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“From the prison door right to the sidewalk, everything went downhill,” A qualitative study of the health experiences of recently released inmates

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### Abstract

In many states, budget constraints are prompting earlier release of prison inmates. Prior studies have demonstrated elevated mortality rates in the post-release period but little is known about the health experiences of former inmates in the transition from prison to the community. The objective of this study was to understand the health-seeking experiences, perceptions of risk, and medical and mental health needs of former prisoners in the first two months after release from prison. Participants consisted of 29 former inmates within the first two months after their release from prison to the Denver, Colorado area. Using qualitative methods, trained interviewers conducted

individual, in-person, semi-structured interviews exploring participants' experiences with health, mental health, and health care since release. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed utilizing a team-based approach to inductive analysis. We found that health-related behavior occurred in the context of a complex life experience, with logistical problems exacerbated by emotional distress. Major themes included 1) transitional challenges; 2) cognitive responses including perceptions about personal risk, knowledge and priorities; 3) emotional responses including pronounced stress, fear, anxiety, disappointment; and 4) health behaviors. Former inmates reported multiple challenges, poor transitional preparation preceding release, and inadequate or absent continuity of mental and physical health care in the context of significant emotional distress and anxiety. Improved release planning, coordination between the medical, mental health and criminal justice systems may reduce the risk of poor health outcomes for this population.



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## Keywords

Forensic mental health; Prisoners; Qualitative research; Prison re-entry

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