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# **Women ex-prisoners' post-release. Where to from here?**

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(based on AHURI funded study on ex-prisoners and  
accommodation.)

**Paper for the Sisters Inside “Is Prison Obsolete?”  
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# Women ex-prisoners' post-release<sup>1</sup> Where to from here?

## Introduction

At 7% of the prison population, women represent a small, but rapidly growing minority of the Australian prison population and therefore of the post-release population (ABS 2003). No national data are gathered on women releasees (or releasees in general for that matter) so information must be extrapolated from data on prisoners and from data kept by Centrelink (which is not gender specific). Census numbers are of little use in considering the post-release population; flow-through figures and information are of much more use. What is clear is that currently, for a majority of women, the answer to the question where to from here is – straight back inside! This is a human rights and social justice scandal.

In Australia, Centrelink estimated that some 43,000 persons were released from prison in the 1999-2000 year (Anderson 2000) based on registrations for various benefits. NSW Corrective Services estimates that up to 20,000 releases from prison (including remand), occur in a year. Given that women make up 6-7% of the prisoner population on any day, and that they have shorter sentences on average than men and form a larger proportion of the remand population than men, it could be estimated that women may make up between 9-11% of the releasee population. This would translate to about 4,000 women releases in a year (some of which may be the same woman going in and out of prison twice or three times in one year). Some 30-40% of these women releasees are likely to be Aboriginal women. Unfortunately all this is speculation given that there is no formal data collection.

This paper outlines what information there is about women post-release and reports findings that are relevant to women, of a recent research project investigating ex-prisoners, housing and integration<sup>2</sup>. Theory, policy and services regarding women post-release are discussed in a rights and social justice framework.

## Women Ex-Prisoners-Specific Literature

There is a small literature internationally and in Australia on women being released and their post-release experiences. This paper focuses on housing and allied social factors such as family and employment.

### *UK housing*

Wilkinson's 1988 UK study found that an appreciable number of women prisoners were homeless at arrest or were in unstable housing arrangements. Women without male partners found it exceedingly difficult to retain housing. Many women had to return to domestic violence situations to avoid homelessness. Moreover, fully 50% of the women were homeless on release and a staggering 66% of the women who were homeless prior to their last sentence were reincarcerated within months. Paylor (1995a) also in the UK, found that the contemporary accommodation outlook for ex-offenders was worse than in the 1970s. Over 50% of men and women in his study experienced deteriorated

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<sup>1</sup> Data retrieved from a large AHURI study on ex-prisoners and accommodation.

<sup>2</sup> Full report of Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone & Peeters 2003 "Ex-prisoners, accommodation and social re-integration" available at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au>

housing situations post-release, many of them suffering levels of homelessness. Women were at greater risk of unsuitable accommodation or homelessness than men.

Carlisle's (1996) study followed the post-release housing experience of 61 UK prisoners hailing from 6 male and 2 women's prisons. Imprisonment saw 38/61 participants lose housing held previously (8/19 women; 10/15 from ethnic minorities). Almost all would have preferred to retain their former housing. Social support was a demonstrated crucial factor in retaining past housing. Hostels were the housing option most commonly proffered to homeless ex-prisoners: most either refused or were highly reluctant to take up this option citing safety, privacy, hygiene and interpersonal concerns as reasons. Groups with particular re-housing difficulties were women, persons from ethnic minorities, persons with learning disabilities, persons with drug and alcohol issues and those ex-prisoners returning to families requiring support. Carlisle called for mixed, non-institutional and self-contained housing featuring needs-based floating support for ex-prisoners.

### ***Post-release in general***

A survey of 235 women in Cook County Jail in the USA found high levels of homelessness and housing distress, mental illness, unemployment, drug use and lack of support:

- 53.6% had been homeless prior to incarceration,
- 66% had experienced Domestic Violence
- 54% had been unemployed at arrest and 23% said they had been unemployed because they had no housing, and
- women without housing were twice as likely to have been detained more than six times (Goswami & Schervish 2002).

