

BEYOND THE PRISON GATES –

The experiences of people recently released from prison
into homelessness and housing crisis



Louis Schetzer and StreetCare

Public Interest Advocacy Centre Ltd June 2013

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This report is dedicated to Felicia Tungi of the Haymarket Foundation, who passed away in April 2013.

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Beyond the prison gates - the experiences of people recently released from prison into homelessness and housing crisis

1. Exiting prison and homelessness; 2. Availability of information and support pre-release; 3. Difficulties faced by ex-prisoners upon release; 4. Homelessness after release from prison; 5. Accommodation and support services for people released from prison.

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Executive summary

In 2012 the Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS) and StreetCare (the HPLS Homeless Consumer Advisory Committee) undertook a consultation project exploring the experiences and difficulties faced by people who have recently exited the prison system into situations of housing crisis or homelessness. The close relationship between recent prison experience, housing crisis, homelessness, and socio-economic disadvantage has been confirmed in several Australian studies over the last ten years.

This project involved consultation interviews with 26 people who exited prison in the previous two years into situations of housing crisis or homelessness. These interviews were undertaken by members of StreetCare with support from HPLS. The project also involved six interviews with community workers who have direct professional engagement with people who have recently exited the prison system.

The aims of the project were to identify:

- 1 the experiences of people experiencing homelessness who had recently been released from prison;
- 2 the perceived difficulties faced by generalist homeless services and agencies in relation to the provision of services to homeless people recently released from prison.

Consultation participants

Of the 26 participants in this consultation who had recently been released from prison, most were men, although women were not disproportionately under-represented when one considers the gender breakdown of the NSW prison population. Most participants were aged between 35 and 50 years and all were from the metropolitan Sydney region. Nearly all participants were in receipt of some form of social security benefit and had volunteered information about a history of drug or alcohol addiction or mental illness. All but two participants had failed to complete secondary school education.

Twenty-three participants indicated that they had been in prison on more than one occasion. The three participants who had been to prison on only one occasion were all women. Fourteen participants indicated that their most recent term of imprisonment was for less than 12 months. Eight participants said that their most recent term of imprisonment was for more than two years.

Over a third of participants indicated that on the night they were released from prison, they slept rough, or had some other form of primary homelessness. Other responses also indicated a form of homelessness, such as couch surfing, short-term emergency or temporary accommodation, supported accommodation, transitional accommodation, boarding house accommodation, or staying with friends and family. All participants were either currently homeless, or had experienced homelessness in the previous three months.

Common themes identified in the consultation

Problems identified regarding pre-release services in prison

Common problems identified by participants regarding services and information within prison regarding accommodation and post-release support:

- lack of access to information about accommodation and support services for prisoners about to be released. Prisoners have to be proactive in asking for support, assistance or information;
- difficulties in accessing welfare support services in prison – inordinate delay in being able to see welfare, limited availability of welfare services in prison, and perceptions of incompetence or inefficiency in welfare services;

-
- lack of access to education or training courses in prison – particularly life skills training to assist reintegration into the community.

Common themes regarding participant suggestions for improvements:

- more resources for welfare services within prison;
- increased availability of life skills training and educational courses within prison;
- increased availability of written information in prison about available support and accommodation services in the community;
- more visitors from community organisations and advocates to meet with prisoners about to be released.

Several participants were highly critical of the Community Offender Support Programs (COSPs). The most common criticisms were that COSPs still, essentially, provide a prison environment, with prison-like policies, strict regimes and practices that do not emulate life 'outside' and do not promote reintegration into the community. In addition, COSPs were criticised as offering only a short-term, temporary option that did not often lead to long-term accommodation, often only available for particular types of prisoners, usually too remote from community centres (being located on prison grounds), and as being controlled by prison staff.

Difficulties finding accommodation post-release

Participants identified some particular difficulties securing stable accommodation following release from prison. Commonly recurring themes included:

- the temporary nature of most accommodation options;
- the lack of social housing in NSW, the lengthy waiting list for public housing, and frustration negotiating processes and procedures to access social housing or community housing;
- lack of availability of crisis accommodation options for people leaving prison, with many services having no beds available – “everything’s full”;
- discrimination on the basis of being an ex-prisoner, particularly from boarding houses;
- inability to afford private rental accommodation or boarding house accommodation;
- not having identification to enable access to social security payments to pay for accommodation;
- being paroled to crisis or temporary accommodation services which did not have available accommodation, thus placing them in breach of parole;
- lack of support services or accommodation services.

Other common difficulties identified post-release

Participants identified various factors that presented difficulties for them in reintegrating into the community, and particularly, presenting obstacles in securing stable accommodation. Commonly recurring themes in this regard included:

- the risk/temptation to reoffend, due to difficulties in fitting into society, lack of accommodation options, lack of independent living skills;
- disconnection from society, institutionalisation and lack of living skills;
- feeling isolated from friends and community support networks;
- being exposed to bad influences making reoffending an easy option;
- having previous legal and criminal problems resurface unexpectedly;
- for women, feeling unsafe and vulnerable to abuse or harassment;

-
- difficulty finding employment;
 - difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction;
 - mental illness.

Post-release support services

Most consultation participants reported that they became aware of useful community and accommodation services from informal contacts networks, such as finding out from other prisoners whilst inside prison, or other homeless people after release, or from their own experiences of being homeless in the past.

Community workers providing services to people who have recently exited prison face a number of distinct challenges and difficulties in providing services:

- lack of resources and organisational capacity to address high demand for services;
- lack of short-term and medium-term accommodation options for clients;
- lack of exit-planning and continuous support for people exiting prison, particularly those who exit prison from remand;
- dealing with highly traumatised, angry clients, presenting with difficult behaviours arising from mental illness and/or substance addiction.

Emerging themes for resolving difficulties faced by people exiting prison accessing accommodation

A number of common themes of policy responses and reform initiatives to improve the situation for people exiting prison into situations of homelessness and housing crisis emerged from these consultations. The most important issue identified was the importance of pre-release exit planning for prisoners, and the need for consistent, integrated case-management for people released from prison that commences pre-release and continues post-release. In addition, the need for access to appropriate welfare support prior to release, as well as comprehensive information regarding available accommodation and support services post release were common suggestions for improvement.

A strong theme that emerged was the need for more community-managed, supported transitional accommodation for ex-prisoners, more crisis accommodation, more affordable accommodation, and more social housing. Participants identified a range of difficulties with accessing accommodation, including problems of availability, affordability and discrimination on the basis of criminal and prison history.

Participants were also strongly supportive of additional resourcing to improve the services provided by non-government organisations to ex-prisoners. Participants indicated that additional resourcing would assist community workers dealing with a high demand for their services, and potentially enable expanded capacity for organisations to provide more comprehensive case-management and support.

Several consultation participants spoke about the importance of stable, safe housing in terms of reintegrating back into the community and moving away from a life of reoffending and returning to prison. Their comments suggest that for people recently released from prison, housing and stable accommodation are often seen as important symbols of hope and promise for a new life, where one can move away from a life of disadvantage, re-offending and repeated periods of incarceration.

Chapter One

Introduction

“You feel so small, so insignificant... because when you get out of jail you’ve got nothing. Who have you got? You’ve got no-one.”

- Consultation participant No. 001

This chapter explains why the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) and the Homeless Persons’ Legal Service (HPLS) decided to undertake a consultation project with homeless people who had recently exited the prison system. It begins by providing a background about HPLS and the homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare, then details the rationale for undertaking the project, its aims and the policy context in which it was undertaken. Some of the recent Australian studies that have explored the connection between exiting prison and homelessness are also discussed.

The chapter also outlines the importance of the involvement of StreetCare in the design and conduct of key elements of this project, and how the consultation was undertaken. At the conclusion of the chapter is a brief description of the contents of each of the other chapters in the report.

The Homeless Persons’ Legal Service and StreetCare

HPLS is a joint initiative of PIAC and the Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH) NSW. HPLS provides free legal advice and ongoing representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It operates ten clinics on a roster basis at welfare agencies in the greater Sydney area. These agencies provide direct services, such as food and accommodation, to people in housing crisis. The clinics are co-ordinated by HPLS and staffed by lawyers from PILCH members acting pro bono. Since 2004, HPLS has provided free legal advice and representation to almost 7,000 people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. During 2011-12, HPLS assisted 713 clients.

In 2008, HPLS established the Solicitor Advocate position to provide legal representation for people who are homeless and charged with relatively minor criminal offences. The role was developed to overcome some of the barriers homeless people face accessing criminal advice and representation, including: a lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate the legal system; rushed appointments leaving little time to obtain instructions; and, lack of capacity to address multiple and complex interrelated legal and non-legal problems. Since 2008, the HPLS Solicitor Advocate has provided court representation to 362 individual clients.

HPLS adheres to the principle that addressing homelessness must take place within a human rights framework. The right to adequate housing is recognised in Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the binding right is set out in Article 11 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR).¹ Article 11(1) of ICESCR recognises:

... the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself [sic] and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has extensively considered the nature of the right to adequate housing. The Committee established that the right to adequate housing involves more than just having

1 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 993 UNTS 3 (entered into force 3 January 1976) ratified by Australia on 10 December 1975 (entered into force for Australia on 10 March 1976).

shelter but that it is the 'right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity'.² The Committee also established seven indicia of adequacy, including security of tenure and that housing is affordable and accessible.³

As a State Party to ICESCR, Australia is required by Article 11(1) to take appropriate steps to ensure the realisation of the right to adequate housing.

One of the homeless people with whom HPLS has previously consulted has articulated the following indicia as to whether housing is adequate:

- stability;
- allows you to belong to the community;
- provides a sense of belonging;
- is somewhere to call home;
- provides opportunity to participate in society;
- ensures security of items and security of the person.⁴

HPLS believes that the active involvement of those who are or have been homeless leads to the development of more effective public policy in response to issues facing homeless people, as well as assisting in the empowerment of participants. HPLS also recognises the fundamental right of people to 'take part in the conduct of public affairs', as enshrined in Article 25 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*.⁵

HPLS seeks the views of homeless people through its homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare. StreetCare is made up of nine people who have recent experience of homelessness. The members reflect the diversity of homelessness in NSW, and include men, women, transgender people, young people, and representatives from inner Sydney, outer suburbs and rural and regional areas. StreetCare also provides a mechanism for HPLS to engage actively with other people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to facilitate their input into public policy and law reform initiatives.

In 2010, the NSW Government engaged PIAC to organise three Consumers' Forums that provided homeless people with an opportunity to contribute to the organisational planning and decision-making processes of the NSW Government regarding homelessness. StreetCare was actively involved in the organisation, conduct and reporting of the results of these forums. The forums were conducted in Inner Sydney, the Hunter and Western Sydney. These forums involved consultation interviews and focus groups with 232 people who had recent experience of homelessness.

In 2011, the then Minister for Housing proposed that Housing NSW and members of StreetCare form a working group to work through issues raised in the Consumers' Forum reports. Housing NSW provided funding for StreetCare to establish the Consumers' Forum Homelessness Working Group. The Working Group met three times during 2011 to consider the results of the Consumers' Forum Reports in more detail and identify practical options for addressing the issues identified.

2 General comment No. 4, The right to Adequate Housing (Art. 11(1)), UNCESCR, General Comment No 4, 6th sess, [7], UN Doc E/1992/23 (1991).

3 Ibid [8].

4 Public Interest Advocacy Centre (2009), *Homeless not Houseless: Submission to NSW Fair Trading on the draft Residential Tenancies Bill 2009*, 3-4.

5 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171 (entered into force 23 March 1976) ratified by Australia on 13 August 1980 (entered into force for Australia on 13 November 1980, except article 41, which entered into force for Australia on 28 January 1993). The full text of the ICCPR is available at: <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>>.

Background to project

In November 2011, PIAC decided to undertake a consultation project with homeless people who had recently exited the prison system.

HPLS has previously identified the difficulties faced by ex-prisoners who experience or are at risk of homelessness as an area of concern. The issue was raised during the 2010 HPLS Homeless Consumer Forums referred to above. In addition, in 2011, the Premier's Advisory Council on Homelessness identified the need to reduce homelessness for people exiting prison as a priority action area.

In 2008, in its White Paper outlining the national approach for reducing homelessness, the Commonwealth Government recommended a 'no discharge into homelessness' policy for people exiting statutory and custodial care.⁶ The NSW Government has also identified the difficulties faced by ex-prisoners in accessing housing and support services as a policy priority. In its 10-year plan to guide its policy and budget decision-making (NSW 2021), under Goal 13 ('Better protect the most vulnerable members of our community and break the cycle of disadvantage'), the following appears as a priority action:

Reducing homelessness, rough sleeping and repeat homelessness will require significant housing assistance, but we will also need comprehensive and integrated mental health, drug and alcohol and domestic violence services. Actions to achieve the targets include:

- promote reintegration of people leaving custody through targeted housing and support models.⁷

Casework data from the HPLS Solicitor Advocate suggests that there is a strong causal relationship between previous experiences of imprisonment, homelessness and further re-offending. Of the 241 individual clients represented by the HPLS Solicitor Advocate from January 2010 to December 2012, 46 per cent disclosed that they had previously been in prison.

For these reasons, HPLS decided to undertake a consultation project with homeless people who had recent experience of being in prison, and also with community workers in homelessness services who work with clients who have recently exited the prison system.

Accordingly, HPLS embarked on this project with two principal aims:

- 1 to identify the experiences of people who are experiencing homelessness who have recently been released from prison;
- 2 to identify the difficulties faced by generalist homeless services and agencies which assist homeless people in relation to providing services to homeless people recently released from prison, as perceived by consumers and agency employees.

Policy context

According to the 2012 NSW Inmate Census conducted by Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW), the total number of full-time custody inmates managed by Corrective Services on 30 June 2012 was 9,643; 93 percent of whom were male, and 7 per cent female. This includes unclassified inmates, and inmates in maximum, medium and

6 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008), *The Road Home, A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, 2008, 27.

7 NSW Government (2011), *NSW 2021 – A Plan to make NSW number one*, Goal 13, Better Protect the most vulnerable members of our community and break the cycle of disadvantage, Reduce the number and rate of people who are homeless, p. 28.

minimum security. Of these, 72.5 percent were under sentence and 25.8 per cent were on remand. Of the total number of full-time custody inmates, 24.6 per cent faced a maximum term of imprisonment for less than two years, and 47.9 per cent faced a maximum term of imprisonment of more than two years.⁸ According to Baldry, this type of prison census data is misleading when considering the needs for people being released, as it does not include “flow-through” numbers – i.e. the number of prisoners who flow through the system over the course of a year. The majority of this population is in prison for less than a year, but cyclically return to prison. This group of people is far more likely to be at risk of homelessness upon release.⁹

For 1.5 per cent of full-time custody inmates, the last known address was listed as “no fixed abode”.¹⁰ Since 1995, the number of unsentenced inmates in full-time custody in NSW has increased from 711 to 2,486 – an increase of 350 per cent per cent. The rate of people on remand, relative to the general adult population, has increased from 18 per 100,000 in 1994-95 to 45 per 100,000 in 2010-11, a 250 per cent increase.¹¹

CSNSW operates a number of transitional and homelessness related projects and services. These include the following:

- Community Offender Management – Probation and Parole Service pre-release planning for all sentenced inmates, including addressing accommodation issues.
- Coexisting Disorders Coordinators – these exist in five Probation and Parole offices to assist medium-high risk offenders to access services, including accommodation services.
- Parolee Support Initiative – coordinated case management and interagency partnership with provision of housing a key objective.
- Parramatta Transitional Centre – a community-based residential facility for up to 21 women serving the last stage of their sentence.
- Bolwara Transitional Centre – a transitional residential centre for up to 16 women with histories of drug or alcohol disorders.
- Nara Ngara Pre-release program – a 3-4 month therapeutic residential program for men at Long Bay Correctional Complex, addressing drug and alcohol addiction and offending behavior.
- Dillwynia Independent Living Unit – an accommodation facility adjoining the Dillwynia Correctional Centre, providing a managed environment to assist women adjust to living in the community.

CSNSW runs ten Community Offender Support Program (COSP) centres. The COSP centres provide transitional accommodation for people exiting prison who are assessed as suitable for the program. According to CSNSW, a COSP centre is a non-custodial, community-based service where offenders on parole or on community based orders can reside whilst being assisted to obtain suitable, sustainable accommodation and employment. The NSW Government states that COSP centres assist with the reintegration of offenders in the community, and contribute to a reduction in the risk of re-offending through the provision of:

- interim accommodation for eligible offenders who are unable to attain or maintain suitable accommodation and/or access to community support services and programs;
- assistance to obtain sustainable independent housing and employment in the community;

8 Corben, Simon (2012), *Statistical Publication – NSW Inmate Census 2012: Summary of Characteristics*, Statistical Publication No. 39, Corrective Services NSW, November 2012.

9 Baldry, Eileen (2010), ‘Women in Transition: From Prison to...’, (2011) 22 *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 253-267 at 255.

10 Corben, Simon (2012), n 8 above.

11 New South Wales Law Reform Commission (2012), *Report 133 Bail*, April 2012, Sydney, 47-48.

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- access to programs and services with the aim of reducing the risk of re-offending and creating public safety;
 - case management including the development of life skills, education and employment strategies;
 - strategies to link offenders to relevant community-based support services and programs;
 - exit strategies to assist offenders to move to a stable lawful lifestyle;
 - sustainable partnerships with community organisations including cultural and ethnic councils in order to support the re-settlement process; and
 - outreach services and programs for offenders who have moved into the community from the COSPs.¹²

In addition, CSNSW provides funding to some non-government organisations to provide transitional housing and other support services for people exiting prison. These include the following programs:

- Community Restorative Centre to provide post-release transition and support services;
- Judge Rainbow Lodge – supported accommodation for 3-6 months for men;
- Glebe House – supported accommodation for men;
- Guthrie House – supported accommodation for 3-6 months for women leaving custody;
- Namitjira Haven – residential centre in Lismore targeting Aboriginal people;
- New Horizons – supported accommodation for 3-6 months for men leaving custody.

Recent studies regarding ex-prisoners and accommodation

According to Matthew Willis of the Australian Institute of Criminology and Toni Makkai of the Australian National University, people exiting prison face considerable barriers and problems in securing and maintaining accommodation. They identified a number of factors that present as barriers for ex-prisoners integrating into the wider community, including:

- discrimination and stigmatisation as offenders;
- the effects of institutionalisation;
- accumulated debt prior to and during the term of imprisonment;
- loss of tenancy or relationship breakdown while in custody;
- recidivism and repeated episodes of imprisonment;
- social isolation after exiting prison, and returning to pro-criminal associations;
- lack of access to and eligibility for public housing.¹³

However, while the links to exiting prison, homelessness and further re-offending have been explored overseas, up until 2003 there was a lack of research in Australia on the housing needs of people who exit prison, and the nexus between exiting prison and homelessness. While there had been some attention to these issues within

12 NSW Government, Jobs NSW, 5 October 2012, <http://jobs.nsw.gov.au/en/career-profiles/%7E/link.aspx?_id=25FF8C2B140E4B4087170150A48B7218&_z=z>

Note – COSP centres have not been evaluated so there is no indication as to whether they achieve these goals.

13 Willis, Matthew and Makkai, Toni (2008), 'Ex-Prisoners and Homelessness: Some Key Issues', *PARITY*, Volume 21, Issue 9, October 2008, 6-7.

Australia prior to the turn of the 21st century, the lack of solid evidence regarding the relationship between housing, homelessness and re-offending was noted.¹⁴ This lack of empirical evidence was one reason behind the 2003 research undertaken on behalf of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute by Dr Eileen Baldry, Dr Desmond McDonnell, Peter Maplestone and Manu Peeters (Baldry et al, 'Ex-prisoners and accommodation: what bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration?', AHURI Final Report No. 46, August 2003).

A principal aim of the research was to provide an understanding of the housing needs and circumstances of persons being released from prisons in NSW and Victoria. This project involved interviews with a sample of people about to be released from prisons in NSW and Victoria, with subsequent interviews at three months and then six months post-release. In total, there were 194 participants (130 male, 64 female) from New South Wales and 145 participants (122 male, 23 female) from Victoria, all of who were interviewed pre-release and followed up post-release. At the nine-month post-release interview, 238 participants remained in the study (145 in NSW, 93 in Victoria) making it the largest study to date of people exiting prison in Australia.

The study concluded:

- ex-prisoners were more likely to stay out of prison if they:
 - were living with parents, a partner or close family post-release;
 - had employment or were studying;
 - were on parole; and/or
 - had contact with and support from agencies post-release.
- Ex-prisoners were more likely to return to prison if they:
 - had been in prison before and had been on remand or serving a short sentence;
 - were homeless or transient post-release;
 - did not have accommodation support or they felt the support was unhelpful;
 - suffered from alcohol and other drug problems; or
 - were in debt.
- the strongest predictors of ex-prisoners being re-incarcerated were found to be high levels of transience in the immediate post-release period (moving more than twice within a three month period) and/or experiencing worsening problems with heroin use.
- Indigenous participants were particularly vulnerable to homelessness and lack of integration. Sole parents (mostly female) and young single men were the next most vulnerable groups of participants.

