Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding drug-related mortality in released prisoners: A review of national coronial records

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Reviewer: Amy Jo Harzke

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The manuscript is greatly improved, but several revisions are required. These are indicated below.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. The authors state in the Abstract that the ex-prisoners who died of accidental drug-related causes were compared with those who died from all other “unnatural” causes. It appears that deaths due to chronic infectious diseases (e.g. HIV, HCV) were included in the comparison deaths, so “unnatural” does not really apply. The use of “unnatural” appears twice in the abstract and once in the discussion (similar sentence, pg. 7), but throughout the paper, “all other causes” is used. Unless the authors limited their overall search to “accidental” or “unnatural” causes, “all other causes” should be used rather than “other unnatural causes.” If the authors did limit their search to accidental or “unnatural” causes, this needs to be clarified and emphasized in the Methods.

2. It is unclear why the authors do not include the results related to poly-substance use in a table (currently reported in narrative section 3.4). It seems that if the poly-substance issue is important enough to include in the Abstract and to address in the Discussion and Conclusions, it should be included in a table, or the authors should state a strong rationale for not doing so.

3. In the Introduction, the authors state (pg.4): “Given that previous studies exploring drug-related deaths have identified ex-prisoners through coronial records, this study…. This is confusing (maybe because of the word “exploring”?), because it reads as if it is intended to provide a rationale for the study, while also seemingly contradicting the stated rationale for the study. The stated rationale for the study is that it provides an exploration of the circumstances surrounding drug-related deaths among ex-prisoners, which few other studies have done (pg. 3). Perhaps the sentence needs to read something like: “Although previous studies have used coronial records to identify and quantify drug-related deaths among ex-prisoners, few studies have used these records to investigate the circumstances surrounding drug-related deaths among ex-prisoners.”

4. In the Abstract, the second sentence in the Conclusions is a bit misleading and may be unnecessary. Because the sentence follows the clause in the previous
sentence which is specifically about those who died from drug-related causes, the sentence seems to suggest that mental and physical health conditions were more prevalent among those who died from drug-related causes, which was not the case. Indeed, those who died from drug-related deaths were less likely to have psychiatric morbidity or a history of self-harm.

5. In the Abstract, the authors suggest that “among those who die from drug-related causes, poly-drug use is normative and extreme socioeconomic disadvantage is common.” Pairing the poly-drug use with socioeconomic disadvantage in this way seems to suggest that poly-drug use is routine or common among ex-prisoners in general rather than at the time of death. This is not necessarily supported by the findings. It is needs to be clear that poly-drug use was noted at the time of death.

6. In the Introduction, the authors use “descendants” rather than “decedents.” I suspect it is an auto-spell issue.

7. The authors added a sentence in the Methods to clarify some procedural information regarding coding (bottom pg. 4). Does the placement of this information mean that only the case identification only was double-coded as described and that the other pieces of data collection were not similarly coded? If both bits were double-coded as described, it seems like this paragraph should appear at the end of the Data Collection section. If only the case identification was double-coded as described, then a description of procedures for the rest of the data collection should be explicitly given.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Overall, it would seem to make sense to merge tables 1 and 2, because they provide background characteristics, and to add a table 3 that gives the toxicology reports and circumstances of death.

2. In the Abstract, it would be clarifying to say that poly-substance use “at the time of death” was recorded in 72% of drug-related deaths. Given the history of drug use variables also reported in the results, it seems more clarifying than redundant to add this clause.

4. In the Abstract, it seems redundant to say a “nationwide” search was conducted of the “national” information system.

5. In the Abstract and in the Discussion, the authors suggest that their findings be considered “in the wider context of prisoner experiences….” Does it make more sense to say “ex-prisoners” here, given that the findings are related only to post-release drug-related mortality?

6. On page 7, the authors list several variables associated with drug-related deaths in previous studies. The authors include “being single,” but did not include “living alone.” This is not my area expertise, but it seems like living alone has been associated with drug-related deaths in previous studies.
7. When the authors use “however,” proper punctuation is a semi-colon.

8. It seems that “preventive” has become preferred over “preventative” in the scientific literature.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.