

Research Paper

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A sense of Place: A study of accessing housing for women exiting prison – housing first not housing last

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Executive Summary

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The purpose of this study was to research the barriers in accessing homes experienced by women leaving prison and identify the benefits of women-only housing provision through a locally driven initiative. The findings revealed through the women's narratives, how a targeted focus on a need for a home improved the lives of, and produced positive outcomes for women leaving prison.

Background:

Homes that are safe, affordable and long-term in resettlement planning and responses to women's needs tend to be male-oriented solutions as are most homelessness responses (Casey, et al., 2008; Agenda, 2016). My study provided an account of women's narratives on leaving custody, explored their *Sense of Place* and the emotional impact fears and worries had on women leaving prison on accessing accommodation. The narratives evidenced the importance of a home and the need for a client-led response as opposed to the traditional signposting for accommodation and endorsed a more robust and tailor-made approach to sourcing a home for women leaving prison.

The aim of this research was to identify how women related to *home* post-prison and answer my research questions: 'How can resettlement frameworks overcome the barriers they face and reduce the use of short-term accommodation?' and 'What were the benefits for the women of a Housing First approach?' In order to meet this aim, the following objectives formed the basis of this research:

- Research the barriers experienced by women in prison accessing homes
- Explore current support frameworks from custody to community for housing needs
- Identify and challenge post supervision term solutions against the need for long-term housing for women
- Evidence the emotional impact of the fears women in custody experience on where they will live following a prison sentence
- Examine and evidence the unsuitability of hostels for women exiting custody
- Test the benefits of a housing first home to reduce social and financial inequalities

Methodology:

The research used a qualitative in-depth methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews and focused on women's life histories of their understanding of what constituted a home prior to their experience of custody. Twelve women participated and received direct support to access homes prior to leaving custody. The interviews took place over a twelve-month period and focused on their previous experiences of home, caring roles prior to prison and their understanding of what was relevant as a pathway for them from custody to community in terms of housing support. The research examined a "housing first" approach dedicated to women exiting prison to test how this influenced resettlement. Invited participants ranged in age from 18 to 59 years old. The respondents were Caucasian and had served a mixture of short and long-term sentences. The study sample was small however, this enabled strengths in the rich data drawn from the interviews.

When beginning this study, it was evident some participant observation would benefit the participants. Getting to know the women in an informal setting enabled me to see their world through their eyes. However, the data was drawn from the semi-structured interviews.

Findings:

Research on the accommodation needs of women in custody was limited and has not focused on the longer term need a woman has for a home. Combining this with the women's experiences, the research demonstrated that the need for a home on release from custody required more than simply providing accommodation. Recent studies demonstrated there is a need for enhanced support in sourcing homes on release, however support was patchy as the women who had previous experience, revealed. It is to be noted in particular, the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) (House of Commons, Committee of Public Accounts, 2016) reforms have a mandatory requirement for 12-months post-custody supervision by the twenty-one privately run Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC). Accommodation requirements of women in custody historically, have been largely unmet and a welfare-based approach is required from first-point entry into the justice system that can be carried through a prison sentence in preparation for release. Findings from the women serving longer sentences were very different from the women serving repeated short sentences.

Furthermore, women serving longer sentences received differing approaches to accommodation needs from their probation officers in contrast to the women supervised by the CRCs.

In the context of providing accommodation on release, I was able to identify from my experience as a former practitioner offering a specific pathway into homes for women leaving prison, the importance of long-term homes as opposed to temporary accommodation responses. The study encouraged discussion and recommendations for a targeted approach to assess a woman's environmental needs at pre-sentence stage with follow up assessments within custody to enable resettlement plans to be drawn up early in a woman's sentence. The research identified that a robust approach to early housing advice is vital for women serving prison sentences. This preventative approach would integrate the use of the 13-week rule under the Housing Benefit Regulations since this can be activated for women serving short-term sentences of six-months and under. For the women of no fixed abode in custody, housing needs were inadequately documented with mixed responses to such.

