

Housing support for ex-prisoners: challenges and opportunities



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 361: Exiting prison with complex support needs: the role of housing assistance

What this research is about

This research examined policies and programs relevant to the housing pathways of ex-prisoners with complex support needs in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, and analysed the effect of housing assistance on ex-prisoners' interactions with the criminal justice system.

The context of this research

In 2020 just over 41,000 people were in prison; the large majority (92%) were men. Indigenous people are hugely over-represented in prisons, with an imprisonment rate more than thirteen times that of non-Indigenous people. In 2018, 40 per cent of prisoners had been diagnosed at some point with a mental health condition, and 29 per cent of prison entrants had a disability or chronic health condition. One-third (33%) of prison entrants were previously homeless, with 28 per cent living in short-term or emergency accommodation and 5 per cent sleeping rough or in improvised shelter in the four weeks prior to entering prison.

More than half of people exiting Australian prisons either expect to be homeless or don't know where they will be staying when they are released: in 2018, 44 per cent expected to be in short-term or emergency accommodation, while 2 per cent expected to be sleeping rough (and 8% did not know how they would be housed).

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There were approximately 65,000 releases from prison in 2019. Just over 9,100 adults in 2018–19 sought assistance from homelessness services across Australia because they were exiting custody—comprising 4.6 per cent of all adults seeking SHS assistance in that period and representing the fastest growing SHS client group, increasing 67 per cent over eight years (2011–12 to 2018–19).

As prison populations and imprisonment rates have grown, so too has the need for housing assistance post-release. A decade of growth in prisoner populations and rates of imprisonment has coincided with declining policy priority for both the homelessness and social housing sectors and, in the case of social housing, declining real per capita expenditure.

Disability service provision has been transformed by the introduction of the NDIS. In the shift to person-centred funding for disability support provision, the states and territories have withdrawn from service provision—including, in some cases, accommodation and support services targeted at people in contact with the criminal justice system (e.g. the NSW CJP). However, there are signs that such people are not reaching the new scheme.

The key findings

Planning for release

Across the three jurisdictions, the common official position is that planning for release begins on entry to prison, with more specific case planning and referrals to transitional programs commencing 6–12 months before the date when the prisoner may be released on parole. It is important to note, however, that prisoners released without parole (i.e. at expiry of sentence) receive no assistance; and those being released directly from remand also receive no support. In regard to prisoners approaching parole, interviewees highlighted that the important action is left to happen in the couple of weeks, or even days, prior to release.

From interviews with agency representatives and ex-prisoners, two general points stand out. The first is the dearth of accommodation options available to prisoners post-release; the second point is that the large majority of people leaving prison have complex support needs with significant histories of abuse, neglect, trauma and institutionalisation. These factors lead to significant and ongoing challenges with respect to clients' desisting from offending and reintegrating with the community.

Pathways after prison

With very few people released directly to a new tenancy, ex-prisoners face a fraught pathway through various forms of temporary accommodation—motels, caravan parks, SHS facilities and boarding houses—with a few also accessing, via referrals from corrections, transitional accommodation specifically for ex-prisoners. Workers indicated that temporary accommodation could be a useful tool to change a client's course and link them with other services but having to rely on it was highly stressful for clients. There is considerable variation in the accommodation offered by SHS, with interviewees identifying large congregate services and shared spaces as posing risks to residents. There is a high level of dissatisfaction with private boarding houses but, out of necessity, use is still made of them.

Most interviewees saw social housing, rather than private rental, as the better option for long-term housing for ex-prisoners. Of necessity, they still worked at accessing private rental, but the challenges are formidable: for example, the scarcity of affordable properties, ex-prisoners' gaps in rental histories, and discrimination. For ex-prisoners with high support needs, some interviewees referred to the NDIS and the possibilities of SDA, but others worried about the risk of perpetuating congregate, institutional forms of accommodation. The social housing pathway was acknowledged to have challenges of its own, with a tendency for support services to drop away after a tenancy commences. However, interviewees viewed social housing as optimal in terms of providing affordability, security (safety and permanence), and space for personal fulfilment and engagement with support.

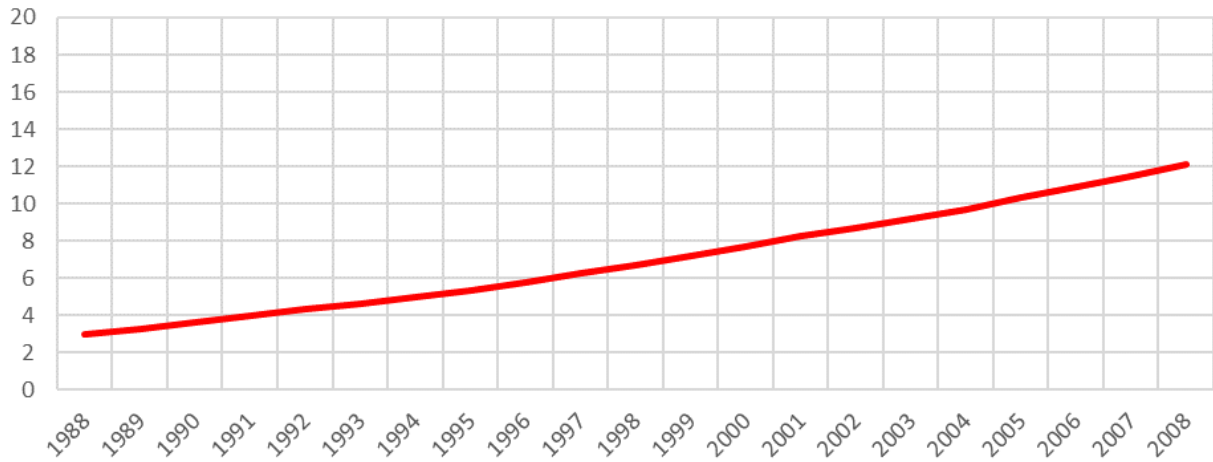
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Benefits of public housing

The research measured the effects of housing assistance on post-release pathways by conducting a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) analysis of linked data about two groups of NSW ex-prisoners: those who received a public housing tenancy at some stage after release (n 623) and those who received private rental assistance only (n 612).

