

**The Risk Matrix:
Drug-related Deaths in Prisons in
England & Wales, 2015-2020**

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Background

- Rates of drug-related deaths (DRDs) in the UK have more than doubled since 2012
- Increases in DRDs have also been observed in prisons
- Some research on drug-related deaths following release from prison, but few studies analysing deaths occurring *in* prisons

Aim of our study:

To explore the factors contributing to drug-related deaths in English and Welsh prisons between 2015-2020 based on analysis of the 'other non-natural' fatal incident investigations conducted by the Prison and Probation Ombudsman.

Methods

- Prison and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) - independent body investigating fatal incidents in prisons in England & Wales
- Gather evidence about the person prior to their death – records/policies & interviews with staff and people living in prison – and write report
- 5 categories of death: homicide, natural causes, self-inflicted, **other non-natural**, and unclassified.

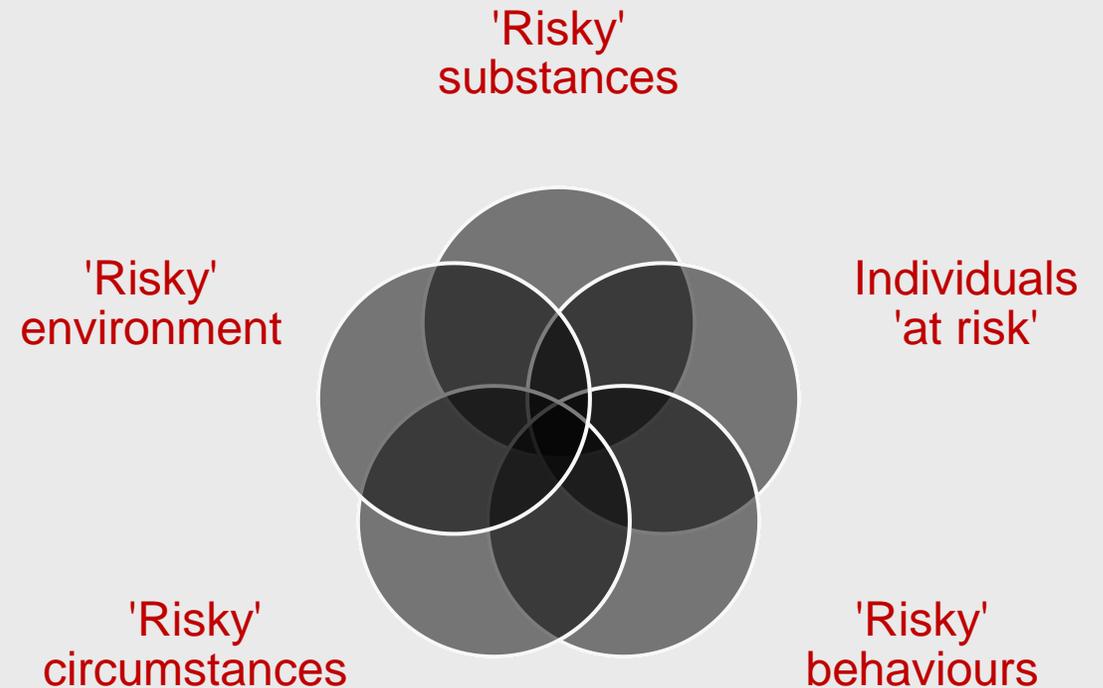
- Analysed 129 fatal incident investigation reports in the ‘other non-natural’ category
- *‘Other non-natural category’ offers a useful proxy measure for drug-related deaths.*

Year	Number at 31/12/21
2015	12
2016	23
2017	25
2018	50
2019	13
2020	6
Total:	129