Hamlyn & Lewis in the UK (2000) found that 90% of a small sample of women post release experienced barriers to inclusion in the community including lack of accommodation and money and experienced social isolation and depression. Of the twenty five percent in employment only 1/10 were able to get work related to skills developed in prison. Shewan et al (2000) found that 1/4 to 1/3 of all female drug fatalities in a region in Scotland were women who had been released from jail in the prior 12 months and implied that supported housing could reduce such fatal overdose rates.

Similar findings in Victoria (Australia) by Davies and Cook (1998) indicated that of 62 women who died shortly after release, 45 died of drug-related causes. Of these women 37.8% died in temporary accommodation, either at the home of a friend or acquaintance, or in boarding houses or hotel rooms. It also indicated that 90% of the women who died shortly after their release from prison had no fixed address at the time of death. They came to the same conclusions as Wilkinson pointing out that more suitable, stable, supported accommodation may have reduced these distressingly high numbers.

Fabb (1991) and Robson and Nancarrow (1991) in Victoria and Lewis and Hayes (1997) in NSW suggested that women ex-prisoners' inability to establish positive social connections post-release may be associated with their inability to secure suitable housing. In Carnaby's retrospective study (1998) of women ex-prisoners (N=24) and agencies (N=45) in Victoria, 80% of the women claimed that securing appropriate housing was a significant factor in precluding their reoffending. They also said that they had had difficulties in finding accommodation due to their being ex-prisoners, sole

parents with young children and impecunious and not having a car. Drug problems loomed large in relation to housing, as did their wish for sole occupancy housing away from former associates. Dutreix (2001) following and supporting Carnaby, notes that there are strong social forces leading women prisoners to be homeless upon release including loss of prior accommodation due to lack of income to maintain rent payments and making plans to stay with family or friends that then go awry (p.3). She asserts that:

*[Women ex-offender's] crime rates can be reduced further as a result of different housing policy. However [this women's] housing policy needs to address the issue from a broad and holistic perspective. This would include increasing public housing stock, further funding for emergency and transitional accommodation and providing appropriate support services (p.3).*

### **Mental illness**

Women prisoners (and presumably women ex-prisoners) suffer higher rates of mental illness than their male counterparts. In general having a mental illness, being homeless and being imprisoned are negatively significantly strongly associated (Belcher 1988; Shah 1989; Benda 1991 & 1993; Caton et al 1993; Vitelli 1993; Martell et al 1995; Zapf et al 1996; Aderibigbe 1996 & 1997; Lamb & Weinberger 1998; James et al 1999; Solomon & Draine 1999; Desai et al 2000; Craig & Hodson 2000) but there is almost no gender-disaggregated data available. Hartwell (2001) after analysing information on mentally ill prisoners and their post-release contact with health services suggests that women with a mental illness post-release are particularly susceptible to homelessness (p5). Walsh (2003) argues that since “judges and magistrates will not release mentally ill offenders into a void” (p236) gender specific support services are desperately needed in the community to provide alternatives to prison and post-release supported accommodation.

Ritchie (2001), in discussion with 42 women recidivists in prison, outlines the severe difficulty facing both the women and their neighbourhoods as they return to highly disadvantaged communities that are supporting high numbers of returning ex-prisoners. Vinson highlighted the geographical concentration of Aboriginal women prisoners (and thus presumably ex-prisoners) in NSW, showing that 30% came from just 3 suburbs in Sydney (Vinson 1999a).

Black and Indigenous women are massively more likely to be imprisoned in the UK, North America and Australia and have higher recidivism rates than their “white” counterparts thus are likely to experience greater difficulties post-release.

In general the research and descriptive literature provides a distressing picture of experiences of women being released from prison.

## **Post-release programs for Women**

### **Victoria**

In Australia current arrangements to address homelessness predominantly focus upon providing support and accommodation for people who are already in crisis and have become homeless (Victorian Department of Human Services 2001a). A ‘key client group’ identified in community consultation as requiring particular attention, was people leaving prison (Victorian Department of Human Services 2001b, 2001c, 2001d). Recent consultations for this strategy identified that neither the prison system nor the homeless

service system was effective in addressing the specific needs of people exiting prison. The discussion paper noted that prisoners are not able to apply for public housing through any of the priority Segmented Waiting List (SWL) (*currently under review*) categories because they are not deemed to be 'homeless' in prison. This is despite possibly having been homeless, or in severe housing crisis, immediately prior to incarceration. Prisoners who may have been on a waiting list for public housing are unable to retain that place even if they have been waiting for several years. It also pointed out that some Transitional Housing Managers (THM) are seen to be more accessible than others, and THM staff members do not receive any specific training on the needs or circumstances of ex-prisoners. As ex-prisoners are unlikely to have pre-arranged support services on release they are also unlikely to receive immediate access to transitional accommodation. Initiatives are being taken to try to address some of these criticisms. These include the Victorian government putting \$13m over 3 years to build up post-release supported housing options, some for women specifically.

The Victorian Department of Human Services papers also addressed problems for women leaving prison, stating that they need access to a range of other critical support services, and generally for extended periods of time. It was felt that current limits on support periods negate service effectiveness and force women to cycle in and out of crisis and/or further incarceration. Whilst the Office of Housing (OOH) does provide for a reduced rent during short-term sentences (\$15 per week), many prisoners are not made aware of this provision and many would not be able to meet the \$15 per week payment whilst in prison (Victorian Department of Human Services 2001d). This is being addressed currently by the Victorian government.

Nevertheless women around Australia being released are in an even worse situation than most men are. In most States there is only one dedicated supported accommodation for women (eg in NSW - Guthrie House) - and these are overwhelmed with women referred from parole, courts and welfare officers (Carnaby 1998). The Sisters' Inside Organisation, despite excellent results with a transitional worker in 2002 still struggles to fund a service connecting women with housing and other social supports. Women prisoners have higher levels of drug and alcohol problems and histories of sexual and physical abuse than male prisoners. Aboriginal women prisoners are, proportionally, the fastest growing group of prisoners in Australia (ABS 2003). These difficulties are compounded for women with dependent children as Ogilvie discusses,

*.....satisfactory accommodation arrangements are crucial with respect to women regaining access to children who have been placed in 'care' situations of one type or another. This can mean that in the absence of any alternative, some women may feel compelled to return to violent partners post release.*  
(Ogilvie, 2001:4).

### **South Australia**

A study of crisis accommodation and support needs of women exiting custody in the Adelaide metropolitan region, conducted by the South Australian Department of Human Services, found that the key features of an effective re-integration program include:

*a focus on addressing needs identified by clients;  
offering choices, clear information and pathways to other service options;  
continuity of worker/client relationships;*

*programs for both pre and post release*  
(Slowinski, 2001:1)

The study drew attention not only for the need for support for 'exiting' women prisoners, but support of a kind capable of accepting clients who are difficult in that they have high and complex needs. This observation could be generalised to embrace a very substantial portion of the ex-prisoner population. The study is also significant for its recommendations in relation to preventative strategies; that is strategies aimed at reducing the risk of homelessness and its attendant destitution, and efficient protocols between prison programs addressing post-release and service providers. Significantly, this study also drew attention to the high representation of Aboriginal women in the prison population and noted the initiative to appoint a Women's Worker as part of the Aboriginal Prisoner and Offender Support Service.

The focus upon prevention of post-release problems in the South Australian study is found in a more advanced state of development in a 2002 draft paper of the Victorian Department of Human Services, *Victorian Homeless Strategy*. In relation to the accommodation needs of ex-prisoners the paper recommended a pilot program establishing Housing Placement Workers in three correctional centres and assistance to short term prisoners to maintain their existing housing arrangements. This initiative is under way.

There is much hidden gender-related social distress and homelessness for those connected with the criminal justice system. Children of imprisoned parents are at a higher risk of homeless than other young persons are. This is due, amongst other matters to breakdowns in alternative living situations, going into substitute care and, in general, having severely disrupted childhoods. In NSW the Children of Imprisoned Parents Report (Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues NSW 1998) details some of these matters. It also touches on the plight of some families of prisoners, almost all women and their children, who are left to fall into poverty, debt, and possibly homelessness.

## **Summary**

What has emerged consistently across time and continents, is that:

- a large minority of women being released from prison does not have family support or suitable accommodation to which to go;
- pre-release information and support regarding post-release matters are grossly inadequate;
- ex-prisoners and those who are reincarcerated who are re-incarcerated point to lack of suitable housing as a key factor in their unsuccessful transition to outside life;
- there is a severe lack of coordination / integration amongst appropriate government and non-government agencies on post-release matters;
- there are particular subgroups amongst women ex-prisoners, such as those with a mental illness and single women with children, who are more vulnerable and more likely to end up without support or adequate housing.

Many of these problems have very recently the focus of government attention in most Australian States and Territories (as well as in the UK) as noted, and a variety of projects in Victoria and WA in particular, mainly around supported housing, are being initiated. It is still the case though that many of these initiatives do not address the very short term women prisoners – especially those in remand.

## **Ex-prisoners, housing and integration research**

A research project on post-release experience, funded by AHURI sought to gather both quantitative and some qualitative data from a reasonably large sample of men and women being released from prisons in NSW and Victoria and to interview them at 3, 6 and 9 months post-release. This aimed to provide for the first time in Australia, reliable data on ex-prisoners' experiences, with particular attention to housing and related social needs.

There were 339 pre-release participants, 194 (130 male and 64 female) in NSW and 145 (122 male and 23 female) in Victoria. Therefore 87 women were included in the pre-release sample and were followed up post-release. At the end of the nine-month interview period, 238 participants (71 of them women) had been interviewed or had information gathered regarding their post-release experience. This represents 70% of the original sample and 80% of the women's sample, an extremely good response rate for this kind of research.

Data gathered included participants' pre-prison housing and social situation and, after release, their social progress, especially housing experiences. The closed questions were intended to provide quantitative data for a population about whom almost nothing statistical is known and the open-ended to provide some explanatory insight into any statistically significant outcomes and into how ex-prisoners interpret their after-prison experiences.

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

- 75% (252) were male, 25% (87) female
- 16% (54) were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; 50% (27) of all Indigenous were women.
- 31% of the women were Indigenous.
- 66% of the total, 70% of the women, had been imprisoned previously;
- 82% had just served sentences of 12 months or less with 53% having served 6 months or less; Of the women 90% had served 12 months or less with 62% serving 6 months or less
- 75% (male and female) had not completed secondary school with most not completing year 10

### **Housing**

- 20% in NSW and 12% in Victoria were homeless (literally without shelter) prior to imprisonment; 20% of women homeless prior.



- 16% (14% of women) expected to be homeless or did not know where they were going post-release
- 73% in NSW, 58% in Vic were given no information on accommodation or support pre-release. But 52% of women received information.
- 24% were in family accommodation prior to imprisonment, but 36% expected to be with their family post release. 67% of men expected to be with parents / partner post-release whereas only 32% of the women expected that.
- 34% (38% female, 21% male) had been dependent on public or assisted housing prior to imprisonment

### **Participants with children**

- 42% of women releasees compared to 5% of men were sole parents
- 66% women had dependent children with 42% of the women being single parents
- Of women participants, women sole parent made up 50% of those in short-term public housing; 20% in priority public housing; 50% in long-term public housing and 67% of the homeless women prior to imprisonment. They expected the same post release.
- Women sole parent participants comprised 100% of the women expecting to live in boarding houses and 33% of those women who did not know where they would be accommodated post release. Moreover, of the indigenous persons who had accumulated Department of Housing debts, half were female sole parents.
- On the whole children of male releasees were living with their mother. Children of women releasees were more likely to be living with a grandparent. In other words women do not have the support of a partner / parent in way men do, in regard to care of children.

### **Debt**

- 33% of women had debt
- 27% of women had housing department debt

### **Employment**

- 35% (24% women) had been employed prior to incarceration
- 57% of women participants were unemployed prior to incarceration compared with 41% of men
- 76% (92% of women) did not expect to or did not know whether they would be employed post-release.

This description of the participants' circumstances confirms the extreme precariousness most experience in relation to housing, family relations, employment and participating in society both prior to their incarceration and upon release.

## **Results 9 months post-releasee**

### **Return to prison**

Women participants (87 of the 339 participants) were more likely to return to prison over the 9-month study period than their male counterparts. Of the men in the sample 78 (31%) returned to prison whereas 37 (43%) of the women returned.

TABLE 16 GENDER RETURNED POST-RELEASE

gender	male	female	total
<b>Not returned</b>	174 (69%)	50 (57%)	224
<b>returned</b>	78 (31%)	37 (43%)	115
<b>total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>339</b>

This is a significant result ( $p < .05$ ).

Women also returned to prison significantly faster than men. At the 3 month interview 33 (38%) of the women had returned to prison whereas approximately only 10% of the men had returned by that time (although the men's figure is a little unreliable and may be a little higher).

### **Moving often**

At each 3 month interview and in the combined 9 month total, moving often proved to be the most reliable predictor (other than increasing drug use) of returning to prison, and the more often the women moved the more likely they were to return to prison. More than half the women moved twice or more with 90% of those who moved 3 times or more returning to prison.

### **Indigenous women**

Indigenous women represented almost half of the Indigenous sample. The women returned to prison at a greater rate than Indigenous men with 68% of the Indigenous women back in prison at nine months compared with 36% of the Indigenous men and compared with 35% of the non-Indigenous women.

Indigenous women represented 31% of the women in the study but represented 43% of the women back in prison at 9 months.

### **Housing**

By three months 15 (26%) of the 59 women contacted at that stage had been in primary homelessness during that time and 12 (80%) of them had been returned to prison.

Only 7 women had been able to return to and stay in their family home and an equal number had secured supported accommodation. Only 3 (21%) of these 14 had returned to prison compared to a 56% return rate for those in public or publicly assisted housing with no support – but even this high rate is much less than for those who were absolutely homeless. Those who returned to public housing were often returning to abusive situations or highly unsatisfactory social circumstances. It was not uncommon for women to comment that they wanted to move away from their prior negative circumstances. Many of the women were unable to secure public housing upon release due to debt and being in poor standing with the Housing Authority. It was not uncommon for these

women to have allowed family or friends to use their Departmental house whilst they were in prison and for the house to have been damaged. The women then bore the responsibility for that damage.

None of the Indigenous participants had lived in a stable family home post-release and there was reliance on public and publicly assisted housing.

### **Employment**

Only 2 women had employment and 1 was a student 9 months post-release. None of these 3 was back in prison. That means, that of the 71 women, about whom we were able to gather some information, 4% had employment/was a full-time student. When the 2 who had employment are set against the 40 who said they were seeking work (as opposed to being unable to work due to a disability or looking after young children), it is equally as stark at 5%.

### **Education**

The lower the level of educational attainment a woman had, the more likely she was to return to prison.

### **Debt**

More women reported being in debt post-release (60%) than prior to release (48%). Those who had a debt of some sort were significantly more likely to return to prison (76%) than those who did not (18%). Only 3 of the 20 women who said they had a Department of housing debt had not returned to prison by 9 months.

### **Drug problems**

Alcohol and other drug problems worsened for the women post-release with women reporting worsening problems with alcohol, tobacco, heroin and speed. There was a significant relationship between this drug use and return to prison. Tobacco use was reported as increasing the most severely – of significance because of the cost of smoking.

