

The role of housing in preventing re-offending

STABLE HOUSING AND HELPFUL SUPPORT ARE CRUCIAL TO EX-PRISONERS' ABILITY TO MOVE BACK INTO COMMUNITY LIFE – BUT EVIDENCE FROM THIS STUDY IS THAT THESE ARE NOT AVAILABLE TO THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE RELEASED FROM PRISON.

KEY POINTS

- Imprisonment is socially and financially very expensive for the ex-prisoner and society and so, finding out how to increase an ex-prisoner's chances of making a successful transition into the community is highly desirable.
- Ex-prisoners were more likely to stay out of prison if they:
 - were living with parents, partner or close family post release;
 - had employment or were studying; or
 - had contact with and support from helpful agencies post-release.
- Ex-prisoners were more likely to return to prison if they:
 - were homeless or transient;
 - did not have accommodation support or they felt the support was unhelpful;
 - had an increase in the severity of alcohol and other drug problems;
 - were Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander;
 - were a woman; or
 - had debt or debts.
- The strongest likelihood of ex-prisoners being re-incarcerated was found to occur if they moved house often (more than twice in a three-month period) in the immediate post-release period and/or experienced worsening problems with heroin use.
- Being transient (moving house two or more times within a three-month period) post release made tackling drug and alcohol problems more difficult for individuals.
- Half the study sample was transient post-release.
- These findings suggest that assisting ex-prisoners to find stable housing immediately post-release should be a priority for State Government corrections departments and support agencies.

Based on research by Dr Eileen Baldry, Dr Desmond McDonnell, Peter Maplestone and Manu Peeters. The project, conducted jointly by AHURI UNSW-UWS and RMIT-NATSZEM Research Centres, explored prisoners post-release housing circumstances and social integration and connections with re-offending. A sample of people being released from prison in NSW and Victoria over a 3 month period was interviewed and followed up at three, six and nine month intervals post-release.



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CONTEXT

Prisoner numbers in Australia have been increasing rapidly over the past decade and therefore the number being released has increased proportionally. There are no reliable data on numbers of prisoners released each year but Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) estimates suggested that in 2001 more than 43,000 people were released from prison Australia-wide. The researchers estimate that some 44,000 were released in 2003.

Prisoners (and therefore ex-prisoners) as a group have high levels of poor education, unemployment, mental and intellectual disabilities, poverty and

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alcohol and other drug problems, making them amongst the most disadvantaged people in Australia. A majority eventually is re-incarcerated, indicating that most ex-prisoners are not rehabilitated by their prison term and are unable to integrate into society once released from prison.

Although correctional services are State responsibilities, matters pertaining to ex-prisoner re-entry to the community involve many government departments and programs, both State/Territory and Federal.

In Victoria and NSW, correctional service departments fund or partly fund a small amount of post-release support. NSW, for example, directs 0.3% of its budget to community based post-release programs. Government departments of housing, health and community/human services and agencies such as Centrelink are involved in providing services.

A small number of non-government agencies (NGOs) provide housing services for ex-prisoners, with the Australian Government's Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) via NGOs providing the bulk of assisted housing places, about 50 in each state. Both NSW and Victoria are funding pilot programs for post release prisoners, although full evaluations are not yet available.

Given all these factors, discovering what factors post-release assist ex-prisoners to successful transition back into community life is important. This study is the first Australian research to provide reliable data on ex-prisoners' housing experiences and the relationship between housing and recidivism.

METHODOLOGY

The data from this study were gathered between November 2001 and January 2003. One hundred and ninety four participants in NSW and 145 in Victoria were interviewed just prior to release and then were sought for interview at three, six and nine months post-release. Of the participants, 145 from NSW and 93 from Victoria were re-interviewed or followed up in some way, meaning that 70% of the original sample was included in the final analyses.

Of the total original sample:

- 75% were male, 25% female.
- 16% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- 66% had been imprisoned previously.
- 82% had just served sentences of 12 months or less with 53% having served 6 months or less.
- 75% had not completed secondary school with most not completing year 10.

At nine months, 34% of the original sample had been re-incarcerated, 32% in Victoria and 35% in NSW.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 11 for the total sample as well as separately for NSW and Victoria, for significant factors and associations. Qualitative information was analysed into categories and themes to provide an understanding of how various factors affected ex-prisoners' experiences.

