The individual experience of ageing prisoners: systematic review and meta-synthesis through a Good Lives Model framework

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Objective: The existing literature on ageing prisoners tends to focus on such aspects as diagnosis and physical ill-health. In contrast, the experience of imprisonment from the perspective of ageing prisoners has received less attention. Grounded in a Good Lives Model theoretical framework, we reviewed and meta-synthesised literature around their experience of life in prison, its impact on their wellbeing and how prison services are currently addressing their complex needs. We further identify potential areas of improvement.

Methods: 1. Systematic search on Assia, PsycInfo, MedLine, Embase, Web of Science, Google and Gov.uk. 2. Extraction and categorisation of data on NVivo. 3. Development of themes through thematic analysis and meta-synthesis. 4. Identification of potential areas of improvement.

Results: We selected 25 studies for our review, of which 13 were from the USA, seven from the UK, two from Australia and one each from Ireland, Switzerland and Israel. We identified three themes: The hardship of imprisonment, addressing health and social care needs, and the route out of prison.

Conclusions: Ageing prisoners have unique and complex health and social care needs which, to varying degree across different countries, are mostly unmet. Promising initiatives to address their needs are emerging, but, at present time, the overall experience of incarceration for the ageing prisoner is quite poor, given the inconsistent physical, emotional and social care support offered from prison intake to release and beyond. Copyright © 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: prison; ageing prisoners; mental health; physical health; systematic review; meta-synthesis

History: Received 11 January 2017; Accepted 12 June 2017; Published online 13 July 2017 in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)

DOI: 10.1002/gps.4762

Introduction

The number of ageing prisoners is growing in many countries. In the United Kingdom, the population of prisoners over 60 years old has increased eight times since 1990 (Senior et al., 2013). In the United States of America, Ireland and Australia, ageing prisoners have been identified as the fastest growing group (Joyce & Maschi, 2016; Davoren et al., 2015; Cornish et al., 2016).

This increase has been determined by demographic factors such as the ageing of the population (Senior et al., 2013) and cultural factors, including less lenient treatment of ageing offenders (Yorston, 2015). This has been accompanied, in the UK context, by tougher sentencing policies, causing an increase in longer, life and indeterminate sentences (Moll, 2013), historical and “other offences” (+95% between 1995 and 2005) (RECOOP, 2015).

Ageing prisoners have been identified as a special need population in relation to physical, mental and social health care (Atabay, 2009). Regarding their physical health, in addition to common ailments, whose incidence increases with age (e.g. arthritis, Parkinson’s...
disease, dementia, diabetes) (Baidawi, 2015), they experience poorer health status compared to people in the community, owing to their common histories of substance abuse and poor health management (Cooney & Braggins, 2010). Deteriorating physical health impacts on the mobility and independence of ageing prisoners, who may require consistent social care.

In relation to mental health, a recent meta-analysis found that 38% of ageing prisoners suffer from ‘any psychiatric disorder’, with more than double the prevalence reported in community studies (15%) (Di Lorito, Vlmm, & Dening, 2017). The authors also found higher prevalence for depression, schizophrenia/psychoses and anxiety disorders.

Several policies aim to address the complex health care needs of ageing prisoners, including the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) against inhuman treatment and the eighth amendment to the US constitution (Williams et al., 2012; Wahidin, 2011). In the UK, ageing prisoners are granted equal care as people living in the community through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on mental wellbeing and independence in ageing people (NICE, 2015) and the Care Act 2015, which gives local authorities legal responsibility for the social care and support needs of prisoners.

Consideration of individual needs is also a key principle of strength-based models for the rehabilitation of offenders, which, in contrast with risk need responsivity (RNR) (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) focusing on risk reduction, resort to personal strengths to promote rehabilitation (Robertson et al., 2011). Among the strength-based approaches, the Good Lives Model (GLM) is gaining a central role in forensic policy and practice (Robertson et al., 2011), following several international studies which yielded promising results in rehabilitation outcomes (Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016a; Barnao, Ward, & Robertson, 2016b; Ward & Willis, 2016; Chu & Ward, 2015; Fortune et al., 2015; Lord, 2014).

