

The housing needs of ex-prisoners

Current evidence indicates that ex-prisoners are more likely to re-offend if they do not find satisfactory accommodation on release. Despite this, a recent study of the information and support offered in four prisons, carried out by Jane Carlisle of the Centre for Housing Policy at York University, found that, while there was some good practice, the general level of housing assistance prisoners received was inadequate.

f Although many prisoners had been inadequately housed before going to prison, the great majority wanted to retain their original homes. On release, however, less than half were able to return to their previous home.

f Three factors were instrumental in determining whether ex-prisoners succeeded in retaining their homes: the quality of family relationships, the availability of housing benefit, and their financial status.

f Housing information in prisons was designed both to help prisoners retain their previous accommodation and enable them to find new accommodation where necessary. However, the provision of information varied widely in the four prisons studied. Many prisoners were disinclined to ask for help and there was confusion about responsibilities among staff. No written guidance or procedures relating to housing advice were located.

f Problems faced in re-housing prisoners include:

- Access to independent, mainstream accommodation is increasingly difficult.
- Arranging accommodation other than in hostels prior to release is very difficult.
- Very few ex-prisoners agree to live in a hostel; they are concerned at being drawn into re-offending by contact with other ex-offenders.

Introduction

Approximately 90,000 prisoners are released into the community each year. Many of these people have lost their homes because, for a variety of reasons, they were unable to maintain their housing while they were in prison. Even a short sentence can precipitate profound resettlement problems. The housing situation of ex-prisoners is important to the well-being of the whole community. Two-thirds of ex-prisoners who had no satisfactory accommodation re-offended within twelve months of release, whereas only a quarter of those with good accommodation did so.

Housing information within prisons

This fell into two main categories:

- information that enabled a prisoner to retain previous accommodation;
- information that enabled the prisoner to arrange new accommodation.

The provision of information varied widely between the four prisons in which staff were interviewed. One prison provided a model of good practice. An officer in the probation department with expert knowledge of the field worked full time on helping prisoners with their housing problems. This officer provided photocopied letters for prisoners to send to landlords and benefit offices in order to maintain their tenancies.

In another prison nobody appeared to have responsibility for helping prisoners with housing problems. Thus prisoners lost tenancies because they were unaware of their right to housing benefit, although the tenancies could have been maintained. Some prisons provided housing information through specially trained prison officers, on pre-release courses or through allowing outside agencies such as the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) into the prison to hold workshops.

It was difficult for prisoners to arrange accommodation prior to release other than to a hostel. Local authorities and housing associations would not accept onto their waiting lists people who were in prison. Most frequently a prison probation officer would contact the prisoner's home probation officer about finding accommodation.

How ex-prisoners retained housing

The most common means of retaining a home was through a partner maintaining a mortgage or tenancy. Relationships with partners were crucial in maintaining a home; however, relationships were prone to breakdown during a prison sentence. Less than half the ex-prisoners in the study were able to return to their previous accommodation after they had been released.

At the time of the fieldwork housing benefit was available for a maximum period of 12 months to

Table 1: Sources of housing advice for prisoners

Resources based within prison	Resources based in the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probation officers • Prison officers (specially trained in providing housing advice) • Pre-release course (run by prison officers but may include outside agencies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probation officers (seen on visits to prison or pre-release home leave) • Pre-release course (run by community probation officers but may include other agencies)

Table 2: Accommodation outcome by tenure

	Kept accommodation	Lost accommodation	Total
Owner-occupiers	7	9	16
Council tenants	8	3	11
Housing association tenants	3	2	5
Private rented sector tenants		6	6
Lodgers	5	10	15
Hostel dwellers	0	3	3
Accommodation with job	0	1	1
Squat	0	2	2
Sleeping rough	0	2	2
Total	23	38	61

maintain prisoners' homes. This was the most common means by which single tenants maintained their accommodation. The period for which housing benefit is paid to maintain a prisoner's home was reduced to thirteen weeks in April 1995. More prisoners will inevitably lose their homes as a result of this regulation.

The majority of single ex-prisoners whose tenancies were maintained by housing benefit were single mothers. Women ex-prisoners with children can find themselves in a 'catch 22' situation, where they need adequate accommodation before they can regain custody of their children after release, yet are not considered to have dependent children unless they currently have custody. They are not therefore considered to be in priority need for housing.

How ex-prisoners lost housing

The largest number of ex-prisoners interviewed at the follow-up stage who had lost their housing had been owner-occupiers (apart from lodgers, whose housing situations were generally unstable) (see Table 2). Their houses were repossessed when they were unable to sustain the mortgages. All owner-occupiers had been in full-time work prior to imprisonment. None had found work since discharge from prison.

All ex-prisoners who had been living in the private rented sector lost their accommodation. Three had been unaware of their eligibility for, or unable to organise the payment of, housing benefit. Two were in prison too long to be eligible for housing benefit, while one had no wish to return to bed and breakfast accommodation.

