



PIAC Briefing Paper

Beyond the prison gates

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

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.

This briefing paper outlines the key findings and themes that were identified from these consultations. In addition, it lists eleven recommendations to address the key problems that were identified during the consultation.

Following the conduct of consultation interviews, HPLS was actively involved in key consultation roundtables with Corrective Services NSW and

Housing NSW focusing on issues relating to the accommodation and support needs of people exiting prison in NSW. HPLS had strong input into the recommendations arising from those roundtables based on the information derived from these consultations. Several of the recommendations contained in this briefing paper are therefore the same or similar to the recommendations arising from the roundtables.

Consultation participants

This project involved 26 interviews with people recently released from prison into housing crisis or homelessness, and six interviews with community workers who have direct professional engagement with people who have recently exited the prison system.

Of the 26 participants in this consultation who had recently been released from prison:

- Most were men, although women were proportionately 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.
- Most participants 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.

“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...”

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.

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

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 accommodation and post-release services and information available within prison:

- 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.

“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.”

“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... What the fuck, they’re supposed to help you.”

Common themes regarding participant suggestions for improvements include:

- 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.

“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.”

Several participants were highly critical of the Community Offender Support Programs (COSPs). The most common criticisms were that COSPs 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 often did not lead to long-term accommodation, often only available for particular types of prisoners, is usually too remote from community centres (being located on prison grounds), and as being controlled by prison staff.

"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..."

Difficulties finding accommodation post-release

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

- 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";

"There was no accommodation, no beds anywhere."

"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..."

- 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;

"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."

- 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 include:

- the risk/temptation to reoffend, due to difficulties in fitting into society, lack of accommodation options, lack of independent living skills;

"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."

- disconnection from society, institutionalisation and lack of living skills;
- feeling isolated from friends and community support networks;

“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... 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.”

- 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;

“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.”

- Difficulty finding employment;
- Difficulties associated with alcohol or substance addiction;
- Mental illness.

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

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.

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

Community workers who work with 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;

“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.”

- 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.

“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.”

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 which 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.

“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.”

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.

“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 jail. 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’.”

Participants were also strongly supportive of additional resourcing to improve the services provided by the non-government agencies 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.

“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.”

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.

“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.”

“When I got my place it was really, really overwhelming. Really. One hundred and ten per cent that’s 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.’”

Recommendations

1. The NSW Government should take immediate steps to increase the available stock of crisis, transitional and short-term accommodation options for people exiting prison.
2. The NSW Government should provide funding to increase the availability of community-based transitional accommodation options for people being released from prison and remand, which is administered by non-government, community organisations with expertise in providing accommodation and other supports for people exiting prison.
3. The NSW Government should take active measures to increase the availability of affordable social and private rental housing stock in NSW.
4. The NSW Government should make further amendments to the *Bail Act*, in accordance with the recommendations of the NSW Law Reform Commission's review, that all current presumptions in relation to bail be replaced with a uniform presumption in favour of release, to enable a reduction in the remand population.
5. In order to reduce the remand and short-term-sentence prison population, the NSW Government should develop and implement appropriate diversionary sentencing options that employ problem-solving approaches to criminal offending. These should focus on underlying medical and social problems that contribute to recurring contacts with the criminal justice system.
6. The NSW Government should ensure that adequate support measures are implemented for people released from remand, particularly those released from court. This should include:
 - a. Development of processes to predict the possible release dates of remandees, including identification of key court hearing dates;
 - b. Identification of remandees' post-release accommodation and support needs to facilitate appropriate exit-planning;
 - c. Ensuring appropriate early intervention support services, and crisis and transitional accommodation options for people, being released from remand, who do not have safe accommodation options;
 - d. Ensuring that all people being released from remand have adequate proof of identity, and that such proof of identity is not branded with Corrective Services NSW logos or information.
7. The Department of Attorney General and Justice should establish a court-based brokerage and support service for remandees released from court to ensure that such people are provided with appropriate direct referrals for accommodation and support services, and that personal possessions and medication that belong to the person and may still be held at the prison, are expeditiously forwarded to the person.
8. Corrective Services NSW should undertake a review of all processes and policies in respect of exit planning for prisoners to ensure:
 - a. Prisoner release dates are identified and planned for;
 - b. Identification of prisoner post-release accommodation and support needs to facilitate appropriate exit-planning;
 - c. Appropriate early intervention support services, and crisis and transitional accommodation options for people being released from remand who do not have safe accommodation options;
 - d. Early contact with community-based support and accommodation services, to ensure continuous case management commencing prior to release, and continuing post-release;
 - e. Ensuring that all released prisoners have adequate proof of identity, and that such proof of identity is not branded with Correctional Services NSW logos or information.
9. The NSW Government should undertake appropriate legislative, policy and educational initiatives to reduce discrimination against people exiting prison in order to ensure access to necessary accommodation and support services.
10. The NSW Government should provide additional resources to community-based accommodation and support services that focus on people released from prison, to enable more intensive, higher

quality case management and support for people about to be released from prison, and continuing post-release.

11. The NSW Government should provide resources for specialist and generalist homeless services for specific case management and support programs targeting ex-prisoners

© Copyright Public Interest Advocacy Centre

Public Interest Advocacy Centre Ltd

Level 7, 173-175 Phillip Street

Sydney NSW 2000

Phone: +61 2 8898 6500

Fax: +61 2 8898 6555

Email: piac@piac.asn.au

Web: www.piac.asn.au

ABN 77 002 773 524