The GLM is grounded in principles of human dignity and postulates that rehabilitation to socially integrated lifestyles is attained when the prison system provides the resources/support for the person to meet individual needs or “Primary goods” (Table 1) (Laws & Ward, 2011; Ward & Maruna, 2007; Ward & Stewart, 2003), by applying three principles:

1. **Person-centredness**, which considers the person’s preferences, aspirations and individual needs.
2. **Human agency**, which acknowledges the individual’s ability to identify individual needs and act through socially integrated lifestyles to meet them.
3. **Human rights**, which gives back dignity to offenders, by recognising their own individuality and the need for prison services to implement tailored pathways of rehabilitation.

These principles put the prisoner at the centre, and therefore their subjective experience is crucial. Although a robust body of international literature exists around ageing prisoners, most studies rely on data collected through the input of stakeholders’ groups other than prisoners (e.g. custodial staff), neglecting their subjectivity. Grounded on a GLM theoretical framework, this review provides a meta-synthesis of the literature around the experience of imprisonment through the perspective of the ageing prisoners and is guided by three research questions:

(i) What is the subjective experience of imprisonment for the ageing prisoner?
(ii) What are the variables that most affect this experience?
(iii) How are prison services addressing the individual needs of ageing prisoners?

### Methods

#### Selection strategy and search criteria

This review complies with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009).

Inclusion criteria:
Study is on ageing prisoners. We systematically searched for terms related to the age domain, but we avoided a strict age inclusion criterion because:

(i) There is little consensus as to the age range of ‘older’ prisoners (Williams et al., 2012). Some contend that given that age 60 is the cut-off in community studies, 50 years old would apply to prisoners, who usually experience premature ageing, given their poor health habits and histories of substance abuse (Cooney & Braggins, 2010). Others object that prisoners experience similar health problems as people in the community (Fazel et al., 2004). Given the absence of a resolution in the current debate and in order not to discard relevant sources a priori, we refrained from adopting a pre-determined age cut-off.

(ii) Prisoners feel that ageing is a highly subjective experience:

“There was an unusual reaction to the question ‘How old does a prisoner have to be before people treat him as an older prisoner?’” Fourteen men suggested that this “depends on the man’s physical and mental condition”, Reed (1980).

The primary interest of the study is the experience of imprisonment for the ageing prisoner including aspects that impact on this experience.

Either sex.

Any language and year of publication.

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies on ex-prisoners or patients in forensic psychiatric settings, as they do not have current lived experience of imprisonment.
- Remand prisoners, as the experience of being temporarily detained in prison may greatly differ from that of sentenced prisoners.
- Studies which do not reflect the views of prisoners.

We ran our search in December 2015 and again in December 2016 to retrieve the most updated literature. We searched on five databases: Assia, PsycInfo, Embase, Medline and Web of Science and combined terms from three domains:

(i) The age domain, including: Age*, old*, ageing, elderly, mature.
(ii) The prison domain, including: Prison*, imprison*, inmate*, incarcerat*, detain*, detention*.
(iii) The health domain, including: Care, mental*, emotion*, physical*, health*, service, healthcare, psychotic, psychos*, psychiatr*, psycholog*, mental*, wellbeing.

(iv) The same strategy was used to identify further relevant literature through the first 100 hits on Google and Gov.uk and by screening the reference pages of the studies we retrieved.

Quality screening of the studies

We undertook a quality screening of our sources using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)—Version 2011 (Pluye et al., 2011), a validated screening tool for complex systematic literature reviews that include qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies.

Data extraction and analysis

Data were extracted onto NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012). We adopted a deductive approach to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and extracted data which were relevant to our research questions, but refrained from generating themes at the initial stage. Only after extraction, based on the emerging topics, we developed tentative umbrella themes and sub-themes. The task was undertaken by the main author, who proposed an initial number of seven tentative themes to the research team.

Each team member studied the dataset, assessed the appropriateness of the tentative themes individually and fed back to the group during successive team meetings. The process of meta-synthesis of themes was iterative. A final number of three themes and titles reflecting their content was agreed by all research team members.

Results

We retrieved 3222 records; 3199 were identified through the databases and 23 through Google and Gov.uk. Following title or abstract screening, 3120 were dismissed. The remaining 102 were screened for duplicates and assessed for eligibility against the inclusion criteria. Twenty-five studies were included in this review (Figure 1).

