

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Exiting prison with complex support needs: the role of housing assistance

From the AHURI Inquiry: Inquiry into enhancing the coordination of housing supports for individuals leaving institutional settings

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Executive summary

Key points

- Imprisonment in Australia is growing and ex-prisoner housing need is growing; but at the same time, housing assistance capacity is declining.
- Without real options and resources, prisoner pre-release planning for accommodation is often last-minute. Insecure temporary accommodation is stressful, and diverts ex-prisoners and agencies from addressing other needs, undermining desistance from offending.
- Ex-prisoners with complex support needs who receive public housing have better criminal justice outcomes than comparable ex-prisoners who receive private rental assistance only. Public housing ‘flattens the curve’ of average predicted police incidents (down 8.9% per year), time in custody (down 11.2% per year), justice system costs per person (down \$4,996 initially, then a further \$2,040 per year), and other measures.
- In dollar terms, housing an ex-prisoner in a public housing tenancy generates, after five years, a net benefit of between \$5,200 and \$35,000, relative to the cost of providing them with assistance in private rental and/or through homelessness services.
- The evidence strongly supports **the need for much greater provision of social housing to people exiting prison**, particularly for those with complex support needs.

One of the classic metaphors for exiting prison is 'going home'. However, 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.

The connection between imprisonment and homelessness presents special risks for people with complex support needs: that is, people leaving prison who have a mental health condition and/or a cognitive disability. People with complex support needs are often excluded from community-based support and services because they are deemed 'too difficult', and so end up entangled in the criminal justice system.

Post-release housing assistance is a potentially powerful lever in arresting the imprisonment–homelessness cycle, and breaking down the disabling web of punishment and containment in which people with complex support needs are often caught.

Key findings

Imprisonment is growing ...

Over the past decade, Australian prisoner populations and imprisonment rates have grown—notwithstanding a dip in numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over 41,000 people were in prison at the time of the 2020 prison census. Men continue to make up the large majority (92%) of prisoners, but in most jurisdictions rates of growth in the imprisonment of women have been somewhat higher than for men. Indigenous people continue to be hugely over-represented in prisons, with an imprisonment rate more than thirteen times that of non-Indigenous people, and still rising.

... ex-prisoner housing need is growing ...

A wide range of factors associated with disadvantage and support needs are highly prevalent among people in prison, particularly: mental health conditions (40%), cognitive disability (33%), problematic alcohol or other drug use (up to 66%), and past homelessness (33%). However, prisons are not mere aggregators of disadvantage: they are inherently afflictive. All prisoners experience suffering, and this compounds disadvantage and complicates other support needs.

We estimate that there were approximately 65,000 releases from prison in 2019, and one in seven of these resulted in a request for assistance from a specialist homelessness service. Ex-prisoners have been the fastest growing client category for specialist homelessness services (SHS) over the past decade.

... but housing assistance capacity is declining.

Homelessness services and social housing are strained after a decade of declining policy priority and, in the case of social housing, declining real per capita expenditure. Ex-prisoners are a priority group in homelessness policy, and have been since the short-lived period of homelessness policy reform in the late 2000s. This is reflected in the increase in ex-prisoners accessing SHS, and a wider commitment to inter-agency work and Housing First principles; however, the necessary housing is lacking. The diminishing social housing sector has tightened its targeting, and sought to increase the ways it can assist clients to access private rental housing.

Disability service provision has been transformed in more profound ways, by the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). In the shift to person-centred funding for disability supports, the states and territories have withdrawn from many forms of service provision—including, in some cases, services targeted at people in contact with the criminal justice system. However, there are signs, acknowledged by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), that such people are not reaching the NDIS.

There are also state-funded transitional support and accommodation services specifically for ex-prisoners but, relative to need, their capacity is tiny.

Pathways after prison: ex-prisoner and agency perspectives

For this study, we 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. The standout point made by all interviewees was the dearth of housing options for people exiting prison.

Many agency interviewees spoke about the significant histories of abuse, neglect, trauma and institutionalisation experienced by the cohort they work with, and how these factors lead to significant and ongoing challenges in terms of clients' desistance from offending and reintegration with the community. They indicated that access to a range of supports, currently rationed to the highest priority cases, should be provided much more widely.

Interviewees reported that prisoner pre-release planning for housing and post-release support is constrained by high workloads and limited services. Without the necessary resources to plan (including long-term accommodation options), these arrangements are often left until very shortly before release.

After release, the road to permanent housing for ex-prisoners can be long, and beset by pitfalls.

They could easily be waiting a couple of years, realistically. For them that's a long time, and so far off in the distance it's difficult to conceive of. And a long time in which things could go wrong in their lives—to be homeless or back in prison, all sorts of things. And the longer the time, the less chance you've got that they'll be in a place to be offered something. (Victorian community housing provider)

The general consensus among interviewees was that insecure temporary accommodation is stressful and diverts ex-prisoners and support agencies from addressing other needs, undermining desistance from offending.