In 2004, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) undertook a qualitative study involving interviews with ex-prisoner clients of agencies funded under the then Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) as well as interviews with employees of SAAP organisations (Willis, Matthew, 'Ex-Prisoners, SAAP, Housing and Homelessness in Australia – Final Report to the National SAAP Coordination and Development Committees', Australian Institute of Criminology, May 2004). The study involved qualitative interviews in five states, with 41 ex-prisoner clients of SAAP agencies (32 male, 9 female), and 18 staff members of six SAAP agencies.

The AIC study supported the Baldry et al study, indicating a strong relationship between being released from prison on parole or other supervision, and being able to access stable and ongoing accommodation. The study found that those who appeared to have the best prospects for longer-term success and those who were able to access the most beneficial overall support, were those referred to supporting agencies under the terms of a

14 Willis, Matthew (2004), *Ex-Prisoners, SAAP, Housing and Homelessness in Australia, Final Report to the National SAAP Coordination and Development Committee*, Australian Institute of Criminology, May 2004, 25; Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), *Ex-prisoners and accommodation: what bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration?*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI Final Report No. 46, August 2003, 4.

parole or other order, as these clients may have been eligible to participate in pre-release programs, and began receiving support immediately on their release. Immediacy of this support meant that the prisoner was not trying to get by alone during the critical days and weeks after release.

The study found that outcomes were far less positive for ex-prisoners not released under the terms of a parole order, where the prospect of immediate homelessness often results in the ex-prisoner re-offending. The study found that people released from court on bail, or from remand or full-time custody, in areas far from home without money, were often unable to access pre-release programs or make use of welfare services in prison.

The study emphasised the importance of having immediate, structured pre- and post-release support for as many prisoners as possible.

In the interviews with community workers the study received reports of the various challenges and difficulties of working with clients who had recently exited prison. These included:

- institutionalisation, limiting clients' capacity to function outside of the prison environment;
- lack of available and affordable accommodation options;
- lack of resources for agencies working with homeless people who have recently exited prison;
- poor information about other support services;
- poor exit planning for prisoners for whom there is uncertainty about release dates;
- stigmatisation and discrimination by private landlords, boarding houses and potential employers.

In 2008, Eileen Baldry, Jackie Ruddock and Jo Taylor undertook an analysis of the transitional and post release needs of Aboriginal women with dependent children who are exiting prison in Western Sydney. The study involved focus groups with a total of 17 Aboriginal women with children. The women had been incarcerated in Emu Plains and Dilwynia prisons. Service providers working with Aboriginal women being released from prison were also interviewed. The focus groups with the women identified the following themes:

- the importance of children in their lives and the need to provide a safe, secure and stable environment for them;
- the need for stable, safe housing with supportive services to assist with financial and life skills;
- the stress of family obligations;
- the experience of drug and alcohol addiction;
- the need for cultural and kinship support;
- having to deal with trauma from sexual and physical abuse.

The study identified a need for transitional and post-release support for Aboriginal women with children, with case-management directed by Aboriginal women.¹⁵

In 2012, the Women in Prison Advocacy Network (WIPAN) undertook a project looking at the housing and support needs of women exiting prison. The project involved consultations with members of WIPAN, receipt of submissions, and also consumer consultations via a focus group with women recently released from NSW prisons. During the focus group, consumers spoke of the close connection between their housing needs and their attempts to remain free from drugs and alcohol, to be apart from criminal networks, and to resist

15 Baldry, Eileen, Ruddock, Jackie and Taylor, Jo (2008), *Aboriginal Women with dependent children leaving prison project: needs analysis*, Homelessness NSW, University of NSW, 2008.

re-offending. Their concerns focused on children, their safety and connections with the community. The resulting report, *Dreaming of a Safe Home, Consumers and community workers' perspectives on housing and support needs of women leaving prison in NSW*, was released in August 2012.

Conduct of this project

Involvement of homeless consumers in this project

One of the unique aspects of this project was the involvement of the HPLS homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare, in the design and implementation of this consultation project. Members of StreetCare assisted in developing the key themes for the consultation interviews, and the development of information sheets to be provided to consultation participants. StreetCare members assisted in the recruitment of several consultation participants, and also assisted in identifying the most appropriate agencies to contact for assistance in recruiting additional participants. With support from the HPLS Senior Policy Officer, StreetCare members were involved in conducting 24 of the 26 interviews with homeless people in this project.

The involvement of StreetCare members in the conduct of the consultation interviews was an essential ingredient in facilitating participants to be open and expansive in their comments. Given their own experiences of homelessness, the difficulties they have encountered in securing housing, and in some cases problems when released from prison, StreetCare members were able to provide an empathetic and sensitive mode of interviewing for consultation participants, which encouraged them to open up and go into considerable detail about their experiences. The richness and intensity of the recounted testimonies of interview participants is a product of the confidence and comfort StreetCare members were able to engender from consultation participants when conducting the interviews.

Consultation interviews

This project involved 26 consultation interviews with people who had recently been released from prison into situations of homelessness or accommodation crisis, and six interviews with workers at homelessness services or agencies, or services who work specifically with people exiting prison. It does not purport to represent the experiences of all people who have recently exited prison.

The focus of the project was on people who have been released from adult prisons within the preceding two years prior to their consultation interview. The reason for this limitation was to ensure that the recounted experiences of participants would be reasonably current and relevant to the existing policy environment. In addition, as this project relied heavily on the recollections of participants, focusing on recent experiences of participants would ensure that the information obtained would be more reliable and accurate.

It should be noted that this project was regarded as a consultation project, not a research project. No attempt was made to employ particular research sampling techniques in recruiting participants. The 26 people who agreed to be interviewed should not be regarded as necessarily constituting a representative sample of people who have recently exited the prison system into accommodation crisis. However, there was an informal attempt to solicit input from divergent groups within the affected section of the population.

The primary intention of this consultation project was to provide a process through which participants could express their views as freely and in as much depth as they wished and then to present them in a detailed and sensitive manner. This gave participants confidence to be expansive and open with their input. This was based on the experience of HPLS in conducting the 2010 Homeless Consumer Consultation Forums and is in keeping with in-depth interviewing techniques.

Many participants indicated that these interviews represented the first time that someone had listened genuinely to their views and perspectives about how to address particular issues impacting on their life. The participants

appeared to feel quite comfortable and safe during the interview and as a result became quite expansive in their responses. It is likely that this was a product of the empathetic and authentic interview approach of the StreetCare members who conducted the interviews.

Further details of how the consultation was undertaken and how the information obtained has been analysed is included in Appendix A. In particular, Appendix A provides details regarding the procedures used to recruit participants, both people who had recently been released from prison, and workers at homelessness services or agencies, the conduct of the interviews, and the specific approach to analysing the information.

Limitations of the project

As indicated above, in this project it was not intended to obtain a range of participants that is perfectly representative of the total number of people who have been released from prison in the last two years. Nor is the sample of participants representative of homeless people as a whole. In addition, given that the number of participants involved in this project is relatively small in relation to the total number of homeless people who have been recently released from prison, the issues and difficulties identified by participants in the course of these interviews should not be regarded as definitive of the difficulties experienced by people recently released from prison. Rather, the problems and difficulties identified through these interviews reflect the experiences of these participants. However, there was considerable consistency across the group in the issues raised and this provides a strong basis for consideration of appropriate policy responses to housing and associated problems experienced by people leaving prison.

Structure of this report

This report covers a series of themes that were identified through the consultation interviews, including difficulties encountered by people in accessing information and support services prior to release from prison, difficulties accessing accommodation post-release, other difficulties encountered post-release, difficulties accessing support services post-release, and problems faced by support services providing services to ex-prisoners. The report also provides suggestions from consultation participants about improvements and changes that could be made.

Chapter Two details the profile of the individuals who participated in the consultation.

Chapter Three looks at the availability of information and assistance for prisoners prior to their release from prison, which could assist them in finding accommodation, or support services that could assist them when they were released.

Chapter Four considers the difficulties and problems participants faced when trying to find somewhere to live after leaving prison.

Chapter Five considers the responses from participants about other difficulties they encountered upon their release.

Chapter Six focuses on the accommodation and support services available in the community for people who have recently exited prison, and how participants found out about these services.

Chapter Seven draws together the themes from each of the chapters to present a summary of the main issues identified by consultation participants.

Chapter Two

Consultation participants

“My home is jail. This is like my holiday, in there’s my home.”

- Consultation Participant No. 001

This project involved consultation interviews with 26 people who exited prison in the previous two years into situations of housing crisis or homelessness. This chapter considers the profile of the individuals who participated, including gender break-down, age, current location, current source of income, highest level of education attained, and whether they indicated a history of drug or alcohol addiction or mental illness. In addition, we consider the history of incarceration of the participants and the length of time they last spent in prison. Finally, we consider their current accommodation arrangements and how they fit within the cultural definition of homelessness as developed by Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, namely:

- ‘Primary Homeless’: people without conventional accommodation; for example, those living on the street, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter;
- ‘Secondary Homeless’: people who move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another; for example, people using emergency accommodation shelters;
- ‘Tertiary Homeless’: people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.¹⁶

The chapter also provides a brief analysis of the profile of the six community workers who agreed to be interviewed as part of this project.

Gender

Of the 26 people consulted in this project, there were 20 men and six women. According to the 2012 NSW Inmate Census conducted by Corrective Services NSW, of the 9,643 full-time custody inmates managed by CSNSW on 30 June 2012, 93 percent were male, and 7 per cent female.¹⁷ While the sample of participants in this project is not meant to be representative, given the proportion of men and women in adult corrective services custody in NSW, the proportion of women participants in this project is not disproportionately low.

Age

The average age of the 26 participants in this project was 43 and the median age was 42. The oldest participant was 60 and the youngest participants (N=2) were 27. The most common age group was in the 40-44 year age group (six participants). This is significantly older than the average age of prisoners in NSW, where the most common age group is 25-34 (35.2 per cent of full-time custody inmates managed by NSW Corrective Services on 30 June 2012).¹⁸

16 Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie, *Counting the Homeless 2006: New South Wales* (2009) Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [15] <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10755>> at 23 December 2009.

17 Corben, Simon (2012), *Statistical Publication – NSW Inmate Census 2012: Summary of Characteristics*, Statistical Publication No. 39, Corrective Services NSW, November 2012.

18 Ibid.

Location

This project did not seek to obtain a representative sample of participants in terms of geographic location or area where they were currently residing or living. Given that participants were recruited through the assistance of community support workers at welfare agencies, specialist homelessness services and post-release support agencies located in metropolitan Sydney, it is not surprising that all participants identified their current location of residence as being within Sydney.

Amongst the 26 participants, there were four participants currently residing in Western Sydney.

Source of income

None of the participants involved in this project reported any form of employment income, either full-time or part-time. Of the 26 participants, 24 reported being on some form of social security benefit or pension, and two participants reported that they were not in receipt of any income or social security benefit.

Of the 24 participants who reported being on some form of social security benefit, there was an even split of 12 reporting being in receipt of the disability support pension, and 12 reporting that they received a Newstart allowance.

Highest level of education

Of the 26 participants in this consultation, two had completed secondary school education, one of whom had also completed a tertiary degree. Of the remaining 24 participants, three participants had no high school education at all, and 21 participants did not complete their high school education. One participant had not had any schooling after Year 2:

I left school in year two. Me dad took me out in primary school... I can't read or write very well.

Fourteen of the participants indicated that they had received some formal qualifications while in prison. Most of these were trade or re-skilling type courses (eg, horticultural courses, forklift driving, administrative office courses, hospitality) (seven participants) or basic literacy or computer literacy courses (four participants). Three participants indicated that they had commenced tertiary courses whilst in prison.

Drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness and other health problems

Of the 26 participants in this consultation, 23 volunteered information that indicated that they had a history of either drug or alcohol addiction, or mental illness. A further breakdown of these figures indicates the following:

- 20 participants indicated that they had a history of drug addiction;
- seven participants indicated a history of alcohol addiction;
- five participants indicated a history of both drug and alcohol addiction;
- six participants indicated that they suffered some form of mental illness or brain injury;
- four participants indicated that they suffered from both mental illness and drug/alcohol addiction.

Several of the participants were quite open about their problems with substance abuse:

For me it was just being an active addiction. I lived on the block for a long time so it was normality really, you're like... homeless, it's just ... it was just the way that it was you know.

It's only because of drugs and that and not having no family support. Getting out of jail having no help, no nothing and you're going back into the same crime again and you're going back to jail, you know what I mean.

All I am trying to do is stay out of jail but I'm at the end of my tether. I really am... the point is I need help, I've been to detox today because I know I've got a bad drug problem...

Similarly, some participants were open about their problems with mental illness:

I was diagnosed with Bipolar and schizophrenia but in the last two years I've had no medication because I won't go back on it because I don't need it.

And keeping it all together mentally because I suffer from bipolar disorder and subsequent to my release I got very sick...

The experiences I've had in those places, there is a massive amount of mental health issues with the blokes on the streets and stuff and we've got nowhere else to go as well...

Some participants also volunteered information about ongoing and long-term serious health problems and illnesses:

It gave me Hep C and HIV. It's all got through jail, through tattooing. I didn't know about it. The prick didn't clean me gun out properly.

I've got emphysema and pneumonia.

I would have found out eventually because I'm a HIV patient. They wouldn't let me out to just go out on the street.

The high proportion of participants with a history of drug or alcohol addiction, and/or mental illness is consistent with data indicating the prevalence of mental illness and drug/alcohol disorder among homeless people interacting with the criminal justice system. This is also reflected in the casework of the Homeless Persons' Legal Service Solicitor Advocate. From January 2010 to December 2012, the HPLS Solicitor Advocate provided court representation to 241 individual clients facing criminal charges. Of these:

- 48 per cent disclosed they had a mental illness
- 63 per cent disclosed they had drug or alcohol dependency;
- 72 per cent had either a mental illness or drug/alcohol dependency; and

- 41 per cent had both a mental illness and a drug/alcohol dependency.

The high prevalence of drug/alcohol addiction is also consistent with Australian research indicating a strong correlation between drug use and criminal involvement. In an Australian Institute of Criminology survey of 1,884 detainees in 2009, over 86 per cent reported using alcohol or illegal drugs on at least one day in the previous 30, and of these over half (52 per cent) indicated that substance use was a factor in their most recent offending.¹⁹

It is also consistent with studies indicating that people with mental health impairments are overrepresented in the NSW criminal justice system and prison population. A 2007 survey of 189 adult defendants in criminal matters in NSW Local Courts by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) found that 55 per cent of surveyed defendants suffered from one or more psychiatric disorders.²⁰ In a 2009 NSW Inmate Health Survey, of 996 inmates, 49 per cent of inmates indicated that they had at some stage been assessed or treated by a doctor or psychiatrist for an emotional or mental problem.²¹ So, if anything, these issues are not as evident amongst the group we interviewed as would be expected from the research just discussed.

Previous research has consistently identified a strong relationship between homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse. In their study of 4,291 homeless people in Melbourne, released in 2011, Johnson and Chamberlain found that 31 per cent of their sample had a mental illness (not including any form of alcohol or drug disorder).²² Current research exploring the pathways of people with mental and cognitive impairment into prison indicates that those people with disability, in particular complex needs, are significantly more likely to have experienced homelessness than those without disability.²³ A 2003 study involving 403 homeless young people in Melbourne aged 12-20 found that 26 per cent of those surveyed reported a level of psychological distress indicative of a psychiatric disorder.²⁴ In its 2003 study into the legal needs of homeless people in NSW, the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW reported that mental health, alcohol and drug issues, dual diagnosis and other complex needs are prevalent among the homeless population, particularly those who are entrenched in homelessness.²⁵

Previous experiences in prison

Of the 26 participants in this project, 23 had been to prison on more than one occasion, with several participants indicating that they had spent significant periods of their adult life in prison. The three participants who had not previously been to prison were all women.

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- 19 Payne, Jason and Gaffney, Antonette (2012), 'How much crime is drug or alcohol related? Self reported attributions of police detainees', *Trends in Issues in crime and criminal justice No. 439*, Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), May 2012, p. 3.
- 20 Jones, C. and Crawford, S (2007), 'The Psychosocial Needs of NSW Court Defendants', *Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 108*, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics (BOCSAR), 207, p. 5.
- 21 Indig, D., Topp, L., Ross, B., Mamoon, H., Border, B., Kumar, S. and McNamara, M. (2010), *2009 NSW Inmate Health Survey: Key Findings Report*, NSW Justice Health, 2010, p. 17.
- 22 Johnson, G. and Chamberlain, C. (2011), 'Are the Homeless Mentally Ill?', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Autumn 2011, at 35.
- 23 Baldry, Eileen, Dowse, Leanne and Clarence, Melissa (2012), *People with mental and cognitive disabilities: pathways into prison*, Background Paper for Outlaws to Inclusion Conference, February 2012, available online at <<http://www.mhdc.d.unsw.edu.au/publications.html>> (15 March 2013).
- 24 Rossiter, B., Mallett, S., Myers, P. and Rosenthal, D. (2003) *Living Well? Homeless Young People in Melbourne*, Melbourne, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, at 17.
- 25 Forell, Suzie, McCarron, Emily and Schetzer, Louis (2005), *No Home, No Justice? The Legal Needs of Homeless People in NSW*, Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Sydney, at 124.

The most number of times a single participant reported being in prison was more than 30 times, though this participant could not remember the exact number of times. Nine participants indicated that they had been in prison between 3-6 times, and another nine participants indicated that they had been in prison between 7-10 times.

Some participants went into considerable detail about their history of incarceration, while several participants were quite vague, speaking in terms of significant periods of their life in prison:

I started at 18 in 2003, 14 months then I got out for a month, went back in for eight months, got out, was on parole, lasted two months and back in for 12 months. Got out a month and a bit and went back in for six months, got out, out for a month, went back in for nine months, got out, two months. Went back in for 11 months, got out for about a month and a little bit again and then, that's the fifth and then I went back in for eight months and four weeks and then I did 14 months and I've been out for a month, so I've been in for a bit.

Yes - I've been going to jail and out since I was about 17. I'm 29 now... I have been out maybe 10 months in the last 12 years.

Yeah I've been in more than once. I've been in roughly around 19 or 20 times.

Yes... over 20 years like I've done four years, 12 months, 18 months, just different laggings.

The exact same thing every single time and the lady just asked me before how many times I've been in jail, I couldn't answer it because I've lost count. I mean I've been in and out since I was 18.

Several participants openly expressed how they had spent most of their adult life in prison, and how that had become a normal existence for them:

They added it up that I've done - since I'm 27 they said that I've done eight years and two months in and I've spent one year eight months out, something like that. So I've done more jail than I have outside.

I have spent the last 34 years of my life in jail. All for break and enters. I've been in prison more times than Captain Cook's probably sailed the world.

I'm 43, you've heard it a million times and I've spent roughly half my life in jail.

All I've known is crime and drugs and jail. My home is jail. This is like my holiday, in there's my home.

The high incidence of multiple experiences of prison amongst the participants is consistent with the casework statistics of the HPLS Solicitor Advocate. Of the 241 individual clients represented by the HPLS Solicitor Advocate from January 2010 to December 2012, 46 per cent disclosed they had previously been in prison.

The close relationship between offending, re-offending, incarceration and homelessness has been identified in several studies over the last ten years. The 2003 study of 194 ex-prisoners in NSW and 145 ex-prisoners in Victoria found similarly high rates of recidivism and homelessness, and that over half of the NSW participants experienced episodes of homelessness in the nine months following release from prison.²⁶

Length of last term of imprisonment

Participants were asked how long was their most recent term of imprisonment. Of the 26 participants in this consultation project, 14 indicated that the length of their most recent term of imprisonment was less than 12 months (with two participants indicating their time in custody was seven days). Of the 12 participants who indicated that their most recent term of imprisonment was longer than 12 months, eight said that they spent longer than two years in prison. The longest term of imprisonment indicated by a participant was nine and a half years, and the second longest was five and a half years. These findings underscore Baldry et al's (2003) conclusion that those who have periods of homelessness and cycle in and out of prison, experience serial homelessness and incarceration as a form of serial institutionalisation.²⁷

Current accommodation

Of the 26 participants in this consultation project, 23 indicated types of current accommodation that came within one of the three classifications of homelessness, according to the standard definition of homelessness. Of these 23 participants:

- nine participants indicated that they were in crisis or temporary accommodation (secondary homelessness);
- nine participants indicated that they were in a form of temporary supported accommodation (secondary homelessness);
- three participants indicated that at the time of their interview they were sleeping rough on the streets (primary homelessness);
- one participant was in temporary transitional accommodation after release from prison (secondary homelessness).

The three participants who were in stable accommodation (two were in social housing accommodation and one was privately renting) had all moved into their current accommodation within the previous three months. Prior to that they had either been in temporary accommodation, couch surfing or were staying with friends or family.

I was sleeping on a girlfriend's couch up until Thursday and a friend of a friend owns a house in Pennant Hills and they've managed to give me their granny flat at a really good price...

Not surprisingly, several participants referred to their current accommodation as the organisation through which their participation in the consultation project was arranged.

26 Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), see n 14 above, i, 12. See also Forell, Suzie, McCarron, Emily and Schetzer, Louis (2005), see n 25 above, 269; NSW Homelessness Community Alliance (2011), 'Homelessness and the justice system', *Policy statement*, Sydney.