Quality screening of the studies

Twenty studies were screened for quality, all of which passed the preliminary screening; therefore, none was excluded for poor quality. Five were not screened for quality as they were not empirical (Baldwin & Leete, 2012; Booth, 1989; Chaiklin, 1998; Hodel & Sanchez, 2012; Moll, 2013).
The scores ranged from 50 to 100. Five articles tallied the maximum score (Allen et al., 2008; Doron, 2007; Fazel et al., 2004; Leigey, 2008; Reed, 1980). The qualitative studies (or qualitative element of the studies) obtained mostly positive scoring in items 1.1 (data sources), 1.2 (data analysis) and 1.3 (discussion of how findings relate to the context). In relation to discussion around the researchers’ influence in the interview process (item 1.4), negative scoring was attributed in all but three cases (Doron, 2007; Leigey, 2008; Reed, 1980).

For the quantitative studies (or quantitative element of the studies), mostly positive scoring was attributed for items 2.1 (sampling strategy) and 2.3 (tools for data collection). Information on response rates was instead poorly reported in most studies (item 2.4). The quality screening is reported fully in Table 2.

Study characteristics

Sixteen studies were qualitative, nine were quantitative and three adopted mixed methodologies. The publication year ranged from 1979 to 2016; most of the articles were published from the mid-2000s onwards, following an increase in the prevalence of ageing prisoners. Thirteen studies were from the USA, seven from the UK, two from Australia and one each from Ireland, Switzerland and Israel. In contrast to other countries, the US studies covered all years of publication, reflecting a longer tradition of prison literature in the USA.

Seven studies focused on the general experience of imprisonment; the remainder addressed dementia (n = 4); death/suicide (n = 3); release from prison (n = 3); physical and/or mental health and related needs, including social care (n = 3); religion (n = 2); treatment for physical and mental health (n = 2); and forgiveness (n = 1). The studies from the USA and the UK covered the whole range of topics. Most studies concerning dementia were published since 2010, which reflects the increased prevalence and increasing research interest in the condition.

Most studies were peer reviewed. We also included two unpublished theses (Leigey, 2008; Reed, 1980), which we believe reduces potential publication bias. The study designs included both empirical and
non-empirical methodologies. Study samples ranged from two to 263 prisoners. The age cut-off for inclusion in the studies ranged from 45 to 69 years old. Ten studies were conducted on just one prison and 12 studies looked at multiple sites (Table 3).

Themes

We derived three themes:

1. The hardship of imprisonment

2. Addressing health and social care needs

3. The route out of prison

The hardship of imprisonment. The first theme was the hardship of imprisonment experienced by ageing prisoners due to “Institutional thoughtlessness”, the systematic neglect of age-related needs through a one-size-fits-all regime (Crawley, 2005). This was reflected in the access issues for inmates who have limited mobility, as reported by an ageing prisoner in the Irish prison system:
Walking up and down the stairs is hard, the breathing’s not the best…you can imagine going to the top, it’s five floors up” (Joyce & Maschi, 2016).

In the UK context, many prisons dating back to the 19th century do not fully comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, presenting narrow cell doors and inaccessible bathrooms (Senior et al., 2013; Crawley, 2005). In addition, facilities are often located on upper floors (Joyce & Maschi, 2016). Limited accessibility, through a GLM perspective, leads to neglect of the primary human need for healthy living and functioning (see Table 1), because the ageing prisoners may be unable to use essential services for rehabilitation and well-being.

Another example of institutional thoughtlessness relates to dementia. Only few institutions have actively worked to become dementia friendly (i.e. promoting the inclusion of people with dementia) (Fazel et al., 2002), mostly in the United States (Moll, 2013; Hodel & Sanchez, 2012) and in the UK, where HMP Norwich offers units for serious conditions, including dementia, and HMP Exeter is developing a specialist service for dementia (Moll, 2013).

