

Sexual health and behaviour of New South Wales prisoners

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This is the NSW part of an NHMRC-funded study of NSW and Queensland prisoners in 2006–07.

1118 men and 199 women in NSW were surveyed by computer-assisted telephone interview after random selection by prisoner number.

This is the first time telephone interviewing has been used in a statewide prison health survey.

Prisoners were personally informed of the purpose and content of the study and gave written informed consent.

Prisoners who could not speak English, were intellectually disabled, were too mentally ill, were unavailable (e.g. being transferred, in court or in hospital) or could not safely be moved to the telephone location were ineligible. 82% of eligible inmates agreed to take part.

The sample

Before coming to prison, 57% of men and 54% of women lived in a household without a landline telephone and would thus have been ineligible for telephone population health surveys. Only 20% men and 24% women had done a telephone survey before.

18% men and 25% women were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

Half (58% men, 72% women) had Year 10 schooling or less. The most common offences were assault and property offences.

Prisoners' health was less good than in the general community. 11% men and 13% women had a disability that hindered mobility. 74% men and 85% women were current smokers. 17% men and 32% women did not drink alcohol before coming to prison, but 29% men and 18% women drank at NHMRC 'hazardous' or 'risky' levels. Most (>80%) had taken non-prescribed drugs, and 55% men and 77% women had injected drugs in their lifetime.

Sexuality

Table 1 'Do you think of yourself as ... ?'

	Men %	Women %
Heterosexual or straight	95	63
Bisexual	3	29
Homosexual (gay/lesbian)	1	7

Female prisoners are very different from the general population (<2% of women identify as bisexual). Male prisoners are much more similar to the general population.

Table 2 'Have you had (any kind of) sexual experience ... ?'

	Men %	Women %
Only with other sex	89	41
Mostly with other sex	8	39
Equally with both sexes	1	10
Mostly with same sex	1	9
Only with same sex	<1	2
No one	1	0

For both men and women with same-sex experience, the majority had it outside prison or both inside and outside.

Table 3 Where inmates had sexual contact with same sex (% of total sample)

	Men %	Women %
Outside prison	7	22
Both inside and outside prison	3	29
In prison	2	8
Total	11	59

Regular relationships

80% men and 70% women had a regular opposite-sex partner before they were sent to prison. A minority (42% men, 29% women) were using contraception in the relationship.

Reproductive experiences (women)

80% of the women had been pregnant; age at first pregnancy ranged from 13 to 40. 67% of the sample had had ≥ 1 child, and 38% had had ≥ 1 abortion.

Sexual forcing or coercion

14% men and 59% women said they had been 'forced or frightened into doing something sexually that they did not want to do' in their lifetime.

Sexual attitudes

	Men % agree	Women % agree
Films these days are too sexually explicit	35	42
Sex before marriage is acceptable	88	85
If two people had oral sex, but not intercourse, you would still consider that they had had sex together	76	79
An active sex life is important for your sense of well-being	84	67
Abortion is always wrong	47	27
Having an affair when in a committed relationship is always wrong	80	73
Sex tends to get better the longer you know someone	70	76
Sex between two adult women is always wrong	23	15
Sex between two adult men is always wrong	62	29

In prison

Sex in prison

6% men said they had ever had any sexual contact (including touching) with another inmate. 5% said it was consensual, 1% that it was not. For many this was only touching or oral sex, not anal sex. 4% said it was for pleasure and 1% that it was for protection; <1% did it for drugs or food/tobacco.

Most men disapproved of sex in prison and considered that men who did it were gay.

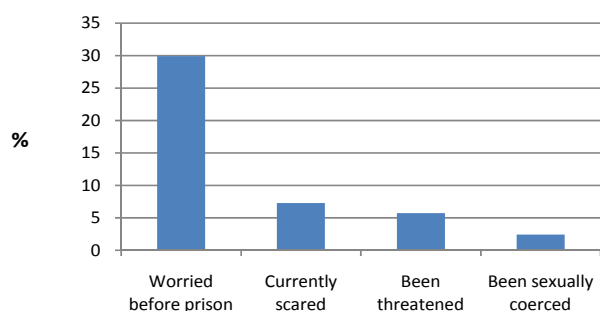
36% women had had any sexual contact (including touching) with another inmate. Almost all said it was consensual. 29% did it for pleasure, 2% for protection and 4% for drugs, food/tobacco or other debt.

Condoms and dental dams

Most men (94%) had access to a condom machine; 50% had ever taken a condom packet from a machine, but few condoms were used for sex. Women had access to dental dams; 4% had ever used one for sex with a woman in prison.

Sexual assault

Men were concerned before they came to prison that they might be sexually assaulted, but few currently feared assault and even fewer had been assaulted/coerced.



Assault

34% men and 27% women said they had been assaulted or attacked (beaten up) in prison.

The team: Chief investigators: Tony Butler, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology; Juliet Richters, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales; Basil Donovan, National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, University of New South Wales, and Sydney Sexual Health Centre, Sydney Hospital. **Associate investigators:** Luke Grant, NSW Department of Corrective Services; Alun Richards, Queensland Department of Corrective Services; Anthony Smith, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. **Staff:** Kristie Kirkwood, formerly Centre for Health Research in Criminal Justice, NSW Justice Health; Lorraine Yap, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales; Karen Schneider, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales.

Qualitative study

A qualitative study was also carried out in NSW, including fieldwork in prisons and in-depth interviews with 59 prisoners and ex-prisoners. This focused on sexual issues that concerned only a minority of prisoners and which could not be explored in detail in the questionnaire survey: sex between prisoners, gay men in prison, HIV+ people in prison, and transgender inmates. For further details contact Dr Lorraine Yap, SPHCM, UNSW, email l.yap@unsw.edu.au.

Coming soon ...

A full report of the NSW survey findings will be published in November 2008. It will be followed by a report of the Queensland findings (co-investigator Dr Alun Richards, Qld Department of Corrective Services). Several journal papers are in preparation. Please contact Dr Juliet Richters, SPHCM, UNSW, email j.richters@unsw.edu.au for further information.