



## 5.7 Prisoners

The prison population in Australia is increasing, both in overall number and as a proportion of the population. The health profiles of prisoners are different from those of the general community; they have higher levels of mental health disorders, illicit drug use, chronic conditions, communicable disease and disability.

The prison population is fluid, with many prisoners entering and leaving prison each year. In 2015, more than 50,000 people entered prison and more than 50,000 were discharged. This constant movement through the prison system means the health issues of Australia's prisoners become health issues for the whole community.

This snapshot uses the 2015 National Prisoner Health Data Collection (NPHDC) to report on the health and demographic profile of people entering prison. Where data are available, broad comparisons are made between the health of prisoners and that of the general community.

### Who is in prison in Australia?

The prisoner population is predominantly male, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over-represented in the prison system (Table 5.7.1).

Table 5.7.1: Prison and general population demographics, 2016

	Prison population	General adult population
Male	<b>9 in 10</b> (92%)	<b>1 in 2</b> (49%)
Indigenous	<b>1 in 4</b> (27%)	<b>1 in 50</b> (3.0%)

Sources: ABS 2016c, 2017b.

People entering prison are often from disadvantaged backgrounds (Table 5.7.2).

Table 5.7.2: Prison entrants and general population socioeconomic factors, 2015–2016

	Prison entrants, 2015	General adult population
Homeless	<b>1 in 4</b> (24%) were homeless in the month before entering prison	<b>1 in 200</b> (0.5%) were homeless on Census night, 2016
Unemployed	<b>1 in 4</b> (27%) were unemployed and looking for work in the month before entering prison	<b>1 in 25</b> (4.4%) aged 15 and over were unemployed and looking for work in February 2015
Education level	<b>2 in 3</b> (68%) had an education level of Year 10 or below	<b>1 in 5</b> (21%) aged 15–74 had an education level of Year 10 or below in May 2015

Note: Comparisons should be interpreted with caution due to differences in age structure, age intervals and time periods between the prison population and the general population data.

Sources: ABS 2015b, 2016b, 2018; AIHW 2015.





# What do we know about the health of Australia's prisoners?

People entering prison are likely to have mental and physical health problems, and behave in ways that are risky to their health (Table 5.7.3).

Table 5.7.3: Prison entrants and general population health conditions, 2014–2016

	Prison entrants, 2015	General adult population
Mental health condition	<b>1 in 2</b> (50%) reported a history of a mental health condition	<b>1 in 5</b> (19%) aged 18–54 reported a long-term mental or behavioural health condition in 2014–15
Chronic health condition	<b>1 in 3</b> (31%) reported a current chronic health condition	<b>1 in 5</b> (22%) aged 18–54 reported a current chronic health condition in 2014–15
Hepatitis C	<b>1 in 3</b> (31%) tested positive to hepatitis C	<b>1 in 50</b> (1.9%) aged 18–54 were estimated to be living with chronic hepatitis C in 2015
Current smoker	<b>3 in 4</b> (74%) were current smokers	<b>1 in 6</b> (16%) aged 18 and over were current smokers in 2016
Used illicit drugs	<b>2 in 3</b> (67%) had used illicit drugs during the 12 months before entering prison	<b>1 in 5</b> (19%) aged 18 and over reported using illicit drugs during the 12 months before being surveyed in 2016

Notes

1. Chronic health conditions reported by prison entrants included arthritis, asthma, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease only, whilst chronic health conditions in the general population also included chronic respiratory conditions, chronic musculoskeletal conditions and mental health conditions.
2. Where possible, an age range of 18–54 in the general population was used for health comparisons as the vast majority of prison entrants were aged under 55 with only 2.4% aged 55 and over.
3. Comparisons should be interpreted with caution due to differences in age structure, age intervals and time periods between the prison population and the general population data.

Sources: ABS 2015c, 2015a, 2016b; AIHW 2015, 2017; Kirby Institute 2016.

Compared with people living in Australian households from the same age group, people entering prison are more likely to have disability—meaning that they have core activity limitation in one or more of the areas of self-care, mobility and communication. Core activity limitation for people entering prison is:

- 1.1 times as likely as for people living in Australian households for people aged 20–34
- 1.5 times as likely for people aged 35–49
- 1.3 times as likely for people aged 50–64 (ABS 2016a).

As most people entering prison in the 50–64 age group are aged under 55, the comparison for this age group likely underestimates the limitation that older prisoners have compared with people of the same age in the general population.





## The prison population is ageing

The Australian prison population is growing faster than the Australian population, with older prisoners the fastest growing age group (ABS 2017a). The number of prisoners aged 50 and over increased by 84%—from 2,400 prisoners in 2005 to 4,400 in 2015—and by 170% for prisoners aged 65 and over—312 prisoners in 2005 to 842 in 2015 (ABS 2005b, 2015d). This substantial increase compares with a 27% increase in the Australian population aged 50 and over between 2005 and 2015 and a 34% increase in the number of Australians aged 65 and over (ABS 2005a, 2015a).