These units offer specialised group activities such as walking, reminiscing and training in personal hygiene; modifications to the prison, including visual aids for easier navigation and quieter dining tables/zones (Hodel & Sanchez, 2012); and specialist programmes, such as the “Gold Coats”, an Alzheimer’s Association sponsored buddy scheme in 11 California prisons, in which people with dementia are assisted by younger inmates in managing finances, food, medications and cleaning (Baldwin & Leete, 2010; Moll, 2013). Exceptions aside, however, the overall picture appears less encouraging, as summarised by the CEO of Age Action, Eamon Timmins:

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Table 3  Study characteristics

| Author        | Year | Country | Article | Theme of article                  | Design          | Methodology   | Sample (n) | Age  | Site |
|---------------|------|---------|---------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|------|------|
| Aday          | 1994 | USA     | Journal | Experience of imprisonment        | Case study      | Qualitative   | 25         | 68 (x) | 1    |
| Aday          | 2005 | USA     | Journal | Death                             | Cross sectional | Mixed         | 102        | 59 (x) | 1    |
| Aday & Webster| 1979 | USA     | Journal | Experience of imprisonment        | Cross sectional | Mixed         | 40         | 55+  | 1    |
| Allen et al.  | 2013 | USA     | Journal | Religion                          | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 94         | 45+  | 1    |
| Allen et al.  | 2008 | USA     | Journal | Religion                          | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 81         | 50+  | 1    |
| Baldawi       | 2015 | Australia| Journal | Health status                     | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 233        | 50+  | 1    |
| Baldwin & Leete| 2012 | Australia| Journal | Dementia                          | Editorial       |               |            |      |      |
| Barry et al.  | 2015 | USA     | Journal | Suicidal ideation                 | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 124        | 50+  | 1    |
| Bishop et al. | 2014 | USA     | Journal | Forgiveness                       | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 261        | 45+  | 1    |
| Booth         | 1989 | USA     | Journal | Health status                     | Discussion paper|               |            |      |      |
| Chaiklin      | 1998 | USA     | Journal | Treatment                         | Discussion paper|               |            |      |      |
| Crawley       | 2005 | UK      | Journal | Experience of imprisonment        | Observational cross sectional | Qualitative | 80+        | 65+  | 1    |
| Crawley & Sparks| 2006 | UK      | Journal | Release                           | Observational cross sectional | Qualitative    | 80+       | 65+  | 1    |
| Doron         | 2007 | Israel  | Journal | Experience of imprisonment        | Cross sectional | Qualitative   | 12         | 50+  | 1    |
| Fazel et al.  | 2002 | UK      | Journal | Dementia                          | Case study      | Qualitative   | 2          | 69+  | 1    |
| Fazel et al.  | 2004 | UK      | Journal | Treatment                         | Cross sectional | Quantitative  | 203        | 60+  | 1    |
| Forsyth et al.| 2015 | UK      | Journal | Release                           | Longitudinal    | Qualitative   | 62         | 60+  | 1    |
| Handtke & Wangmo| 2016 | Switzerland| Journal | Death                            | Cross sectional | Qualitative   | 35         | 51+  | 1    |
| Joyce          | 2016 | Ireland | Report   | Experience of imprisonment        | Cross sectional | Qualitative   | 23         | 50+  | 1    |
| Joyce & Maschi| 2008 | USA     | Thesis   | Experience of imprisonment        | Cross sectional | Qualitative   | 25         | 50+  | 1    |
| Leigey         | 2007 | USA     | Journal | Release                           | Pilot           | Qualitative   | 51         | 50+  | 1    |
| Loeb et al.   | 2013 | UK      | Report   | Dementia                          | Report          |               | 19         | 59 (x) | 1    |
| Moll           | 1980 | USA     | Thesis   | Experience of imprisonment        | Cross sectional | Qualitative   | 127        | 60+  | 1    |

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Institutional thoughtlessness was also reflected in activity programmes. Only 55% of prisons in England and Wales offer age-friendly activities and in 67% these are not suitable for inmates with mobility difficulties, who may become reluctant to venture out of their cell (Crawley, 2005), remain active and engage in hobbies and recreational pursuits (see Table 1).

