Reviewer's report

Title: Life years lost to incarceration: inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians

Version: 2
Date: 6 May 2014
Reviewer: Stuart Kinner

Reviewer's report:

The revised manuscript is improved. I remain unconvinced that the phrase “life years lost to incarceration” is not misleading (see below comment in relation to para 2 of the Introduction). “Years spent incarcerated” would be both more succinct and less open to misinterpretation.

The key finding is that Aboriginal people spend more time incarcerated than do non-Aboriginal people. In the Discussion the authors point to evidence of adverse health and social consequences of incarceration, and argue that their findings therefore underscore the need to reduce incarceration of Aboriginal people. The discussion of how Bill C-10 selectively impacts on Aboriginal people is interesting and adds policy relevance.

The Introduction is very short, and more context may help readers appreciate why this study is valuable. For example, can the authors state plainly and unambiguously that information on incarceration rates and sentence length, stratified by Aboriginality, are not readily available? And can they explain why this information is important? The aims are not clearly articulated, and for this reason I found the Methods harder to follow. The final conclusion, that better and more extensive data are required, is sensible.

More details comments follow.

ABSTRACT

• ‘We applied a “years of life lost to incarceration” to…’ does not make sense. What is a ‘years of life lost to incarceration’? Perhaps “we compared years of life lost to incarceration for male and female, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians”.

• “…years of life lost to provincial incarceration in (BC) and federal incarceration..” is not a complete sentence and is thus difficult to follow.

• In the Methods section, a few extra words would help the reader understand the sources of the data used. Simply saying “incarceration data” and “demographic data” is not particularly informative.

• In the Results section it is unclear whether these findings are with respect to the entire population, or only the subset who experience incarceration. By the end of the manuscript I think I understand that this is collapsed across the entire population, including people who have never been incarcerated, but this could be
made much clearer.

INTRODUCTION
Too brief. There is no clear rationale for the study. For example, I am assuming that there are no published, official data on rates of incarceration or length of incarceration in Canada, stratified by Aboriginality. This is presumably the reason for undertaking this study, but it is not made explicit until para 2 of the Methods.

Paragraph 2 of the Introduction opens with a sentence about the impact of incarceration on life expectancy, then the next sentence talks about “life years lost to incarceration”, but presumably referring to life years spent incarcerated, rather than reduced life expectancy. This is at best confusing. There is no clearly articulated aim, such that the Methods are difficult to follow, since it’s unclear what the authors are trying to achieve.

METHODS
In the Data Analysis section the phrase “…mortality and health status data (e.g., incarceration)…” is confusing. How is incarceration a health status?

RESULTS
Reporting an incarceration rate in Nunavut based on a sample size of 1 with a 95%CI ranging from zero to 78 seems inappropriate, I recommend not reporting this figure.

DISCUSSION
The first paragraph provides a clear summary of the key findings. The second and third paragraphs logically extend this in light of evidence of adverse health and social consequences of incarceration. The fourth paragraph could perhaps be trimmed with methodological details moved to the Methods or Results as appropriate. The final paragraph, calling for more extensive data to inform debate, is sensible and appropriate.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.