



What Happens After Prison?

RAP Fact Sheet

The post-jail life of former prisoners

Here is something we don't think about much: most prisoners are, eventually, released from prison.

Some might have been there for only a few weeks or months, but others may have been in prison for many years. Even though they have served their sentence, they face enormous challenges and do not receive enough support.

Evidence shows that we do a poor job of preparing people to live in the community again. Former prisoners find it very hard to find a place to live, a job to support themselves and their families, as well as staying healthy.

Finding a home, a job, and staying healthy helps keep former prisoners out of trouble. By failing to help them adjust to life outside prison, we are making it more likely that they will reoffend. We must do better.

The system we have in place to help people re-join the community is overstretched, and cannot cope with the numbers.

In Victoria there is a lack of accommodation and services for prisoners released on parole. There are only 25 beds available in Victoria's one transitional centre so most prisoners are released directly.¹

In 2013/2014 there were only 695 placements at Intensive Transitional Support Programs for the 4,489 prisoners released.²



Finding a home

Two agencies providing transitional support found that 44% of women and 22% of men in 2013-14 were homeless at the expiration of their funded program placement.⁴

One support agency gave swags to released prisoners, as they had no other accommodation options.⁵

Being without a place to live makes everything much harder. Prisoners report that the temptation to re-offend is greater when they are struggling to find a job and a home.³

There is a strong link between homelessness after release from prison – whether that is sleeping rough, or having to move around between family and friends – and re-offending.⁶

Of course, finding a place to live is hard for lots of people. With nearly 35,000 people on the public housing waiting list⁷ and more than 22,000 Victorians experiencing homelessness every night,⁸ the mainstream housing system is unable to cope with the needs of people after they released from prison.



Staying Healthy

42% of male prisoners and 33% of female prisoners have an acquired brain injury (compared with 2% of the general Australian population).¹³

42% of all prisoners had a psychiatric risk rating indicating a mental health issue in 2012-13.¹⁴

Experts estimate that each year about 60% of people who enter prison have a mental and/or cognitive disability.¹⁵

Former prisoners often face serious medical challenges that make life very difficult for them.

These health issues leave them very vulnerable. A 2013 study from Queensland found that that within a year of release, ex-prisoners under 25 were six times more likely to die than their age-matched peers in the general population.¹⁷

Female prisoners under 25 faced a risk of death 20 times higher than other women of the same age.¹⁸

Without adequate support, facing these challenges is often insurmountable for former prisoners.

55% of people in prison have alcohol and drug issues.¹⁶

Finding a Job



Only 6% of males and 14% of females in prison have completed secondary education or higher.¹⁰

Prisoners report having inadequate access to training and education courses while in prison.¹¹

Former prisoners find it particularly hard to find work. One study found 75% of people leaving prison who were seeking work were unemployed.⁹

This can be for all sorts of reasons. But one major issue is that they often lack the skills and qualifications to get the work they need to get back on track.

This is a missed opportunity. Poor education makes reoffending more likely, and makes it harder for prisoners to reintegrate into the community.¹²



What can be done?

Knowing what to do is hard. The information about what happens to prisoners after they leave prison is very limited. This makes it very difficult to know for sure what policies actually work.¹⁹ However, it is clear that helping prisoners find a place to live, a job to support themselves and their family, and staying healthy, can help prevent reoffending. With proper support many re-join the community and contribute in lots of different ways.

There are a number of great organisations that support former prisoners re-join the community. Some examples are:

- **VACRO** (www.vacro.org.au) which provides support services to prisoners, former prisoners and their families.
- **Grow** (www.grow.org.au) which runs programs that assist prisoners with mental illness reintegrate into the community.
- **Flat Out** (www.flatout.org.au) which provides advocacy and support service for women who have had contact with the criminal justice and/or prison system in Victoria.
- **Jesuit Social Services** (www.jss.org.au/programs/justice-and-crime-prevention) deliver several programs designed to help young people leaving the criminal justice system avoid reoffending.
- **Australian Community Support Organisation** (<http://www.acso.org.au>) are a large non-government, not-for-profit organisation working to help people in difficult circumstances avoid offending.
- **The Victorian Community Legal Centre Justice Connect** have been working on a project aimed at assisting prisoners break the cycle of debt so that they have a better chance of starting fresh once released.

More can be done. All Australian Governments should properly support and fund programs which help former prisoners start a new life after prison, and keep on the right track.

References

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