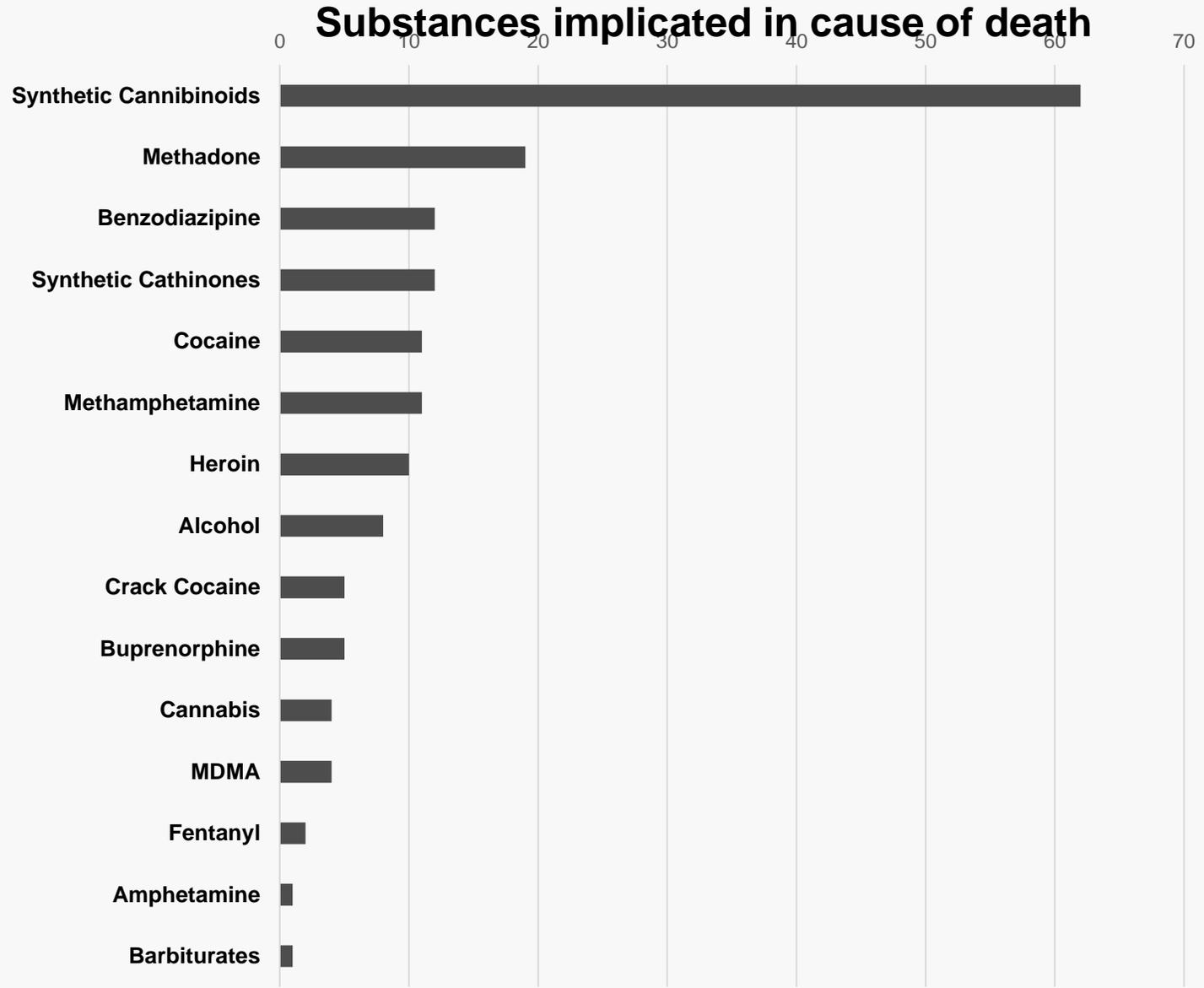
Theoretical approach

- Risk environment: *'the space – whether social or physical – in which a variety of factors interact to increase the chances of harm occurring'* (Rhodes, 2002)
- Social construction of accidents (Green, 1997) – examine the situational features which lead to 'accidents'
- Explore how each DRD in prison emerges as an event in a context of interwoven forces coming together in a unique combination

Risk Matrix: Drug-related Deaths in Prison



'Risky' substances



- Rising and extensive contribution of synthetic cannabinoids
- Lack of awareness and knowledge about NPS during early years 2015-2016.
- In some cases, long term NPS use, but warning signs missed
- Risks of combining substances - little knowledge about interactions

Individuals 'at risk'

- 94% male
- 43% aged over 40 years
- 88% history of substance use recorded
- 26% reference to underlying physical condition
- 57% reference to mental ill health

Mental health conditions recorded* (n=74)

Groups of mental illness co-morbidities	N	%
Depression and anxiety	45	31
Suicide and self-harm	45	31
Substance use with mental illness	19	14
Personality disorder	16	11
Psychosis	18	13
TOTAL:	143	100

*Many cases had more than one condition

'Risky' behaviours/experiences

Mixing of
substances

Stockpiling
substances

Construction of
makeshift pipes
& inhalers

Concealing
substances
within the body

Culture of debt and bullying around use and supply

**31% reference to bullying (victim)*

**27% reference to drug debt*

**29% reference to involvement in drug supply*

'Risky' circumstances

- Operational response

eg. Delays in emergency code and calling ambulance

eg. Equipment (defibrillators) not located or not working

- Lack of monitoring

eg. unresponsive, but no checking

eg. not responding to reports of overdose or under the influence

- 75% single cell

- Irregular supply of drugs of unknown quality/ strength

- Increased risk of death during key transition periods (on arrival, after recall, after transfer)

- Risky dates (holidays, birthdays, anniversaries) -> increased risk of experimentation

- Traumatic events – anniversary of loved one's death, separation/ divorce etc.

