Zones of abandonment: Understanding LAIB discontinuation among Aboriginal people after release from custody

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Introduction: Release from custody marks a period of acute risk for Aboriginal people receiving opioid agonist treatment, with discontinuation rates higher than in non-Aboriginal populations. Yet the context shaping decisions to stop treatment remain poorly understood.

Methods: This qualitative study drew on interviews with 22 Aboriginal people who discontinued long-acting injectable buprenorphine (LAIB) within 12 weeks of release from custody, and focus groups with 36 Aboriginal Medical Service practitioners across NSW. Drawing on Biehl's concept of zones of abandonment and Aboriginal scholarship on health and wellbeing, we explored how Aboriginal people navigated the post-release transition and what shaped LAIB discontinuation.

Key Findings: Participants described release delivering people into zones of social abandonment characterised by homelessness, service withdrawal, and disrupted social ties. For some, the competing demands of reintegration meant that LAIB became incompatible with their community goals. For others, it was the absence of structure and support post-release that made sustaining treatment difficult Workers pointed to inconsistent information transfer, limited prescribing capacity, and referral gaps as key barriers. These factors were compounded by intergenerational trauma from ongoing colonisation, weakened kinship connections, and profound structural disadvantage. Cultural reconnection to family, country, and community was seen as necessary rather than supplementary component of effective care.

Discussions and Conclusions: Bringing Biehl's framework into dialogue with Aboriginal conceptions of health and wellbeing, we theorise the post-release environment as a zone of social, structural, and cultural abandonment. Through this lens, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of treatment (dis)engagement beyond binary measures of success or failure.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: LAIB supported important harm reduction goals in custody, yet sustaining those gains in the community requires social, structural and cultural conditions, rarely present in the post-release period. For LAIB's benefits to extend beyond custody, investment in housing, pre-release planning, and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations is essential.

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