

## The impact of immigration detention on mental health

This briefing summarises some of the key findings from a [2018 systematic review](#)<sup>1</sup> carried out by the Helen Bamber Foundation in partnership with academics and experts, looking at the body of research on the impact and mental health consequences that immigration detention may have on adults, adolescents and child immigration detainees. The aim of the review was to update and expand on a similar review conducted in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

The briefing highlights key findings that might be most useful for those working with these groups, including those providing direct support and those designing services and policy.

### Introduction

There is significant and consistent evidence that refugees are more vulnerable to mental illness, particularly depression and PTSD, compared to the general population.<sup>3</sup> In addition to pre-migration factors such as exposure to torture or human-trafficking, post-migration factors, including prolonged asylum procedures; prohibition from working; poverty; and poor housing are also significantly associated with poor mental health.

The 2009 review looking at the effects of immigration detention on mental health found detainees to have high levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Suicidal ideation and deliberate self-harm were also common. Severity of distress was significantly greater in those who had been detained for relatively long periods.

Concerns were raised around the fact that time spent in immigration detention in a host country is a particular stressor because it entails both loss of liberty and the threat of forced return to the country of origin. It also is reminiscent for many of experiences they had in their country of origin or elsewhere where they have experienced harm.

The 2018 review identified several studies published since the 2009 review was completed. It reported on findings from a total of 26 studies<sup>4</sup> and 2099 participants. Data from as many as 58 countries was included. The intention of the review was to document:

- a) the prevalence and types of mental health problems among child and adult immigration detainees and
- b) risk factors associated with mental health problems among immigration detainees.

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<sup>1</sup> von Werthern, M., Robjant, K., Chui, Z. et al. [The impact of immigration detention on mental health: a systematic review](#). BMC Psychiatry 18, 382 (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Robjant K, Hassan R, Katona C. Mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers: systematic review. Brit J Psychiatry. 2009 Apr;194(4): 306-12

<sup>3</sup> Fazel M, Wheeler J, Danesh J. Prevalence of serious mental disorder in 7000 refugees resettled in western countries: a systematic review. Lancet. 2005;365:1309-14; Priebe S, Giacco D, El-Nagib R. Health evidence network synthesis report 47. Public health aspects of mental health among migrants and refugees: A review of the evidence on mental health care for refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants in the WHO European Region. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016

<sup>4</sup> 16 studies on adults, 9 studies on children and families and one reported on both

It looked particularly for evidence about the possible effects of pre-existing trauma and/or mental health problems and of duration of detention.

## Key findings

- **Detainees suffer from severe levels of mental health problems**

11 studies employed self-report methods of measurement and the data relating to detention experiences consistently identified severe levels of mental health problems with anxiety, depression and PTSD being the most common.

Two of the identified studies involved diagnostic clinical assessments<sup>5</sup>. In these it was found that 76% of detainees had mental health disorders, with 26.2% meeting criteria for serious mental illness within 4 days of admission.

- **The severity of mental health problems is increased for those who have been detained compared to their non-detained counterparts**

Six studies compared the self-reported levels of mental health of detainees to non-detained refugees or migrants from a similar background. All six showed higher symptom scores and rates of meeting the clinical threshold for mental health disorders in the detained groups.

- **Detention decreases a person's quality of life and poor detention conditions worsen this**

Three studies measured detainees' quality of life and uniformly reported low ratings. One study finding that the quality of life levels were mediated by the level of perceived support and satisfaction with the care received from detention staff.

- **Detention increases a person's risk of self-harm and or suicide**

Two studies examined suicide and self-harm rates.<sup>6</sup> Self-harm was found to be precipitated by factors such as detention conditions, negative decisions, and procedural factors such as duration of claims.

- **The longer a person is detained the worse their mental health and quality of life becomes**

Eight studies reported on the relationship between length of detention and mental health and/or quality of life. Four of them<sup>7</sup> found a significant positive correlation between detention duration and increased symptoms. One study, which included a two-month follow up, indicated that symptoms were markedly reduced in those who had been released prior to the follow up. However, symptoms and social isolation remained higher in those who had been formerly detained compared to their non-detained counterparts.

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<sup>5</sup> Both of these were restricted to male detainees

<sup>6</sup> Using data extracted from incident reports within detention centres in Australia and the UK

<sup>7</sup> Conducted in Australia and the UK

- A person's mental health symptoms are likely to improve following release from detention, but detention is likely to have a lasting negative impact

Three studies conducting single assessments following release from detention suggest that symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD endure well beyond the detention period, and persist at 10 months, 3 years or almost 4 years after release. In two studies, numerous anxiety-related symptoms, such as avoidance of related triggers, nightmares and flashbacks were linked directly to the detention experience. The severity of such long-term impacts, along with continuing sadness, hopelessness, and anger were again found to correlate with detention duration

- Detention has a similarly negative impact on children and/or families as on adults

Ten studies looked at the mental health of children and/or families. A wide range of psychological disturbances mirroring and extending those of adults was found across all three studies which also all included clinical assessments. All children evidenced at least one psychiatric disorder, most frequently depression, anxiety, PTSD and somatization, depending on the diagnostic categories used. The overwhelming majority also struggled with sleeping (65–100%) and eating problems (100%), suicidal ideation (50%), and self-harm (25–80%).

## Conclusion

The body of research reviewed made clear that detention results in severe mental health consequences amongst detainees. Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder were most commonly reported both during and following detention. Whilst such mental health difficulties cannot be viewed in isolation from past histories and pre-detention traumas, controlled studies with non-detained controls uniformly suggest higher symptom scores were found in detained compared to non-detained refugees. In addition, the duration of detention was positively associated with severity of mental symptoms.

The review concluded that there was a pressing need for the proper consideration of mental health and consequent risk of detention-related harm in decisions surrounding detention as well as for improved care for individuals within detention facilities. It also highlighted the urgent need for further research on both the acute and longer-term impact of immigration detention on mental health.

The following practical recommendations arising from the study findings were made:

- Comprehensive assessments should be carried out by care providers with appropriate experience.
- Adequate treatment should be provided for detainees suffering with mental health difficulties.
- Steps should be taken to identify and address vulnerability that avoids or minimises further harm being done.
- A greater focus on minimising length of detention is needed.
- There should be a statutory limit of duration of detention.