

THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM – Best Practice approaches supporting ex-prisoners to access stable housing

> Based on a recent South Australian (SA) research project, Dr Tony Gilmour from Housing Action Network, identifies practical ways to better coordinate housing and support.

We currently spend lots of money circulating people between homelessness and prison, then back again. Around half the prison population has been in jail before. One fifth are homeless before incarceration, and a slightly higher percentage exit into homelessness. This merry-go-round is bad for individuals, communities and taxpayers.

Homelessness and re-offending

Providing housing and support for ex-prisoners is a classic 'wicked problem'. It involves complex departmental and organisational relationships spanning correctional services, social housing and homelessness support. It is also a topic where the media debate focuses on keeping 'dangerous' people in prison and stopping exiting prisoners 'jumping the queue'.

Consistent research findings in Australia and overseas identify offending and imprisonment as both a symptom of – and a pathway to – homelessness. Homeless people, including those in correctional facilities, are much more likely than the general population to experience mental health problems, and drug and alcohol misuse. As Professor Baldry from the University of NSW has noted, it is very difficult to disentangle criminal behaviour, homelessness, poverty, and mental and cognitive impairment.

Releasing ex-prisoners into an environment with the same unresolved housing and social problems they faced before sentencing can lead to reoffending.

Formerly homeless people exiting the correctional services system are more likely to experience unemployment, lower incomes, discrimination and housing difficulties. A large minority of people being released from prison do not have suitable housing following prison, and pre-release information and support in securing accommodation is often inadequate.

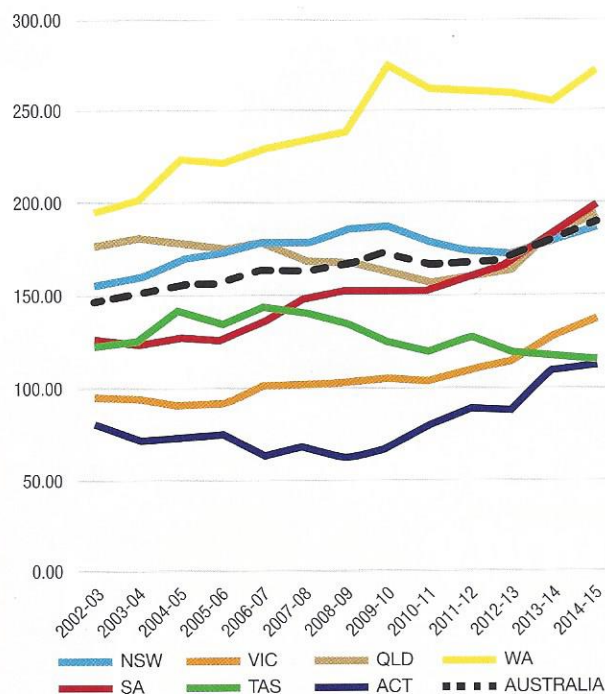
Without proper support, releasing ex-prisoners into an environment with the same unresolved housing and social problems they faced before sentencing can lead to reoffending. This creates a cycle of imprisonment and release.

The booming prison sector

Figure 1 shows the imprisonment rate per 100,000 adults across Australia. The national trend has been a consistent increase, from a rate of 147.2 in 2002-03 to 198.5 in 2014-15. This amounts to a 29 percent rise in imprisonment over the last 12 years.

Levels of imprisonment continue to vary between jurisdictions, with the Northern Territory (NT) a clear outlier with rates in 2014-15 of 885 per 100,000 population (or 4.6 times the national average). Of the other jurisdictions, Western Australia (WA) has been consistently high (271 in 2014-15) and the ACT consistently low (113 in 2014-15).