27 Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), see n 14 above, 29.

*I'm living here. Edgar Lodge
whatever - what is it called?
I'm living here - got kicked
out yesterday from the place
I was staying and yeah
they've given me seven days
to stay here so
I don't know what happens
after seven days. It's all new.
I don't know what's going to
happen - get an extension or
- hopefully get a Houso. Get
a house*

*I've been in, it's like a halfway house there, there's about four of
us there. We all share everything. We all get on good, like go out
of our way to help each other and that you know.*

*At the moment I'm living here at the lodge, been here since I got
out of jail about three months ago...*

*I'm at Haymarket Hostel. I'm sort of used to this environment
because most of the places that I've lived in have been like this.
It is getting to me. I've had enough of it all.*

Community workers' consultation

This project also involved consultations with six community workers who have direct professional engagement with clients who have recently exited the prison system. Of these:

- five participants were women and one was a man;
- two participants worked for a specialist homelessness service that provided crisis or temporary accommodation;
- one participant worked for a specialist homelessness service that provided general welfare support;
- one participant worked for an organisation that provided supported accommodation and other services related to dealing with addiction;
- two participants worked for an organisation that specifically worked with ex-prisoners, providing supported accommodation and other services relating to addiction.

Summary

Of the 26 participants in this consultation who had recently been released from prison, most were men, although women were not disproportionately under-represented when one considers the gender breakdown of the NSW prison population. Most participants were aged between 35 and 50 years and all were from the metropolitan Sydney region. Nearly all participants were in receipt of some form of social security benefit and had volunteered information about a history of drug or alcohol addiction or mental illness. All but two participants had failed to complete secondary school education.

Twenty-three participants indicated that they had been in prison on more than one occasion. The three participants who had been to prison on only one occasion were all women. Fourteen participants indicated that their most recent term of imprisonment was for less than 12 months. Eight participants said that their most recent term of imprisonment was for more than two years.

Twenty-three participants' description of their current accommodation would bring them within the Chamberlain and MacKenzie definition of 'cultural homelessness'. Each of the three participants who indicated that they were in stable accommodation had only moved into that accommodation within the last three months, and prior to that were homeless.

Chapter Three

Accessing support services in prison

“Putting a person behind a door and locking him in. It’s all they do. They don’t say nothing to you. How’s that positive? There’s nothing positive about jail you know what I mean.”

- Consultant participant No. 003.

One of the specific issues canvassed with consultation participants concerned the availability of information and assistance for prisoners prior to their release from prison, which could assist them in finding accommodation, or finding out about support services that could assist them when they were released. In this chapter, we consider the responses from participants including the range of criticisms about the information, welfare supports and specific programs provided within the prison environment. The chapter also considers positive experiences recounted by participants in terms of services they accessed in prison prior to their release. Most of the participants also provided useful suggestions as to what improvements could be made to better equip persons about to be released, to assist them in securing accommodation and other support services in the community.

Problems in accessing support prior to release

The most common problems and difficulties identified by consultation participants in terms of accessing support and assistance prior to release from prison were:

- lack of access to information about accommodation and support services for prisoners about to be released;
- difficulties in accessing welfare support services in prison;
- inadequate access to training and education courses while in prison;
- inadequate or inappropriate services from Community Offender Support Program centres (COSP).

Lack of access to information for prisoners about to be released

Respondents commonly reported their experiences of little or no information being made available leading up to release, and that they had to be proactive in seeking support, assistance or information, or needing to have some prior knowledge of what’s available. These problems were identified by 19 of the 26 participants.

If you’re a straight release you’re not being released on parole. The correctional authorities virtually don’t want to know about you. It’s sort of out the door, “See you later, don’t come back.”

There’s no information, no nothing... and as soon as they know that you’re not taking your parole, you don’t even get contacted then. You can’t even put in to see anyone.

No, nothing... they said, “look your time’s up here’s your papers, here’s your money and walked me to the gate and they said, “don’t worry, your bed will still be there for you next time...” If they can’t help us at least give us something to steer us in the right direction ... give me some options instead of just saying “no can’t help you, see you later.”

There is nothing for an inmate being released from jail... Your release date comes up, your money’s already there, you go from your cell to the reception room, you put on your civvies you turn around and sign your release papers and then they tell you where to go and pick up your money and off you go out the gate.

Nothing. It was pretty much "Hooroo on your way. Here's the door, sign this, get your money, piss off."

It's a bit easier for people who have the freedom who can walk around and find these things, but when we're inside, we just can't get up in the morning and walk out and find them.

There's no information available, you've got to find it out for yourself.

For one woman, the prospect of having to be proactive to seek out information about helpful support and accommodation services was just too difficult whilst in prison:

In prison I just wanted to shut down. All I wanted was to do my time and get the fuck out of there. Not being humble, I couldn't ask for help. I guess there was some help inside if I wanted it.

The lack of information prior to release was also identified by some community workers.

There is just the disadvantage of being in custody and then being released... a lot of guys don't have a knowledge of services, what they're eligible for and how to access them.

Problems with prison welfare services

An overwhelming majority of participants identified problems in accessing prison welfare services to access information or support prior to release from prison. In total, 22 of the 26 participants identified problems with prison welfare services relating to difficulties and delays in accessing the services, lack of availability of welfare services, and perceptions of incompetence or inefficiency.

Several participants indicated that they found it difficult to get access to prison welfare services:

There's nothing really that you can use as a service in there. Except welfare and that's impossible to see them anyway.

You put in to see welfare. You don't see them for three to four weeks. By the time you see them you're released. I did put in for welfare but I didn't see them. Not once did they come to me. I couldn't even get money put in from my outside bank account...

But every time I go in it's the same thing. I mean some days like when I put in to see welfare or someone, some days I'd be waiting three days and some days it doesn't even happen. They don't even bother to come and see you.

They say there's help and that they can do this and that for you. But the reality of it is you're getting sent from jail to jail, there's waiting lists and at the end of the day all they can really help you with is offer you homeless shelters and boarding houses.

The welfare, they are just overloaded with work - so you can't even get in there to ask them questions pretty much at all and yeah... It has to be something important for you to see them.

Well it is pretty hard to get to see welfare. Like you put a form in, it takes weeks. You've basically got to tell them, like you've just got to keep persisting. You've just got to be persistent you know what I mean, because it goes on priority. Like say it is not an urgent matter like it is not do with your family or something like that, they don't really care. It just takes a while. You've just got to keep putting forms in.

Some participants reported that there was no welfare service available to them in prison.

No, they don't give a fuck, you've got to do it yourself. You've got to try and push them to get help. Like the staff threw me out and I was fucking back on the streets again. After 10 years you know what I mean. What the fuck, they're supposed to help you. They're saying send you to jail, they rehabilitate you. They don't. Some jails don't do fuck all for you.

They didn't contact me until I had about six or eight weeks then they said to me "we haven't got time to stuff around and find addresses because you're getting out soon, you're just going to have to go to COSP and work it out from there."

I wasn't told about anything. So I was basically left to my own demise and I ended up back on skid row again. In the times that I've been going in and out of jail I've never actually come across anyone within the corrective service facilities saying that 'oh we've got this place right for you'.

Nothing. They have got nothing for you and that's coming from the horse's mouth. The only thing welfare done for me was got me here because I told them to ring up here to see if there was a place here for me. It was just my pure luck that I had done it all, that we're here today.

You can't even put in to see anyone. I put in to see welfare and what for? I want to see about getting a place. "No you're not on parole. You're getting out full time. We don't have to find you a place, find yourself one."

These experiences were confirmed by community workers working with people exiting prison into accommodation crisis. Community workers expressed the view that perhaps there were insufficient resources for welfare support within prison.

My understanding and from my experience is that not a lot is done. We get referrals from welfare with inmates thinking we are a housing service when really that's one part of what we do... I think there isn't enough welfare staff to give enough attention to each inmate.

The experiences that I have heard is you get one maybe two visits leading up to your release in which you are trying to sort out options around accommodation and stuff and even then you're not guaranteed anything.

For people who are in minimum or medium prison it just doesn't appear to be a lot of support.

Some of the participants who did see a welfare officer were highly critical of the quality of welfare services provided in prison, expressing frustration about poor quality information provided by welfare staff, negative or judgmental attitudes expressed to prisoners, or not making sufficient effort to assist prisoners awaiting release:

Well, look, they are supposed to have social workers in the prison, which they have and they're getting a job but they don't give out any information. I mean some of them - I don't know how they got their job. I told one of them "you're not looking after me, you have no interest in me, you don't even know what you're talking about" but I couldn't get rid of her.

The welfare system in prison will not do anything but say "see you when you get back". They're supposed to help you find somewhere to live you know...

Welfare? All they can give you is a homeless hotline, that 1800 number if you are not on parole. They pretty much said to me "We're sick of helping people get out of jail, we're sick of helping you from the jail, because when you get out, you just go and use drugs and you just blow it all.... We're tired and sick of helping you, you go do it yourself." So that's what I got out of what they were trying to tell me.

They lock you up and then they throw the key away in the afternoon and they go home. They don't care where, you know. We're going to be homeless when we get out - as long as they get their pay packet.

I said to one of the workers one day "you sit on that side of the desk and say that you care, OK, but your care factor is that big, and you haven't done anything wrong. We have, but until you've been in our shoes, please don't look down on us."

One participant was particularly negative about the support available for prisoners, and the people employed to provide welfare support for prisoners:

They don't give a shit about the blokes in the prison system because they want to treat them like shit. Behind the cameras they want to pull faces at you and say nasty things about you just so as you can keep that hatred going for them which then in turn gives them more victims to stick in their prisons.

While many of the participants were critical of welfare service available in prison, some reported positive experiences with accessing prison welfare services, particularly in relation to facilitating contact with outside organisations and helping to secure accommodation upon release. While some of the reported positive experiences appear to contradict the criticisms referred to above, it should be noted that the accounts reflect the experiences and perceptions of individual prisoners, which may vary considerably. In addition, even where participants reported positive experiences in accessing prison welfare, some of this was qualified with the rider that the support did not actually meet the participant's need at the time.

They've always... like social workers and that have always helped me... they helped me get accommodation.

Prison welfare officers, who are employed by Corrective Services, they're helpful. They'll chase up crisis accommodation facilities for you but nevertheless you've virtually got to source out crisis accommodation on that very day that you're released because as you know yourselves, you can't book ahead.

Through welfare. Welfare and parole... they rang them up for me and the lady said she would come out and talk to me about it, fill out the application, see if I get accepted first. Welfare helps you too if you haven't got accommodation... so the service is there.

I did find them sort of helpful, to a degree, but they didn't cover a lot of the aspects of the topics that I wanted to take up with them. Yes they helped me out to a degree.

I know welfare do a lot, as much as they can in the jail system for you - try and go through housing commission... but it's not easy.

I've probably only accessed prisoners' aid once but they still do what they're supposed to do, like accessing your money and funds and that. The prison chaplain is pretty good too.

Yeah, well this time was my last time. So like I was doing a program, the drug program and I was seeing like a social worker at the jail and I asked to see if she could get me accommodation because I'm stuck here. So she had a couple like CRC, Rainbow Lodge, Glebe House, it's like a rehab there. It's accommodation for blokes who get out of jail.

Lack of access to training/courses

Several participants stated that there was not sufficient access to training courses or educational opportunities. Some indicated frustration at only being offered basic courses or programs and not being able to access university courses. Criticisms included not being able to access courses when serving a short sentence, and starting a course only to be reclassified and sent to another prison where the same course was not available.

Some jails it's very hard to get into a course and most of them they will only fund it for basic literacy and basic IT and all those sorts of things. Very hard to do a university degree. I spent two and a half years in jail the first time. I could have finished a degree in that time and I couldn't even get started on it because of the turnover and because you're going to get sent to this jail and this jail they don't want to start people off, start helping them and then a week later they are gone or the person doesn't want to do it. It's very hard. If you were a lifer you will get to do it. Otherwise don't even bother.

Sometimes you go to a jail and you get that comfortable you're doing a course and then next minute it gets hitched you know what I mean. So, really you've got to be stable in a jail where they do run courses because not many jails do run courses.

They usually generally don't do much with you when you're only short term.

There's not that many courses in jail you'd be able to do like I done nothing in New South Wales because they wouldn't offer me nothing because of me time.

The courses in there are really designed to just occupy your time. There's some jails that have courses that will get you out but it's few and far between

Some were also critical of the lack of pre-release or life-skills courses or training to assist reintegration back into the community.

There is absolutely no pre-release courses running in New South Wales anymore... if you wanted to study anything other than two times two don't hold your breath.

This is consistent with the responses from participants in the 2003 study undertaken on behalf of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute by Dr Eileen Baldry, Dr Desmond McDonnell, Peter Maplestone and Manu Peeters, who noted that there was a lack of organisation in the prisons to ensure pre-release information and supports are available for short-term prisoners.²⁸

Community Offender Support Program centres (COSP)

A significant number of participants were highly critical of the Community Offender Support Program centres (COSP). According to CSNSW, a COSP centre is a non-custodial, community-based service where offenders on parole or a community-based order can reside whilst being assisted to obtain suitable, sustainable accommodation and employment.²⁹

The most common criticisms of the COSP centres from consultation participants were that they were too regimented and strict, with the view that they were essentially a jail environment outside of the jail.

COSP was a suck hole program. There is 99 per cent of people who go into it, abuse it and it just doesn't work. It's run by Corrections... it's no different than being in jail, it's right next to the front gates of the jail. You've only just swapped walls.

They helped me get accommodation... Yes COSPs - I find them not very helpful, very negative. They just ask too much like you know what you want to do for the day ... it's just what they expect of you. I just don't think it's constructive enough. It's just too strict, you know.

The COSP houses... they're all run by probation and parole and they're real strict conditions... because you're leaving jail you don't want to go to another place you know where you've got to live under jail conditions, you've got to be in by six o'clock you know and everything like that and when you get released from jail after you've finished your time you just want to get on with your life ...

28 Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), see n 14 above, 24.

29 See Chapter One for more details about the COSP Centres.

The new growth system in corrective services is the COSP housing. They've got 16 or 18 housing units up around the State, which they force parolees to go to. You might as well be in jail. You've got curfews and that sort of stuff and the recidivist rate out of those COSP centres is massive. They're only allowing people to move out of those places if they think it's a suitable address. I won't go there. I'd rather sit in a cell.

Now I've also stayed at a COSP Centre, which is on the prison grounds, it's run along prison services regime, very controlling, very coercive. I got sick and tired of their coercive regime.

Similar sentiments were expressed by some of the community workers who were interviewed:

I have heard of a COSP... that is basically just an extension of the prison where they are meant to be helped with housing and so forth...

What I've heard about them? It is jail out of jail and that's what the clients tell me, yeah.

Other criticisms of COSPs expressed by homeless consumers were that they were difficult to get accepted into, they were located right next to the actual prison and therefore stigmatised residents who were working in the community but returning to live in the COSP centre at the end of the day, that in regional areas, the COSP centre was located a considerable distance from the town making it difficult to travel to and from employment, and that residing in a COSP centre was only a short-term option.

They made these COSP centres but then even then, they picked who they want.

I got out of jail I went to the COSP Centre. Well it's hard because the COSP is at Windsor. To get from the jail to the station there's two buses a day. Otherwise, you're walking 40 minutes to catch another bus to the station or you walk to the station which is an hour and 15 minutes walk. So you're stuck in the middle of nowhere and it's a two-hour train trip to the city. You've got curfews so you've got to factor in the four-hour time travel. It's very hard, you know once you are at the COSP.

I had to walk past the main gate eight to ten times a day and hand my phone in at 8.30, had to be home by six o'clock. I hated it, I really hated it. I felt like I was on day leave because I had to go back every day walk past the gates, see the screws every morning and afternoon and shit like that. Yeah, I don't know how I made it.

But when you go to these COSP Centres, you're labelled straight away. You're a crim. Everyone knows it, "there's a crim."

The problem is that it's only a short term thing and if you've got a long term parole you've got nowhere to go...

Positive experiences with services available in prison

Consultation participants were also asked whether there were services or supports within prison that were helpful for assisting them access accommodation or other post-release support services. A number of consultation participants identified some services and programs available within prison that were considered helpful in securing accommodation on release, and also reintegration back into the community. The main services considered helpful were:

- Prison welfare services (referred to above);
- Services and prisoner support groups visiting prison;
- Work release programs.

Services visiting prison

Several participants indicated that they found the most positive and effective strategy for preparing for leaving prison is having external welfare services, support services or accommodation services visiting prison and assisting in case-planning for release and reintegration into the community. Some particular services that visited prison to facilitate access to post-release support were Community Restorative Centre (CRC), church-based prisoner support, Prison fellowship and the Connections Program.

CRC is a NSW community organisation that provides support to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families and friends. The services offered include counselling, accommodation, a subsidised transport service, a court support service, outreach to prisons, and information, advice and referrals.³⁰

Prison fellowship is a faith-based organisation that provides spiritual and practical support to prisoners and their families.³¹

The Connections Program operates in all adult Correctional Centres in NSW, and is administered by Justice Health, a Statutory Health Corporation established under the Health Services Act (NSW) 1997 and funded by NSW Ministry of Health. It is a voluntary program and aims to improve continuity of care for prisoners with histories of problematic drug use who are being released into the community. A comprehensive assessment is completed and a post-release plan is developed with clients prior to their release.³²

I got assistance through CRC. Yes they helped me with my housing post release from a jail sentence, about six months prior to my release. Yeah it's great.

We had visits from Centrelink representatives and they had Department of Housing representatives and that was basically it.

CRC contacted me and they came out to the jail. They spoke to me for about maybe five times and I put the application in and I got accepted and I pretty much got in straight away at the CRC house. I didn't have any problems finding a place. So I moved in there.

30 Community Restorative Centre (2 May 2013) <<http://www.crcnsw.org.au/>>.

31 Prison Fellowship Australia (2 May 2013) <http://www.prisonfellowship.org.au/aboutus_83_1.html>.

32 No Bars – Supporting drug and alcohol services to work with criminal justice clients (2 May 2013) <<http://www.nobars.org.au/criminal-prisons-community-offender.html#connections>>.

The Connections they're massive. Connections is big man. If they are in jail - someone get to the jails and let them know to get a hold of Connections like go through welfare and just say I wish to make appointment to speak to Connections. They are great man.

There's a pastor - he's got something going on with the Department of Houso so I contacted him about six months before I got out - if I needed a place and he said he'd sort something out. He helps people, families.

Like I done church, it's called - It's run by people with all churches and they go from jail to jail helping people out and they are probably the best people I have ever meet. Prison fellowship that's it.

Well I met a woman from Connections in jail and they were helpful. Got me a Medicare card whatnot. They rang Edward Eagar but I already knew that Edward Eagar just accepts you - you've got to turn up.

Work release

Some participants were very positive about work release programs that were available in prison, and how such programs assisted reintegration in the community.

I thought it would just be wonderful to come and help somebody out. I think my situation is bad but it's nothing compared to some of these people in here where I worked. And you just need someone that wants to understand and give you that break. Give you that opportunity to prove yourself. It makes the world of difference. When I went back after working, the others would say "Have a look at you, look how happy you are."

In Stage 2, you can get a job, a proper job. It's fantastic.

What would have helped pre-release

During the consultation interviews, some participants expressed opinions about the services and assistance which they consider would have helped them settle back into the community if they had been available prior to release. Some of the common themes that were expressed included:

- pre-release courses, particularly those which provide some training in basic living skills;
- better networking between staff of CSNSW and non-government organisations that provide accommodation and support services in the community;
- the need for more written information to be provided to prisoners about to be released;
- more visitors from community organisations and advocates to meet with prisoners about to be released.

Pre-release courses and life skills training

Several participants stated that they would have benefited from being able to attend courses and workshops which provided basic information about living skills, how to set up a home, how to budget, how to access essential services such as housing, social security and how to adjust to life in the community.

Well I think even more programs in jail I think. Not programs but mini skill things... like living skills. A month before you are due to get out go and... they should have a course or something that says you go once a week or something for that where you sit there for a couple of hours and you can go through things and even allow you to make phone calls.

Workshops. Information and basic - like broken down, like basic. To get help with restocking your house.

Run courses for blokes so they can get out and adapt outside... just trying to adapt outside so you communicate with other people.

The need to equip people about to be released from prison with living skills was recognised by one of the community workers interviewed:

I feel like that what they really need is someone to hold their hand and do it with them and to start making those calls before they leave prison and really linking them up properly and even if the support worker goes to different things with them, to show them that it is not scary, it's easy - someone to go shopping with them, to learn those skills of how to buy food at the supermarket.

I think it's great that they can do courses in prison, I have heard that they can do courses that are helpful but they are not life skills; they might get them a job but that's not what is the foundation of living. The foundation of living is to have a roof over your head and food in your fridge and just the basic stuff.

Better networking between Corrective Services and non-government support services

Several participants identified the need for better case-planning in preparation for exiting prison, where staff of CSNSW start networking and communicating with relevant non-government accommodation and support services in the community, well in advance of a prisoner's release, to identify the most appropriate support services for a person about to exit the prison system, and facilitate effective case-planning and ongoing support for the person. This would be particularly useful for longer-term prisoners. However, for prisoners on short sentences and those on remand, exit-planning and continuous case management are more difficult to facilitate.

