

# Homelessness in Ex-Prisoner Populations: A CRC Submission for FACS

---

*Prepared by Mindy Sotiri and Alex Faraguna for the Community Restorative Centre*

The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) provides specialist transitional and reintegration support programs in NSW aimed to break entrenched cycles of criminal justice system involvement, homelessness and poverty. CRC works with people to address the causes of offending, re-offending and recidivism and has been providing services specifically to people leaving prison for 65 years.

## Overview of the Problem

In 2015/2016, 17,108 people were released from NSW prisons into the community.<sup>1</sup> Sourcing suitable housing and accommodation options for people on release from custody is the single greatest challenge for community organisations working in the space of reintegration and transition. Although it is difficult to gauge the exact numbers of people on release who are exiting into homelessness, what *is* clear is that this population is significantly over-represented in prisons. What is also clear is that not only does the experience of homelessness significantly increase the risk of imprisonment (and other forms of adverse criminal justice system contact), imprisonment itself increases the likelihood of homelessness.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup>

Of the 17,108 people who were released from custody in 2015/2016, on reception only 4% (747) of people reported that they owned their own home. 19.5% (3340) reported that they were renting (3340), with the remainder in much more tenuous circumstances with regard to housing stability (homelessness, unstable housing, staying with family and friends).<sup>6</sup> Although difficult to ascertain precisely from the data, it appears that at least 60% of people leaving custody each year will be exiting into primary or secondary homelessness.<sup>7 8</sup> That is, each year in NSW over 10,000 people are released who do not have adequate, stable accommodation.

***Across the whole of NSW there are only 50 beds available specifically for people who are homeless immediately on release from prison<sup>9</sup>.*** The absence of housing increases risk of re-offending and has implications not just for those individuals who are desperate to find a pathway out of the criminal justice system but are unable to because of chronic homelessness and poverty, but also for the broader community with regard to crime and safety.

## The GSH Reforms: 2 years in and still no beds for men leaving prison

The GSH reforms articulated clearly that people leaving custody should be a priority target group. It was acknowledged from the outset of the reforms that homeless people are over-represented in prisons, and that prison itself increases the risk of homelessness. As the reforms approach their third year, it is clear that despite the good-will of many in the sector, and the considerable collaborative efforts of FACS, Corrections NSW and CRC to build knowledge and capacity across NSW in working with this group, the reforms have failed comprehensively to provide services to men leaving prison who are homeless.

While there is still much work to do for women on release from prison, the retention (and in fact expansion) of CRC's women's service, the funding of the Miranda Project, the funding of WIPAN, and the efforts of some small regional women's services to operate inclusively with women leaving custody (coupled with the relatively small numbers of women in prison) has resulted in a relative improvement in the situation for women on release from prison. For this reason, this submission is only focused on the un-met needs of men leaving prison.

The situation for thousands of men exiting prison has worsened over the last three years. At the same time as post-release specialist services had their funding either cut or dramatically reduced, NSW is dealing with a dramatically increasing prisoner population, and more specifically, a significant increase in recidivism rates.

## What exists for people exiting custody?

### Short term and crisis beds

**There are currently only 28 Corrective Services funded beds** (across five different supported accommodation services) in NSW for men leaving prison. These beds are all short term (12 weeks or less), and only available for men on parole who are referred directly from Corrective Services. Some of these services do attempt to provide outreach and aftercare, however most are not funded specifically to do this.

In addition, **there are 14 beds in crisis hostels specifically reserved for men exiting custody** (Hope Hostel and Matthew Talbott). Foster House accepts men directly from custody, but will not reserve beds for this purpose. When beds are not reserved, there is no guarantee that someone on release from prison will be granted a place. Many people leaving custody report that they would prefer to sleep rough than access large homeless shelters with shared bedrooms, and frequently with easy access to drugs.

### Transitional support for men

#### Long term housing and support for men leaving prison in NSW

**There is no longer *any* long term transitional or reintegration support for men leaving prison in the Inner Sydney Metropolitan Region. In 2015/2016 2,284 people in prison reported on entry to prison that they had been living in the Central/Eastern Sydney region<sup>10</sup>. However, the number of people on release to this region is significantly higher because of the large number of homeless hostels and services in this region, and because of the inner-city drift post institutionalization. This is an unacceptable situation.**

CRC currently offers long term support (with advocacy and facilitation around housing) to 160 men each year on release from custody.

CRC is currently able to provide long term support and facilitate long term housing assistance for up to approximately 80 Indigenous men in the Broken Hill region, (via the Indigenous Advancement Strategy) 40 men in the Nepean Blue Mountains Region in NSW (through GSH in partnership with Wentworth Housing) and can provide intensive support and housing for 20 men in South Western Sydney (through the Corrective Services ERS in partnership with Housing and Mental Health).