Social disengagement and loneliness is often exacerbated by loss of contact with family and friends (Leigey, 2008) and age-related life events, such as the death of a spouse or friends (Booth, 1989) and may lead to alienation from life (Moll, 2013; Crawley, 2005), or in GLM terms, a loss of pleasure in the here and now (see Table 1). This was well summed up by an ageing prisoner:

“Unfortunately, there’s guys whether it be old age or just that killer thing of ‘I don’t care, I’ll just lie down in bed and I’ll go asleep’...A lot of them here have given up” (Joyce & Maschi, 2016).

In response to the hardship of imprisonment, ageing prisoners adopt various coping mechanisms, such as religion and spirituality (Leigey, 2008). In contrast with younger prisoners, who tend to hide their religious belief from their peers, ageing prisoners often pride themselves over a rich spiritual life (Reed, 1980), which alleviates feelings of depression, anxiety and fear (Bishop et al., 2014, Allen et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2008), thus promoting “inner peace” (see Table 1). Attending religious ceremonies also represents an opportunity for social life and connectedness (Reed, 1980).

Another important response to the hardship of imprisonment is the potential for reconciliation and restitution. With the passage of time, prisoners may come to accept responsibility for their offence and their sentence. This may bring a change in attitude towards the victim(s) of their crime and the judicial authority, as well as emerging personal forgiveness for their wrongdoing (Bishop et al., 2014). Ageing prisoners also resort to reminiscing, the recalling of happy memories and/or challenging past events successfully dealt with, to find the strength to face the present (Crawley, 2005; Leigey 2008). Instead, counselling, psychotherapy and pastoral care were not reported as coping mechanisms. This may denote poor service provision in the prison system, which, as highlighted by Chaiklin (1998), is nonetheless crucial:

“One should distinguish between humanitarian care, therapeutic care, and custodial care. All are needed. There is also a need for crisis intervention…”.

Addressing health and social care needs. The second theme was care provision in the prison system. Our findings indicated that the complex physical, mental and social care health needs of ageing prisoners remain largely unmet, neglecting the primary good of healthy living and functioning (see Table 1).

This may occur because of the highly specialised care required, which may exert strain on the resources of the prison system (Booth, 1989). In the current economic climate, where optimisation of costs is often the priority, cuts in funding may result in poor service provision (Crawley, 2005).

In relation to physical and social health care needs, one barrier is represented by the emphasis on punishment over care, which makes custodial staff reluctant to respond to the ageing prisoners’ needs (Crawley, 2005) and by a “macho” culture, which considers attending to prisoners’ needs as feminine (Moll, 2013). The negative impact of the prison culture is reinforced by ageing prisoners being poorer self-advocates than the younger inmates (Doron, 2007). In an ageing prisoner’s words:

“With the younger ones, they know they have to keep them healthy anyway because they’d be complaining and they’d be writing to the papers” (Joyce & Maschi, 2016).

Physical health issues and social care needs may also pass unidentified, especially if untrained prison staff are unable to recognise symptoms or emerging social care needs (Baidawi, 2015). The overall discontentment around physical and social health led a prisoner to conclude that only by becoming persistent self-advocates, can ageing prisoners have their health and social care needs met (Loeb et al., 2007).

A similar neglect extends to mental health needs (Fazel et al., 2004), given the reticence of ageing prisoners to voice their needs, because of the stigma attached to psychiatric illness (Leigey, 2008) and the fear of being ridiculed by prison officers or fellow inmates (Baidawi, 2015). This concern is well supported by evidence, as Joyce and Maschi (2016) report that ageing prisoners are more frequently the victims of bullying compared to younger prisoners (38% against 12%).

A potential vehicle to address the complex physical, mental and social health care needs of ageing inmates is networking with charities/organisations specialised in old age, such as AgeUK or the Alzheimer’s Society,
which could offer professional advice (Baidawi, 2015). In England and Wales, however, only a third of prisons co‐operate with external agencies (Senior et al., 2013).

Given the neglect of basic needs, ageing prisoners report poor emotional wellbeing and frequently engage in negative thinking. Some ageing prisoners may come to see death as liberation from misery (Crawley & Sparks, 2006; Aday, 2005). Handtke and Wangmo (2014) report that 50% of ageing prisoners have suicidal thoughts, which are often undisclosed, as being on suicide watch is stigmatising. In addition, suicide assessment is not carried out regularly, making it more difficult to identify at‐risk subjects (Barry et al., 2015).

