

Prevalence of blood born viruses and uptake of Hepatitis C testing and treatment in Australian prisons: The AUSHEP study

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Background: People in prisons have high rates of blood-borne virus (BBV) infections, making prisons a priority setting for BBV elimination strategies, particularly for HCV testing and treatment. This study evaluated prevalence of the BBVs (HCV, HBV, HIV), and uptake of HCV testing and treatment in Australian prisons.

Methods: AusHep is an ongoing national bio-behavioural prison-based survey. This analysis included preliminary data from NSW, South Australia, and Tasmania. Randomly selected participants in selected prisons were offered point-of-care testing for HIV and HCV (anti-HCV) antibodies, HBs antigen, and HCV RNA (if anti-HCV positive). Data regarding the history of BBV testing/treatment were collected by interview. BBV prevalence estimates were weighted by prisoner population size in each jurisdiction.

Results: Among 798 participants recruited from 13 prisons (participation rate 98%), 706 (88%) were male, median age was 35 years, 33% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 51% reported ever injecting drugs. Prevalence estimates were 30.4% for anti-HCV (n=210), 6.5% for HCV RNA (n=36), 0.6% for HBs antigen (n=4), and 0.7% for HIV antibody (n=6). Among anti-HCV negative participants (n=588), 52% had ever been tested for anti-HCV (21% in the past year). Among anti-HCV positive participants (n=210), 95% had ever been tested for HCV RNA (52% in the past year), and 68% had ever received treatment (12% in the past year). Among participants who received HCV treatment, either ever (n=147), or in the past year (n=28), 14% and 11% were HCV RNA positive, respectively. Among those HCV RNA positive (n=36), 67% were unaware of their HCV status.

Conclusion: A lower HCV RNA prevalence was found compared to previous reports, suggesting increased treatment uptake. Most people with HCV were unaware of their status, while a considerable proportion of those previously treated needed retreatment. More efforts are needed to enhance HCV screening and treatment in prisons.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The Kirby Institute and AusHep study are funded by the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing.