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Presentation title: Surviving the pandemic lockdown in British prisons: A participatory action research study

Objective: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to one of the most substantial natural experiments in recent history. Beginning in March 2020, prisoners in England and Wales were locked down for 23 hours per day for months in an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The objective of this study was to understand the lived experience of the lockdown from the point of view of the incarcerated. **Methods:** Funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and in partnership with the ex-prisoner-led User Voice organization, this study employed a participatory action research (PAR) design. We delivered an accredited 2-day 'peer research methods' course to 60 prisoners across the 10 facilities, explaining the basics of participant observation, interviewing and survey research. Peer researchers wrote field notes, conducted 1-on-1 interviews, and surveyed over 1300 fellow prisoners. We returned to three of the prisons to collaboratively analyze the results with the peer research volunteers. **Results:** Over two-thirds of survey respondents agreed that "mental health has never been worse in this prison." Using a standardised measure of mental health, we found that 85% reported "feeling depressed or hopeless" with over 1/3 saying they had these feelings "nearly every day." Almost half reported experiencing suicidal thoughts that they would be "better off dead." In a regression analysis we outline the key predictors of these poor mental health outcomes. **Implications:** These extreme levels of depression and anxiety are consistent with pre-pandemic research on the impact of solitary confinement, yet spread throughout the prison system as a whole they represent a potential mental health crisis with implications that could rival those of the virus itself.