CAVEATS

The sample for this study comprised all those released from prison in the two states over a three-month period who chose to participate. This sampling method was designed to be representative of the population of prison releasees; however, because there is little information about those who chose not to participate, it is not possible to know whether those who agreed to participate differ

significantly from those who did not. It should be noted that 66% of the participants had previously been in prison and, although we know that a majority of prisoners do re-offend, the results of the study may be skewed towards the views/experiences of re-offenders. In particular, the results here do not distinguish between the experiences of first-time offenders and re-offenders. Finally, the sample size – whilst larger than for many other studies of this nature – is not large by comparison with other social science surveys and at small sub-group level may not be sufficient for meaningful results.

FINDINGS

Of the original sample, 73% in NSW, and 58% in Victoria were given no information on accommodation or support pre-release. This is significant in the light of the study's major findings.

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Also notable was that participants came from, went back to and called home a small number of disadvantaged suburbs and towns in both NSW and Victoria. In NSW, by far the majority of participants came from and went back to a very small number of clustered suburbs and towns in eight areas. In Victoria there was some clustering around a disadvantaged area outside of Melbourne and in two areas within Melbourne, although this was not as notable as in NSW.

In the research, staying out of prison post-release was chosen as the only readily available and fairly reliable measure of ex-prisoners' progress, an indication that an ex-prisoner was managing socially and economically to some extent.

RETURNING TO PRISON

Two key factors emerged as the strongest predictors of return to prison. They were:

- worsening problems with heroin use; and
- moving house often (in this context, two or more times in a three-month post-release period)

Prior to release, very few participants rated their drug use as a problem, but as the study progressed participants increasingly saw their drug use as problematic.

Half of those interviewed post-release were highly transient, moving two times or more between interviews – and this was found to be a predictor of return to prison. Upon release, many ex-prisoners hoped they would be able to live with their parents, partners or other family members. This proved to be a forlorn hope for most, especially in NSW where, by three months post-release, 60% of those who hoped to be with family were on the move and without stable accommodation. Typically these transient ex-prisoners would move from friend to friend, sleeping on a couch, and often to the street and maybe to a hostel. This pattern of frequent movement corresponds to the notion of 'iterative homelessness' employed in another recent AHURI study (Robinson, 2003).

These chaotic living arrangements made doing anything about drug rehabilitation, employment or social connections virtually impossible for the study participants. A majority of these transient participants was re-incarcerated by nine months post-release, as the following table shows.

Table 1: Number of moves post-release

| Moves | 0 or 1 | 2 or more | Total |
|---------------------|----------|-----------|-------|
| Not returned prison | 89 (78%) | 46 (41%) | 91 |
| Returned prison | 25 (22%) | 66 (59%) | 135 |
| Total | 114 | 112 | 226 |

Statistical analysis showed significant associations between returning to prison and a number of factors. These were:

- 1. Being homeless.** During the study, the rate of homelessness increased compared to the situation before incarceration (from 18% pre-jail to 21.4% post-release). At nine-months post-release there were clear differences in the rate of homelessness between the two states. For NSW participants there was an eight percentage point increase compared with the pre-incarceration homelessness, while Victorian participants' homelessness rate was reduced (12% to 8%).

2. Not having accommodation support or the support offered being assessed as unhelpful.

Participants were asked whether they had any support on housing matters post-release. Of those interviewed, 151 said they did receive some support, mainly social, with other forms being financial and counselling. Their assessment of whether the support was helpful (for example, the suitability of the accommodation) was highly correlated with recidivism. Only 14 people (18%) who said the support was helpful returned to prison whereas 52 (69%) of those who said it was unhelpful returned to prison.

3. An increase in the severity of alcohol and other drug problems.

With time, the total numbers rating their drug use as a problem increased significantly, and many said their alcohol or other drug use was a significant factor in their return to prison. The results indicated that the worse the drug problem, the more likely the person was to be returned to prison.

4. Being Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander.

None of the Indigenous participants had lived in a family home post-release and many relied on public and publicly-assisted housing. Many

Staying with parents and other close family appears to be associated with stability, not having to move and staying out of prison

Indigenous women were unable to secure public housing upon release due to debt and being in poor standing with the State Housing Authority. It was not uncommon for these women to have allowed family or friends to use their housing authority house whilst they were in prison and for the house to have been damaged. The women then bore the responsibility for that damage. Disadvantaged areas also featured prominently when considering NSW Indigenous participants. There was a strong trend towards poorer housing and living alone, with 80% of those still out of prison living alone at the nine-month interview. Half of those Indigenous participants out of prison at nine months were homeless.

