

Imprisoned Women with Severe Mental Illness: Addressing Critical Gaps in Primary Healthcare Access

Women in prison experience some of society's highest levels of severe mental illness (SMI), alongside trauma, physical ill-health, social disadvantages and health inequalities.

The **IP-SIS study (Improving Primary Care Services for Imprisoned Women with Severe Mental Illness)** explored how primary healthcare is delivered in women's prisons, what works well and what prevents women from accessing the care they need.

The three-phase qualitative study was supported by a Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). It involved:

16

interviews with **primary healthcare practitioners** in women's prisons

58

women participating in ten focus groups and two interviews across eight women's prisons (a diverse range of ages, ethnicities and personal circumstances were represented)

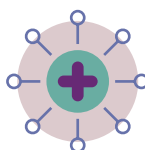
28

prison and healthcare staff taking part in consensus groups

Key Findings



Healthcare systems are fragmented, with poor communication between services and difficulties maintaining continuity of care.



Health is viewed holistically; physical and mental health and social wellbeing are linked.



Trauma has a major influence on healthcare needs and engagement with services.



Additional barriers to equitable healthcare are experienced by foreign national women, women from racially minoritised communities and those with communication or language needs.

Research Showcased at the House of Lords in June 2026

No Justice Without Us, co-hosted with Baroness Sara Hyde, brought together politicians and stakeholders responsible for prison healthcare policy and service delivery, prison operations, NHS healthcare commissioners, researchers and frontline prison reform charities.



The event was planned and delivered with LEAG members, ensuring the lived experiences of imprisoned women were front and centre. It spotlighted:

- IP-SIS study findings, implications and the developing framework (next page)
- other co-created resources exploring lived experience across the criminal justice system, including **films**¹, a **zine**², a **research toolkit**^{3,4}, a co-authored *Probation Journal* article and a **mental health handbook**⁵ for women in prison.

¹ youtu.be/hJSfMe_Bae8?si=eqYnt37d3UfA5omU

² healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk/ip-sis-ppie-zine-lived-experience-leads-change

³ healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk/lived-experience-research-toolkit

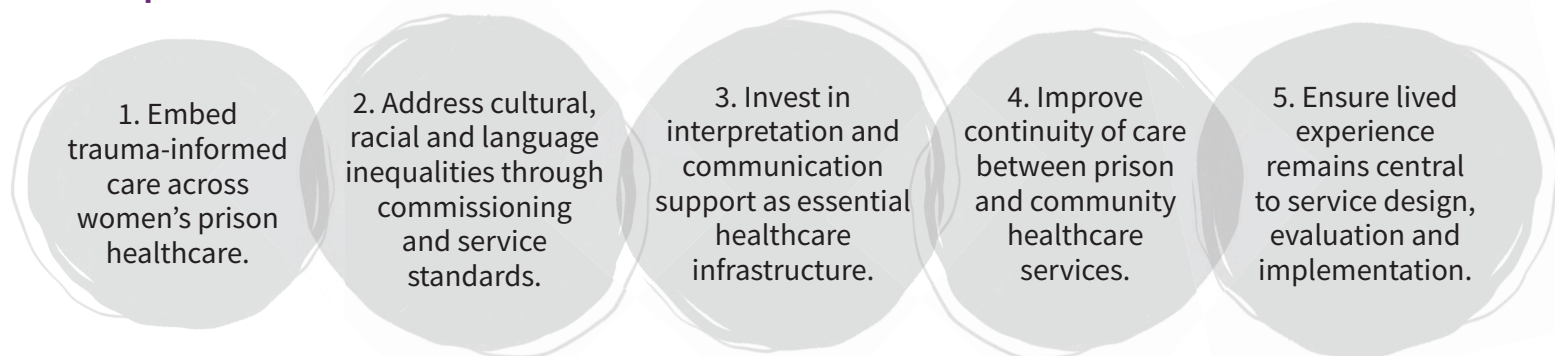
⁴ Access the NIHR-funded *Lived Experience Research Toolkit (Health and Justice)* via the 'Resources' section of our website (healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk). We ask that you complete a short form beforehand, as this helps us understand how it is being used and how we can continue to improve it.

⁵ healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk/women-in-prison-mental-health-handbook

Implications for Policy and Practice

IP-SIS findings intersect with and should inform debates regarding criminal justice, prison reform, early release, access to community healthcare and public service delivery.

Five priorities for action:



The IP-SIS Framework: An Evidence-Based Approach to More Equitable, Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Primary Healthcare

Study findings informed development of the IP-SIS Framework⁶ to support improvements in primary healthcare for women with SMI in prison.

It is built around three core principles of trauma-informed practice, cultural humility, equity and inclusion, and person-centred care.

⁶ healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk/ip-sis-framework-2

Includes practical guidance for healthcare providers, prison services and policymakers within **six domains**:

1. Early Identification and Intervention
2. Accessible and Equitable Care
3. Joined-Up and Relational Care
4. Peer, Community and Faith Support
5. Information, Rights and Empowerment
6. Trauma-Informed Relationships

What Happens Next?

The IP-SIS team is continuing to share the findings through briefings, infographics and stakeholder engagement, while seeking follow-on funding to test and refine the IP-SIS Framework across multiple women's prisons.

The longer-term ambition is to support more responsive, equitable, integrated, trauma-informed and culturally responsive healthcare for women with severe mental illness in prison and beyond release.



Midlands Partnership University
NHS Foundation Trust

NIHR | School for Public Health Research

NIHR | School for Social Care Research

NIHR | School for Primary Care Research

For more details, contact Professor Tammi Walker tammi.walker@durham.ac.uk.

Visit healthjusticeforensicrosearch.webspace.durham.ac.uk

Research funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) reference number NIHR206780.

Edit and design: Research Retold (www.researchretold.com) 2026