### **Short and Medium Term Support**

In addition, CRC is also able to work with up to 50 men each year on release from prison who are looking to reside in an inner west boarding house. This is shorter term but intensive support.

### **Short Term (non-housing) support**

There are 14 ITS workers across NSW (providing short term support) to men and women on parole. All up this project works with up to 560 clients each year. All of these clients are on parole. This project works with people for 12 weeks only and must operate using a community corrections case-plan. The short-term nature of this support means that it is not possible to organise accommodation.

*In order to form partnerships and obtain nomination rights with community and social housing providers, support organisations need to be able to offer ongoing, long-term support. This option no longer exists at all for men leaving custody in the Sydney Metropolitan Region. As discussed below, this did exist for over twenty years via two small, but highly successful programs run out of CRC. CRC lost funding for the Specialist Homelessness Service for men exiting custody with the GSH reforms. At the same time, CRC also lost funding for the Corrective Services men's transitional project (which offered long term, housing first support). This significant gap in the service land-scape has not been addressed.*

## **What works?**

In early 2015, CRC contracted BOCSAR to track CRC clients who had participated in intensive, housing-first, transitional reintegration programs between 2008 and 2013 in the Sydney Metropolitan and Hunter Regions. Prior to this, CRC had tracked return to prison data only over the course of the project internally, and was not able to make claims with regard to recidivism post-participation with CRC.

All clients who were accepted onto specific CRC intensive transitional programs (regardless of how long they participated) were included in the sample. BOCSAR was able to track 387 CRC clients over a 12-month period post release, and 313 CRC clients over a 24-month post release period.

Clients who had been formally exited from CRC projects because they had completed the program and achieved all case-plan goals were tracked as a separate sub-group.

	12 month Rates	24 month Rates
All clients	26% re-incarcerated (n = 387)	34% re-incarcerated (n = 313)
Completed program	7% re-incarcerated (n = 148)	12% re-incarcerated (n = 132)

While there are clearly limitations in generalising this data because of the sample size, when combined with external research which also posits that post-release support of the nature offered by CRC has a significant impact on recidivism these figures are at the very least indicative of a solid approach to breaking cycles of re-offending.

## The Need for A Specific Homeless Strategy for People Leaving Prison.

CRC's transitional programs (prior to being de-funded in 2013) worked specifically with homeless people on release from prison with complex needs and high risk of re-offending. As noted above, these programs boasted recidivism rates of 12%. There is a need in NSW to revisit funding services which use best-practice, evidence based models of support, and specifically, are able to offer long-term housing and support for people with complex needs including homelessness on release from prison. It has become remarkably apparent that simply 'tacking on' people leaving custody to mainstream services does not work. There are a number of reasons for this, most of which relate to the way in which best-practice with this population requires a long-term, assertive outreach, through-care service, which many services are not able (or willing) to adopt. Despite the high needs of this population, this group face regular exclusion from services *because* of the fact that they have been to prison.

CRC's Telephone Information and Referral Service (TIRS) provides advice and information to prisoners and their families and service providers working with these groups. The most frequent question asked of the TIRS service is how to secure post-release accommodation (more than 50% of all calls to the TIRS line concern a person with no accommodation immediately upon release).

Information gathered via the TIRS service shows that crisis accommodation services are currently overwhelmed due to high levels of homelessness across NSW. The need for people exiting custody to compete with the broader

homeless population for scarce resources makes it very difficult to secure accommodation for the purposes of bail, parole applications and final release, an issue which also adds to prison overcrowding. Organising accommodation from prison is difficult for many reasons but two factors most frequently impact upon TIRS callers:

1. Insufficient crisis accommodation services that are able to accept people directly from custody
2. Insufficient pre-release planning and support prior to release. The lack of pre-release support in no way reflects on the good will or professionalism of the welfare staff in the prison, but rather is indicative of an overcrowded system, and the challenges inherent in addressing complex welfare concerns in institutional settings.

There is also a significant population who are excluded from the limited specialist supports that do exist because of the nature of their imprisonment. People exiting custody following a remand period, or a short sentence without a parole period are not eligible for Corrective Services funded transitional projects, and frequently do not have contact with any support staff inside Correctional Centres to assist in pre-release planning.