Like it has got to be done from jail... because if you are out on the street that's it. It is hard to do it on your own. You need to do it before you get out because you are in a structured environment there you know what I mean. If you can get something similar before you get out it would be much easier...

So it's really up to the jails, they've got to fucking start pulling their finger out and start putting things out there for the blokes out there. Because a lot of the blokes I'd be talking to like meself they really haven't got no support out here sometimes. It's sad.

This need was also identified by some of the community workers who were interviewed. They particularly mentioned that there needs to be more welfare support staff working in prisons to enable effective exit case plans for people being released from prison.

They need to really be able to link in with outside agencies and have some relationship building and across a whole lot of different services so that they can really prepare these clients for release. I know they do the stuff around Connections and the health with the methadone but it just doesn't go far enough. We just need more positions and more money for more positions inside to be able to link people.

I think that exiting prisoners to homeless services really shouldn't happen, you know. Some work needs to be done while they are in prison you know to exit them to somewhere appropriate where there's support, and people able to help them.

I think the intervention needs to happen in jail... intervention before the client exits jail. This needs to happen before they exit rather than the client is exited and then they call Homeless Persons or they are on the street and you know nothing is available to them. I think the intervention needs to happen you know at least a couple of months before they leave prison, yeah.

Provision of more published information about support services

Given what was said by participants about the lack of information and publications accessible in prison, it was not surprising that several participants indicated that more could be done in terms of information provision for people about to be released:

A list of places where people can go that haven't got family to back 'em up or anything like that you know. As I said with me with parole it was either a COSP house or the Matthew Talbot. They were the only two options I was given. I tried all the COSP houses but they all knocked me back because of my extensive criminal history and some of the charges that I've been on.

I think the jail should actually start doing something like that. Put notices up on the walls and just stop the young fellows coming into the jail who've been kicked out of their homes at 18 years old or something. I think just getting notices up on the boards and that.

I reckon having more pamphlets about boarding houses or accommodation. There needs to be more readily available for you or being able to talk to welfare a bit more about what was going on with the jail, like with getting out and so forth.

Yeah, there needs to be more signage in the jail, you know what I mean. Like signs and that. Like if anyone's having troubles getting out or drug problems and that, have a sign on the wall or something, like a notice saying if you need somewhere to live, they can see it up on the wall and that. Then they can go from there.

Visitors from community organisations and advocates

Some participants identified that what would be really helpful for people about to be released is being visited by official agencies, and supportive advocates or welfare workers who could assist with setting up the necessary support structures and deal with particular issues prior to the person being released.

So you get people to go in there and say “you got a three year sentence, you do two, to two and a half, we might be able to help you get a bangle, if you do the right thing by the system, while you’re in there, we will help you fight for your children, and we will help you with accommodation, and we will help you with their school, and we’ll have somebody here to meet you and take you shopping, and get you back into the environment.” I think it would be very helpful for a lot of people.

Where the services actually come into the jail and you can actually go there and ask them questions like - RTA, state debt, I think. CRC used to come, Legal Aid.

Somebody from the outside that’s gonna reassure you as well. Because once you walk out that gate, they don’t give a shit.

Summary

During the consultation interviews, participants were asked about what information or assistance was made available prior to their release from prison, which could assist them in finding accommodation, or finding out about support services that could assist them when they were released. Participants identified a range of difficulties in trying to access information and welfare support while in prison in preparation for their release. Some participants made comments about the sorts of services they accessed in prison that they found useful. Participants also offered some suggestions for improvements in the provision of information and welfare support to people awaiting release, which could assist them in accessing accommodation and other useful support services in the community.

Common problems identified by participants regarding services and information within prison regarding accommodation and post-release support included:

- lack of access to information about accommodation and support services for prisoners about to be released.
- difficulties in accessing welfare support services in prison.
- inadequate access to training and education courses while in prison, particularly life skills training to assist reintegration into the community.

Several participants were highly critical of Community Offender Support Program centres (COSPs). The most common criticisms were that COSPs still, essentially, provided a prison environment, with prison like policies, strict regimes and practices that did not emulate life ‘outside’ and did not promote reintegration into the community. In addition, COSPs were criticised as offering only a short-term, temporary option, that did not often lead to long term accommodation, often only available for particular types of prisoners, usually too remote from community centres (being located on prison grounds), and as being controlled by prison staff.

Positive experiences of services accessed in prison prior to release were recounted by some participants. While many of the participants were critical of welfare services available in prison, some were quite positive and appreciative of the welfare services made available to them in prison and how they assisted in accessing accommodation and other support services upon release. Other participants were positive about support services and official organisations visiting prisons and providing assistance services and commencing case-

management services for people about to be released. In addition, the work release program was also endorsed as a positive program, which helps prepare people for release into the community.

Common themes from participants regarding possible improvements included:

- more welfare support within prison;
- improved case planning, exit planning and networking with non-government support services in the community;
- increased availability of life skills training and educational courses within prison;
- increased availability of written information in prison about available support and accommodation services in the community; and
- more visitors from community organisations and advocates to meet with prisoners about to be released.

Chapter Four

Problems finding accommodation post-release

"I keep on doing me time over and over again. I've served me debts to society but I keep on doing it, keep on serving time."

- Consultation participant No. 008

During the interviews, participants were asked about where they spent their first night after being released, where they stayed immediately after being released from prison and where they were currently residing. For nearly all participants, stepping out of prison meant stepping straight into some form of homelessness, whether it be sleeping rough, couch surfing with friends or family, or trying to find some form of temporary accommodation.

During the consultation interviews, when they were asked about the difficulties and problems they faced trying to find somewhere to live, most participants also provided specific comments relating to accessing housing and accommodation after leaving prison. This chapter considers these responses as well, giving particular attention to barriers and difficulties in accessing accommodation.

Accommodation immediately after release from prison

Over one-third of the participants said that they spent their first night after release from prison "sleeping on the streets", "in a park", or some other form of primary homelessness. The remaining participants gave answers that indicated a form of secondary homelessness (staying with friends or family, couch surfing, short-term emergency or temporary accommodation, supported accommodation) or tertiary homelessness (medium-term transitional accommodation, boarding house accommodation).

Sleeping rough

Nine of the 26 participants indicated that they "slept rough" or were "on the streets" the first night after being released from prison. Each of these nine participants who slept rough was one of the 14 participants who had been released after a short prison sentence (less than 12 months) or remand.

I just got out of prison three weeks ago so... I was on the street for about a week. Then I rang up the homeless people and they sent me here. I wasn't quite happy being on the street, no...

Basically when I first came out the last time I was on the street, yes. I had to spend two weeks sleeping rough, so I did until there was a bed available, and then when the bed became available, I snapped it up.

I've been sleeping in the belly of friggling Moreton Bay fig trees and stuff, fending off possums and rats in the middle of the night. Because I've just got nowhere to go.

Some participants found accessing accommodation on the first night impractical, or arrangements for accommodation broke down and could not be remedied given the lateness of the hour.

Mission Australia arranged for motel accommodation and somewhere along the line it was stuffed up so the first night I slept on a park bench. I jumped on the train and by the time my train journey ended at night and by the time I walked up to the motel from Parramatta station I was told there was no booking there.

When I got out I was up the North Coast and I got out at 10.30pm at night. They dropped you at the station. You're on your own... I eventually got back to Sydney. I got here and I was just ringing the Homeless Persons Line. It was over Christmas.

For some, living rough continued for a considerable time following their release from prison.

And when I got out I was on the streets, I lived on the streets for about a year went to all these places for help, not interested in helping, you know, and I told them my circumstances, and that and they said no, I'm not interested. There's nothing we can do for you.

I actually lived in a van. I had a little van and I just lived rough in the van - accessed here for showers and meals and that sort of thing, but then I wrote off the van and I've been sleeping outside rough since.

Staying with family or friends, couch surfing

Six of the 26 participants indicated that following their release from prison they went to stay either with friends or family in the short-term, until they could sort out their ongoing accommodation. For one person this was not a positive option as it led him back into substance abuse and placed him at risk of further offending.

And a friend just sort of popped up... Bob. Bumped into Bob and he'd just moved from Edward Eagar to Campsie so he offered me, you know, stay there over the night... I bumped into Bob, which was not good. And like I said my mindset I didn't know where I was going to end up. Going to the homeless line and I still had - with the same clothes on, it was just all a bit much and I said "yeah sure I'll go to your place" and from there used drugs and pretty much spent all my money.

I stayed with some friends around the western suburbs area and had to go through the process of going back through the Department of Housing and refuges and boarding places

Yeah on someone's couch, spare mattress on the floor...

Some of these participants indicated that their first night after being released was at the residence of a family member. This is consistent with the responses reported in Chapter Five, where participants with family support recognised the advantage they had as compared to those without such support.

Like when I had stayed out before I just got on the drug court program I was staying with the sisters and it was just really uncomfortable for me.

I stayed with Mum for two days then I went and I stayed with friends. Then, the lease was up and I was at a loss again.

Temporary and supported accommodation

Eight of the participants indicated that they went straight into temporary or supported accommodation following their release. However, as discussed below, these options usually proved to be only temporary or short-term solutions, merely delaying their time of sleeping rough.

They'll chase up crisis accommodation facilities for you but nevertheless you've virtually got to source out crisis accommodation on that very day that you're released because as you know yourselves, you can't book ahead.

I am currently living here at Edward Eagar. I got out of jail I went to the COSP centre. I was there for about four or five weeks and then came here... So it's very hard to get an address in jail you know if you haven't got support outside, someone trying to find it for you, or to help you or whatever. So basically you're either going to end up at a COSP or you're going to end up in a homeless shelter for support.

I had my own room to start with but then when I had to move out to move back in, you go into a dormitory style. I can't stand that. I mean I don't mind sleeping on the street but not in a dormitory style.

I'll tell you what it is. I came here, I came from prison to here, to the Matthew Talbot and I lived here for about three months, and since then I've lived out on the streets

Post-release accommodation for some was related to their alcohol or substance abuse, and was supported, though still temporary.

I'm in a drunk tank, semi-resident. Prior to that I was on the streets for the last five months or so. Well what can I say? Here I am in the drunk tank. I've got nowhere to go. It's just overnight accommodation. You get in there about six o'clock in the evening. You have to have alcohol on your breath. And you're thrown out by nine o'clock the next morning. You're sick as a dog. You're shaking like a mongrel because you're so crook from the grog. So bang, I would go look for another drink. Just so I was - in the hope that I can stay drunk enough during the day so as I can get back into the tank that night. It's a fucking revolving door.

The first day I stayed at the O'Brien Centre, up at St Vincent's Hospital. They're not too bad. I had to go because I was on a community treatment order.

Transitional accommodation

Two participants reported that they went straight into transitional accommodation after release from prison.

I got out of jail. CRC took me on this time when I got out.

Difficulties finding accommodation

During the consultation interviews, participants were asked about experiences in relation to trying to find accommodation when they came out of prison, and specifically what problems they faced when trying to find somewhere to live. The main problems that were encountered by participants were:

- the lack of social housing, problems with Housing NSW, and frustration negotiating processes and procedures to access social or community housing;
- lack of availability of short-term and crisis accommodation;
- inability to afford private rental or boarding house accommodation;
- being denied accommodation on the basis of criminal record or having recently been in prison;
- the temporary nature of most accommodation options for ex-prisoners;
- not having proof of identification;
- inflexible parole conditions;
- lack of support services, in particular for people not on parole.

Lack of social housing/problems with Housing NSW

The most commonly reported difficulties regarding trying to find stable accommodation after release from prison concerned difficulties experienced with Housing NSW (identified by 13 of the 26 participants). Of these, the most common problem was the difficulty in securing priority housing, and the lack of social housing stock to meet the demand.

So I've had to register and go on the so called priority housing list. I've been told it's the list that doesn't move. So I've been placed here on a three month maximum stay here and if I don't have an address in the three months I get revoked.

Housing seem to want to put you in a situation where you have no resort but to go and rely on refuges and guest houses and that, to try and get back into society. So it makes it a little bit rough.

At the end of the day unless you're going to walk into Department of Housing and get housing straight away, you've basically got homeless shelters and boarding houses.

I have been on the Department of Housing list for eleven and half years. Eleven and a half years and I'm still waiting... I've lost count of how many times I've rang them up and you know they just seem to say the same old thing. You've just got to wait until your time comes up.

For some, the problems with Housing NSW concerned a failure in administration, mistakes about moneys owed to them, inflexibility in applying housing policies about contacting them, or updating current addresses (even when moving from place to place at regular intervals) and thereby losing priority status.

I went to Housing after I got out of jail. Filled out an application form. But when I got out of jail I found I owed them fifteen hundred odd dollars, which I queried and I had to chase all that down. That took a fair while... and they won't do anything for you while you owe them money irrespective of whether you do owe it to them or not. They just wipe you and I kept going back every couple of days.

But a transitional centre I was at Housing came to see me there. I went on a priority housing listing and because I didn't make it to two appointments - I couldn't get there. I notified them. They bumped me to a regular waiting list and on my release I had nowhere to go.

I didn't notify them of every couch I went to sleep on so they sent me a survey apparently which I had never received and they took me off the waiting list without notifying me. So it's been hell trying to stay on the waiting list and trying to keep rent paid, being sick.

Houso I don't find very helpful. Some people just get through it just like that. Other people do the same thing and use the same attitude but you just don't get nowhere. And it's bullshit. I mean like even though I am priority housing every time I go to jail I get put right back at the end of the line again. I reckon it's pretty unfair

A couple of participants suggested that Housing NSW should be more proactive in providing assistance to prisoners awaiting release, ascertaining what their current status was in terms of eligibility for priority, or whether there were moneys outstanding.

Housing should have been in jails and talking to people seeing what their situation was.

I reckon housing should help them a bit more... They don't actually help you and that's why a lot of the people come back to jail because they don't get help before they get out.

Lack of availability of short-term and crisis accommodation

Nearly half of the participants interviewed expressed concern and frustration about the lack of short-term and crisis accommodation, and the inability to access such accommodation following release from prison.

The problem was we rung them on the day of my release and the worker goes "Yes, we've got a bed here", but by the time I got back down to Sydney they said "No, the bed's been filled" and they couldn't put a hold on the bed.

There was no accommodation, no beds anywhere. This is the last place. So I took it.

They say ring back at ten o'clock. By the time I rung up at ten o'clock they tell me everywhere's full. You know at 10 o'clock so I tried ringing at nine o'clock you know and they told me the same thing everywhere's full, you know. So what time do you really have to ring to get accommodation?

I pretty much went down to the Matthew Talbot at Woolloomooloo but they were full. I checked out all the other homeless men shelters in town. They were all chock-a-block full. So I ended up down at Knudsen Place which is another drunk tank. I woke up the next morning and I was still in the same dilemma. I had nowhere to go.

The shortage of crisis accommodation beds was identified by four of the community workers who were interviewed as well.

There is a glaring lack of transitional accommodation. Guys being released into homelessness is something that is happening across the board in NSW and is one of the reasons why our project began, identifying that gap and trying on a smaller scale, trying to do something to address it.

[You] live on the streets until you get that accommodation or if you are lucky enough you might have a mate and you can sleep on their couch until you get accommodation. But it can be a very stressful situation from what I have observed.

Accommodation - the limit on crisis accommodation beds... the shortage of crisis accommodation beds would be another one.

We feel it all the time with all of our guys is that they come out and they've got nowhere to go, limited amount of temporary accommodation. Boarding houses or short-term crisis places are traditionally a place that has wound them back into trouble... Finding sustainable accommodation I think has been a massive trouble for nigh on all of our guys.

Inability to afford private rental or boarding house accommodation

For 11 participants, the lack of affordability of boarding house and private rental accommodation was a major barrier in seeking to secure accommodation post release. Exiting prison with limited financial resources, and concerns that the crisis payment from Centrelink was inadequate to cover rent and basic expenses, were commonly identified factors in this problem. This is consistent with the 2004 qualitative study by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) with ex-prisoner clients of agencies funded under the then Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).³³

I was given \$240 on release and that was to last a fortnight. I had to book in there the first night, which cost me \$50. I had to come here the next day and book in here again which cost me \$249.50. Obviously you can see there's a shortfall of \$50 odd, \$60 to begin with... plus in between time I had to catch trains and all those sort of things, you know what I mean. That immediately puts the pressure on, especially on a newly released inmate, to reoffend.

I can't afford to even look anywhere because I've got a bad drug habit... but as far as going to try and get housing and things like that it's hard because by the time you get paid and you just can't budget. You can't do anything.

33 Willis, Matthew (2004), see n 14 above, 127-128.

Well you don't really have the money to look for anywhere. You know, you're on the dole. I mean as soon as you get out you get half a cheque and then two weeks later you get another half a cheque, and then two weeks after that you finally get your full cheque, so you're very limited. You've got no clothes. Like when I got out I had no clothes, no shoes, nothing. So I had to take all those things into account. Straight away you've got the financial problem of where do you live...

Epecially when you are going to get out with \$340, I mean how do they expect you to live on that and get accommodation. Come on, that's just ridiculous, know what I mean, and you've got that for three weeks until your next full cheque. Come on I mean look at the rent these days.

I didn't get no money at all when I came out. All I had was a train ticket to Sydney. I should have had a full cheque there. This is 10.30pm at night... two days later I went and they gave me a \$200 advance which they ended up taking back off me in my next cheque anyway so I only ended up with \$300 to last me a fortnight. That's three weeks with no money...

One community worker who was interviewed recognised that being released without sufficient financial support to secure immediate accommodation can result in a prisoner being released to sleep rough.

If you're released with no money and they've got no money, if they can't pay for their accommodation they're on the street... I suppose, yeah, money is a huge factor.

Discrimination on the basis of criminal record or having recently been in prison

Several participants indicated that after being released from prison, they had been refused accommodation when the provider found out about their previous criminal record or the fact that they had recently been in prison. For some participants, the discrimination was obvious, while for others they perceived that the demeanour and attitude of boarding house proprietors and real estate agents immediately changed as soon as they were forthcoming about their recent criminal history.

Even I find just people look at me and judge me by the appearance. They see tattoos and stuff like that and a lot of people just don't want nothing to do with you... you can't tell them I've been in jail for the last 12 months. They wouldn't have a bar of you. They'd just automatically judge you.

Whether it's boarding houses or whether it's studio apartments I tend to be very forthcoming with that kind of information... Not only could I see the demeanour of the person change immediately, but it is almost like their attention span shortened, their focus shifted. It was obvious to me that my application went to the bottom of the list.

Well I firstly went to all the boarding houses that I know of and they've asked me where I've been and where I've been living and I said I just got out of jail. As soon as I say I got out of jail their whole manner changes, don't want to know me, shut the door in my face...

And I found out the one big flaw being an ex con in getting accommodation was the references... They don't want to sit down and look at you and all of a sudden they see you with wires and a ball and chain and arrows.

The community workers who were interviewed also identified this as a barrier for people exiting prison. However, they also noted that some of the discrimination and prejudice experienced by this group of people happens at a more subtle level, and sometimes also at the hands of general homeless service providers.

One of the major challenges is the prejudice of other services in regards to this client group. Really not understanding the trauma that prison has on people, not to mention the trauma that they have experienced prior to getting there and which got them there in the first place. So a lot of it is around attitudes and the lack of understanding of other services to my clients.

The way that some guys present sometimes is also an issue. I think there are barriers that are put up against guys just by virtue of them being difficult to talk to which is not always the case but there's, I guess, a stigma attached to that as well.

Temporary nature of most accommodation options for ex-prisoners

Several consultation participants expressed frustration that the only accommodation options after their release were temporary, and that this merely postponed the problem of finding safe, secure, stable accommodation. Most of the participants who identified this problem indicated that they did not know what they were going to do after the period of their temporary accommodation expired. For some, this type of accommodation merely served as a delay in returning to the streets.

It's 12 weeks maximum so I got about 4, 5, 6 weeks something like that left. I don't know what I am going to do at the moment. I am not sure. I am just trying to get this ID so I can get a job and try and save some money, get a studio apartment, a cheap studio apartment. I don't want to live in a boarding house. It's just too depressing

See, I've only basically just stayed in places like Matthew Talbot or Edward Eager, until I can get established, back on my feet again to get back in society. But these sort of places are only like short term and it makes it a lot harder having to get back into society when you've only got a short amount of time to deal with.

Basically the only option I had was to go to the Department of Housing and they offered me five days accommodation at a hostel. And then you basically have five days and when that runs up you go back down and you get an extension, and that lasts for 28 days. And that's all.

Yes so it's really disconcerting trying to work out if you're staying here for a little while.

The temporary nature of most accommodation options for a person exiting prison was also identified by one of the community workers interviewed.

It becomes an ongoing struggle and, I mean the housing issue is one that we all face, and a lot of guys are just sitting in transitional places waiting for a permanent tenancy somewhere. Sometimes they are waiting for years and years and the nature of transitional places is that it needs to be supported.

Difficulties and frustration negotiating processes to secure accommodation

Several participants also voiced their frustration in dealing with government and non-government agencies in their efforts to access services to assist them in securing accommodation. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, fragmented systems, officious front-desk staff at agencies, complex documentation to complete and requests to provide additional information not previously asked for, were all sources of frustration and anxiety for consultation participants.