Some of the women felt that Through the Gate (TTG) services misunderstood their housing needs and felt it was a waste of time engaging with resettlement teams. Of significant importance, the size of the women's prison estate and the placement of women in prisons miles away from their home localities presented challenges to the newly implemented CRC services. The participants in this study had received a separate pathway for housing and outcomes were positive. Having affordable homes on release had a major impact on resettlement and the women were able to focus on addressing the majority of their varying needs with access to services made easier by having an address for information dissemination. This reduced the risk of breaching licence conditions thus reducing the risk of recall to prison. The women were able to access primary healthcare services and were assisted with housing benefit and bank account applications so they were able to readily adapt to life in the community. Finally, for some of the women, they were able to seek employment and move forward leaving behind their time in prison. They were able to concentrate on building foundations, have the freedom to flourish and some of the women were able to reunite with their children and families.

Recommendations and Conclusion:

Recommendation 1: A dedicated housing advisor at first point entry into the criminal justice system. There is in place at the time of writing, Liaison and Diversion Services (L&D). This service is required to record the housing status as part of their assessment of people in police custody. A dedicated housing advisor as part of these services would be able to implement early interventions that would

identify: a) Existing housing that could be protected under the housing benefit 13-week rule if the person is likely to receive a custodial sentence of six months or under; b) Identify and record if a person is homeless enabling the prison to action resettlement planning at a much earlier stage, There is opportunity for L&D services to assist with probation pre-sentence reporting through dissemination of information to probation services.

Recommendation 2: Pre-sentence reports (PSR) should identify and record the housing status of people. Recent reports have described the resource challenges faced by the NPS in this area and the use of L&D as in recommendation 1 would be of value at this stage. Pre-sentence reports are vital to identify the challenges faced by women; e.g. responsible for dependent children and who will be caring for the children. For children that could enter the care of a local authority – it can be identified at this stage what housing may be required on release from prison.

Recommendation 3: Basic custody screening tools (BCST) – every person is subject to an assessment and screening within five days of entering custody. The BCST should identify any issues with housing and trigger action in this area that should be used at resettlement planning stage. Where a tenancy is unavoidably surrendered whilst a person is in custody, the final BCST should identify this and form part of the resettlement planning. Referrals for housing can then be made as soon as possible.

Recommendation 4: Further consideration should be made by the Ministry of Justice working with trusts, charities and other providers in the sector to establish a fully evaluated pilot project using the Housing First model.

Recommendation 5: A national housing strategy led by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) with cross-organisational responsibilities from the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Probation Trusts, PRS accredited associations and voluntary sector organisations. The designing of such a strategy should be afforded cross-organisational inputs that could form a national housing strategy for women but led at local levels. The MoJ should develop clearer expectations of CRCs and probation in regard to assessing housing need and taking responsibility for ensuring housing agencies meet those needs.

Recommendation 6: Funding to be ring-fenced for women-only housing provision. Supported living funds have been extended to 2022 by the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Recommendation 7: To improve knowledge of housing need and provision; and to clarify responsibilities, the NPS should commission training on the issue for all resettlement staff.

Recommendation 8: The routine use of expensive hostel accommodation to meet long term housing need should be reduced by the provision of more suitable, economically viable, housing provision. This would require cross-departmental engagement from the MoJ and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

It is hoped this study offered a unique understanding and recognition of what constitutes a home for women affected by the criminal justice system. For women to achieve their sense of place, there should be a focus on women's resettlement that factors in where they will live following a custodial sentence. If we are to achieve the resettlement goals of women, called for by previous researchers, there has to be a different understanding of what 'resettlement' means. By offering a home, women are afforded opportunities to address the complexities of their lives producing benefits for them, their children and a reduction in the number of women receiving short-term sentences. For women serving longer sentences, resettlement planning should be re-designed offering positive outcomes.

ENDS