People who had been living in hostels or squats, or who had housing provided with their job, all lost their accommodation. One man with learning disabilities had hoped to return to his former home in a supported hostel but was refused a place because of his methadone dependence.

Social tenants fared best in retaining their homes, with less than half of them losing housing. The reasons why some social tenants had lost their homes varied from imprisonment exceeding twelve months (no eligibility for housing benefit) to rent arrears, while one property had been vandalised.

A high proportion of people lost their homes, indirectly, because of relationship breakdown. Partners left homes that they might have been expected to maintain either on income support as owner-occupiers or on housing benefit as tenants. Many ex-prisoners had to cope with the loss of their home, their partner and their job as they attempted to become rehabilitated into the community.

Housing provision for ex-prisoners

Places in statutory, approved probation hostels were restricted to ex-offenders who were on a statutory supervision order. Some long-term ex-prisoners who had stayed in these hostels acquired local authority or housing association accommodation after having their names on the waiting list for twelve months while they were in the hostel. The maximum length of stay in a hostel was generally twelve months.

With the notable exception of London, there was good provision and a wide variety of hostels in the voluntary sector who took ex-prisoners. They ranged from large sites with 24-hour staff cover to small, satellite houses that staff visited twice a week.

Referrals to hostels are often made through a probation officer. Some hostels have age or gender related admission criteria, and some cannot accept people who have been convicted of arson or sex offences because of the conditions placed upon them by buildings insurance or planning regulations. Ex-prisoners convicted of those offences faced particular difficulty in finding accommodation.

Very few ex-prisoners were willing to accept a place in a hostel, which they described as full of other ex-offenders, whom they wished to avoid. This was expressed in terms of 'keeping out of trouble' and included a wish to refrain from using drugs, which they believed to be endemic in hostels. Some hostels operated a strict regime, including a curfew and a ban on alcohol and visitors, which may also have prejudiced their acceptability.

Some probation services administered landlady schemes through the Probation Accommodation Grant Scheme. This scheme provided a government-funded support element in housing for ex-offenders. Ideally, the landlady provided informal support on a one-to-one basis for the ex-prisoner. In practice, it appeared that the majority of schemes had commercial landlords, while others followed the pattern of a hostel with a resident manager.

Almost two-thirds of the ex-prisoners in this study were single people. They had no statutory right to housing, although some were offered local authority accommodation on low demand estates.

The effects of policy

Housing for ex-offenders was largely provided by the voluntary sector, and was funded by the Home Office through the Probation Accommodation Grant Scheme (PAGS). Voluntary projects made bids directly to the Home Office for PAGS funding for a variety of supported accommodation projects, the money being relayed to them through the county probation services. Accommodation projects were administered and monitored by the Probation

Service, whose staff looked forward to the completion of the devolution of funding from the Home Office to themselves from April 1996.

The completion of devolution of PAGS from April 1996 should enable more flexible provision of accommodation in the voluntary sector. Probation officers hope to fund specific packages of housing and support to meet the needs of individual clients. A significant implication for voluntary providers is that funding for a project can be withdrawn on three months' notice, which could jeopardise a project because of financial uncertainty and the inability to plan effectively for the future.

Since the implementation of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 home probation officers have been under no legal obligation to see ex-prisoners who have been sentenced to less than twelve months' imprisonment. A secondary result of the Act is that duties so constrain the officers' time that they are rarely able to assist ex-offenders to whom they have no statutory duty.

The period over which sentenced prisoners can claim housing benefit was reduced in April 1995 from 12 months to 13 weeks. The implementation of this regulation began to take effect from August 1995. This study suggests that single mothers are the group of ex-prisoners most likely to suffer as a result of the reduction, as they were more likely than others to maintain tenancies by claiming housing benefit throughout a prison sentence.

The situation of tenants whose imprisonment exceeds 13 weeks but is less than 12 months has deteriorated with changes in the housing benefit rules. Yet owner-occupiers with a mortgage did not have even this brief cushion to enable them to maintain their homes. Imprisonment for those owner-occupiers who were single, or who suffered the breakdown of a relationship while in prison, meant almost certain loss of their property.

About the research

The research involved: interviews with 175 prisoners shortly before their release, to collect information about their previous accommodation, and to arrange post-release interviews; interviews with 23 professionals associated with helping prisoners to maintain or to find accommodation; interviews with 61 ex-prisoners, or a close relative, between four and eight months after release about their housing experiences.

Further Information

A full report, *The housing needs of ex-prisoners*, will be available in June (price £7.50 including postage and packing) from the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, Heslington, York YO1 5DD, Tel: 01904 433691. A single laminated A4 card providing a basic Good Practice Guide for use in prisons is also available (price £1.50 including p&p) from the Centre for Housing Policy).

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