5. Being a woman. Women participants were more likely to return to prison over the nine-month study period than their male counterparts. Of the men in the sample 78 (31%) returned to prison whereas 37 (43%) women returned. Women appear to have had greater problems than their male counterparts securing suitable accommodation. Proportionally far fewer were living with parents, partners or close family than the men.

6. Debt. Of the 226 participants for whom there was information about debt post-release, 116 (51%) said they had a debt of some sort. Those with a debt were more likely to return to prison (50%) than those who had no debt (30%). Of those with a debt, 35 (30%) had a State Housing Authority debt. Of these people, 22 (63%) returned to prison compared with 45% of those with other forms of debt.

STAYING OUT OF PRISON

Three factors were significant in staying out of prison. They were:

1. Living with parents, partner or close family.

Of the 41% of those living with their parents, partner or other family member only 23% returned to prison. Of those living alone or with friends or acquaintances, 52% returned to prison. In Victoria, a much larger percentage (44%) than in NSW (18%) was still living with parents at nine months post-release. Staying with parents and other close family appears to be associated with stability, not having to move and staying out of prison.

2. Having employment or being a student.

Of the 227 participants who answered the question about employment post-release, only 36 (16%) had employment of any kind or were full-time students. Of those who had employment or were full-time students only three (or 8%) returned to prison, whereas 46% of those who were unemployed returned to prison. None of the five students had returned.

3. Helpful Agencies. Ex-prisoners' own assessments of the helpfulness of support agencies proved to be highly reliable in indicating whether they were returned to prison.

STATE DIFFERENCES

There were major differences between NSW and Victoria. Particularly, although all participants in the study tended to come from disadvantaged areas, the concentration of ex-prisoners in areas of economic and social disadvantage was more marked in NSW than in Victoria. Outcomes were also better for the Victorian participants – significantly more of them stayed with parents or close family and had employment post release compared to their NSW counterparts. Housing affordability in Sydney compared to Melbourne may also have had an impact on outcomes in NSW.

Housing affordability in Sydney...may have had an impact on the outcomes in NSW

The un-affordability of housing, particularly in Sydney, and the difficulties this posed for people being released from prison came through consistently in the qualitative data.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has showed that moving often post-release is a predictive factor in a person's return to prison. When stable housing is combined with helpful support that assists in addressing issues such as drug problems, family relations and employment, the evidence from this study is that ex-prisoners are much less likely to return to prison.

Some of the policy and practice implications flowing from this research regarding housing for ex-prisoners are already being taken up in some states.

Major implications include:

- The need to provide up-to-date and accurate release and post-release information on accommodation and other support services available, in a manner relevant to the prisoner, to all prisoners prior to release.
- The importance of a multi-agency team approach to housing, health, mental health and employment, one that includes ex-prisoners' views and knowledge. Coordination and integration of programs and services is vital. Participants in this study had their own opinions of what was appropriate and helpful – and those who perceived agencies as unhelpful were more likely to end up back in prison. Therefore, the appropriateness of post-release services should not be exclusively a matter for professional judgement.
- Following from this, it is noted that allocation of a trained caseworker to each and every prisoner pre-release could be a way to aid this integration. A caseworker could make contact with the prisoner pre-release to establish the person's housing and support situation with a view to post-release support.
- The findings support the prioritisation of housing support for ex-prisoners. Stable housing established for releasees from the outset with support to help maintain that housing, is likely to lead to less recidivism.
- 'One size fits all' housing support may not be appropriate for ex-prisoners (just as other AHURI studies have suggested it is not appropriate for others with multiple disadvantage). Some ex-prisoners require 24 hour intensive support in a group setting upon release, others require independent living with less intensive support.
- Support to parents and other family members of ex-prisoners, where the ex-prisoner has moved in with these family members, could be made available to facilitate the social support available from family.

The concentration of ex-prisoners in areas of economic and social disadvantage was more marked in NSW than in Victoria

- Caseworkers would be ideally situated to be advocates for ex-prisoners, where necessary, to help deal with housing debt, rental and rent assistance matters.
- There is a need to develop specialised post-release supported housing for Indigenous women as this group was found to have particular difficulties accessing both public and private housing markets.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The project on which this report is based is entitled *Ex-prisoners and accommodation: what bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration*.

To see a summary of the project and its associated research reports, search on www.ahuri.edu.au

Papers available:

- Positioning Paper;
- Final Report.

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.



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