'Risky' environment

Prisons described as being in 'crisis'

- Overcrowding
- Increasing levels of violence
- Increasing self harm & suicide
- Staff shortages
- Cuts to prison services and programmes (especially drug & mental health services)
- Lack of 'purposeful activity' (education, work and other rehabilitative activity)

Prisons violence is 'out of control', report warns

🕒 19 April 2017

The Observer
Prisons and probation

Are prisons in England and Wales facing a meltdown?

Few in government can now deny that our jail system is in severe crisis. Yet no one seems to want to tackle it

 INDEPENDENT PREMIUM

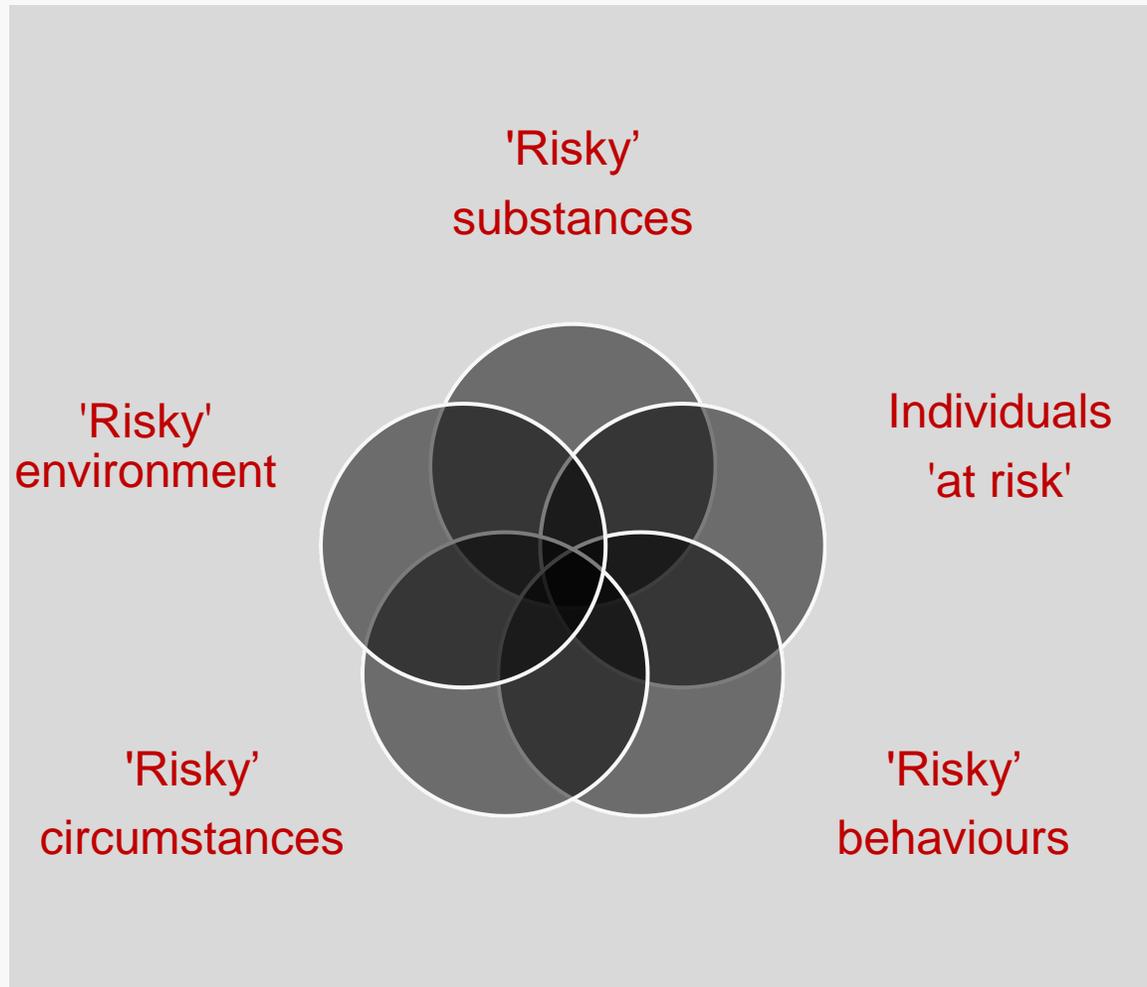
The crisis in Britain's prisons is perpetuating a cycle of offending

Gangs and drugs fuelling upsurge in prison violence

By Danny Shaw
Home affairs correspondent, BBC News

🕒 13 January 2015

Conclusion: tackling the risk matrix



- Diversion to community-based interventions
- Introduction and expansion of harm reduction approaches (OST, naloxone, drug checking, provision of safe supplies and equipment)
- Careful monitoring of people who use substances both illicitly and on prescription
- Improve emergency response
- Wider prison reform – resourcing, regime, culture