

Resettlement Experiences of Street Sex-Working Women on Release from Prison

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Abstract

Leaving prison is a challenging process for women. For street sex-working women, these challenges are exacerbated by the complexity of their needs. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of street sex-working women, together with the views of professionals from community-based projects who have supported this group in the transition from custody to the community. The research particularly focuses on the

resettlement needs of street sex-working women on release from prison, the factors which support the resettlement process and the areas for development.

The completed study provides a foundation for future research into the development of policy and practice relating to street sex-working women and their experiences of custody, release and resettlement.

Findings

- All participants identified the importance of women needing a home to go to on the day of their release from prison. Being housed immediately after leaving prison was seen by both service user and professional participants as key to ensuring that other vital services, including support around health and addiction, were put in place.
- All of the service users interviewed had substance misuse issues. All professional and service user participants viewed support around substance misuse as one of the most important aspects of release planning and support.
- Despite histories of profound trauma being prevalent among street sex-working women in prison, participants highlighted that there was insufficient trauma-specific support in the custodial setting. Most professionals felt that this was something that should be addressed before the day of release and then continued in the community.
- The violence inherent within street sex work was recognised by both professionals and service users. This violence was identified as posing a significant risk to the personal safety of street sex-working women, both on the day of their release and thereafter.
- For most of the service users interviewed, their circumstances in the community had felt so unsafe that being in prison was viewed as a more desirable alternative. However, for some bullying and the possibility of being assaulted by other inmates were very real fears.
- All participants called for more robust and effective release planning and cited examples or had personal experience of where this had not happened. Service users felt strongly that by having services in place in good time prior to the day of their release, they would feel more supported, more motivated and increasingly likely to engage. Women serving short sentences or recall periods in custody were seen as less likely to have services in place for the day of their release.
- Most service users described challenges around accessing welfare benefit payments, as benefit systems did not allow for funds to be made immediately available on the day of release.
- Very few of the service users interviewed were met by a support service at the prison gates on the day of their release, although all said they would have valued this support.
- Sex work projects played a vital role in supporting street sex-working women both on the day of their release and on an on-going basis. Long-term, intensive support was seen as vital when supporting street sex-working women leaving prison. Support needed to be made available for extended periods after the day of release and tailored to meet the needs of the individual.

Recommendations

- Street sex-working women require support around their substance misuse issues throughout the resettlement process.
- Further consideration should be given to the practice example contained within this study with a view to replicating this model across other geographical areas.
- Street sex-working women need access to safe and supported housing on the day they are released from prison.
- Therapeutic support needs to be made available to street sex-working women in prison and continued after release in the community.
- Awareness training should be made available to all professionals who are involved in supporting street sex-working women.
- Service design needs to be adapted to reflect the needs and circumstances of street sex-working women.
- Changes need to be made to the current welfare benefits system to allow prisoners to be able to apply for benefits before the day of their release.
- Street sex-working women should be recognised as a vulnerable group and given priority access to services on release from prison.