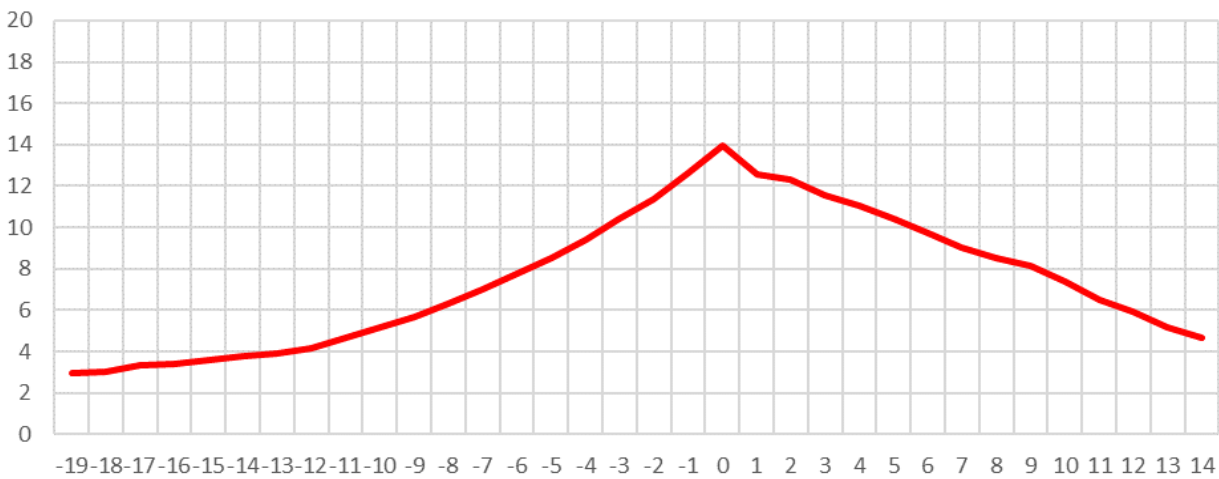
Ex-prisoners who received public housing had better outcomes across a range of criminal justice measures. For example, whereas the group who received private rental assistance only recorded a rising average number of police incidents over the data observation period, the public housing group recorded a decline after they commenced in public housing.

Figure 1: Average predicted number of police incidents per annum, for people with rental assistance only following exit from prison



Source: The authors, drawing on MHDCD data (2020).

Figure 2: Average predicted number of police incidents per annum, before and after receiving public housing following exit from prison



Note: Public housing received at year 0.

Source: The authors, drawing on MHDCD data (2020).

When people who leave prison are allocated public housing they report a 8.9 per cent per year reduction in police incidents; court appearances down 7.6 per cent per year; proven offences down 7.6 per cent per year; time in custody down 11.2 per cent per year; time on supervised orders after an initial increase, down 7.8 per cent per year; and justice costs per person down \$4,996 initially, then a further \$2,040 per year.

When housing costs are taken into consideration, public housing generates a net benefit of \$5,200 to \$35,000 per person over five years, relative to the cost of providing assistance to an ex-prisoner in private rental or through homelessness services.

The cohort's median time from first prison exit to public housing is five years (mean 5.9). Were public housing received sooner following exit from prison, the benefits to the individual and society would be expected to occur sooner and therefore be even greater.

What this research means for policy makers

The evidence strongly supports the need for much greater provision of social housing to people exiting prison, particularly for those with complex support needs. Such housing is a stable place that a person exiting prison can hold onto as they make changes in their circumstances, and in themselves, to desist from offending. It is also a steady base from which to receive and engage with support services.

There is no reason why the beneficial effects of public housing for ex-prisoners would not also be realised in community housing or Indigenous housing, provided they offer secure, affordable tenancies and associated conditions (e.g. access to transfers), like public housing. By the same token, the findings also argue against policy strategies that aim to reduce the security associated with social housing—such as time-limited tenancies and reviews of continuing eligibility.

Rather than prioritise ex-prisoners over other social housing applicants, there should be increased provision of social housing generally (including Indigenous housing), to which ex-prisoners, as well as others in need, have greater access. Furthermore, policy reforms should be made to reduce barriers to housing access for ex-prisoners, such as current requirements around repayment of debts.

There should be an increase in inter-agency cooperation in the period when a prisoner is approaching their expected release date regarding housing and other needs post-release. More can be made of this period: firstly, by improving access to prisoners for reintegration, disability and housing and homelessness workers, who bring with them specialist skills and knowledge; second, by assigning a single case manager to each person exiting prison, to help them navigate the many services and obligations they will face upon release.

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Methodology

This research reviewed current policies and programs relevant to post-release pathways; interviewed people working in housing, disability and reintegration support agencies, state corrective services representatives, and ex-prisoners, in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Tasmania; conducted the CITS analysis using linked data about NSW ex-prisoners provided by NSW government agencies to the UNSW MHDCD Databank, and completed cost-benefit analyses of housing options.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

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