Facing the Outside World: The Voices of Those Who Exit Prison into Homelessness

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'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 interrelationship between homelessness, criminal offending, incarceration and then release from custody into homelessness to repeat the cycle has been noted in several Australian studies over the last ten years. According to Sotiri and Faragnuna, the most common difficulties faced by people who sought assistance from the Community Restorative Centre's Telephone Information and Referral Service (TIRS) in 2016 were insufficient crisis accommodation services for people released from custody, and insufficient pre-release planning and support for people about to be released from prison.[1]

While there are differing opinions as to what is the cause and what is the effect within this cycle, what is clear is that the individuals caught up in this vicious cycle experience significant frustration, anxiety, anger, disappointment and cynicism at the failure of government and support services to provide an effective circuit breaker that allows them to rebuild their lives. Giving voice to those caught up in this cycle was one of the objectives behind the 2012 Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) consumer consultation project with people exiting prison into homelessness.

Beyond the Prison Gates — Consumer Consultation with People Recently Released from Prison into Homelessness and Housing Crisis

In 2012 the PIAC 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. This project involved consultation interviews with 26 people who exited prison in the previous two years. Of the 26 participants in this consultation:

- 20 were men and six were women
- most participants were aged between 35 and 50 years
- nearly all participants were in receipt of some form of social security benefit
- most participants volunteered information about a history of drug or alcohol addiction or mental illness
- all but two participants had failed to complete secondary school education.

The Cycle of Reoffending

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. Nine participants indicated that they had been in prison between seven to ten times. The three participants who had not previously been to prison were all women. The most number of times a single participant reported being in prison was more than 30 times.

'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.'

Fourteen participants indicated that their most recent term of imprisonment was for less than 12 months. 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. 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 and I've spent roughly half my life in jail.'

These findings underscore Baldry et al's[2] 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.

A common theme was the difficulty in not reoffending after being released from prison. Fourteen participants 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.

'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.'

'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. They wonder why we do all this stuff, it's because we got nothing… When you've got nothing you've got nothing to lose and you don't care…'

Lack of Pre-release Support

Several participants said that they found it difficult to access information and support services while in prison in preparation for their release. Some of the particular problems that they mentioned included: lack of access to information for prisoners awaiting release, particularly those not being released on parole; limited welfare support services in prison; and lack of access to education or training courses in prison, particularly life skills training to assist reintegration into the community.

'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.'

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

'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.'

Released into 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, 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.

For all of the participants, the lack of crisis accommodation options for people leaving prison, was soul destroying, with many services having no beds available.

'I mean it seems wherever I go it seems to be a dead end. I seem to hit a dead end. 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 frustrating…'

'There was no accommodation, no beds anywhere.'

Participants also identified difficulties securing stable accommodation following release from prison. Lack of affordable housing in New South Wales, with lengthy waiting list for public housing, and frustration negotiating processes and procedures to access social housing was a common theme amongst participants.

'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 and if I don't have an address in the three months I get revoked.'

'I have been on the Department of Housing list for 11½ years… 11½ years and I'm still waiting. I've lost count of how many times I've rang them…'

'Houso I don't find very helpful… 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.'

Institutionalisation — Not Being Able to Fit Back into Society

Several of the participants identified various difficulties and challenges for them to reintegrate into the community, and particularly presenting obstacles in securing stable accommodation. This included a strong sense of disconnection from society, institutionalisation, a lack of living skills and feeling isolated from friends and community support networks. It was these comments that illustrated the frustrations and anger of participants who found it difficult to re-establish their lives on the outside.

'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 moved on.'

'I couldn't handle it. You feel so small, so insignificant…'

'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 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.'

Conclusion

Behind the statistics and data of the difficulties faced by people when released from custodial settings into housing instability and homelessness are individuals who are angry and frustrated that they have been let down by the system and discarded by society. This creates a dynamic in which they are highly prone to re-offend and return to prison. This was well illustrated by the personal experiences recounted by people released from prison into homelessness who participated in PIAC's 2012 consumer consultation project *Beyond the Prison Gates*. Their accounts remain highly relevant given the recent data of reported difficulties faced by people who sought assistance from the Community Restorative Centre's TIRS.

Endnotes

1. Sotiri M and Faragnuna A 2016, Shown the Exit: A Snapshot of the Issues Facing People Leaving Custody in New South Wales in 2016, *Parity* Volume 29, Issue 10, November 2016, p. 50.

2. Baldry E, McDonnell D, Maplestone P and, Peeters M 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, p. 29.