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PATHWAYS HOME

How can we better deliver better outcomes for people who have been in prison?

> On day two of the Affordable Housing Conference, Sally Ringrose spoke on behalf of the Community Restorative Centre as part of a panel on 'What Works in Housing People Who Have Been in Prison: Lessons from New York and Nearer to Home'. Her colleagues, Dr Mindy Sotiri and Sophie Russell, analyse the data and continue the conversation in this article

The latest census figures from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) show that the NSW prison population currently sits at around 13,494 (NSW BOCSAR 2018a). A total of 18,284 people were released from NSW prisons in 2016/2017 (NSW BOCSAR 2018a). Securing safe, affordable and permanent accommodation and housing is the single greatest challenge for people exiting prison and reintegrating into the community.

“ Securing safe, affordable and permanent accommodation and housing is the single greatest challenge for people exiting prison and reintegrating into the community ”

Housing, homelessness and imprisonment

Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2018) and the New South Wales Network Patient Health Survey – previously known as the Inmate Health Survey – (Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network, JH&FMHN, 2017) highlight both the over-representation of homeless people inside prisons and the absence of accommodation services for them on their release.

People who are homeless are over-represented in Australia's prisons, and previously incarcerated people are over-represented among the homeless. Research has found that experiencing homelessness increases the risk of criminal justice system contact, and experiencing imprisonment increases the likelihood of homelessness (Baldry et al 2003; Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

“ Experiencing homelessness increases the risk of criminal justice system contact ”

The most recent figures show us that 9.3 percent of men and 14.8 percent of women were in primary homelessness prior to their incarceration (JH&FMHN 2017). Almost a quarter (24.3 percent) of the total NSW prison population were in the kinds of unstable accommodation often referred to as 'secondary homelessness' (JH&FMHN 2017).

The figures are particularly stark for women: 31.9 percent of women in prison in NSW were in primary or secondary homelessness prior to imprisonment (JH&FMHN 2017).



Research indicates that up to 90 percent of women in prison have experienced violence and abuse in their lives (Australian Institute of Family Studies, AIFS, 2012), with Indigenous women specifically experiencing high levels of domestic/family violence (Bartels 2010). Women exiting prison often return to living environments where they are at risk of violence, due to a lack of appropriate and affordable housing options.

The number of people attempting to access homelessness services from custody in NSW has almost doubled over the last six years – from 1,121 in 2011/2012 to 2,176 in 2016/17 (AIHW 2018). Over this same period, the NSW prison population increased by 33 percent (NSW BOCSAR 2018b).

“ These numbers paint a stark picture of the absence of services available for those who request it ”

Demand for homeless services across the board in NSW is growing. These services supported over 74,000 people in 2016/17, compared to 52,000 in 2011-2012 (AIHW 2018). However, despite this increase in the provision of services, the homelessness sector is not funded or able to meet the demand. For example, data from the AIHW shows that 37.2 percent of people who required accommodation support in NSW did not receive it in 2016/17 (AIHW 2018). This includes 12,280 people who were homeless and needing crisis or emergency accommodation (AIHW 2018).

These numbers paint a stark picture of the absence of services available for those who request it and show an increase in requests for support for people leaving prison. However, these figures are unable to adequately capture the situation for people who did not, or could not, request support. For example, although the number of people requesting assistance from inside prison has grown, for many people in prison, it is impossible to access support from community agencies on the



outside. People inside prison are frequently not able to request accommodation assistance due to limited access to phone calls or information, and reliance on program staff within prisons to facilitate requests.

Access to services is further complicated by the significant over-representation of people with mental health disorders and cognitive disabilities in prison, and the fact that many people in prison come from highly disadvantaged and inadequately resourced communities (MacGillivray and Baldry 2013; AIHW 2015).

“ The majority of people in prison in NSW are on short sentences, cycling in and out ”

The majority of people in prison in NSW are on short sentences, cycling in and out. For example, 22 percent of people in prison in NSW are on sentences of less than six months, and 75 percent are there for less than two years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Although there is some limited short-term accommodation support in place for people on parole, for the large number of people who are released from remand, or after a short sentence, or for people coming out with no parole period, there is no clear accommodation pathway out of prison.

Over the past five years in NSW, the increasing prisoner population has been the subject of much policy and budget attention. There has been a considerable expansion of the state's prisons and an unprecedented investment in programs intended to reduce re-offending (Elliott 2016; NSW Government 2017, 2018). However, there is a paucity of accommodation options for people released from prison. Each year, thousands of people are released into homelessness in the community, due to only 58 beds being funded for this group.

Over half (51.3 percent) of those released from prison in NSW return within two years (Productivity Commission 2018). Finding suitable and secure accommodation post-release is key to supporting people to build pathways out of the criminal justice system.

How can we support people to build pathways out of the criminal justice system?

There is a significant body of research emphasising the key principles in best-practice reintegration support for people with complex needs. These principles are:

1. *Reintegration framed outside of the lens of individual rehabilitation*

Successful reintegration programs move beyond the individualised criminogenic psychological focus of many prison programs, which tend to be primarily interested in 'addressing offending behaviour', and instead place the structural predictors of recidivism (such as homelessness and housing instability) at the heart of service delivery design.

2. *Service delivery incorporating systemic advocacy*

Where possible, service delivery should incorporate systemic advocacy to assist people to navigate the complex legal, social and welfare systems. This also includes recognising

the importance of having people with lived experience of the criminal justice system embedded in agencies.

3. *Throughcare model*

Best-practice models of support are based on a throughcare model, which incorporates pre-release engagement (Gilbert and Elley 2015; Angell et al 2014). Support should start wherever possible prior to release, and transitional pathways should be planned prior to the point of exit (Borzycki and Baldry 2003). Engaging with people prior to release allows the caseworker relationship to be established in a reasonably 'safe' environment, and without the distractions and chaos of life on the outside.

4. *Long-term, proactive, holistic and relational case work models*

People who have spent their lives being 'managed' by criminal justice institutions require support and time to build pathways out of the criminal justice system. Long-term support is necessary to build trust and engagement, and essential to establish the housing provider partnerships required to implement housing first approaches. Consistent and highly individualised social work support has been found to be crucial in supporting people to build pathways out of the criminal justice system (Gilbert and Elley 2015; Angell et al 2014; Hunter et al 2016).

5. *Community-based outreach*

Services that build, or rebuild, lives are most effective if they occur in the context in which someone is then to live, taking into account and building upon family and social networks, and building genuine pathways outside of criminal justice system settings.



6. *Housing first*

A housing first approach acknowledges that people leaving prison require a base from which to work on other factors that they may need to address to avoid returning to prison, such as drug and alcohol support and counselling (Nunn et al 2010; Padgett et al 2006). There are many well-recognised structural barriers in the way to achieving housing (including the housing shortage in many parts of NSW). However, there is also too frequently explicit and implicit discrimination when it comes to housing people who

have been to prison. Evidence indicates that having a safe, secure and permanent place to live is a central component of successful reintegration into the community (Baldry et al 2003; Roman and Travis 2006; Roman et al 2006; Pleggenkuhle et al 2016).

Those who do not have stable and appropriate accommodation following release from custody are more likely to reoffend and end up back in prison. Building pathways out of the criminal justice system that have a housing first approach are crucial for both the promotion of community safety, and for supporting people who have been trapped in cycles of homelessness and imprisonment.

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