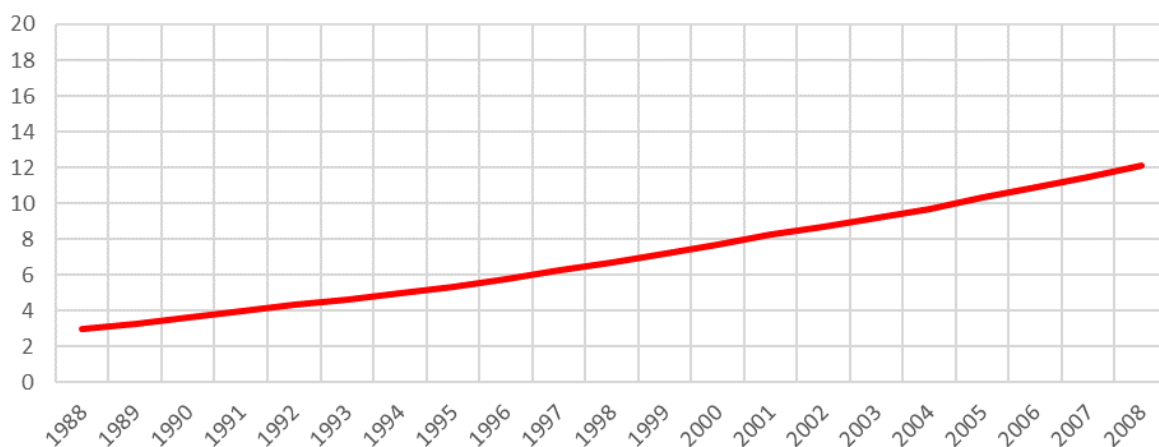
Of necessity, ex-prisoners and support agencies work at accessing private rental housing, but barriers—primarily unaffordability— make this route challenging, and impossible for many. Respondents acknowledged that the social housing pathway has its own challenges, but they generally felt that, combined with ongoing support, it is the best long-term prospect.

Pathways after prison: linked data analysis

The research team conducted a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) analysis of post-release housing assistance and criminal justice outcomes for ex-prisoners with complex support needs. The Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disabilities (MHDCD) Databank at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) holds linked, de-identified administrative data from NSW state government agencies. From this dataset we selected 623 people who received public housing after exiting prison and 612 people who received rental assistance only.

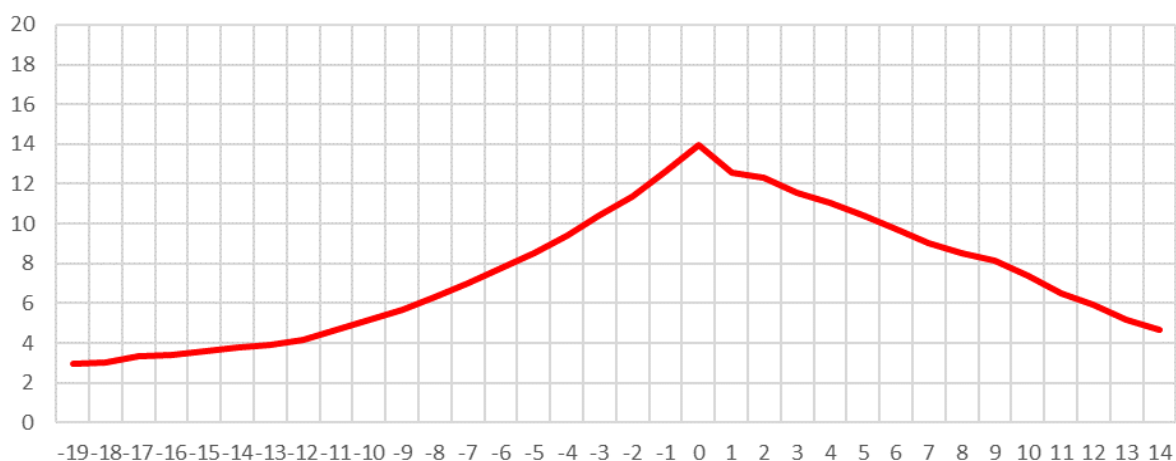
The figures below show the average predicted number of police incidents per annum for the 'rental assistance only' group, and for the 'public housing' group. For the latter group, the difference made by public housing (received at year 0) to the trend in predicted incidents over time is stark: public housing 'flattens the curve'.

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 MHDCC 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 MHDCC data (2020).

The trend shows a reduction in police incidents of 8.9 per cent per year after receiving public housing. We found similar downward trends when considering other criminal justice measures for this group.

- 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.
- Justice costs per person: down \$4,996 initially, then a further \$2,040 per year.

Our research identified that, for most of these measures, women, Indigenous people and people with multiple diagnoses experience similar improvements to people outside those subgroups. Age (i.e. each additional year of age at first prison exit) is associated with a small additional improvement for most measures.

Fewer interactions with the criminal justice system means cost savings to the justice system. We found that, 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.