I find the hardest part if a bloke is coming out is getting the paperwork together and getting it all sorted out. The time it takes. They come out of jail, you need four walls and roof over your head. Then you're told you got to trot back down to Centrelink to get this, or trot over there to get that. There is no central location... the information is fragmented and when you finally get that bit of information then you find that I've got to get this but it's somewhere else and you've got to trot off over there... and you spend a half hour trotting down there, waiting in line because the line's busy by the time you get there. There's three hours gone. So by the time you get back to Housing and that's not quite the right form, so you've got to trot back. So it takes you literally, to do an hour's work it takes you about 20 hours to get an hour's proper work done. It's just walking, talking, waiting and all that. It's a very unproductive system for people, and it's very frustrating.

I mean it seems wherever I go it seems to be a dead end. I seem to hit a dead end. Every single time. At the moment I've just given up because I am so frustrated and like I am trying to control my temper and it's very, very frustrating...

Just getting it together. It took me about five to six weeks to get everything back together again to sort it out... It's really frustrating. It took me weeks to sort that out.

They reckon they've got all these contacts. I went into housing to get a T number or whatever it's called... every time I'd go in there and ask them what I needed they give me something else they'd never tell me in one go you need this, this and this... I sort of get frustrated when I need to speak officially to someone because I don't speak the way they speak. I speak what I think and it starts to frustrate me because I can't get me point across.

Community workers were also sensitive to the frustration experienced by their clients who had recently exited prison when trying to navigate bureaucratic processes, and being uncertain as to what services are provided by particular agencies.

On the front line I mean it's met with frustration and you know people wondering what we're doing if we're not providing housing, and yeah it is met with disappointment, frustration. It's hard...

Lots of barriers in regards to the process. For example having to fill in this form and then... things like that for the paperwork in regards to Pathways. I know there are ways around that but I think clients need help to navigate that system, and that is just one small thing... It can be overwhelming.

Not having proof of identification

For some consultation participants, not being able to arrange appropriate identification prior to their release from prison proved to be a source of difficulty in accessing social security payments, employment and accommodation.

Okay I was released with no identification, nothing. Again without being able to get access to any other money through Centrelink, which I went and saw and they brushed me - I had to have the right identification.

Now today I had to go and get ID through RTA. There's nothing in the world could stop that being done online, on computer through Corrective Services, so that when you are released there's an RTA identification supplied to you.

What would have helped me before I got out is if I had have been able to get photo ID and all those sorts of things. I've been out for three months and I'm still trying to get photo ID. Things like that. Opening a bank account. All these simple things that would have enabled me to get out and get straight into a job. But yet I got out of jail with no ID, nothing and I'm still trying to get ID. I can't get a job without photo ID.

Inflexible parole conditions

Several participants recounted difficulties when they were subject to inflexible parole conditions, either on previous occasions when they had been released from prison, or following their most recent sentence, during the period of their parole.³⁴ The lack of stable accommodation presented as a barrier for getting released on parole, often forcing them into unsatisfactory accommodation options such as COSPs, temporary accommodation, or crisis accommodation, placing them in situations where they were at risk of re-offending. One participant indicated that during his last term of imprisonment, his preference was to complete his full sentence and not have to deal with probation and parole.

The problem is parole won't let you out unless you've got a stable address. So it's very hard to get an address in jail, you know, if you haven't got support outside, someone trying to find it for you, or to help you or whatever. So basically you're either going to end up at a COSP or you're going to end up in a homeless shelter for support.

34 At the time of the interviews, no participant indicated that they were still on parole.

And parole service is a joke because everyone that gets out on parole right they're normally got to have somewhere to live before you can get granted parole. That's why the last time I said "no I don't want parole, you can have it. I'll just do me full time."

So they give them parole if they've got a family to go to but if they haven't got a family to go to they'll give 'em parole but they'll put 'em in a half way house and then as soon as the parole's finished you go. And they say "Oh you've got to find yourself a place before".

One participant expressed that in relation to a previous sentence, the fact that he had stable accommodation available through an offer of social housing from Housing NSW was not considered satisfactory for his parole conditions. Housing NSW was unwilling or unable to make an alternative offer in another location. Accordingly, his release on parole was denied.

I've been on housing lists for 30 years. I've had one offer, that was about seven or eight years ago and probation and parole had that knocked on the head. They didn't want me to be in Redfern.

Some participants indicated that in the past they had been released on parole on the condition that they reside in a particular service that provided temporary or supported accommodation. However, when they arrived at the service, they were informed that there were no beds available, leaving them no option but to sleep rough, placing them immediately in breach of their parole accommodation conditions. For others, once the period of temporary accommodation expires, unless there is suitable and approved medium-term accommodation to move to, they are also at risk of being in breach of their parole conditions.

I came through this place through jail the last time through my probation and parole officer at Silverwater Jail... they were full up when I first applied so I had to spend two weeks sleeping rough. Because I was on parole I was trying to get off the street, get into accommodation, because of my parole conditions. I didn't want to get breached.

One of the community workers interviewed also indicated that the unstable and temporary nature of housing and accommodation options for people leaving prison often results in breaches of parole. The inflexibility of some accommodation conditions for people released on parole can mean that they are forced to stay in over-crowded conditions with family members, which may place them at risk of re-offending.

A huge, huge number of breaches because of the lack of stability that housing provides for people.

Yes, or paroled to a particular accommodation which just passes as acceptable accommodation and then they need respite from that accommodation for a weekend, so they might go and stay at an auntie's for a weekend without letting parole know. But that is the best thing for the actual client to be able to get some respite from that place and gives them enough breathing room... It may not be perfect, it may not be the perfect housing situation either, but it is respite from the overcrowding they may be experiencing where they have been paroled to.

Lack of services/lack of supports

Problems were also identified by one consultation participant, and several community workers, regarding the lack of suitable support services and agencies for people exiting prison, particularly those who are not on parole, or who exit prison from remand.

You know so, because you're not on parole you're not a statistic... you are finished, you're finishing they don't need you because you're not on parole. If I was on parole and out here they would have a house for me. There's people here that have been out and on parole for three months and have got houses... I have done 30 odd years of jail you can't get a start because they're just digging their head in the sand.

Community workers identified gaps in support available for people who are released from prison either from remand or after completing their full sentence. Issues identified included a lack of transitional accommodation, a lack of adequate exit-planning prior to release, lack of support to continue drug rehabilitation and a lack of appropriate support services.

For people who aren't being released on parole there is nothing.

I have also heard plenty of stories of guys that have been released from a rural correctional, given a train fare to get to the city and that's it. Yeah, so there seems to be a lack of support services, planning and resources for these guys.

It's like they have already been in a facility and they have been discharged without having an adequate exit plan for them back into the community so people are coming here, they have no methadone but they have been on methadone while they were in prison, but they have no prescriptions for that. So we have to rush out to get them prescriptions. I know staff who have pulled the money out of their own pockets to pay for methadone because they can't get a free prescriber – that takes time to get onto the free prescribers. So, yeah, just kind of lack of services.

There is nothing set up there for where they go and especially if there are crimes and the reason they're in prison is related to their homelessness, it is just going to be a cycle and they're going to end up back in there.

One community worker reported that the lack of services for people exiting prison can occur as a result of a person's particular history with some agencies, in which violent, aggressive or otherwise inappropriate behaviour has resulted in some services placing strict conditions on whether that person can return to the service.

I would say if they've had history with other services - that would be one of the main reasons why services won't take a client is because they have had history and it would be around violence and aggression. For example, I recall years ago we had a client who accessed the service and he was under the influence of alcohol at the time but also he was mentally unwell and he wasn't open to any sort of help, and he trashed the place one day and then when the prisons start to refer him to us we said "We'll have to sit down and work out a management plan with the client". So we said "No, until you're willing to work with us, then there is not much we can do to work with you".

Loss of previous accommodation

For one participant, having stable accommodation prior to being imprisoned, and then losing that accommodation and all his belongings after expecting that it would still be available for him upon his release, caused further difficulty upon release, creating a sense of having to start all over again.

I had a private rental before that, before jail. I went and paid my rent on the Thursday, went to Court on the Friday then got locked up because I didn't think I was going to get locked up. Anyway from jail I got in contact with him. He reckoned he was going to save my stuff and store it and then rent it out again. After Edward Eagar, I rang him and he pretty much might've well told me he threw my stuff out.

A similar experience was recounted by one of the community workers interviewed.

You know I am working with a client now who was housed five or six years ago, four days later was arrested and did eight months, lost his property, ended up homeless again. Here we are six years later going through the same process.

Summary

Over one-third of the participants indicated some form of primary homelessness immediately after their release from prison. Other common responses included staying with friends or family, couch surfing, short-term emergency or temporary accommodation, supported accommodation, medium-term transitional accommodation, and boarding house accommodation. This is not surprising given that the focus of this consultation was on people who either were currently experiencing homelessness, or had recently experienced some form of homelessness.

Participants provided specific comments relating to barriers to accessing stable housing and accommodation after leaving prison. The most commonly identified problems included: difficulties accessing public housing, lack of availability of short-term or crisis accommodation, unaffordability of private rental and boarding house accommodation and being discriminated against because of their recent prison experience. This is consistent with previous research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2004 with ex-prisoner clients of SAAP services.

Participants also spoke about their frustration dealing with bureaucratic processes, the problems of only being able to access temporary accommodation and the danger this posed in terms of sleeping rough or being in breach of parole after this temporary period expired. Some participants also spoke about the difficulties in opening a bank account, finding employment and securing accommodation stemming from the fact that they left prison without any acceptable proof of identification.

Several participants also spoke about the difficulties in securing accommodation due to inflexible parole conditions, and the fact that often they would end up in breach of their parole conditions as a result of the unavailability of beds in the designated accommodation, or having to leave that accommodation before the end of their parole. Some participants also reported that not being on parole meant that they did not receive any support or assistance in obtaining accommodation on release.

Chapter Five

Problems encountered post-release

“Half the time I just think stuff it. I may as well go do something, go back to jail where I’ve got a bed and I know what the routine is and I know what’s going to happen next. Even though you’re always watching your back you feel safer in there. You come out here not knowing what’s going to happen.”

- Consultation participant No. 013.

During the consultation interviews, participants were asked about difficulties and problems they faced trying to find somewhere to live after they were released from prison. In this chapter, we consider the responses from participants about their experiences regarding the temptation to re-offend, and the underlying reasons for that. The chapter also considers the participants’ responses relating to being disconnected and not fitting in with society upon release: of isolation, of lacking basic living and coping skills, of being exposed to negative and destructive influences that increase the temptation to re-offend, or of having previous criminal activity which they thought had been dealt with resurface unexpectedly. Participants also talked about their fear of violence and harassment. The chapter concludes by considering particular difficulties participants may have experienced in terms of finding employment, or dealing with alcohol or substance addiction.

Recidivism and the risk of reoffending

As indicated in Chapter Two, of the 26 homeless participants in this project, 23 had been to prison on more than one occasion, with several participants indicating that they had spent significant periods of their adult life in prison. During the course of the consultation interviews, a common theme was the difficulty in not reoffending after being released from prison. A total of 14 participants (including three women) articulated how difficult it is to fight against the temptation to commit criminal offences in order to return to prison. Issues of insecurity, lack of money, substance abuse, lack of supports, difficulty finding stable accommodation and fear, were all given as reasons why reoffending to return to prison becomes a viable option for people who have recently been released from prison without stable accommodation.

Yeah I’m a bit institution-alised. I find if I don’t have the support of people around me I’m fucked, I end up back in jail real quick... Like if I didn’t have a place to stay I would have been in jail in a week.

And it’s like, I mean, I think to myself I might as well be back in jail... Well it’s almost like they are setting you up to fail, right.

I’ve been out a month, this is usually how long I’m out for and then I’ll go back in... People don’t understand that. They wonder why we do all this stuff, it’s because we got nothing, you know what I mean. When you haven’t got nothing you’ve got nothing to lose. When you’ve got nothing to lose you don’t care, you know what I mean.

A bloke’s suddenly let out of jail, no money, nowhere to go. He had no idea what to do. He had no home, no clothing, no accommodation, no family support and there is a lot of guys out there, a lot of people... and they’ve got no support. They get out and they are just dumped on the street like a piece of flotsam. What do they do? They commit a crime and go back to jail because at least they get four walls and a roof and a meal.

Only until recently when I was evicted out of my apartment because I was just too sick to pay my rent did I understand how people can reoffend, ... desperation makes you do weird things when you've got nowhere to turn, no money, no food, no home.

I came here and ended up going from here to on the street, you know, just round and round in circles, boarding houses, back to here until I reoffended and ended up using drugs again, back in jail... and this is the third time.

Each of the six community workers interviewed also recognised that the temptation to re-offend and return to prison is a commonly recurring theme for the people with whom they work and to whom they deliver accommodation and support services.

I have a current client I have been working with just recently who now says "I want to go back to prison, I don't have to think for myself. These pressures are too much for me. I have no stability, I don't know whether I am coming or going. I am going to breach. I want to go back."

You know, I think the thing that shocked me is how many people re-offend or feel worthless and not really worthy of living in society.

I have seen people released and re-offend straight away because they were connected with services that weren't appropriate and would rather be back in jail.

These responses are consistent with research that suggests that the immediate period after release is a time of immense stress for prisoners, during which time there is a high risk of the individual reoffending. The first 30 days post-release is considered the most critical time for people exiting prison.³⁵

Finding life difficult on the outside

For many the temptation to re-offend and return to prison was related to difficulties experienced in settling back into the wider community. Some of the particular problems identified by participants included:

- feeling institutionalised and disconnected from the rest of society;
- feeling isolated from friends and community support networks;
- not having basic living and coping skills to settle back into society;
- being exposed to bad influences making re-offending an easy option;

35 See Walsh, Tamara (2006), 'Is Corrections Correcting? An Examination of Prisoner Rehabilitation Policy and Practice in Queensland', *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, (2006) 39(1) 109, 113; Castellano, T.C. and Soderstrom, I.R. (1997), 'Self-esteem, depression and anxiety evidenced by a prison inmate sample: Interrelationships and consequences for prison programming', *The Prison Journal* (1997) 77(3) 259; Larivee, J.J. (2001), 'Returning Inmates: Closing the public safety gap', *Corrections Compendium* (2001) 26(6) 1; Meisel, J.S. (2001), 'Relationships and Juvenile Offenders: The effects of Intensive Aftercare Supervision', *The Prison Journal* (2001) 81(2) 206-245.

- having previous legal and criminal problems resurface unexpectedly;
- feeling unsafe and vulnerable to abuse or harassment;
- being unable to secure employment;
- difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction.

Disconnection from society/Institutionalism

Nearly half of the participants interviewed indicated that once they were released from prison they found it extremely difficult to settle back into society, following the structured and institutionalised environment of prison. For some, the barriers and defences that they have had to establish while in prison are not easily relinquished upon release, resulting in feelings of insecurity, fear, paranoia or despair.

They didn't understand that getting out of jail, even if you've only done a week or a year, you're institutionalised and you're very structured in your way of living and it's hard. You don't know how to ask for something, you know what I mean?

It just makes them want - have to swallow their pride because when we're out and about if we let our weaknesses out, people take advantage of them. The vultures are still out there taking advantage of you... Because I feel so disassociated from society now, it's incredible. I walk down the street and I'm paranoid because I just haven't got anything. I've got no support network.

I've given up. Just given up. I've had enough.

It's a scary world out there and when you've been locked up for so long that your door's locked for you and you're told what to do, ... and your meals are there, and then all of a sudden you're in that big wide world and you don't know where your next meal's coming from or where you're laying down. So it's quite daunting.

You are not adjusted to society... How many times do you get people who have done big laggings that can't conform to society or can't adjust or can't cope, can't function because they have trouble organising their money?

For some people, once they get released, they feel they have to shut down, as they are unable to deal with people, feel nervous around crowds, and find it difficult to accomplish basic tasks like shopping and dealing with day-to-day life.

People that do massive amounts of time have gotta walk out to a whole world that's just gone forward leaps and bounds, and it's very frightening. It is so frightening, and you've got nowhere to go to pull your head in or just have your time ...

I used to get out and I'd shut down. I wouldn't talk to no one because I was too institutionalised. Like I've seen some fucked up things in jail...

The first time I got out, the car nearly made me sick, and then two days later I had to go shopping for the house. I was shaking like a leaf, and I was so scared, I just wanted to get out of there. And technology... I didn't know how to get out of a supermarket. I think people need to be helped with these things.

Apart from being shell shocked, I just couldn't handle crowds and that kind of thing.

Community workers similarly identified the difficulties faced by people when released from prison, in terms of adjusting to a life without the strict routines, structure and regimens, where they are required to cope on their own.

It seems that their needs have been met while they have been in the prison system but then they have come out and we have to find them all those supports all over again. So there are no links then back into other community services.

They're desperate. I think that they're desperate for something, someone to help them... You know I think sometimes people leave prison and they are so happy to have left that it doesn't take long for them to go "Now what?" And that's when we get them usually.

Because they have gone from one certain lifestyle to another lifestyle and it is like black and white almost. They have been in a place where everything is done for them - they are told when to get up, when to sleep, when to shower, when to eat, when to walk, when to talk. It is very routine and then they get let out in the wide world - no routine, no structure, they are not being fed, they are not being housed. Nothing is being provided for them. It is like the mat is just being ripped out from under their feet and they are expected to survive. To me there is a massive, massive chasm between the two.

Isolation and lack of family support

For several consultation participants, there was a strong feeling of isolation after release, often compounded by a lack of family support, loss of contacts with friends, and feeling of not having any other personal support networks to draw upon. For some of these individuals, this sense of isolation was a strong factor in re-offending, with the intention of returning to prison where there was more social interaction and access to support services and networks.

It's only because of drugs and that and not having no family support. Getting out of jail having no help, no nothing and you're going back into the same crime again and you're going back to jail, you know what I mean. It's mainly for support. You need a lot of support. You can't just get out with no support... I've been alone in jail and I've had no one outside to fucking really turn to, you know what I mean. You think "Oh fuck, what am I going to do?"

I've gone from having a family in the last ten years to no family at all and it's through problems on my own.

Many people out there don't, they've hardly got no one to turn to, so you wonder why they're out there on the streets there, and because no one cares about them.

I had no family in the city. People who haven't walked it or haven't lived it just don't understand.

Because when you get out of jail you've got nothing. Who have you got? You've got no-one. A lot of us haven't got family, haven't got friends. You go to jail for a year, all the numbers in my phone they're all different. Everyone's gone, everyone's moved on... I was a mess. I couldn't handle it. You feel so small, so insignificant, you know what I mean.

For some participants, this issue was illustrated by recognising the advantage that they or other people they knew had, by having family support on their release. This often made the sense of isolation for those without family supports even more stark.

So they let me out. You know I can look back on that. I mean I left with two other guys and they had family. Six of them, brothers, sisters, girlfriends whatever and they're all sort of hugging and kissing and I just walk on by, went and handed my cheque in, got my money and went and caught a bus to Parramatta.

Because I was fortunate enough to have a family to come, well my mother picked me up from the transitional centre and I could go home for two days. But if, I wouldn't have a clue how other prisoners would be released if they had no help, no assistance

... a lot of people try to go back to families just because they've got no income or no money behind them when they first get out. They've gotta have some residential address before they can actually exit there...

Lack of living skills and coping skills

As indicated in Chapter Three, several participants expressed the view that there needed to be more training and assistance provided in prison prior to release in regards to basic living skills, to assist people being released to settle back into the community. It was therefore not surprising that one of the commonly expressed difficulties faced by consultation participants was the lack of basic skills and abilities to function in the community. Basic living skills, such as how to shop, how to cook, how to budget, how to find accommodation, how to set up a home, how to think for oneself, how to navigate crowded places, were all identified as major challenges for someone who has been released from the controlled prison environment.

... there's a lot of problems from what I perceive in jail from people coming out and just... you've got four walls and a roof and you sleep on the floor ...

Some people come out, three years in jail this poor bugger is dysfunctional. He doesn't know where these things are. For three years he's been like a trained robot and then he comes out.

The every day simple things is what used to get me. I'd get overwhelmed with things. You come out and you're worried about this.

These difficulties were commonly identified by most of the community workers who were interviewed. These workers were in a position to identify some of these challenges, as these were often the types of services that were requested by people who had recently left prison.

Sometimes it's about I guess educating our clients and kind of brokering with housing or community housing around just being patient with guys around the basic issues around property maintenance and keeping up with rent and things like that, and what it means to hold a sustainable accommodation.

Challenges are also around the fact that the women haven't had to think for themselves in a whole lot of regards. In regards to doing the shopping or having toilet paper - inside it is there for them - so the basic challenges of life and having no structure once released from custody.

The major issue is not knowing where to go and how to even start - how to even pick up the phone and just get in there and do it, it just seems too big. To organise a house, somewhere to live, to organise furniture, and when you see it all in this massive big package it is too much. It is very stressful and it is hard for someone to break it down and all of a sudden gain those life skills overnight.

