

Resettlement issues facing female lifers

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Research Paper 2002/01

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Abstract

Women offenders face particular challenges on resettlement into the community and although some issues will be the same for all women prisoners, women lifers face distinct issues and these are often overlooked. In particular, a lifer will only be released when she has convinced the Parole Board that she is a sufficiently low risk to be managed in the community. An essential aspect of this assessment is the release plan and whether it provides sufficient support for effective reintegration. Resettlement is, therefore, of

particular significance to women lifers because it can impact on their chance of being released and of being recalled.

The purpose of this study was to research the range of resettlement issues facing women lifers from a legal perspective. The focus was women lifers' preparation for release in the context of the life sentence; the parole board process and the life licence.

Findings

- The majority of those interviewed felt that a period of time in open conditions was essential to allow for reintegration into the community but that the length of time could be reduced to 12 months.
- The availability of open places is limited to three establishments. This often results in a woman being located far from her proposed release area causing difficulties for a lifer reintegrating back into the community.
- A primary concern was the suitability of accommodation on release.
- The majority had not had the opportunity to build up a relationship with the probation officer supervising the life licence on release.
- It was suggested by the majority that a mentor could offer appropriate support.
- The majority felt that there should be more opportunity for temporary release from closed conditions.
- There are limited hostel places in the female estate, but lifers would benefit from being able to reside in hostel accommodation prior to the parole board review.
- There were clear benefits in undertaking both community work and paid work but the majority recognised their criminal conviction and life status would be a barrier to employment on release.

Recommendations

- Recognise individual needs: any blanket policy can become an obstacle if it is not applied in the context of individual circumstances.
- Review the Temporary Release Provisions; to allow for increased temporary release in closed conditions; to reduce the settling in period to 3 months when transferred to open conditions; to increase resettlement leaves to every four weeks; to increase range of community work placements; and to cancel the 4 day policy in respect of paid work.
- Increase the availability of hostel places in order to allow lifers to reside in hostels prior to a Parole Board review.
- Provide more frequent contact with the Supervising Probation Officer.
- Review hostel and alternative accommodation and provide a central database of all hostel accommodation. Housing Associations should review the policy of only identifying place when release date is known.
- Establish a centrally co-ordinated voluntary mentoring scheme to provide positive role models.
- Prepare a Release Information Pack for all lifers before release, with information on disclosing conviction, the life licence and helpful points of contact.