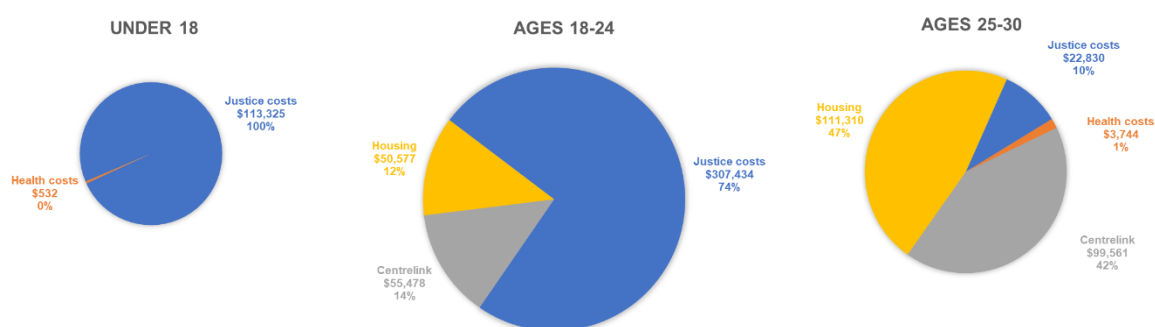
Two case studies

Two case studies—'Jason' and 'Debra'—were drawn from the MHD CD Databank in order to illustrate the role that social housing can play in the trajectories and experiences of people with cognitive disability and complex needs who are in contact with the criminal justice system.

- Jason's consecutive public housing tenancies from age 23 were found to be associated with a dramatic reduction in his costly interactions with the criminal justice system, some of which related to violent offences against women.
- Debra had several public housing tenancies between the ages of 37 and 45. During that time, she maintained periods of up to 18 months without contact with the criminal justice system, providing significant cost savings. The provision of more support around Debra's mental health and other needs may have helped avoid her repeated crisis-related contact with police and emergency hospital admissions, and assisted her to maintain her tenancies, reducing the cost to Debra and the state.
- Both Jason and Debra waited for housing after release from custody, during which time they frequently reoffended.

Calculating the cost of Jason and Debra's institutional contacts (i.e. interactions with the criminal justice system and other agencies) highlights the economic, as well as social, benefits of providing social housing and support for people released from custody—both in the short and longer term.

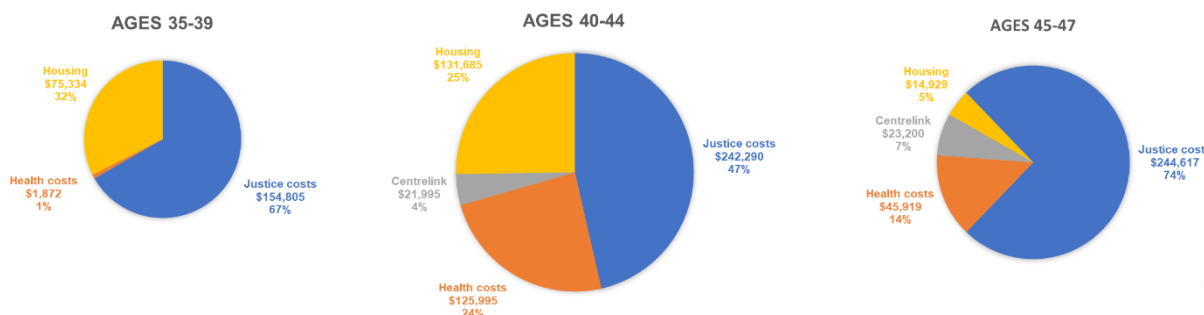
Figure 3: Jason's institutional costs, by age and agency



Note: Jason received public housing from age 23.

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

Figure 4: Debra's institutional costs, by age and agency



Note: Debra received public housing, intermittently, from age 37 to 45.

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

Policy development options

The evidence strongly supports the need for much greater provision of social housing to people exiting prison, particularly for those with complex support needs. Relatively secure, affordable public housing is a steady 'hook for change' 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 stable base from which to receive and engage with support services.

Our linked data analysis looked specifically at public housing, because we could not identify in the data assistance from community housing providers and Indigenous NGOs. We see 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.

The study

The research focussed on NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, and employed a mixed-methods approach. It comprised four components.

- Reviews of published statistics on prisoners and their support and housing needs, and current policies and programs relevant to post-release pathways.
- Interviews with 41 people, including: corrective services representatives; housing, disability, and reintegration services workers (government and NGO); and six ex-prisoners with complex support needs. Interviews were conducted in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.
- CITS analysis of linked administrative data from the MHD CD Databank at UNSW.
- Two cost-benefit analyses: one based on the CITS analysis, and the second based on two case studies drawn from de-identified linked administrative data.

The MHD CD Databank at UNSW holds de-identified linked data for about 2,713 people who were in prison in NSW at some point between 2001 and 2008. The data is provided by NSW state government agencies—including the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), Police, Corrective Services, Justice Health and other health areas, Juvenile Justice (now Youth Justice), Legal Aid, Disability, Housing and Community Services—and relates to each person's contact with agencies before, during and after their time in prison, giving a whole-of-life picture of institutional involvement.

This research was conducted as part of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) *Inquiry into enhancing the coordination of housing supports for individuals leaving institutional settings*. The Inquiry includes research on exits from residential rehabilitation facilities (Duff, Hill et al. forthcoming) and exits from out-of-home care (Martin, Cordier et al. forthcoming).



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