
Homelessness amongst those in the criminal justice system

By admin

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Homelessness is an extreme manifestation of social exclusion, where housing itself is not the only solution. Many homeless people have additional problems such as alcohol and/ or other drug related difficulties, a lack of skills, mental health issues, a pattern of relationship breakdown and/ or a history of offending. Any, some or all these difficulties may apply, thus dictating that additional support and advice is essential for those in need.

The [Homelessness Act 2002](#) acknowledged the difficulties of prisoners and stipulated that Local Authorities must include ex-prisoners amongst those who may be in priority need. Unfortunately interpretation of this legislation means that it is only applied to a small proportion of those leaving custody. Significant numbers of ex-offenders face homelessness and a high incidence of people without settled accommodation are amongst those receiving custodial and non-custodial sentences. Some research indicates that offenders facing homelessness are up to six times more likely to end up back in custody. It is also believed that housing is a protective factor against re-offending and a figure of 20% reduction in reconviction is suggested. Tackling an offender's homelessness can provide the stability necessary to enable that individual to access the advice, support and/ or treatment s/he may require to address their offending behaviour and so make positive changes in their lives. The chaos, the day to day struggle and the insidious undermining of basic dignity caused by homelessness cannot be underestimated.

For prisoners housing (and benefits) advice is essential in trying to prevent the loss of existing accommodation or in bringing tenancies to an end before rent arrears become a barrier to re-housing. 31% of prisoner accommodation is lost whilst in custody due to limited housing benefit entitlements, a third of offenders leaving prison become homeless on release and one in twenty ends up sleeping rough. Some research indicates that 40 – 45% of rough sleepers have been in prison.

HMP Hewell Grange has developed a housing advice centre run by prisoners, which was developed by [Nacro](#). More such assistance and innovation is required with other initiatives such as a common referral/ application form for social landlords needing to be further progressed and local champions who promote new ideas in assisting difficult to house groups needing to be identified.

There is a general perception that female offenders are more capable than males at resolving their housing needs. This appears to be true only in that they are more effective at utilising contacts previously linked to their offending lifestyle. Not necessarily the most appropriate option! Female offenders have multiple and complex needs but are not always referred for advice, support or interventions by criminal justice agencies (despite the fact that this may prevent homelessness) as

they are not always seen as a priority due to low level offending.

Stable housing is a key factor in assisting those who have been involved in the criminal justice system to develop non-offending lifestyles and increase their employment opportunities, which is one of the main positive indicators in reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Housing with support is key to re-integrating ex-offenders into the community as many offenders and ex-offenders do not have the skills to manage a tenancy independently. This is where specialist organisations such as C.A.S.S. fit in! The social exclusion of offenders, ex-offenders and their families imposes a range of additional costs on us all. Properly tackling the homelessness problem for these people could contribute significantly to crime prevention efforts and in turn reduce crime.