Ex-prisoners often speak to TIRS of having spent their first days, weeks or months out of custody sleeping in parks or train stations. Temporary Accommodation (T.A.) allowances (28 days over the course of a year) can be used up quickly during periods of homelessness prior to incarceration and when T.A. is accessible, it is often limited to a few nights in unstable and unsuitable locations that can increase the factors that make reoffending likely. Few TIRS callers report having been referred to longer-term support services or any assistance beyond limited T.A. The non-Government community based services that exist provide vital support to those fortunate enough to secure a space but there are simply not enough beds available to meet the ever-growing demand of an increasing. Public or community housing would be an ideal solution for some people but is rarely a viable option immediately after release due to the difficulties of making arrangements, unsupported, in custody.

A person, particularly if they have been imprisoned for a long time, may lack adequate skills and experience in successfully maintaining a tenancy without support, including prioritising essential living expenses such as rent and utility bills, overall budgeting, maintaining the property as well as positive relations with neighbours.

People who exit prison into long-term homelessness have the same financial, housing, social and health needs as other chronically homeless people often with more difficulty in securing accommodation or employment due to their criminal history. Re-offending through crimes of survival or desperation can keep the person in a vicious cycle of imprisonment and homelessness. Callers sometimes express a genuine belief that life would be easier if they reoffended and returned to prison; an attitude that is unsurprising when release is often experienced as equally uncertain and fearful as time spent in custody.

## Best Practice (Specific strategies for working with homeless people leaving prison)

There is a need for more specialist post release services that encompass the best practice principles necessary to successfully engage clients:

1. Community based, flexible outreach models.<sup>11 12</sup> Services are most effective if they occur in the context in which the person is to live, taking into account and building upon family and social networks and building genuine pathways outside of criminal justice system settings.
2. A housing first approach.<sup>13 14</sup> Safe, secure, permanent accommodation provides people with a base from which to address their disadvantage (including creating opportunities for education and employment).
3. Long-term relational case-work provided by skilled professional workers.<sup>15 16 17</sup> The support of a known individual worker, who provides continuity of care, can have a profound impact on willingness to engage and trust in the service. Transitional workers should have a comprehensive understanding of the pragmatic issues for people on release (including issues related to parole, Centrelink, housing, child custody, and employment) as well as an ability to work closely with people around alcohol and other drug use, mental health and past trauma.
4. A through-care model.<sup>18 19</sup> Support that begins prior to release allows the case-worker relationship to be established without the distractions and chaos of life on the outside.
5. Strong interagency relationships with key partner organisations based on shared values including a client centred practice.

## The Promise of the New (Or why multiple recent new initiatives to reduce reoffending will not meet the needs of homeless people leaving prison)

Although there is some optimism on the part of government and the community sector in terms of new projects in the community sector/reintegration space that are currently in development, or in their initial phases, it is critical to emphasise, that *none of them address the housing needs of people leaving prison.*

OnTracc, the new ACSO/ABIAS Social Benefit Bond is almost identical in scope to the short term Corrections funded ITS project. This means it is *not* available for anyone who is not on parole, and is *not* a housing project.

There is currently a Justice tender under consideration for an Extra Offender Management Service (EOMS) which will target high risk recidivists who are *not* on parole. While an important project, and targeted to a critically under-serviced population, it is explicitly intended to be focused on 'criminogenic' rather than 'welfare' concerns such as housing.

There is also a new Volunteer Mentoring scheme under consideration, which again while focused on an important target population is again concerned with the reduction of re-offending *rather* than the housing needs of people leaving prison.

## Where to From Here?

In recent years in NSW while there has been increased attention, energy and goodwill around the issue of post-prison homelessness there remain significant gaps and blind-spots in service provision, with very few organisations providing support specific to the needs of this ex-prisoners. Post-release transitional services based on a flexible, through-care outreach model of long-term, wrap-around support, a housing first approach and strong interagency partnerships need to be developed and expanded to break the cycle.

There is a strong argument to be made to reinstate some of the successful long-term, housing first programs that operated prior to the reforms in both Corrections and FACS. There is a need for housing to be seen as absolutely *central* to the process of reintegration, and not simply as one concern (in a long list of complex concerns) faced by people exiting prison. Without a serious commitment to the housing of this population, there is very little prospect of breaking entrenched cycles of poverty, homelessness and offending.

## CRC and Long Term Housing First Support for Men

The development of a model where support and housing is provided is entirely achievable and does not require a great deal of work. CRC already performs this work very successfully with women exiting prison, and has delivered over 20 years of successful housing-first service provision to men. CRC also has in-principle support from multiple community housing providers to replicate our women's services for men. That is, if CRC were to be funded to provide support to men leaving prison, our housing partners would offer our clients nomination rights, and transitional properties in which they would be able to live for at least 12 months, prior to moving them into permanent housing. For \$250,000 per annum, it would be possible to support up to 80 men in the community using this best-practice partnership approach.