Someone who has been in prison for a while or has been institutionalised it is very hard to adapt slowly to what is necessary to live because, you have had no-one to show you. You have been in prison; no-one is showing you how to cook the peas for ten minutes, or you know cook one side of the meat for three minutes and then turn it over. Like just simple... like going to the shops. What do I buy, what do I actually put in my trolley to make a meal, how much food do I need to last me for a week, what am I going to have for breakfast, what am I going to have for dinner, what am I going to have for lunch, should I have snacks, do I buy drinks? Just really basic things... They are expected to know how to do those things, and that is what we face every day is people who just come in here so lost.

Exposed to bad influences

Some individuals' accommodation and support options placed them in environments in which they were exposed to negative influences that made reintegration into the community more difficult. Sharing temporary accommodation with others who suffer from drug or alcohol addictions, or are involved with other criminal activity, can make it difficult for a person who has recently exited prison and is wanting to start afresh or deal with their addictions.

There were too many temptations, you know what I mean. There was too much temptation there. And like if you didn't have like moral support from the fellows around you like, I just basically got led down the wrong path, you know what I mean, and started using drugs again and found myself back on the street. But then I've ended up in jail again.

A lot end up at [support service] because two things: a lot of the ex-prisoners are drug addicts or have a drug history and they seem to more gravitate to there, but they used, too, now they're here.

I went to [support service]... but it's the environment you're in which I find too hard. You've got 80 other alcoholic addicts, like people who are there life long they've just been on the streets and all you know what to do is what you do.

There's hundreds of dealers in here. Everybody who's in that section over there they're all ex-crim.

The temptation to re-offend as a result of being around destructive influences and previous criminal associates was also confirmed by several of the community workers who were interviewed.

You know I have recently come across a guy... something changed in him and he really wanted to make a go of it and when he first left prison his only option was to re-offend because it was safer in prison and he was supported in prison and he had a place in prison whereas in this life he didn't and he was in massive, massive risk of going back to his old ways. And also because he is part of another life here. It is a different world once you get out of prison and all those people that he was going with before who were bad news wanted him to go with them and he had no option because it's a really difficult situation.

I think that they don't have any positive supports around them and that falling into old habits and making wrong choices is just what happens, because they don't have a sense of community or belonging and that's sort of what happens.

Whilst slightly different, but on a related theme, one community worker identified that for some, the option of dangerous or humiliating activity such as sex work is preferable to returning to prison. Such an activity can be humiliating and degrading for the individuals involved, but also potentially expose them to criminal influences.

The other thing is that over the years many men particularly who I have spoken with have said that they have chosen or have had to choose sex work as a profession because they can't think about going back to jail again and sex work is likely not to get them in jail, but other forms of acquiring money will get them into jail. So it becomes quite an undignified sort of existence for them and it is embarrassing for a lot of the men to have to be sex working.

Having previous criminal problems resurface unexpectedly

For some participants, having previous criminal activity re-surface unexpectedly post-release, such as old warrants being served, resulting in the person being returned to prison, completely derailed their efforts to settle back into society.

I was extradited back here for a parole breach but it was 17 years old or something. But that was about 3 years ago. I got extradited back here, out of the blue. After so many years. I think they said that I owed them three or four months or something like that.

I was doing the right thing and I was picked up on charges for stealing from two years ago. Because of my history I didn't know I had court for it. They turned around and gave me three months for fail to appear and that's for something that I'd done time in between there and they're bringing it up. So what happens next time when in the past where something happened and they are bringing it up?

Feeling unsafe and vulnerable to abuse or harassment

Some of the women participants who were interviewed said that upon their release from prison, they felt unsafe and at risk of being abused or harassed. Being alone, without safe or stable accommodation, and associating

with people who subjected them to physical, emotional or sexual abuse were significant issues making it difficult for them to settle back into the community.

On the streets I just felt really scared and insecure. I was gutted. In the end I just had to surrender. You just want to give up. I was broken, I was absolutely broken. I hadn't eaten for three days.

I would find mates and hook up with them and use with them. They would want to have their way with me and if I didn't put out they'd just tell me to piss off, and I would have to leave and go sleep in a park. Once it got dark I would find a tree or a bush so no-one could see me. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just had a fear of asking for help. The desperation and despair. I had a split decision to make: to pick up the phone and call here, or throw myself off a building.

Inability to find work

For some participants, the difficulty to find employment was also considered one of the hardest things to encounter when released from prison.

I think the biggest problem I had was finding work... I'd say accommodation and employment were my biggest, biggest problems.

No never [had steady work]. I have never had the courage to do it actually. Haven't been out long enough.

Difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction

As indicated in Chapter Two, 20 participants volunteered information about their drug addiction and seven participants volunteered information about their alcohol addiction. Addiction to alcohol or other substances was one of the significant problems they faced when they were released, presenting difficulties for them in relation to finding accommodation and resettling back in to the community.

Yeah, delved back into addiction you know started using and I stayed up for six days. The day before I was supposed to move into my new flat I got arrested.

I'm trying to stay clean at the same time. I go to meetings every day. It's just so hard.

All I am trying to do is stay out of jail but I'm also, as I said to them around here today, I'm at the end of my tether... the point is I need help. I've been to detox today because I know I've got a bad drug problem, but if nothing gets done I'm stuffed.

I can only say what I did, was when I got out because my addiction is heroin and alcohol. I don't want to use and I don't want to drink.

Summary

Most of the participants identified a number of factors that presented difficulties for them in reintegrating into the community, and particularly in securing stable accommodation.

The most common difficulty was the risk and temptation to reoffend, due to difficulties in fitting into society and lack of accommodation options.

Other commonly recurring themes in this regard included:

- disconnection from society, institutionalisation and lack of basic living and coping skills to settle back into society;
- feeling isolated from friends and community support networks;
- being exposed to bad influences making re-offending an easy option;
- having previous legal and criminal problems resurface unexpectedly;
- for women in particular, feeling unsafe and vulnerable to abuse or harassment;
- being unable to secure employment;
- difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction.

In many cases, the temptation to re-offend and return to prison was directly related to these difficulties.

Chapter Six

Post-release support services and what else would help

“Because if you give these blokes like me somewhere to call home, which I haven’t had for like the better part of my whole life... I’ll have something to look forward to. I’ll have something to work for, you know what I mean, and they don’t understand it... I’m just a two bit crim, this is all I’ve been, but I know that now that I’ve got a place, my whole way of thinking is different.”

- Consultation participant No. 001.

The focus of this chapter is the accommodation and support services available in the community for people who have recently exited prison. The chapter commences by considering the responses from the six community workers interviewed as part of this project, in relation to the particular services provided by their organisations and agencies for people who have recently been released from prison, and the proportion of people who use their service who have experience of being in prison.

This is followed by views expressed by participants regarding the services and agencies that they found helpful after they were released from prison, specifically in relation to accessing either temporary, short-term or medium-term accommodation, and any other necessary support services to assist them settling back into the community. Participants were also asked about how they found out about these services.

This chapter also considers responses from community workers regarding some of the particular challenges and difficulties they faced in providing services to people who have recently been released from prison, and what is needed to improve service delivery for people who have been recently released from prison.

The chapter concludes by considering some comments from participants about their perceptions of the importance of having stable accommodation.

Services available for people leaving prison

As part of this project, six interviews were undertaken with community workers employed by agencies working with people who have recently exited the prison system. Four of these community workers were employed in what could be described as generalist welfare agencies or homelessness services that support a large number of people exiting prison. The remaining two community workers worked for an organisation that specialised in responding to the accommodation and support needs of ex-prisoners.

The workers from the generalist welfare agencies used the following terms to describe the services provided: crisis accommodation, crisis support, community support, counselling for addiction, crisis casework. Often the services sought from these agencies by people exiting prisons were the same as those sought by others in disadvantage accessing the service. However, the circumstances and barriers faced by people exiting prison often made the services vital for them.

We are crisis accommodation. People can stay here for up to three months and we also offer intense case management for anybody who wants to participate. Generally they [ex-prisoners] are coming in and they don’t have anywhere to stay so they are homeless, but the needs are often complex. So we assist them with getting medication, psychiatric assessments, referrals and probably more stable accommodation once those primary needs have been met.

We do get a lot of ex-prisoners that come straight to us and have only left jail within 48 to 72 hours and they say “Look, I have just been released from jail and I have no food, clothes, nothing, and I am homeless what can you do for me?”. And it can be very stressful and they are extremely anxious and they have nothing and they are scared... they need life support.

We provide crisis accommodation to men and women over the age of 18 who present with drug and alcohol issues, homelessness. That’s basically what we provide and we take them in active addiction which makes us pretty unique... specialising in clients with co-morbid issues... [for ex-prisoners] it’s primarily around needing assistance to find longer-term accommodation, or stable accommodation.

Well I think we are the biggest crisis accommodation service or would be close to it anyway... you know at least half the year we would have one bed available. Also we have an open door policy; during the day the doors are open. You don’t have to come here to stay. You can come here for a cup of tea or coffee, for a meal, or do some activities.

Both community workers from the agency that specialised in responding to the accommodation and support needs of ex-prisoners referred to the unique manner in which their organisation operated – focusing on working with individuals prior to their release from prison to identify accommodation and other support needs, and providing ongoing accommodation and support post-release.

Each of the community workers in generalist welfare agencies remarked on the fact that most of the people who accessed their service had previous recent experience of being in prison. When asked to estimate the proportion of service users who had been in prison, the lowest estimate was 50 per cent and the highest was 80 per cent.

Our agency is about working with people that have had an experience in the criminal justice system. I guess we offer a whole lot of different services. We have projects that work with women pre- and then post-release; and also with men. We have housing we have a certain number of houses in which people can be released to in the process, then moving on to transitional property and transitional housing.

Services considered helpful by people recently released from prison

During the interviews, consultation participants were asked to identify services and agencies that they had found particularly helpful after they were released from prison, in terms of securing accommodation and accessing other necessary supports to assist them to settle into life on the outside.

Temporary accommodation services

The most commonly identified support services about which consultation participants were positive were temporary and crisis accommodation services, with almost half expressing positive comments about services such as the Matthew Talbot Hostel, Edward Eager Lodge and the Haymarket Centre. Several of the participants expressed considerable gratitude for such services and the support they provide.

Yeah, I'm living at Haymarket and it's a bit of both. It can be up and it can be down. Just depends on what people they actually get in. Yeah, so it depends on the quality of people that are here. It is good. I mean it's good and it can be tough too.

I am living here [Edward Eager Lodge] yes... And it is not too bad. Well the people here and the staff are good. They seem to help you. Go out of their way to help you.

Matthew Talbot was one of them. Edward Eagar was another one... they've been more than helpful to me at the moment due to the circumstances.

Talking to them as well, they're great [Haymarket Centre]. They sit down and actually talk to you. They don't talk down to you, they talk to you, which I find good.

I'm currently here at the Haymarket... this place has saved my life. It's amazing. If it wasn't for this place I wouldn't be alive today. I've got clean.

Some participants specifically acknowledged particular aspects of the services delivered by these temporary accommodation agencies, including access to medical and counselling services.

The support I've got here, I've got a case-worker here, and they help you with housing and, because of my medical condition and, plus it could take anything up to four months to get priority housing. But like they help you, they go to your appointments with you. They give you the forms that you need to fill out and take to the specific people.

Matthew Talbot is a place where they have medical, they have all that sort of stuff I need for my medication and they have doctors on staff. It was the perfect place for me at that time, you know, and it is the perfect place for me at this time. And it has everything that I need. I'm supplied meals, I pay for my own rent, I'm sufficient that way... it helps me set up a background for paying rent... the counsellors here are good. The case workers are good. They help you with everything... they take the time out to talk to you and help you through with your problems and if they can help in anyway they'll do so.

Now I'm broke by the time the sun's up on the Friday and then I have to live here. If it wasn't for here I would starve. I would starve... I'm telling you now if it wasn't for this place here and the nurses here 9/10ths of us wouldn't have our medication because we don't have to pay for it.

Welfare services and helplines

Several participants were also positive about the services provided by agencies and organisations that provide general welfare support services, not necessarily accommodation. Agencies such as the Salvation Army's StreetLevel, Mission Australia, and help lines such as the Homeless Persons' Information Centre and Men's Helpline were all positively referred to by consultation participants.

Street Level, this place... you just feel like they give you the time of day here, you know what I mean, and they would help you like. You walk in here, like I've been around for like 8 or 9 years as a crim and a junkie on the streets and this is the only place where they've got like things on the board, like accommodation and numbers to ring, workers to sit down and talk to you that ask you "how you're going" and whether you've got somewhere to stay tonight, know what I mean like. This is the only place that I know of that will actually give you a go... who gave me the time of day... That's fucking huge. That shows that someone's taking the time to just ask you "How're you going mate?"

Well for the accommodation I used the Homeless Persons Helpline.

They're a great service the Men's Helpline. That Men's Helpline place, they are good... they got that Mission Beat to pick me up. Mission Beat is a mad service.

I left there through Mission Australia. They were all very good and helped me a lot and they got me in me place I am in now....

Transitional accommodation

Several participants were also appreciative of non-government, community-managed transitional accommodation services, which they accessed after leaving prison. Services such as the Community Restorative Centre that provide transitional accommodation as well as other support services, were seen as vitally important in facilitating community reintegration, and getting established after a period of incarceration. However, as noted below, such agencies commonly report being under-resourced to address the demand for services, often having capacity to accommodate a very small percentage of people coming out of prison who do not have stable accommodation options.

I got assistance through CRC. Yes they helped me with my housing post-release from a jail sentence... after being out for six days I got on the drug court program and they've assisted me a hell of a lot, a hell of a lot. So I'm blessed in that regard.

I've been in, it's like a halfway house there. There's about four of us there. We all share everything. We all get on good like go out of our way to help each other and that you know... and we get support from CRC. Yeah, I've got that support, where I've never had it before. So it makes a big deal for me.

Yes. CRC come and seen me probably once every two weeks or once a month and then they tell me that they got a house and that and that's where they put me... I've got what I have today because of them.

Addiction services/Mental illness services

Several participants were also positive about specific programs and services that they accessed in order to address particular problems related to substance abuse, drug or alcohol addiction, or mental illness. Services that provided both accommodation and other support services to address addictions or mental illness were given positive endorsement by some participants.

Because I get treated for my medical conditions at the Haymarket Clinic at the Haymarket Foundation and the staff there are very helpful. They helped me out with my medical needs and all that sort of stuff and they helped me out with trying to find accommodation.

I tried for the Mac Centre, I heard that's pretty good. In a sense it's kind of a bit like a rehab really. They have courses there.

[Haymarket] It saved my life. I got clean here. I do an AA meeting everyday. Without the AA and NA meetings and other groups, there's no way I could stay clean.

There's things like CRC and there's a couple of organisations that it's not really advertised but sometimes you find out. But there is criteria and some of them if you're on methadone they'll help you. If you've got a mental illness they'll help you.

How did people find out about support services?

Informal sources – other prisoners, other homeless people, previous experience

During the consultation interviews, participants were asked about how they found out about the support services that they found most useful on release from prison. The most common responses from participants indicated they were made aware of helpful services from informal networks and contacts, namely other prisoners, word-of-mouth particularly amongst other homeless people, or from their own previous experiences of having been homeless for a significant part of their life prior to going into prison.

The most common response for providing useful information about helpful services on release was from other prisoners, with eight participants listing this as their most useful resource:

We know about CRC because they come out to the jail and all the girls are like "get a house for her, get a house for her." Through all the girls because everyone in jail like they come out to the visits. They come out to visit everyone and when they... the girls come out and go "well I got a house" and they're like "who did you get a house through?" CRC you know...

I just heard it through a couple of other boys in jail yeah. Yeah, word of mouth in jail.

Through other inmates. Yes the grape vine. Not through the actual system, which is, you know, it shouldn't work like that, but it does.

A few people, ex-crimps put me onto them.

The next most common response from participants was also by word-of-mouth, but not from other prisoners, rather from other homeless people. More than half of the participants interviewed stated that their most useful sources of information about services that could assist them after release from prison were either other prisoners or other homeless people.

Through another ex-streetie friend of mine actually... he told me "Look, get your arse down to the Haymarket Centre."

Virtually the people I've known... just by word of mouth virtually for me. I've been on and off the streets now since 17. It's been a long time.

Well it's usually by word of mouth by somebody else. I mean some people that have been around for a long time... and they go "Oh you should go to such and such, you can go here, you can go there." Some people are a mine of information.

For several participants, their own experiences with support agencies and homeless shelters prior to being incarcerated, were the basis upon which they were aware of which services to access and seek support from after their release from prison.

Well I went to a lot of boarding houses before in the past and they've been pretty cool.

I pretty much did it all on my own... I knew who to ring... but the average bloke wouldn't be able to do that. My situation is slightly different because I did have a lot of information available to me which it would take an average bloke getting out of jail without the facilities or knowledge weeks and weeks to find out and be able to get direct answers... I had people that were helping me and I had information and knowledge and I had furniture and all that but there is a lot of people not in my situation.

I've been familiar with the Homeless Services in east of Sydney for a long time, for probably about 7-8 years. I've used both Edward Eagar Lodge and Matthew Talbot in the past for short periods of time.

A couple of participants indicated that for them, the best way of getting information about helpful services was to try and find the information for themselves.

It's not going to come to you. You've got to get up and try and see them and say I'm going to be stuck when I get out.

I did a lot of research myself...

Prison welfare and prison staff

Despite the criticisms of prison welfare services, which were outlined in Chapter Three, several participants stated that they obtained some useful information from prison welfare and other prison staff prior to release, which assisted them in accessing useful support services on release.

And I only knew about CRC because of last time's expo... you have to put your name down three months prior to getting released. You have to seek it out. I don't think a lot of women know how to ask... you have to be a little bit organised to kind of say, okay is this what I need to do.

Someone told me in gaol, from the drug unit it was. Yes, the staff in gaol... they got in contact with them....

I've done a program in there before I got out, a six month program, it's a drug program and that helped me a lot. It changed me whole personality...

A welfare officer had referred me actually unbeknown to me to be quite honest. I didn't know and they come out to visit and we did a referral. I was referred by the service and programs officers and so it worked out well.

Some participants clarified that this information was only provided after they had made the approach seeking such information – that they had to take the first step and initiate contact.

Like, they've got a lot of stuff in gaol that you can utilise, but you've got to ask for it ... because we've got nothing and nowhere to go, we ask for help and keep getting rejected all the time, so blokes go into their shell, you know.

You find out through welfare what avenues you can go through and um... you approach them - you have to approach them for everything in there, they just don't come off the bat to you.

From the service provider end, half of the community workers who were interviewed indicated that they received referrals from CSNSW, Justice Health, prison welfare or probation and parole.

I worked quite closely with Justice Health for a long time and I get a lot of referrals from them, especially with clients with complex needs. We don't really put ourselves out there into the jails but somehow or other our name is out there because I get calls all the time from the jails wanting to refer people to us.

We need our referrals for our project at least three months before they're out... so we generally try to plug our service through parole, through welfare, through counsellors... Most of the people are coming through welfare or parole officers recommending and then referring. So most of our referrals are coming from correctional staff at the moment.

Community support workers

Two participants stated that they received useful referral information from support workers in the community following their release from prison:

I knew PB there. He is one of the workers there and he was very good to me. He used to come and meet me, have cups of coffee with me, try and get me on the right mend and he was pretty good at what he was preaching too. He was very good.

Well, one of the ladies that works here, she's known me for 16 years when it used to be down at Albion Street and I was only 18. I was 17 when I first was going in there. She knew me from then and that's why she sort of pushed,...

Challenges faced by services

Each of the six community workers identified specific challenges and difficulties they face in providing services to people who have recently been released from prison. Common themes included:

- lack of resources to adequately meet demand for services from ex-prisoners;
- chronic lack of accommodation and housing support options for ex-prisoners;
- dealing with clients with particularly difficult and complex behaviours;
- lack of adequate exit planning and other support services.

Insufficient resources

By far the most common difficulty identified by the community workers was the lack of resources and capacity to deal with the constant high demand for the services provided by their respective agencies.

Sometimes we get people rocking up to our door going "what do I do" and we are just... we just provide food and clothing. We have a housing liaison officer that can support them a little but she is here one day a week and she can't help every ex-prisoner that comes through this area.

We would be saving a lot more time if there were adequate supports in place before they got here... so that takes a lot of resources over a very short period of time when we have to put everything else on the back burners to do that.

Oh, we have turn-aways every day, we only have 34 beds... we refer them to Homeless Persons' Information to get a bed through them.

Turn away people? Yes of course, just like everybody else, so you know if we don't have any rooms, particularly over winter, or if it's raining there are less rooms so we do turn them away just like everybody else.

For some community workers, the constant demand for services compounded with insufficient resources often resulted in feelings of being overwhelmed.

I guess we feel the pressure. I feel we are fulfilling a need that really is vital to them but we shouldn't be the ones meeting the vital need.

It's such a big thing, it's been really difficult and really challenging and I don't know what the answers are... Yes, definitely overwhelming.

Lack of accommodation and housing support options

The lack of available short-term and medium-term accommodation options, as well as the under-supply of social and community housing stock were identified as major challenges, adding to the difficulties faced by workers assisting people recently released from prison.

All I know is that there is just not enough accommodation, appropriate accommodation to put clients in...

My major challenges, my big thing is actually housing. That's what I am finding really, really difficult. I mean at the moment I have got so many released unable to be housed for three or four months. They are couch surfing, they are in environments that I just know are setting them up for failure again and that's what is really challenging.

