

Publication

Stigma management during reintegration of older incarcerated adults with mental health issues: A qualitative analysis

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Introduction: The number of older prisoners with mental health issues released from prisons and forensic psychiatric institutions is rising. Their successful integration is important due to its implications for the public's safety and the individual's health and well-being. However, reintegration efforts are hampered due to the double stigma attached to 'mental illness' and 'incarceration history'. To alleviate the burden of such stigma, affected persons and their social networks employ stigma management strategies. This study sought to investigate the stigma management strategies of mental health professionals supporting older incarcerated adults with mental health issues in their reintegration process.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews with 63 mental health professionals from Canada and Switzerland were carried out as part of the overall project. To address the reintegration topic, data from 18 interviews were used. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach.

Results: Mental health professionals emphasized the double stigmatization of their patients which impaired their quest for housing. Lengthy searches for placement frequently resulted in patients' unnecessary long stays in forensic programs. Nevertheless, participants outlined that they were at times successful in finding appropriate housing for their patients due to the use of certain stigma management strategies. They stated that they, first, established initial contacts with outside institutions, second, educated them about stigmatizing labels and, third, provided ongoing collaboration with public institutions.

Discussion: Incarcerated persons with mental health issues face double stigmatization that affects their reentry process. Our findings are interesting as they illustrate ways in which stigma can be reduced, and how the reentry process can be streamlined. Future research should include the perspectives of incarcerated adults with mental health issues to shed more light on the various options that they seek for successful reintegration after imprisonment.

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