Figure 1: Imprisonment rates, 2003-2015



Source: for Figures 1 and 2: Productivity Commission 'Report on Government Services' (2016). NT is included in the Australian average but not shown as a separate line

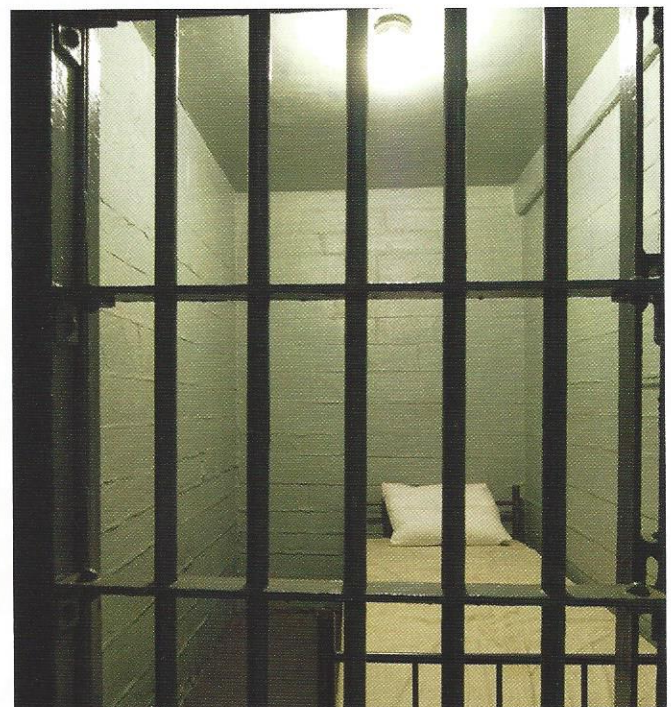
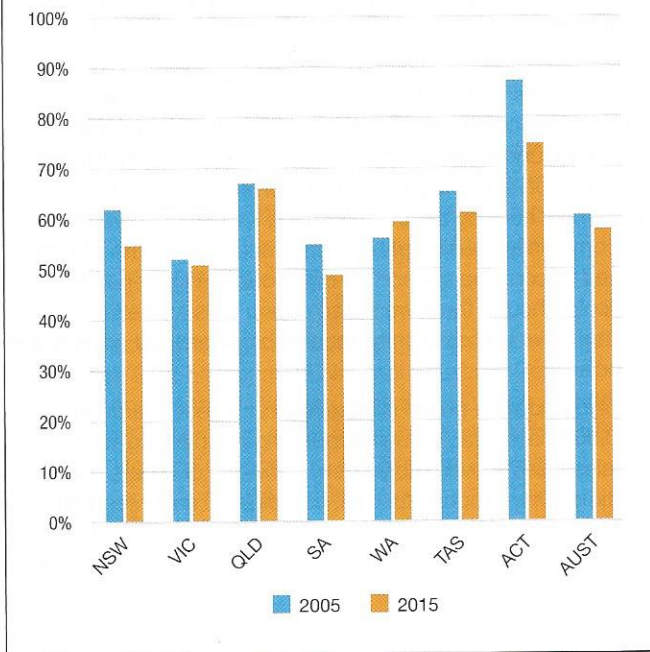


Figure 2: Reoffending trends, 2005-2015



Of all jurisdictions, South Australia (SA) has seen the greatest change over the last 12 years. The state has moved from fourth position to second position in terms of imprisonment levels, which equates to a 58.4 percent increase. This is the highest rise of any jurisdiction other than NT, ahead of Victoria (+44.3 percent) and the ACT (+41.6 percent).

Note: the SA imprisonment rate of 198.5 per 100,000 population is an average. For Indigenous people, the rate is 2,473 and for, non-Indigenous, 149. The rate also varies according to gender, with a rate of 379 for males and 25 for females per 100,000.

Many current prisoners have previously been incarcerated. Figure 2 shows reoffending rates vary considerably in 2015, from a high of 75 percent in the ACT in 2015 to the lowest figure of any jurisdiction with 47 percent in SA. Rates of reoffending have fallen between 2005 and 2015 in all jurisdictions except WA. The decrease in SA was third highest nationally, and two and a half times the rate of decrease across Australia.

Research project

In June 2016, the Community Council Housing Council of SA (CHCSA) commissioned Tony Gilmour and John Stott of the Housing Action Network to find options for community housing providers to provide secure, sustainable accommodation for people exiting the justice and prison system, and for people on remand. A brief environmental scan of the national and international research literature was undertaken; however, the project's main focus was to build a practical understanding of what works best in delivering effective housing and support options.

