Detention of asylum seekers has adverse effects on mental health

Confining asylum seekers in detention centres negatively affects their mental health both during their detention and after their release.

What did the review study?
The number of people fleeing conflicts and persecution is increasing. However, many countries use harsh measures to discourage people who wish to apply for asylum. One of the most controversial is confining asylum seekers in detention centres. The number of such centres is rising.

Understanding the health impact of detaining asylum seekers is important. Asylum seekers have high rates of pre-migration trauma from exposure to war, genocide or imprisonment. These experiences make them vulnerable to health problems. Confining them may worsen the effects of the trauma they have experienced already.

This Campbell systematic review assessed whether detaining asylum seekers has an impact on their mental health. The review also assessed whether detaining asylum seekers has a negative impact on their physical health and social functioning.

What studies were included?
Included studies compared asylum seekers who were detained with those who were not detained. A total of nine studies met the requirements for inclusion, which analysed 8 different asylum populations. The studies were conducted in four countries: the UK, Japan, Canada, and Australia. All the studies used non-randomised designs.

Six of the studies were excluded from the analysis because there were important differences between the groups which were compared, or because the studies were judged to have methodological limitations. All of the excluded studies were conducted in Australia, which has a policy of mandatory detention.

About this review
This Campbell systematic review examines the impacts of on health, including mental health (PTSD, anxiety and depression), physical health and social functioning, of confining asylum seekers in detention centres. The review includes nine studies from the UK, Japan, Canada, and Australia.
How does detention affect mental health?
Detention has a negative impact on the mental health of asylum seekers. Levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety both before and after release were found to be higher among asylum seekers who were detained compared to those who were not detained. The size of the effects were clinically important.

All the studies assessed the mental health of the participants but none reported outcomes related to physical or social functioning.

What are the research and policy implications of this review?

Implications for policy- and decision-makers
Policymakers should consider less harmful policy options than detention. These options may include reporting requirements, sureties or bail, or community supervision. Options that restrict people’s freedom of movement should also be closely monitored to ensure that these do not also have negative mental health effects.

Research implications
The research summarized in the review is of moderate quality. Further research is needed to assess the impacts of keeping asylum seekers in detention centres on their physical health and social functioning. A deeper, comparative understanding of the impacts of different detention conditions on asylum seekers is also needed.

How up-to-date is this review?
The review authors searched for studies between November 2013 and January 2014. The review was published in September 2015.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?
The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary
This summary was written by Simon Goudie (Campbell Collaboration). It is based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2015:13 ‘The Impact of Detention on the Health of Asylum Seekers’ by Trine Filges, Edith Montgomery, Marianne Kastrup, Anne-Marie Klint Jørgensen (DOI: 10.4073/csr.2015.13). Anne Mellbye (R-BUP) designed the summary, which was edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration).