



THE IMPORTANCE OF HOUSING FOR WOMEN COMING OUT OF PRISON



Most of the solutions to women's offending lie outside prison walls – in treatment for addictions and mental health problems, protection from domestic violence and coercive relationships, secure housing, debt and financial management, employment, education and skills development.²

KWOOP Position

- Access to appropriate, safe, stable accommodation is vital in supporting women to stay out of prison. It is an essential element in facilitating reintegration of women into the community after release from prison, thereby reducing recidivism.
- Imprisonment has significant human, cultural, social, and economic costs, both short and long term, that are borne by individuals, their children, families, and communities as well as by government and society as a whole.
- Prison is an ineffective sentencing solution for most women given custodial sentences. In particular, there is unnecessary over-incarceration of vulnerable women who experience a wide range of social, cultural and economic issues and who pose minimal risk to the community. Much more can be done to tackle these issues before imprisonment becomes the only option.
- The reintegration of women back into society after the end of their custodial sentences is a whole-of-government issue and requires comprehensive community support.

Rationale

- Access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic of human rights. It is particularly important for vulnerable members of the community and those who have experience of mental illness, abuse and trauma, family violence, addiction and disability.
- Safe and secure accommodation provides a base from which people can focus on their health and well-being, access services and support, care for children and other family members and build education and employment pathways.²
- The links between homelessness, offending and re-offending are well established. Unstable housing or homelessness, along with alcohol or other drug issues, significantly increase the risk of reoffending.^{3 4 5}
- For people with mental health issues, lack of access to appropriate housing can be very detrimental. Conversely, secure housing allows them to focus on treatment and rehabilitation.⁶
- The 'Housing First' approach has been demonstrated internationally to be very effective in assisting people to stabilise their lives.^{7 8}
- Suitable, supported and stable housing is associated with successful transition from prison into the community and assists people to stay out of prison.^{9 10}
- People who exit prison into long-term homelessness have the same financial, housing, social and health needs as other chronically homeless people but often have even more difficulty in securing accommodation or employment due to their criminal history.¹¹
- Female ex-prisoners face greater challenges in accessing housing and experience higher levels of homelessness, debt, depression, isolation and social exclusion than men.¹² They require assistance with accommodation, finances, employment and family reunification and they are at a high risk of poor mental and physical health.

The housing status of women in NSW prisons

- Many women in prison have experienced multiple factors of disadvantage prior to incarceration. A high proportion have experienced homelessness or housing instability, 77% have a diagnosed mental health condition and 23% have other forms of disability.
- Over 40% of women sentenced to a period of imprisonment re-offend following their release. Having nowhere stable to live on release was a key factor behind the re-offending.
- Of the 2760 women released from NSW prison during 2019, at least 900 were released into homelessness or unstable accommodation.
- There were only nine dedicated beds available for women immediately after leaving prison in NSW, and five of these were short term beds.

KWOOP calls for

- All women due to be released from prison to be provided with:
 - sustained and suitable accommodation, to be a stable base from which to rebuild their lives
 - tailored support from experienced professionals on issues related to parole, dealings with Centrelink, tenancy maintenance, child custody, mental illness and employment.

Context – Women in prison in NSW

- There were 946 women in prison in August 2019. It is understood that since then there has been a 20% reduction due to COVID-related changes in policing and court procedures.
- There was a 33% increase in the number of women in prison between 2013 and 2019. This was not due to an increase in criminal activity.
- 58% of imprisoned women were on remand or serving a sentence of 12 months or less.
- 32% of women in custody were Aboriginal. This compares to 2.9% in the population as a whole.
- Around 40% of Aboriginal women were on remand, that is, awaiting court for bail or sentencing.
- 60% of women in prison were mothers.
- Almost 24% of women in prison grew up in care and 14% said their parents had been in care as children. 18% of the children of prisoners in NSW are in out-of-home care.
- It costs approximately \$110,000 to keep a woman in custody for a year compared with approximately \$6,495 for women to receive support services in the community.

KWOOP Profile of women in prison in NSW, March 2020

¹ Corston report (2007). A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System. Home Office UK.

² https://www.crcnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CRC_FACS_Submission_Homelessness_2016.pdf

³ Baldry (2011) 'People with Mental Health and Cognitive Disability: Pathways into and out of the Criminal Justice System', Paper presented at the reintegration puzzle conference

⁴ Makkai, T & Willis, M (2009) Ex-Prisoners and Homelessness: Some Key Issues, Australian Institute of Criminology

⁵ Schetzer, L (2013) 'Beyond the Prison Gates: The experiences of people recently released from prison into homelessness and housing crisis', Public Interest Advocacy Centre, Sydney.

⁶ https://www.ahuri.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/29381/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change.pdf

⁷ <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/what-is-the-housing-first-model>

⁸ Busch Geertseena (2012) <https://www.habitat.hu/files/FinalReportHousingFirstEurope.pdf>.

⁹ Baldry E, McDonnell, D, Maplestone, P and Peeters, M (2003) 'Australian Prisoners and Post Release Housing' Current Issues in Criminal Justice, Vol 15, No. 2.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia (2016) Prison to Work Report. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

¹² https://www.crcnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CRC_FACS_Submission_Homelessness_2016.pdf

¹³ <https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/ex-prisoners-and-homelessness>