### **Post-release programs**

Women were assisted by drug rehabilitation, employment programs and personal counselling. 77% of women who did not attend one of these programs were back inside while only 33% of those who did attend returned to prison.

### **Geographical concentration**

Almost all participants came from and went back to disadvantaged suburbs and towns that, in NSW in particular, were concentrated in just a small number of areas. These are places in the top 30 seriously disadvantaged places in NSW and Victoria in Vinson's (1999b) study of cumulative disadvantage. Indigenous women participants were the most highly geographically clustered in NSW and were returning to disadvantaged communities with little capacity (even if the will was there) to support them. Aboriginal women in particular often were returning to situations of abuse and violence but had nowhere else to go.

### **Discussion**

Women had served shorter sentences, had returned to prison earlier and at a higher rate, had a higher rate of debt and in particular more housing debt and had a higher rate of homelessness than their male counterparts. 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 were. Almost all were unemployed.

The most severely disadvantaged group amongst all participants was Indigenous women in NSW. These women experienced the highest rate of re-incarceration and homelessness in the sample. The NSW Indigenous women had had a dedicated worker who had contacted them prior to release and we thus expected that they might manage better with that support. But they did not. Further investigation indicated that the Indigenous women's worker was battling extreme odds in trying to help her clients. A fundamental problem was her inability to find suitable housing for most of the women. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. Most of these women were multiple recidivists and had little in the way of accumulated social or material goods prior to incarceration. Most had children and needed appropriate housing in an appropriate area; some had parole conditions precluding them from living with various family members; a number had debts or other problems with the Housing Department. All had served short sentences, and cycling in and out of prison was almost the norm, almost a way of life for these women. Going to prison did not prepare them nor create pathways to successful community living.

Women sole parents (some of whom were Indigenous) were the next most disadvantaged with many having serious problems securing suitable housing for themselves and their children. This seemed to be associated with cumulative problems such as AOD issues, poverty, isolation, housing debt and unhelpful or absent partners.

A human rights and social justice analyses of these findings confirms that racism and discrimination follow a majority of these women from childhood and through their adult lives. Poverty, in economic, housing, employment, educational, familial, emotional and security terms, is clearly a defining experience for a majority of women in prison (although of course not entirely – there are some middle class women prisoners). A majority of women prisoners return to prison quickly indicating that integration with the outside community has not been an easy or successful journey.

This is not surprising if one thinks of the cycling process most of the women go through. They are on short sentences for non-violent property offences and are no sooner out than they are back inside. This can be understood as *Serial Institutionalisation* that creates *Dependency*. Many in this study lived in a state of homelessness (either in primary homelessness or without a stable suitable home) moving often and in some form of chaos. Short stints in prison are a form of 'cumulative institutionalising dependency' because they create a period of enforced stability whilst at the same time stripping away ever more of the outside social and physical capital each woman may have had. Because prison is such an unnatural place it is impossible for women on short sentences to adjust to prison life or gain outside living skills, and time outside is a nightmare of having to deal with ordinary social matters and often extreme loneliness, matters that are not dealt with, not able to be addressed or are subsumed in prison,

## Conclusion

Suitable, stable housing with **support** would have helped resolve post-release institutionalised dependency for most of the women in this study who were returned to prison. Those women who had this kind of support returned in very small numbers. Victoria and WA are investing significantly more than in the past in post-release support to reduce return to prison and these projects are already showing some positive results.

Short prison sentences have no redeeming feature. If under 6 month sentences were abolished and remand was reduced significantly, some 60% of women prisoners would no longer be released each year. Western Australia is showing the way with a reduction in the under 6 month sentenced population, impacting positively particularly on Indigenous persons. The abolition of short sentences (6 months and under) would be an excellent start in addressing the scandal of post-release problems and re-incarceration for a majority of women.

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