We interviewed and held focus groups with 26 individuals spanning community housing, correctional services and prisoner support agencies. These ranged from ministers and departmental chief executives through to managers of frontline staff. Key issues were discussed at a Forum held in

SA innovations

The state has a respected set of approaches to housing ex-prisoners, arguably leading Australia – though a cynic might say there is little competition.

The jewel in the crown is the Integrated Housing Exits Program (IHEP), established in 2003 to accommodate 60 adult ex-prisoners and 20 young people exiting detention. Initially, housing was sourced from Housing SA's general portfolio, though later, as part of the 2009 Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan, new properties were transferred. Currently, 60 percent of the adult IHEP properties are managed by community housing providers.

IHEP is a 'housing first' program run in partnership between social housing providers, the Department of Correctional Services and the Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services of SA (OARS). The OARS' origins lie in the Prisoners Association established 1887. Currently, the organisation provides a number of programs for ex-offenders including drug, alcohol and gambling support, as well as state-wide specialised support for clients exiting prison who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Support is directly linked to IHEPS and other accommodation where social housing landlords provide tenancy and asset management.

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Initial findings: coordination brings results

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Our research found several ways schemes such as IHEPS could be enhanced, though, even as it stands, the program is arguably ahead of other approaches in Australia. SA Correctional Services is especially progressive under a new minister who has pledged to reduce re-offending by 10 percent by 2020. A bail hostel is currently under construction, and there is even talk of additional social housing supply for ex-prisoners.

In terms of support, OARS and their equivalent organisation working with young people (SYC) provide services closely linked with housing and homelessness programs. They do this on a coordinated basis across the state, rather than an ad hoc arrangement centred on particular prisons, which is the model in some other jurisdictions. OARS is an example of a contemporary not-for-profit organisation operating at scale but retaining a clear focus on a specific homelessness group.

There are more philanthropic-driven SA organisations, such as faith-based Second Chances, which provides support for prisoners, their families and children. Volunteers visit prisoners while incarcerated, offering assistance with practical matters such as property storage and banking, as well as emotional support, friendship and mentoring. The organisation's work

helps prisoners in the transition back to the community, maintaining and rebuilding links with their families. Work with prisoners' children helps families reunite and reduces the chance this vulnerable group will themselves enter the criminal justice system.

Although Second Chances is independent of the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system, around 60 percent of their income came from grants. This is again an example of SA Government using public funding wisely in a coordinated and directed way.

Future directions

Helping prisoners access stable accommodation, and sustain their tenancies, is the key way to break the recycling between homelessness and imprisonment. To achieve this, there needs to be an appropriate supply of dedicated affordable housing, the existence of strong ex-prisoner support agencies, and an integrated approach to managing the transition from prison back to mainstream society. People need contact and support within prison, careful management of the transition from prison, and on-going support after release – often for a number of years.

To achieve positive outcomes for ex-prisoners, careful coordination is needed between government departments, housing providers (both public and community) and support agencies (funded and voluntary). However, with current changes in human service delivery, a coordinated approach is becoming more challenging.

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A greater share of social housing is moving to a multiplicity of community housing providers, and they are expected to run as lean, efficient social businesses. There is also greater funding

contestability between SHS providers, coupled with uncertainty over longer term Commonwealth support for homelessness services. When funding is scarce, governments may bow to media pressure – ex-prisoners are often seen as one of the least ‘deserving’ disadvantaged groups in society.

Many aspects of the current human service reforms are positive. The community housing sector can leverage their enhanced funding model compared to state housing authorities to raise debt, and use proven development capacity to deliver new housing options, including for ex-prisoners. All the community housing providers we spoke to for the project wanted to continue supporting this group of higher needs residents, though there were also strong calls for better risk-sharing between community housing providers and government agencies.

Keeping people in prison is expensive at a cost of around \$100,000 each year, though supporting people long-term in homelessness is even more costly – millions of dollars over a lifetime. Only properly-funded, coordinated and integrated approaches to supporting ex-offenders in the housing market can help end the current merry-go-round between incarceration and homelessness.

■ To obtain a copy of the final project report, contact Carmel Rosier: carmel.rosier@chcsa.org.au



Dr Tony Gilmour is Founder and Managing Director of the Housing Action Network (www.housingaction.net.au), a leading Australasian social and affordable housing consultancy. Additional research for this project was undertaken by John Stott, a Network Associate.