The steep rise over time in the number of older prisoners is due to a few reasons: long prison sentences, mandatory sentencing, sentencing of historical sex offenders, reduced options for early release and the decline in preventable deaths over time (AIC 2015; Baidawi et al. 2011; Trotter & Baidawi 2015).

### How healthy are older prisoners?

Older people, including older prisoners, are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions and disability, and need medication, treatment and support with daily living, compared with younger people.

Prisoners experience 'accelerated ageing', where signs of ageing occur 10 to 15 years earlier than for the rest of the population (Baidawi et al. 2011; Williams et al. 2012). For this reason, 50 years is commonly used as the threshold for considering a prisoner in Australia to be 'old' (Trotter & Baidawi 2015).

As well as being more likely to have core activity limitation, people entering prison aged 50 and over often have other health conditions, reportedly brought to their attention by a doctor or nurse. For instance:

- 1 in 3 (33%) reported being told they had arthritis
- 2 in 11 (18%) reported being told they had diabetes
- 1 in 6 (16%) reported being told they had cardiovascular disease
- 1 in 18 (5.5%) reported being told they had cancer.

### What is missing from the picture?

The NPHDC aims to collect data from all public and private prisons in Australia on people who enter prison, prisoners who visit a prison clinic, prisoners who are taking prescription medication while in custody, prison clinic services and staffing levels, and prisoners discharged from prison. Currently, data are collected every 3 years through surveys conducted in prisons over a 2-week period. In 2015, the response rate for people entering prison was 49% and included prisoners from 84% of prisons in Australia. The AIHW is working with all jurisdictions to improve the completeness of this data collection. Data linkage can improve the understanding of prisoner outcomes and pathways through the health system and is being explored by AIHW in collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Longitudinal data on individual prisoners' health—that is, from prison entry to release—are not currently available. Likewise, data on the continuity of care after prisoners leave the prison health system are not available.





## Where do I go for more information?

More information on the health of Australia's prisoners, including information on the use of prison health services by people in prison and information on people being discharged from prison, is available at: <[www.aihw.gov.au/reports-statistics/population-groups/prisoners/overview](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-statistics/population-groups/prisoners/overview)>.

The report *The health of Australia's prisoners, 2015* and other recent releases are available for free download.

Information on prisoners in Australia is also available at <[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4517.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4517.0)>.

## References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2005a. Australian demographic statistics, Jun. 2005. ABS cat. no. 3101.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2005b. Prisoners in Australia, 2005. ABS cat. no. 4517.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2015a. Australian demographic statistics, Jun. 2015. ABS cat. no. 3101.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2015b. Education and work, Australia, May 2015. ABS cat. no. 6227.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2015c. National Health Survey: first results, 2014–15. ABS cat. no. 4364.0.55.001. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2015d. Prisoners in Australia, 2015. ABS cat. no. 4517.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2016a. Microdata: disability, ageing and carers, Australia, 2015. ABS cat. no. 4430.0.30.002. Canberra: ABS. AIHW analysis of Basic Confidentialised Unit Record File.
- ABS 2016b. Participation, job search and mobility, Australia, February 2015. ABS cat. no. 6226.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2016c. Prisoners in Australia, 2016. ABS cat. no. 4517.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2017a. Australian demographic statistics, Dec. 2016. ABS cat. no. 3101.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2017b. Census of population and housing: reflecting Australia - stories from the Census, 2016. ABS cat. no. 2071.0. Canberra: ABS.
- ABS 2018. Census of population and housing: estimating homelessness, 2016. ABS cat. no. 2049.0. Canberra: ABS.
- AIC (Australian Institute of Criminology) 2015. Deaths in custody in Australia: National Deaths in Custody Program 2011–12 and 2012–13. Canberra: AIC.
- AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2015. The health of Australia's prisoners 2015. Cat. no. PHE 207. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2017. National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: detailed findings. Drug Statistics series no. 31. Cat. no. PHE 214. Canberra: AIHW.
- Baidawi S, Turner S, Trotter C, Browning C, Collier P, O'Connor D et al. 2011. Older prisoners—a challenge for Australian corrections. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Justice* 426.
- Kirby Institute 2016. National blood-borne viruses and sexually transmissible infections surveillance and monitoring report, 2016. Sydney: Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales.
- Trotter C & Baidawi S 2015. Older prisoners: challenges for inmates and prison management. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 48:200–18.
- Williams BA, Goodwin JS, Baillargeon J, Ahalt C & Walter LC 2012. Addressing the aging crisis in US criminal justice health care. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 60:1150–6.