Today I had an assessment with a young lady who served in a correctional centre and I just had to be straight up with her and tell her the housing situation is dire, your options are limited and explain to her that I have had people out for months couch surfing, and she is like "Oh my God, but I have been on the list since 1989."

One of the difficulties is actually just kind of seeing how hard it is for them to actually get housing and suitable accommodation and seeing sustainable outcomes because of that. It's very hard I think to just keep plugging away when you feel like you keep hitting walls...

Difficult client behaviours

While most of the community workers spoke about the lack of resources within the agency, and the lack of accommodation options for clients, they noted that when these factors were combined with a client group who experienced complex needs, particularly difficult situations developed. Clients who were often difficult, desperate, had particular expectations of what could be provided, and were sometimes prone to outbursts of anger, often made the front-line community workers feel most exposed and vulnerable to these behaviours.

Oh look we have dramas, we have big dramas at the gate. So what we do is we don't encourage people to come here directly. We encourage them to phone in before they make their way here. Just so that it gives them some sort of idea or indication that they have a bed or not ...

The challenges for us [community workers] is that they get to a point where they are so desperate that if we can't help them to get what they think they need, then we can get thoroughly abused.

I think some of the difficulties are around expectations and I guess tempering them and making them realistic and then kind of entering the grind with the guys... One of the glaring ones is that guys will come up to us and assume that being part of this support service means that they get housing which it doesn't. We don't have housing to just to hand out to everyone...

For that particular client group, and I have been with this organisation for 17 years now, it's challenges around behaviour, but I think that at this point in time we've kind of mastered management plans, risk assessment and tailoring that to the clients' needs.

Similarly, some community workers spoke about the difficulties when working with clients who have been detained in a highly institutionalised and regulated environment for a lengthy period, unable to manage small challenges after release, or clients who have experienced significant trauma and abuse during the period of their incarceration.

And also I am always shocked at the number of reports of rape while they are in jail... it seems to be that coming out of jail for a lot of our clients has actually added to the trauma in their life rather than rehabilitated them while they have been in there. That probably breaks my heart more than anything else over the years when I have heard those stories of the sex working guys... that they would break down in tears and they were embarrassed and it was traumatic for me to have to listen to it, but also for them to have to be living this life where anything is better than being in jail.

We've got a small team, there's just two of us, my colleague is working with someone who has spent well over half their adult life in jail and is extremely institutionalised... institutionalisation is a whole other ballgame. It's a different mentality. They get frustrated, they hold the anger in. You have to be really aware of where they've come from. Someone could have a dummy spit over something really, really simple like a pair of shoes are misplaced and that could be the end of their world because they're so used to being in jail where everything is regimented.

Lack of exit planning and support services post-release

Community workers also expressed frustration that they are often dealing with clients who have just exited from prison with no pre-release or exit planning in terms of accommodation, access to support services, mental health services, or even having access to vital medication to address addiction problems. One worker reported having to work with clients released from remand, and then unable to access their methadone, which remained at the prison.

It's frustrating because there is no exit plan, so we have to keep going back to Justice Health and to Parole or whoever it is trying to come up with a property for somebody and then they can't be within certain distance from schools and the like. That is really difficult.

It seems that their needs have been met while they have been in the prison system but then they have come out and we have to find them all those supports all over again. So there are no links then back into other community services or, you know, mental health facilities or anything like that. So we've got to sort of start it all over again for them, particularly if they have been away for a long period of time.

It is really, really tricky... the onus is back on us then to try and find something for that client and there is no partnering between any of the services with the prison and us. They're like "It's just they're out and they are not our problem anymore", but this is what they need.

Yeah, it is really tough... we do get responses like "you know I have just been in jail I have done my time I am really trying to make something now with my life and I can't get methadone, I feel like I am dying, I'll just go and have a shot until we can get my methadone sorted out." You've got this window of opportunity and if you don't meet all their needs within that window of opportunity they tend to go back to their old patterns because it is what they know.

What else is needed?

Participants and community workers were all asked about what they thought was needed in terms of addressing the accommodation needs for people being released from prison, and assisting in keeping such people out of accommodation crisis and homelessness. The most common themes emerging from the consultations were:

- the need for more transitional accommodation for people exiting prison;
- the need for more crisis accommodation;
- the need for more affordable accommodation and social housing;
- greater commitment to exit planning and appropriate post-release support services;
- more resources for existing support services;
- services to address the specific needs of women recently released from prison.

More transitional accommodation

The most common need to address the accommodation crisis for people exiting prison was more transitional accommodation in the community. Immediate accommodation for a transition period after leaving prison, with basic support to help people who have just been released getting back on their feet in society, was seen as the most important and urgent gap in services.

If there was like somewhere that could just take inmates and put them up somewhere, it would be a lot more helpful... You know, there's nowhere else that you can just walk in off the street, no matter how you dress, how you look, who you are and that they'll sit down and give you the time of day... I wouldn't do crime, like if I had somewhere to put my head at night. For the boys getting out of jail, they need someone or an organisation to say "Listen, here's somewhere to stay. Here's something you can go to and we'll help you."

For a period of time where they've got to do their own shopping, they've got to pay their own rent and they've got to do all that sort of stuff for a transition period of three to six months. Yes that would do them the world of good... it would help a lot.

Find them a place before they get out. Find them some sort of... even if it's this place... they can get a room straight up or Edward Eagar or whatever. Somewhere where they can get help.

Well look the Department spends tens of millions of dollars to incarcerate people right. They spent bugger all on letting them back out in the community... I mean they could have like short-term accommodation for people, so they're not under the gun straight away.

I reckon some sort of transitional housing or some sort of establishment to be able to go there and say "Look, man, I've just got out of gaol. I don't want to have to go out and reoffend so as I can get money to fucking pay for an overnight accommodation joint somewhere. I don't want to have to go back out and stick another fit in my arm just so as I can get numb and pass out under a bush at frigging Belmore Park there, or frigging down Woolloomooloo, or somewhere on the Rocks".

One community worker at a generalist welfare service emphasised the importance of caseworker-supported transitional accommodation.

I remember one ex-prisoner who articulated very well that transitional housing would be awesome. You know with caseworkers who could actually show them how to cook a meal and show them how to go shopping and show them how to pay bills and contribute towards rent and stuff.

More crisis accommodation

Related to the need for more transitional accommodation, was the need for more crisis accommodation beds for people exiting prison. This was identified by several participants.

There is a crying need for those facilities. Obviously there are one or two around, like halfway hostels.

Personally, I'd prefer to be in a mixed community crisis hostel rather than amongst ex-offenders... I think it's better that they be set up so people intermingle, rather than specialising in a particular area like ex-offenders coming out of jail.

Somewhere for people to sleep, even if you shut the doors at 9.30, 10 o'clock of a morning and they weren't allowed back. Somewhere for somebody to put their head down, you know, that's warm and a bit safe, that's not on the streets.

More affordable housing options, including public housing

Several participants also identified the need for more affordable accommodation options for people exiting prison. One participant talked about the possibility of a private benefactor providing low-cost accommodation for people exiting prison. Other participants stated that Housing NSW should prioritise housing for people released from prison.

Like there needs to be somebody, there has to be someone out there that can say "Look, let's just buy a couple block of flats", just have a go, you know what I mean, and give these boys a chance.

Up until recently they used to find you a place to get paroled to, housing commission place... Yeah, we would all love to see more accommodation.

I just believe that we should receive priority from the Department of Housing... So I think Department of Housing should look after us better than what they actually do.

Exit plans/Post-release support

Several consultation participants stated that apart from accommodation, there is a desperate need for pre-release planning and post-release support to help people being released from prison integrate into the community. Pre-release planning and integrated post-release caseworker support to help a person access necessary support services, medical services, facilitate applications for housing, assist with finding employment, and help with re-establishing basic living skills, were seen as vital in securing and maintaining accommodation.

You need the support, you need case workers and stuff I reckon if you are just getting out of jail. You can't do it on your own

For me, personally I needed someone to help me. Someone like a case officer or someone that's actually there because I didn't know how things worked, you know. For me I just need someone that's there, 100%. Win, lose or draw, like all hours, that can kind of be there for support.

They've got to, especially blokes that have done a long time in jail. Like when I done four and a half years in jail you think at that time they will be trying to help me and get me ready, prepare me to come back out in the community, find me work and somewhere to live and that sort of stuff, but no, you get totally nothing. So they've got to set up some services to help ex-prisoners for when they get out of jail... I just want to get a job and somewhere to stay, live a normal life and become a normal person.

The need for effective exit-planning and closer networking and communication between CSNSW staff within prison and non-government, community-based organisations that provide welfare, support and accommodation services outside of prison was strongly identified by several community workers.

Yeah, so if there were definitely more exits plans, better exit plans. If it was the worker from the prison who was actually referring and working with us on a plan and just better supports, you know. Having those supports in place, having a psychiatrist that they're seeing linked into community health service. You know, having whatever medications dealt with.

Again, support and in supporting ex-prisoners I suppose... for people who are extremely institutionalised, you know, having someone released and then connections made between probation and parole, CRC or whoever, and a case manager and accommodation service, and working as a streamlined kind of set-up would be so much more beneficial. Not just for the staff but also for the client. The client wouldn't have to repeat their story and it just treats them in a more humane way as well as being less consuming on individual resources.

I know you do have those options but possibly if there was some avenue that came along a bit sooner, so it wasn't panic stations. "OK, this person has a month before they get out, where are we putting them?" That sort of thing.

I think it is really important to support them as much as possible and I really like the idea of transitional housing and case managers actually working with them once they leave prison. Not just before, but also after. Actually go shopping with them and to look at how to organise housing and stuff like that. Just that really one-on-one case management. I think that's a massive gap.

These concerns reflect the importance of adequate care and support in the period immediate post-release, which, as identified in Chapter Five, is the critical period in terms of stress, anxiety, depression and risk of reoffending for ex-prisoners.

More resources for existing services

One consultation participant was very clear about wanting to ensure that their support service was sufficiently resourced to be able to continue their work.

That CRC is still around for like years.

Similarly, one community worker stated that additional resourcing would assist them to be able to provide a more effective accommodation and transitional support service.

I would love to be able to provide each and every client with a share house they could move into post-release and work with them from that base and be able to say OK this is the base for x months and let's work together and do a whole lot of case work with them while they are in that environment, there as a stepping stone. So I guess it is funding around housing, funding around positions here.

Needs for women prisoners

One community worker also articulated the need for specific accommodation and post-release support services that cater to the needs of women who have recently exited prison.

You know the needs for women is much more limited because of the lack of services out there for women, you know what I mean. Men seem to have a little bit more accommodation options to explore, whereas women, it is much more limited.

The hope attached to housing

During the consultations, most of the participants expressed statements indicating the importance of stable housing and accommodation in getting their life back on track, reintegrating back into the community, and moving away from a life of re-offending and ending up back in prison. For some participants, the lack of stable accommodation was a major precursor to offending and ending up in trouble or in prison. Having stable accommodation was seen as an important circuit breaker in the cycle of re-offending.

Even though a lot of the times I've tried to do the right thing but because of that reason I've never had my own accommodation and that's been my problem my whole life. Never having stable accommodation.

I just found a place for \$175 down at Darlinghurst somewhere and I mean I'm rapt. That for me is the first time in my life I'm actually going to have somewhere. It's only a room but to me that's like my mansion... and I know my head now, I'm not going to do crime. I'm not going to go down this track anymore because I've got somewhere that's mine.

Now I'm stable, I've got somewhere to put my head down and I'm comfortable... I don't want to waste my life in jail. I want to change me whole life. Just trying to get in the community in a better way instead of fucking up all the time, you know.

For other participants, the prospect of securing stable accommodation meant being able to make long-term plans in relation to obtaining employment, re-establishing relationships with immediate family, particularly children, and providing a base from which a person could make positive changes in their life.

Because if you give these blokes like me somewhere to call home, which I haven't had for like better part of my whole life... I'll have something to look forward to. I'll have something to work for, you know what I mean, and they don't understand it... I'm just a two bit crim, this is all I've been but I know that now that I've got a place, my whole way of thinking is different.

But down the track I really want to get my own place and that, so I can get my daughter living in. That's my goal mate... just get a job.

I still need some security, some solid foundation to be able to feel comfortable in myself to move forward again.

Perhaps the most moving statements from consultation participants were those that expressed the significance of having secured some form of stable, supported accommodation in terms of optimism about the future, improvements in their own self-esteem, and the sense of stability, security and safety.

So it's been a long wait but if it wasn't for this thing I don't know where I'd be now. If it wasn't for that... knowing I've housing.

I'm living like a normal person and it makes you feel good. I honestly feel like that I've got a new chapter, I've got a new page. No-one knows me. I'm just another bloke there and that's good. I've got a fresh start. So that's what I like about it. No-one's expecting me to fail.

They got me a house down at Mascot which is nice, I like it and I am comfortable, I've just got to make it homely... I've been there now 2½ weeks. It's home. I haven't used drugs since I've been out of jail at all this time. I knew it was freedom and I had a decent bed. I had a decent shower... It was a clean nice home... It had a telly.

When I got my place it was really, really overwhelming. Really. One hundred and ten per cent that it's mine, you know. I wouldn't sacrifice that for anything really... I have consistency and stability. As I walked over that threshold my knees just buckled, going "well this is home."

Summary

Community workers and people who had recently been released from prison indicated a strong demand for temporary and crisis accommodation services, transitional accommodation services, supported accommodation, and general support services for people who are released from prison. Each of the community workers from the generalist welfare agencies reported that a majority to an extremely high proportion of their clients had recent experience of being in prison. These services were seen as providing a helpful and supportive service for people recently released from prison, as were transitional accommodation services, and services that assist with substance addiction and mental illness.

When asked about how they found out about the support services they found most useful, an overwhelming majority of participants indicated that they were made aware of the services from informal contacts and networks, such as finding out from other prisoners whilst inside prison, or other homeless people after release, or from their own experiences of being homeless in the past and having to access support services. While some consultation participants indicated that they had obtained some useful information from prison welfare and other prison staff prior to release, often this information was only provided after the individual concerned initiated contact seeking out information, rather than prison welfare staff initiating contact to provide the information.

Each of the six community workers interviewed were asked about the challenges and difficulties they faced in providing services to people who had been recently released from prison. The most commonly identified difficulty was the lack of resources and capacity within their organisation to respond to the constantly high demand for services, resulting in workers feeling under constant pressure and overwhelmed. The community workers expressed frustration at the lack of short-term and medium-term accommodation options and the under supply of social and community housing stock. Another commonly identified difficulty was dealing with frustrated, desperate and highly traumatised clients with high expectations, often resulting in workers on the front-line bearing the brunt of angry and abusive outbursts from service users. Community workers also referred to the difficulty of trying to assist clients who have just been released from prison with no pre-release or exit planning, to enable a continuity of support services to address various mental illness, addiction or other medical issues.

Consultation participants and community workers were all asked about what they thought was needed in terms of addressing the accommodation needs for people being released from prison, and assisting them to stay out of accommodation crisis and homelessness. By far the most common responses referred to the need for more accommodation stock – more supported transitional accommodation for ex-prisoners, more crisis accommodation, more affordable accommodation, and more social housing. In addition, the need for more pre-release planning and integrated, post-release case worker support to facilitate accessing essential housing, medical and employment services, were also identified by several consultation participants and community workers.

Many of the consultation participants who were interviewed articulated the importance of stable, safe housing in terms of reintegrating into the community and moving away from a life of re-offending and returning to prison. For many of the participants, obtaining stable housing provided an important source of optimism for the future, and was significant in raising their self-esteem.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

“There’s no-one in this world that’s perfect. And you just need someone that wants to understand and give you that break. Give you that opportunity to prove yourself. It makes the world of difference.”

Consultation participant 019.

Homelessness and imprisonment

The interaction between recent prison experience, housing crisis, homelessness, and socio-economic disadvantage has been confirmed in several Australian studies over the last ten years. That relationship was also apparent in the 26 participants who were interviewed as part of this project, all of whom had recent experience of homelessness. The 20 men and six women who participated in this consultation project, and who had exited prison in the last two years, all experienced significant socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation. Nearly all participants were in receipt of some form of social security benefit and volunteered information about a history of drug or alcohol addiction or mental illness. Only two participants had completed secondary school education.

The connection between homelessness and recidivism was also reflected in the people interviewed in this project, with 23 of the 26 participants having been in prison on multiple occasions. This is consistent with the 2003 study of 339 ex-prisoners in Victoria and NSW undertaken by Baldry et al on behalf of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.³⁶

Accessing support services in prison

Participants identified a range of difficulties and problems in trying to access information and welfare support while in prison in preparation for their release. These included:

- lack of access to information for prisoners awaiting release, with prisoners having to be proactive in asking for information or assistance;
- limited welfare support services in prison, delays in being able to see welfare, and perceptions of incompetence or inefficiency in welfare services;
- lack of access to education or training courses in prison, particularly life skills training to assist reintegration into the community.

Not surprisingly, several participants suggested that there needed to be more resources for welfare services in prison, increased availability of life skills training and educational courses within prison, particularly for short-term prisoners and people on remand. In addition, participants expressed that there needs to be more written information available in prison about available support and accommodation services in the community.

36 Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), see n 14 above, i, 12.

The Community Offender Support Program centres (COSPs) were criticised by participants mainly due to the fact that COSPs essentially provided a prison environment, with strict regimes that did not promote reintegration into the community. The COSPs were also criticised as offering only a short-term, temporary option, being available only for particular types of prisoners, and for being remote from community centres.

Some participants made comments about the sorts of services they accessed in prison that they found useful. These included comments that were positive and appreciative of prison welfare services and how they assisted in accessing accommodation and other support services upon release. Other participants were positive about support services and official organisations visiting prisons. There was strong support for community and non-government services that visited prison and commenced case-management services, which were then continued post-release. Work release programs were also considered important in preparing people for release into the community.

Problems encountered post-release

Most participants identified a number of difficulties when trying to reintegrate into the community, and particularly, when trying to secure stable accommodation. These included:

- the risk and temptation to reoffend, due to difficulties in fitting back into society and lack of accommodation options;
- disconnection from society, institutionalisation and lack of basic living and coping skills;
- feeling isolated from friends and community support networks;
- being exposed to bad influences making reoffending an easy option;
- having previous legal and criminal problems resurface unexpectedly;
- for women, feeling unsafe and vulnerable to abuse or harassment;
- difficulty finding employment;
- difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction.

Problems finding accommodation post-release

Nearly all participants indicated a form of accommodation after being released from prison that came within the cultural definition of homelessness. Over a third of participants indicated that on the night they were released from prison, they slept rough, or had some other form of primary homelessness. Other responses also indicated a form of homelessness, such as couch surfing, short-term emergency or temporary accommodation, boarding house accommodation, or staying with friends and family.

Participants identified several barriers to accessing stable housing and accommodation after leaving prison, including: difficulties accessing public housing, lack of availability of short-term or crisis accommodation, unaffordability of private rental and boarding house accommodation and being discriminated against because of their recent prison experience. Participants also spoke about their frustration dealing with bureaucratic processes, the difficulties they faced because they left prison without any form of identification, and the danger of being in breach of parole either because their designated accommodation did not have room for them, or because their temporary accommodation period had expired and they had nowhere else to go.

More than half of the participants (14) reported that their most recent term of imprisonment was for less than 12 months. It is likely that most of these participants were released directly from remand, or at the end of a short

sentence, and thus were not released on parole. Most of these participants reported that not being on parole meant that they did not receive any support or assistance in obtaining accommodation on release. But equally, some who could have applied for parole indicated that they refused to, because they found parole regimes too onerous and feared being breached.

Post-release support services

Based on the interviews conducted with community workers and consultation participants, there was a strong demand for temporary and crisis accommodation services, transitional accommodation services, supported accommodation, and general support services by people who are released from prison. Consultation participants reported that these services provided a helpful and supportive service for people recently released from prison. In addition, participants gave positive accounts of transitional accommodation services and services that assist with substance addiction and mental illness.

An overwhelming majority of consultation participants reported that they became aware of useful community and accommodation services from informal contacts networks, such as finding out from other prisoners whilst inside prison, or other homeless people after release, or from their own experiences of being homeless in the past. While some consultation participants indicated that they had obtained some useful information from prison welfare and other prison staff prior to release, often this information was only provided after the individual concerned initiated contact seeking out information, rather than prison welfare staff initiating contact to provide the information.

Community workers providing services to people who have recently exited prison face a number of distinct challenges and difficulties. Foremost amongst these is a lack of resources and capacity within their organisation to respond to the constantly high demand for services, resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed. Several of the community workers interviewed also spoke about their frustration at the lack of short-term and medium-term accommodation options and the under supply of social and community housing stock. Another commonly identified difficulty was dealing with frustrated and highly traumatised clients expressing high expectations, with workers on the front-line often bearing the brunt of angry and abusive outbursts from service users. Community workers also spoke about the problems with assisting clients who had left prison without any exit planning, resulting in a lack of continuity of treatment services for mental illness and substance abuse.

Emerging themes from the consultation

The need for pre-release exit planning and post-release case management

A common theme that emerged was the importance of pre-release exit planning for prisoners, and the need for consistent, integrated case-management for people released from prison that commences pre-release and continues post-release. In addition, the need for access to appropriate welfare support prior to release, as well as comprehensive information regarding available accommodation and support services post-release were common suggestions for improvement from consultation participants.