There is a need in NSW to revisit funding services which use best-practice, evidence based models of support, and specifically, are able to offer long-term housing and support for people with complex needs including homelessness on release from prison.

---

<sup>1</sup> NSW Corrective Services (unpublished, 2016) Data provided by Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics Unit 11/10/16

<sup>2</sup> Baldry (2011) People with Mental Health and Cognitive Disability: Pathways into and out of the Criminal Justice System, Paper presented at the reintegration puzzle conference

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government 2008. The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/exiting-custodial-arrangements/>

---

<sup>4</sup> Roman, Cincotta & Osborne (2006) *Principles and Practice in Housing for persons with Mental Illness Who Have Had Contact with the Criminal Justice System*, Urban Institute, Policy Centre, USA

<sup>5</sup> Makkai, T & Willis, M (2009) *Ex-Prisoners and Homelessness: Some Key Issues*, Australian Institute of Criminology

<sup>6</sup> NSW Corrective Services (unpublished, 2016) Data provided by Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics Unit 11/10/16

<sup>7</sup> FACS, NSW Corrective Services, CRC (2015) 'Working with People Leaving Custody: A training and information package for FACS Public Housing, Community Housing, and Specialist Homelessness Services staff'

<sup>8</sup> Breakdown of housing status (as provided by CRES for CSNSW)

*Housing NSW: 1204*

*Homeless: 818*

*Own Home: 747*

*Rented: 3340*

*Shared Accommodation: 1670*

*Living with Family: 6448*

*Unstable: 604*

*Other: 2273*

<sup>9</sup> *Of these 50 beds, 42 are specifically for men and include short term transitional beds at: Glebe House (4 beds), Rainbow Lodge (8 beds), Adele House (4 beds in Toongabbie and 4 beds in Coffs Harbour), John Purcell House (5 beds) and Namatjira Haven (3 beds) and 14 crisis beds at both Foster House and Hope Hostel.*

<sup>10</sup> NSW Corrective Services (unpublished, 2016) Data provided by Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics Unit 11/10/16

<sup>11</sup> Deakin, E (2013) 'Aboriginal Women Leaving Custody Strategy. Good Practice Paper. A targeted review of literature and stakeholder feedback providing lessons for NSW' A Research Paper commissioned by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW and Department of Attorney General and Justice, Corrective Services NSW

<sup>12</sup> Scott, M (2013) 'Evaluation of Two Pilot Projects Aiming to Prevent Homelessness in People Leaving Prison' in *Parity*, Vol. 26, No. 8

<sup>13</sup> Tsembaris et al (2006) 'Housing First Services for People who are Homeless with Co-occurring serious mental illness and substance abuse' in *Research on Social Work Practice* Vol 16, No. 1 pp74-83

<sup>14</sup> Roman, Cincotta & Osborne (2006) *Principles and Practice in Housing for persons with Mental Illness Who Have Had Contact with the Criminal Justice System*, Urban Institute, Policy Centre, USA

<sup>15</sup> Serin, R, Loyd, C, Helmus, L, Derksen, D, Luong, D (2013) 'Does intra-individual change predict offender recidivism? Searching for the Holy Grail in assessing offender change' in *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, Vol 18

<sup>16</sup> Walsh, T. (2004) *Incorrections: Investigating prison release practice and policy in Queensland and its impact on community safety*, Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>17</sup> National Justice Chief Executive Officers' Group and the Victorian Government Department of Justice (2014) *Diversion and Support of Mentally Ill Offenders: A framework for best practice, Consultation Draft*

<sup>18</sup> Deakin, E (2013) 'Aboriginal Women Leaving Custody Strategy. Good Practice Paper. A targeted review of literature and stakeholder feedback providing lessons for NSW' A Research Paper commissioned by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW and Department of Attorney General and Justice, Corrective Services NSW

<sup>19</sup> Borzycki, M & Baldry E (2003) 'Promoting Integration: The Provision of Prisoner Post Release Services' in *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology



---

**Additional References**

Australian Government 2008. *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*.

Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/exiting-custodial-arrangements/>

Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone, Peters (2003) *Ex-prisoners and accommodation. What bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration for ex-prisoners?* Final Report for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

Corrective Services NSW, *Funded Partnership Initiative Transitional Supported Accommodation – TSA*, Fact Sheet September 2014

<http://www.correctiveservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/CSNSW%20Fact%20Sheets/Fact-sheet-Transitional-Supported-Accommodation-TSA-Funded-Partnership-Initiative-FPI.pdf>