

Shown the exit: a snapshot of the issues facing people leaving custody in NSW in 2016

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In 2015/2016, 17,108 people were released from NSW prisons into the community.¹ 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. Reception data indicates that as many as 60% of people in prison have come from primary or secondary homelessness²

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.^{3 4 5 6}

The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) provides specialist transitional 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. In addition to a number of post-release programs, CRC's Telephone Information and Referral Service (TIRS) provides advice and information to prisoners and their families and service providers working with these groups. This article is informed by data gathered from this service. 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). At the time of writing, there are very limited options for housing for this population.

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 homeless population.

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.

What needs to happen?

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

1. Community based, flexible outreach models.^{7 8} 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.^{9 10} 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.^{11 12 13} 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.^{14 15} 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.

Conclusion

People exiting custody often receive support that is insufficient or inappropriate, which can increase the likelihood of reoffending with potentially serious consequences for the safety and wellbeing of the individual and broader community. 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.

¹ NSW Corrective Services (unpublished, 2016) Data provided by Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics Unit 11/10/16

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