While several participants were highly critical of the availability and competence of welfare services within prison, there were positive responses about welfare and support services that visited prisoners prior to release, and particularly those that continued providing assistance post-release. Pre-release exit-planning, combined with continuous case management either conducted by non-government support agencies, or in close partnership with those agencies, was seen as a valuable service in terms of accessing immediate and medium-term accommodation, support services to deal with mental illness or substance abuse problems and other medical issues such as medication needs, counselling or other treatment. In addition, appropriate, pre-release case

planning was seen as a basis to help secure identification upon release, providing assistance in setting up bank accounts and securing social security upon release, accessing education or job-training courses upon release, accessing employment services and accessing life-skills training prior to release.

As indicated above, it is likely that most of the participants whose most recent term of imprisonment was less than 12 months were released directly from remand. The NSW Law Reform Commission has reported that people on remand make up approximately 45 per cent of the total NSW prison population.³⁷ Previous research undertaken on behalf of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute by Dr Eileen Baldry, Dr Desmond McDonnell, Peter Maplestone and Manu Peeters, has noted a lack of organisation in the prisons to ensure pre-release information and support is available for short-term prisoners.³⁸

It is acknowledged that people being released from remand and short-sentences present specific challenges in terms of exit-planning and continuous case management, as they can be released unexpectedly or at short notice. This can make it difficult to ensure that the person has immediate accommodation options that they can access, identification, access to social security, or even access to their personal belongings or money that may still be at the prison if they are released from court. Some people released in these situations may also not be able to access needed medical support that was being provided, such as medication, methadone, or counselling services. Appropriate case management and exit planning for people on remand would need to involve immediate support and needs identification upon entering remand, and developing a process by which court hearing dates at which release may occur are identified and prepared for. In addition, where a person is released from remand at court, a dedicated court-based post-release support worker could facilitate the person accessing their personal belongings, money and any medication from prison, and facilitate accessing short-term accommodation.

The value of pre-release exit planning and continuous post-release case management was borne out by the many positive comments of endorsement for services such as Community Restorative Centre (CRC). CRC works with individuals prior to their release from prison to identify accommodation needs, and other assistance needs such as medical, education, and life-skills training. CRC continues its service following the individual's release from prison, providing ongoing post-release support, and if they are able to house the individual in one of their transitional accommodation properties, accommodation services as well. The Haymarket Centre was also endorsed, as it often receives referrals for individuals about to be released, and adopts a structured case-management approach for its clients, incorporating accommodation, treatment for substance abuse, and other forms of counselling.

The need for post-release support was a strong theme in this consultation, and is consistent with earlier research which has found that the immediate period after release is a time of immense stress for prisoners, during which time there is a high risk of the individual reoffending.³⁹

The need for more social housing and non-government/community-based transitional accommodation

While pre-release exit planning and continuous case management, incorporating post-release support was a strong theme, the issue remains that no matter what level of exit planning is undertaken, there remains a serious under-supply of crisis, transitional and social housing. A dominant theme that came through the consultations from both ex-prisoners and community workers was the need for more accommodation stock – more supported non-government transitional accommodation for ex-prisoners, more crisis accommodation, more affordable

37 New South Wales Law Reform Commission (2012), *Report 133 Bail*, April 2012, Sydney, 47-48. Note – this is the prison flow population, not the census population.

38 Baldry, Eileen, McDonnell, Desmond, Maplestone, Peter and Peeters, Manu (2003), see n 14 above, 24.

39 See Walsh, Tamara (2006), see n 35 above, 109, 113; Castellano, T.C. and Soderstrom, I.R. (1997), see n 35 above, 259; Larivee, J.J. (2001), see n 35 above, 1; Meisel, J.S. (2001), see n 35 above, 206-245.

accommodation, and more social housing. The difficulties associated with accessing accommodation covered issues of availability, affordability and discrimination on the basis of criminal and prison history. Several of these issues have been previously identified in earlier research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology.⁴⁰

The need for more specific transitional and short-term accommodation options catering for people exiting prison administered by non-government, community-based agencies was commonly expressed by ex-prisoners and community workers alike. For community workers, the positive results achieved through intensive case management and post-release support relied on the person having a stable accommodation base. Community workers saw the lack of accommodation options for people being released from prison as one of the most difficult challenges in delivering effective support services for people after they have exited prison.

The need for more resources for non-government agencies assisting ex-prisoners

Another common theme identified across the consultations was how the combination of dealing with issues such as mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction, coping with life on the outside, lack of accommodation options, and lack of resources for non-government support services can lead to a cocktail of frustration and anger, with highly agitated clients occasionally exhibiting difficult behaviours. For community workers on the frontline, feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, and difficulty meeting demand for services were common frustrations that were expressed. In addition, community workers expressed the difficulty in being the “messenger of bad news” to clients, having to tell them that there were no suitable accommodation options or appropriate services with capacity to meet their needs.

According to consultation participants, both ex-prisoners and community workers, the services provided by the non-government agencies to ex-prisoners could be improved by additional resourcing. This additional resourcing could be used to employ more staff, enabling community workers to provide more one-on-one assistance to clients, and provide more direct counselling and assistance for clients with particular needs such as mental illness or substance addiction. Additional resourcing would also assist community workers dealing with a high demand for their services, and potentially enable expanded capacity for organisations to provide more comprehensive case-management and support. However, essentially, as indicated above, the need for more accommodation options for people exiting prison may be the most pressing area in need of additional resourcing.

The importance of housing for someone leaving prison

For people recently released from prison, housing and stable accommodation are often seen as important symbols of hope and promise for a new life, where one can move away from a life of disadvantage, re-offending and repeated terms of incarceration. This hope was evident in many of the comments expressed by consultation participants, who spoke about the importance of stable, safe housing in terms of reintegrating back into the community and moving away from a life of reoffending and returning to prison. For those participants who had secured some form of stable accommodation, albeit only medium term, there was a strong sense that this marked a turning point in their lives, one from which they could approach the future with a degree of optimism, where they could re-unite with children, and other family, obtain employment, and deal with other problems such as addiction or mental illness. For these participants, the importance of being able to secure accommodation in terms of their self-esteem and their confidence is difficult to over-estimate. Having a home, and the sense of safety, stability and security that come with that, is an endorsement of the statement from the United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights on what is meant by the right to adequate housing under Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

In the Committee’s view, the right to housing should not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with, for example, the shelter provided by merely having a roof over one’s head or views

40 Willis, Matthew (2004), see n 14 above, 127-128.

shelter exclusively as a commodity. Rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.⁴¹

Final comments – the voices of consumers

The aims of this project were to identify the experiences of people who are experiencing homelessness, who have recently been released from prison, and to identify difficulties faced by agencies which assist homeless people in relation to providing services to homeless people recently released from prison. At all times, this project has sought to make sure that the voice of the people who have experienced homelessness upon being released from prison was heard and reported. It is their experiences of the difficulties faced in finding out about accommodation and support services, accessing accommodation and housing, and their views about what should be done to address these difficulties, which has been the focus of this project. The difficulties and challenges in accessing accommodation and support services faced by people exiting prison are exhibited in the recounted experiences of the people who participated in this project. It is essential that in considering appropriate policy responses to address these difficulties, that these experiences and their suggestions for solutions are considered.

41 General comment No. 4, The right to Adequate Housing (Art. 11(1)), UNCESCR, General Comment No 4, 6th sess, [7], UN Doc E/1992/23 (1991).

Appendix A

How the consultation was done

Consultation interviews

This project involved 26 consultation interviews with people who had recently been released from prison into situations of homelessness or accommodation crisis, and six interviews with workers at homelessness services or agencies, or services who work specifically with people exiting prison.

Interviews with people exiting prison into homelessness

Recruitment of participants

Participants for this project were recruited through generalist homelessness welfare agencies and support services for people exiting prison. The HPLS Senior Policy Officer identified six agencies that were then contacted asking for assistance to identify potential participants for this project. The six agencies were:

- Edward Eagar Lodge – an inner Sydney emergency accommodation service for adult males and females, with an attached support program;
- Salvation Army StreetLevel – a welfare support program for disadvantaged people in inner Sydney
- Matthew Talbot Hostel – a crisis accommodation service for homeless adult males in inner Sydney;
- Parramatta Mission – a homeless support service offering a range of community programs for disadvantaged people in Parramatta and surrounding areas;
- Haymarket Centre – a service that provides accommodation for homeless men and women with complex issues, including addictions and mental illness;
- Community Restorative Centre – a community organisation dedicated to supporting people affected by the criminal justice system, particularly prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families and friends.

In addition, a small number of participants were recruited directly by StreetCare members themselves, through their own contacts and networks.

Agencies and individuals involved in the recruitment of participants were provided with a copy of a participant information sheet and the interview schedule, and asked to canvass amongst their service users potential candidates who may be interested in participating. A series of consultation dates were arranged with each of the agencies, and agencies were asked to assist in arranging interested candidates to attend at the service to participate in the interviews. For those participants who were recruited by StreetCare members, an interview time was arranged for the participant to attend at the PIAC office with the StreetCare person.

It should be noted that this project was regarded as a consultation project, not a research project. No attempt was made to employ particular research sampling techniques in recruiting participants. The 26 people who agreed to be interviewed should not be regarded as a representative sample of people who have recently exited the prison system into accommodation crisis.

Conduct of interviews

Interviews were conducted at participating agencies and services on the following dates:

- March 2012** StreetLevel Salvation Army
Edward Eagar Lodge (2 days)
- April 2012** Edward Eagar Lodge
Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS)/PIAC
Matthew Talbot Hostel (2 days)
- May 2012** HPLS/PIAC
Haymarket Centre (3 days)
StreetLevel Salvation Army
Parramatta Mission, Hope Services
Community Restorative Centre (2 days)
Matthew Talbot Hostel
- June 2012** StreetLevel Salvation Army
Community Restorative Centre

The interview sessions were arranged with community agencies in advance, with a view that community workers would assist in arranging for 2-3 clients/service users to attend to be available to be interviewed on the set dates. In most cases, willing participants were ready to be interviewed at the appointed times, and there were very few "no shows".

At about half of the sessions listed above, more than one participant was interviewed. Most interview sessions were conducted at the agencies that assisted in recruiting participants. Two interview sessions took place at the PIAC office. Of the 26 interviews undertaken, 24 were conducted by a StreetCare member with either the HPLS Senior Policy Officer or PIAC Senior Policy Officer in attendance and available for support and comments. Two interviews were undertaken by the HPLS Senior Policy Officer, with an agency support worker present.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Prior to commencing the interview, a Participant Information Statement and Consent form was provided to the participant. The interviewers went through this form in detail with the participant, making sure that the participant clearly understood the nature of the project and was able to provide informed consent to participating in the consultation interview. Twenty-four participants agreed for the interview to be audio-recorded. Two participants did not wish their interview to be audio-recorded. These interviews were still undertaken, with responses recorded by handwritten notes.

The interviews followed a general interview guide approach, in which a series of themes were explored with each participant.⁴² While the interview guide identified the relevant themes to be explored in the interview, it only included a limited number of scripted questions, mainly in relation to the participant demographic characteristics and the questions about how many times the participant had been in prison, length of most recent sentence and date of release. Employing a general interview guide approach enabled a degree of flexibility to allow exploration of other key themes or activities which were identified in the interview itself, but which were not included in the guide. Nonetheless, identifying the relevant themes to be pursued across each of the participants provided a systematic approach to data collection, and provided for the most efficient use of limited time. It also allowed for other themes to be considered if identified.⁴³

A copy of the interview guide for people recently released from prison is included in Appendix B.

42 Patton, M (1990), 'Qualitative Interviewing', chapter 7 in Patton, M. (1990), *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1990, 280, 283

43 Ibid, 283-284.

The duration of most of the interviews was between 15-20 minutes, although five of the interviews were of longer duration.

Twenty-three interview participants volunteered information about their drug or alcohol addictions, disability or mental illness. In some of the lengthier interviews, these difficulties manifested in various ways, including difficulties in staying focused or keeping to the question, repeating responses, or expressions of frustration at not being able to remember specific details or events. This resulted occasionally in the interviewer needing to take time during the interviews to help re-settle or re-assure participants, assist with some additional prompting questions, or re-focus the participant on the interview themes. This also resulted in some interviews being of longer duration.

Interviews with community workers

Recruitment of participants

The six community workers who were interviewed for this project were approached through the homelessness and support agencies that assisted in arranging interviews with people who had recently been released from prison. Each participant was provided with a participant information sheet and the interview schedule in advance. Individual appointment times were then arranged with the community workers to conduct the interview.

Conduct of the interview

For the interviews with community workers, six individual interview sessions were arranged. These all took place during June 2012, and took place at the agencies where the participants were employed. All of these interviews were conducted by the HPLS Senior Policy Officer.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Prior to commencing the interview, the interviewer confirmed the information contained in the Participant Information Statement and Consent form with the participant to ensure that the participant clearly understood the nature of the project and was able to provide informed consent to participating in the consultation interview and for the interview to be audio-recorded.

These interviews also followed a general interview guide approach, in which a series of themes were explored with each participant. A copy of the interview guide for community workers is included in Appendix C.

All of these interviews were audio-recorded. The duration of these interviews was between 15-20 minutes.

Analysis

All interview recordings were subsequently transcribed. The data was then transferred into a NVivo project format, with information categorised under predetermined codes based on the themes in the interview guide. Additional codes were developed as required.⁴⁴ Once coding was completed, a contextual analysis of the coded data was undertaken,⁴⁵ to perform the process of “decontextualising and recontextualising the data”.⁴⁶ This allowed a more thorough assessment of the perceptions and difficulties expressed by people who had been recently released from prison in accessing information and assistance to secure accommodation prior to release, and accessing accommodation and support services post-release.

44 Coffey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, Chapter Two, (Concepts and Coding), 29-32.

45 Ibid, 35-37.

46 Tesch, R. (1990), *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*, London: Falmer, 1990, as quoted in Coffey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, Chapter Two, (Concepts and Coding), 121.

Appendix B

Exiting prison into homelessness

Interview schedule for homeless people who have exited prison

Introduction

Hello,

My name is

Thanks for agreeing to chat with me. I really appreciate your time.

What is your name?

I am part of a group called StreetCare. We're a homeless consumers group who advise government bodies about what policies they should make and what services they should provide to help homeless people. We are part of the Homeless Persons' Legal Service.

We're currently doing some work to find out about the experiences of homeless people who have been released from prison. We want to find out what kinds of services people are using to help them find accommodation and other support services to help them settle back in to the community once they leave prison. We hope that what we find out will help improve services for people leaving prison.

Are you happy to take part in an interview about these things?

If you don't mind, we would like to record our conversation. What you say will be important and I won't be able to remember everything.

If you don't want me to record our conversation is it OK if I take notes while we're talking?

Whatever you say will be completely confidential. I won't write down your name or anything else that would identify you.

The things you say might be used in our report but we will not use your name or any other details that could identify you. We'd like you to feel comfortable that you can talk freely, knowing that what you say will be kept confidential.

The only reason we're trying to get this information is to help with research.

- we won't be giving any personal information to anyone in the prison system.
- we won't be giving any personal information to Centrelink, or housing or any other agency or service you might have to go to for help.
- we won't be giving any personal information to anyone who could use it against you in any way.

I do need to tell you that if you tell us about any criminal activity that you have been involved in or plan to be involved in, we may be obliged to give police that information.

However, apart from that, we won't be giving any information to the police.

I also need to tell you that we cannot provide legal advice. If you want any legal advice we can refer you to a legal advice clinic.

Have you got any questions about this?

I'll ask you about how many times you've been in prison, and when, about where you've lived and problems you've had with finding and keeping somewhere to live. This will include how you came to find out about particular services and what information, programs or support there was in prison to help you with finding somewhere to live when you got out.

I won't be asking you to talk about your offences or your experiences in prison. You won't be expected to talk about anything you find uncomfortable or unpleasant. You'll be free to stop the interview at any time, or have a break, or say you don't want to answer any particular question.

We really appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. Your input will really help us in our work, and hopefully may lead to some real changes.

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Just to start with, would you be able to tell me about your current accommodation and where you are living? I don't need to know the exact address, but it would be great if you just describe to me your current living and accommodation arrangements.

Prison and Release from prison

In this section, I'll ask you about periods of time you've spent in prison.

I'm not trying to find out why you've been in prison or anything that might have happened to you inside.

I'm just trying to get an idea of how long you've spent in prison, and whether this has made a difference when you tried to find accommodation when you were released.

2. Have you been in prison more than once? Y N

How many times?

3. When were you last released from prison?

4. How long did you serve last time?

Finding accommodation

In this section, I'll be asking about accommodation.

I'll be trying to get an idea of the types of accommodation you've lived in and how being in prison has affected you trying to find somewhere to live.

I don't need to know exactly where you've lived, just the type of places.

Your answers will start to give us a good idea of the different problems ex-prisoners face finding accommodation, compared to people who haven't been in prison.

5. Can you tell me about your experiences in relation to trying to find accommodation when you came out of prison last time?

Where did you stay?

What services you went to? Were they helpful?

What problems you faced finding somewhere to live?

Use of support services

In this section I will be asking about services or agencies you've gone to for help.

They may be services that have helped you find somewhere to live, or helped you be able to stay in your accommodation.

They might be services you went to, but didn't help you.

I'll also be asking you about what was available in the prison system to help you find somewhere to live when you got out.

What you say will be confidential, so you don't have to worry that the services or corrections will find out what you've said.

6. Thinking about the time since you were last released from prison – what services have you gone to for help with finding accommodation or other issues like health, or other support services to help getting you set-up in the community?

Why did you choose these particular services?

How did you find out about these services?

7. When you were in prison, what information was available to help you find accommodation, or about support services that could help you when you were released?

8. Is there anything you would like to add?

Background Information

These questions are to get a bit of an idea about you, but only for statistics, not to identify who you are.

I'll be asking a few things like your age, your source of income (but not how much), and your level of education.

I am not going to ask you name or address or anything like that.

9. Age:

10. Main source of income:

Full-time employment

Part-time employment

Social security payments

Other:.....

11. Highest level of education:

No high school

Some high school but didn't finish

Finished high school

Trade or technical qualification

Tertiary/university

12. Did you obtain any qualifications in prison? If so, what?

13. Where are you living now?

Privately rented home

Privately owned home

Public housing

Shared home (with others)

Lived with parents/relatives

Private hotel/boarded house

Supported accommodation

Shelter/Temporary accommodation

Other type of accommodation

Sleeping rough

Have nowhere to live

14. Where did you stay on the first night after you were released from prison?

15. GENDER: M F T

That is all I wanted to ask you. Thanks very much for talking with me about your experiences.

Appendix C

Exiting prison into homelessness

Interview schedule for agency staff who work with people who have exited prison

Introduction

Hello,

My name is

Thanks for agreeing to chat with me. I really appreciate your time.

I am part of the Homeless Persons' Legal Service.

We're currently doing some work to find out about the experiences of homeless people who have been released from prison and to investigate issues around ex-prisoners use of support services.

The information we get out of this project will help build our knowledge about a significant client group who use our service. We believe that this group clearly has some serious needs. In this project, we hope to:

Look at the experiences of ex prisoners who are homeless;

Look at how these people find their way to support services; and

How they use these services.

We hope that what we find out will help improve services for people leaving prison.

Are you happy to take part in an interview about these things?

If you don't mind, we would like to record our conversation. What you say will be important and I won't be able to remember everything.

If you don't want me to record our conversation is it OK if I take notes while we're talking?

We respect your knowledge and experience. We value what you can teach us about the accommodation needs of people coming out of prison and the difficult issues involved in providing services to meet those needs.

Whatever you say will be completely confidential. I won't write down your name or anything else that would identify you.

The things you say might be used in our report but we will not use your name or any other details that could identify you or your agency. We'd like you to feel comfortable that you can talk freely, knowing that what you say will be kept confidential.

The only reason we're trying to get this information is to help with research.

We really appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. Your input will really help us in our work, and hopefully may lead to some real changes.

Do you have any questions before we start?

-
1. Just to start with, would you be able to tell me about your agency?
What services does your agency provide?

 2. Does your agency target a particular client group, or groups?
What groups?

 3. What proportion of your clients would you estimate are ex-prisoners?

 4. What type of services do ex-prisoners come in for?

 5. What do you see as the major challenges facing ex prisoners in trying to access accommodation services and other support services?

 6. What do you see as the major challenges in providing accommodation services and other support services for ex-prisoners for your agency?

 7. How are these challenges different from those affecting other client groups?

 8. Why do you think ex-prisoners come to your service?

 9. Is the provision of services to ex-prisoner clients by your agency in any way affecting the delivery of services to your other non-prisoner clients?

Yes No
(If yes) In what way?

 10. What is your understanding of the programs, advice, information and other services available inside the prison system to help prisoners with finding accommodation?

11. Do you see major gaps in service provision for ex-prisoners facing homelessness?

Yes

No

(If yes) What are the gaps?

12. Is there anything you would like to add?

Name of Service

Role in the Organisation

That is all I wanted to ask you. Thanks very much for talking with me about your experiences.

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