to direct prison operating costs and/or healthcare costs. Studies reporting indirect costs to prisoners (e.g., productivity loss) were excluded. The most recent information was used. Most countries presented financial accounts for the 2015–16 or...
2016–17 periods, so all cost outcomes were indexed to 2016 International US dollars.

**Data Sources**

Financial reports on prisons/correctional services solely were included. Datasets which did not specify relevant outcome measurements (i.e., prison operations, healthcare) or the population (i.e., whole country, adult prisoners) were excluded. Expenditure reporting on police, courts, or other services affiliated with Ministries of Justice was excluded, as were assessments of prisoner health services separate from expenditure data (16). Governments typically separate prison expenditures into capital and operating costs. Capital costs refer to fixed, one-time investments on buildings, equipment, or land. Operating costs of prisons refer to day-to-day running costs, accommodation-related costs, and staff costs (17). Ideally, prison healthcare broadly refers to the services in place to address health needs and reduce health risks. It can include primary and psychiatric care, and specialized services. Information for two other countries (Greece and Switzerland) were available but not used. They were not from official governmental sources, did not specify constituent elements of costs, and are likely to be underestimates (7, 15). Costs for Sweden did not include infrastructure costs and were also not included (18).

**Data Extraction**

One of the authors (SS) screened and extracted the data, excluding publications and data points that did not report costs, and determined the remit of the data (e.g., national, regional).
TABLE 2 | Country reports.

| Country          | Publisher                                                                 | Source                                                                 | Year of reporting | Expenditure category | Sample                                                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|                                                                      |                   |                     |                                                                        |
| Sri Lanka        | Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine                      | National Health Accounts                                              | 2013              | Health              | National prison hospitals (central government-financed)               |
| Romania          | Ministry of Justice                                                        | Ministry of Justice                                                   | 2016              | Health              | National Penitentiary System                                          |
| India            | Ministry of Home Affairs                                                   | National Crime Records Bureau                                         | 2015              | Health and Operating | State Prisons/Jails ("prisons" and "jails" used interchangeably)      |
| South Africa     | Department of Correctional Services (DCS)                                 | Annual Report of Department of Correctional Services                  | 2016–17           | Health and Operating | DCS National Facilities                                               |
| Ireland          | Irish Prison Service                                                       | Irish Prison Service                                                  | 2013              | Health              | National - All prisons (open, closed, and high security), including pre-trial detainees |
|                  | Irish Prison Service                                                       | Irish Prison Service                                                  | 2015              | Operating           | National - All prisons (open, closed, and high security), including pre-trial detainees |
| Belgium          | Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre (KCE)                                | KCE Report 293Cs                                                      | 2015              | Health              | National - All Belgian prisons (35 prisons recorded in 2015)          |
| Australia        | Productivity Commission                                                    | Productivity Commission for the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision | 2015–16           | Health and Operating | National - Department of Correctional Services                         |
| UK: Scotland     | The Scottish Parliament                                                    | Health and Sport Committee                                            | 2016–17           | Health              | National - Scottish Prison Service (15 prisons)                      |
|                  | Scottish Prison Service                                                    | Audit Scotland                                                        | 2015–16           | Operating           | National - Scottish Prison Service (15 prisons)                      |
| United States    | PEW Charitable Trusts                                                      | PEW, Vera Institute of Justice, and state officials                  | 2015              | Health              | State prisons (and jail populations of five states)                   |
|                  | Bureau of Justice Statistics                                               | Department of Justice                                                 | 2001              | Operating           | State Prisons                                                         |
| UK: England and Wales | National Audit Office                                                   | Comptroller and Auditor General                                      | 2016–17           | Health              | National                                                              |
|                  | Ministry of Justice                                                        | Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Services              | 2016–17           | Operating/Direct     | National                                                              |
| France           | Ministry of Justice                                                        | Directorate of Prison Administration                                 | 2015              | Operating           | National                                                              |
| Singapore        | Ministry of Home Affairs                                                   | Ministry of Home Affairs                                              | 2016 FY           | Operating           | National                                                              |
| Canada           | Statistics Canada                                                          | Statistics Canada                                                     | 2016–17           | Operating           | Provinces and Territories                                             |
| Germany          | The Berlin Senate Department for Justice and Consumer Protection          | The Berlin Senate Department for Justice and Consumer Protection      | 2013              | Operating           | All German States                                                     |
| New Zealand      | Department of Corrections                                                  | Department of Corrections                                             | 2015–16           | Operating           | National                                                              |
| UK: Northern Ireland | Northern Ireland Prison Service Service (NIPS)                           | NIPS                                                                  | 2016–17           | Operating           | National                                                              |

Data Analysis
Meta-analysis was not conducted due to heterogeneity in definition and measurement of cost outcomes.

Subgroup Comparison
We compared healthcare cost descriptions by country to account for differences in categorization of expenses. Descriptions for the most recent period are included. PRISMA guidelines were followed (Table S1, Figure 1). SS and SF assessed primary outcome measures of healthcare service costs and summary descriptions.

RESULTS
We identified official country reports of prison healthcare costs for 10 countries (Table 2).
Annual healthcare expenditures per prisoner ranged from approximately $34 per year to $6,714 per year (Table 3). There was also wide variation in the percentage of operating costs attributable to healthcare, ranging from 2 to 18% (Table 4).
Seven countries described the constituent elements of healthcare spending, but these were not comparable (Table 5). The most commonly reported cost outcome was “primary medical care,” followed together by “medical supplies” (mostly medication) and “mental health services.” In the three countries (Sri Lanka, Ireland, Australia) that did not clarify expenditures, categorization varied from “curative care” (8) to “medical care” (22) to “prisoner health costs” (9). Most countries did not clarify how expenditure was allocated across services.