Despite the overall poor service provision, our review also found some examples of good practice, which are unevenly spread across countries and mostly depend on whether a national policy on ageing prisoners exists. They nonetheless reflect a growing interest among policy makers, the justice system and prison staff, in caring for the needs and wellbeing of ageing prisoners.

In the UK, HMP Wymott offers weekly visits from healthcare assistants, who provide support for bathing to prisoners with mobility issues; a programme of psychological interventions; self‐help books or referrals to chaplaincy in the occurrence of mental health crises; and the delivery of age‐friendly activities such as arts, yoga or cooking classes (Crawley, 2005; Crawley & Sparks, 2006).

In the Irish context, where prisons are not able to offer support services, social care has been delegated to community‐based organisations such as the Red Cross and the ageing prisoners have welcomed the initiative:

“When they discovered that I had rheumatoid arthritis, they asked the Red Cross to arrange to bring my meals…They’re very well organised” (Joyce & Maschi, 2016).

The route out of prison. As per the GLM principles, to sustain the process of rehabilitation, prisoners must fulfil their need for connection with the wider community (see Table 1), once they are released from prison. However, the evidence suggests that around 50% of ageing prisoners experience homelessness and/or destitution upon release (Senior et al., 2013; Joyce & Maschi, 2013). This is likely to result from limited information around resettlement arrangements (Senior et al., 2013) and poor liaison strategies between prisons, probation services and offenders’ managers.

Pre‐release courses are offered in a minority of prisons, but these rarely cater for individual needs (Senior et al., 2013). Therefore, the soon‐to‐be‐released prisoners tend to rely on the information of other inmates, which is often inaccurate and generates high levels of anxiety (Senior et al., 2013). Most ageing prisoners fear being relocated with younger ex‐offenders (Crawley & Sparks, 2006) and becoming the victims of physical and verbal intimidation (Forsyth et al., 2015) and have concerns around economic uncertainty upon resettlement, which may impact on their health (Crawley & Sparks, 2006; Loeb et al., 2007).

Given these uncertainties, prison may be seen as a protective environment (Doron, 2007, Aday & Webster, 1979). For example, healthcare provision, although far from being ideal, grants a level of security that could be lacking in the community (Handtke & Wangmo, 2014). This applies especially to the US health care system and to prisoners living in geriatric hospital wings which provide highly specialised treatments (Doron, 2007). As one ageing prisoner stated:

“Not long ago I sat down and analysed my situation. Heck, I couldn’t work outside…I’m better off here than I would be anywhere…I have friends in here…My medications and everything are there when I need them” (Aday, 1994).

Discussion

This systematic review adds to the current field of knowledge around ageing prisoners for several reasons:

1. It is the first review grounded upon the evidence‐based and increasingly applied rehabilitation framework of the GLM, through which we interpreted the literature and investigated our research questions.
2. It is the only existing review with an international focus and based on updated sources. This is quite crucial, given the recent policy developments in several countries (e.g. the Care Act 2015 in the UK), novel initiatives (e.g. Red Cross programme in Ireland) and the growing numbers of ageing prisoners in most developed countries.
3. It focuses on the experience of prisoners, as opposed to accounts from other stakeholders. We deem this work timely, given the increasing recognition of the individual dimension of the prisoner’s experience.

Our review confirmed that ageing prisoners have unique health and social care needs, which at present are only partially met. This has implications for
research and practice. Given their direct daily contact with the inmates, prison staff are crucial in identifying and referring prisoners with emerging health issues to health care professionals. Therefore, basic awareness training for prison staff and a change of culture to view prisoners as patients are required (Crawley, 2005). In the United States, the Community Ageing Health Project has extended geriatric training to all professionals working in the justice system (Ahalt & Williams, 2015). Similar initiatives do not seem to exist in other countries.

Given that the remit of custodial staff does not extend to health and social care, effective work of a multi-disciplinary team, which includes health and social care professionals, is essential. These professionals should be capable to work at three levels:

(i) Prevention, by developing and implementing programmes that promote physical and mental health.

(ii) Identification of emerging needs, through team work with custodial staff;

(iii) Intervention, which requires expertise around age-associated conditions and the difficulties that these entail.