DISCUSSION
In this systematic review, we identified 10 countries that have reported healthcare costs in prisons. In addition, we were able to calculate the proportion of overall operating expenditure
allocated to healthcare in 7 countries. Among the 20 countries with the highest prison populations (11), only 4 reported operating and healthcare expenditures on prisoners (20, 21, 24, 25). There were large variations in how healthcare costs were defined across countries, and consistency and transparency is required to enable international comparison. We have sought to address this by developing guidelines for future reporting.

One other finding was that only two countries reported spending more than 10% of their overall prison operating budgets on prison health (24, 25). Additionally, we did not find any clear links between overall spending and the proportion on healthcare. Notably, Ireland had the highest overall operating expenditure per prisoner among the countries reporting healthcare costs, but only 4% of its budget was allocated toward healthcare, which put it among the countries with the lowest proportion (22, 33).

Seven of the 10 countries that reported on healthcare expenditure provided specific detail on the services provided.
| COUNTRY |  
|---|---|
| Time Period: | -For which financial year(s) are you reporting? |
| Prisons Operating Expenditure: | -Does this include depreciation, financial payments on capital assets, fixed assets, and/or transfers/subsidies? (Recommendation: exclude these costs) |
| Prisons Health Expenditure: | -What was the annual expenditure on physical and mental healthcare? |
| % Operating Budget allocated to Medical Care | -What percentage of the overall budget allocated to prisons went toward prisoner medical/healthcare? |

**PRISONER POPULATION**

**I. Context/Demographics:**

| a. Geographical | Are you reporting prison expenditures for the whole country, or a particular region? |
| b. Sample size | Which prison population(s) are being sampled and accounted for in expenditure reporting? |
| c. Characteristics | Age, gender, ethnicity, health insurance status |
| d. Length of current sentence | Distribution of offense types and sentence length (35) |

**II. Exclusion Criteria**

| a. Other samples | Which samples are not included in financial accounting? |

**COST OUTCOMES**

**I. Priority Areas**

| a. Medical Supplies | How much money was allocated to medical supplies for prisoners? List goods included. |
| b. Healthcare Personnel | How much was spent on payroll services? |
| c. Diagnostic: Screenings and Tests | How much was spent on screenings for diseases in prisons? What types of diagnostic tests are offered? |
| d. Primary Care | How much was spent on primary care services for prisons? |
| e. Psychiatric | How much money was allocated to psychiatric services in prisons? |
| f. Rehabilitation | Is rehabilitative healthcare included in prison expenditure? If yes, how much was spent? |
| g. Dental | Are dental services included in prison expenditure? If yes, how much was spent? |
| h. Optical | Are optical services included in prison expenditure? If yes, how much was spent? |
| i. Maternal and Child | Are maternal and child health services included in prison expenditure? If yes, what services are provided and how much was spent? |
| j. Surgical Procedures | Are any surgical procedures included in prison expenditure? If yes, how much was spent? |
| k. Specialized Services | Are any other specialized on-site services included in prison expenditure? If yes, how much was spent? |
| l. Other | Are there any other health-related expenses? |

(Continued)
The breakdown of these services varied between countries. It was not clear in some cases whether staff expenses included salaries of allied health professionals such as pharmacists, technicians, dentists, and visiting doctors (23), or whether “medical supplies” included medicines and medical equipment (21). Dental services lacked sufficient detail (10, 24), and mental health services were defined inconsistently across countries, with some countries integrating addiction care into mental health services (10, 24, 25), but another not (20).

One main implication of these findings is that international comparisons of healthcare expenditures on prisoners are currently not possible due to lack of consistency and transparency in reporting. To address this, we have developed a brief checklist covering definitions, inclusion, and exclusion criteria, and sources of funding that contribute to prison healthcare (such as national health services or ministry of justice) (Table 6). This checklist follows the structure of existing national financial audits, and is based on examples of good practice based on the current review, those categories that appear to be most consistently reported, and previous context-specific reporting guidelines (12, 15, 24, 36). The current proposed checklist would enable international comparison of overall healthcare expenditure in prisons, and provide country specific breakdowns as to how resources are allocated. Consistent international reporting would assist in monitoring whether countries meet basic standards for prisoner health, and allow for examination of links between adverse health outcomes in prisoners and variation in services provided. It would also help to develop and monitor recommended levels of appropriate funding. Different governments are likely to have competing additional priorities of healthcare need (20, 21), which will be reflected in how resources are spent and be reported in this checklist.

Systematic reporting of expenditure may lead to improved health outcomes for prisoners by, for example, targeting specific areas of need in future service provision. They could also lead to increased efficiency and a greater focus on prevention. We have sought to streamline these guidelines to assist in feasibility of completion, standardization, and integration into national financial audits.

LIMITATIONS

Using percentage allocations of overall operating expenditure allocated to healthcare does not necessarily allow for cross-country comparison. For example, Australia and Scotland made similar allocations, of ~9% of Canadian adult institutions and 7.9% of combined American state and federal institutions (13). There were variations in American prisons with regard to sources of funding, which may have underestimated costs in some states. For example, inpatient hospitalization costs were being met by insurance companies in some cases, but borne by the prison directly in others. Similarly, in some states, community mental health services covered some of the cost of prisoner treatment (24).

There are additional sources of information on healthcare services provided in prisons which we have not included in this review, as they do not provide detail on expenditure (16). Future work may look at such reviews of prison healthcare (for non-financial purposes) to provide a more detailed assessment of what services are provided, in conjunction with examining financial reporting.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SF and SS conceived and designed the experiments. SF and SS performed the experiments. SS analyzed the data. SF, SS, and RC wrote the paper. SF supervised the project.
FUNDING

SF is funded by the Wellcome Trust (202836/Z/16/Z) and RC is supported by the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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