Improvement in health and social care also depends on the regular administration of health screenings, which, at present, are systematically carried out at intake but not afterwards. These would further facilitate the identification of social care needs and the allocation of support.

Adequate policy development and implementation are also required. In the UK, the Care Act 2015 may represent a turning point in the social care of ageing prisoners, who constitute 42% of all prisoner referrals for assessment of social care and support (Anderson, 2015). A report of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) following the introduction of the new legislation, however, has denounced that so far a very limited number of referrals for social care has been made to local councils and concluded that integration between health and social care still needs to be achieved in the prison system (Anderson, 2015).

In this sense, local authorities should promote cooperation between support providers (e.g. NHS), prison staff, health commissioners and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to ensure good practice. Interdisciplinary work between different agencies is also fundamental to support the 95% of ageing prisoners who are eventually reintegrated in the community, many of whom need long-term social care (Williams et al., 2012).

In relation to the health and social care needs of terminally ill ageing prisoners, different countries have implemented different strategies, including pre-term compassionate release, specialised units for ageing prisoners, hospice and palliative care and assisted suicide. Pre-term compassionate release (i.e. reintegration of a terminally-ill prisoner in the community when it offers more suitable treatment than the prison) is common in France (Steiner, 2003), but it can be controversial with sexual offenders. Thus, in the US and the UK, requirements are often strict and few prisoners benefit from compassionate release (Williams et al., 2012).

A compromise between security and treatment is offered by specialised geriatric prison units, which are the subject of a heated debate. Some argue that they require large financial investments, promote age segregation, lack stimulation and discourage family visits, if located further than general prisons (Howse, 2003). They also contend that ageing inmates exert a calming effect on the younger prisoners in a mixed environment (Howse, 2003). Others object that these units offer humane and specialist care in a safer environment (Fazel et al., 2004).

Undoubtedly, dedicated units for the ageing patients could provide opportunities for improving end of life care. In Switzerland, assisted suicide is legal practice for terminally ill prisoners (Handtke & Wangmo, 2014). The prison hospice care movement in the United States has led to the wide implementation of in-prison palliative and hospice care, which ensures emotional and physical support for dying prisoners, while preserving their human rights. In other countries, such as the United Kingdom, this is still less common (Docherty, 2009).

Limitations

This review has some limitations. Most of the studies were carried out in the UK and the USA; our findings may therefore be less generalisable to other countries. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of an ageing prison population is also seen in countries with different traditions of legal justice, such as Japan (Williams et al., 2012). Therefore, we feel that our findings are relevant to inform good practice in a variety of contexts.

Further limitations derive from the quality of the studies included. Five studies used non-empirical methodologies, which reduces confidence in their findings. In addition, we could only retrieve one study reporting on ageing female prisoners (Joyce & Maschi, 2016), thus potentially incurring a gender selection
bias. Selection bias may have also been caused by the fact that almost a third of the studies (n = 10) were single site.

Finally, four studies were carried out more than 20 years ago, thus providing data that do not necessarily reflect the current situation. Nonetheless, we observe that their results are consistent with those reported in more recent literature. This suggests that their findings are still valid, and/or that there have been no substantial advances over the years in addressing ageing prisoners’ needs.

Conclusion

Our review found that ageing prisoners have unique and complex health and social care needs which are mostly unmet. There is an interest in this population, which is reflected in initiatives aimed at their wellbeing. However, at present time, the overall experience of incarceration for the ageing prisoner is quite poor, given the inconsistent physical, emotional and social care support offered from prison intake to release and beyond.

Disclaimer

The research was funded by the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care East Midlands (CLAHRC EM). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of health.

Key points

• The experience of imprisonment from the perspective of ageing prisoners has received little attention in research.

• We adopted a prisoner-centred approach grounded in the Good Lives Model, to explore the experience of ageing prisoners, the elements of life in prison impacting on their wellbeing and the current service provision.

• We reviewed 25 international studies and developed through meta-synthesis three themes: The hardship of imprisonment, addressing health and social care needs and the route out of prison.

• We found that, despite initiatives to address their needs, the experience of incarceration for ageing prisoners is quite poor, which reflects the inconsistent support that they are usually offered.

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