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Supported Accommodation Services for Offenders

Steve Kirkwood and Tim Richley

This literature review is a summary of the longer paper published by the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland that explores the literature on the links between homelessness¹, offending and imprisonment, and available research on the effectiveness of supported accommodation (Kirkwood & Richley, in press).

Sacro, and a number of other agencies, have been providing a range of models of supported accommodation for offenders for over thirty years. The various models include supporting people in their own homes, local authority or housing association accommodation, or small hostel-type accommodation. The primary purpose of the services is to assist offenders and ex-prisoners to integrate into society and thereby reduce the risks of them re-offending.

The link between homelessness, offending and imprisonment is well-established. McIvor and Taylor (2000) found evidence that offending is disproportionately high among those who are homeless. Research in the UK found that a third of prisoners were not in stable accommodation before imprisonment and one in twenty were sleeping rough (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). In Scotland, approximately 3,000 ex-prisoners submit homelessness applications each year (Pawson, Davidson & Netto, 2007). There is, therefore, a clear relationship between homelessness and offending. The causal relationships, if any, are, however, complex (Adamczuk, 2007; Hickey, 2002; Shelter Cymru, 2004).

Research on the links between homelessness and offending suggest that homelessness can result in people being more likely to be involved in some way with the criminal justice system, and that involvement in the criminal justice system can increase the risk of people becoming homeless. For instance, research by Shelter Cymru (2004) found that homelessness at a young age can be a predictor of future offending. This is supported by Hickey (2002) who found that homelessness at a young age could lead to offending behaviour - such as shoplifting and squatting - that was related to people's "survival" on the streets. In this regard, there is evidence that some people use drugs as a method of coping with homelessness, and that this in turn can lead to an increase in offending behaviour - such as theft, robbery, drug dealing and prostitution - in order to fund drug habits (Arnall et al., 2007; Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone & Peeters, 2003; Hickey, 2002; Shelter Cymru, 2004).

The homeless are at an increased risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system or, once in it, being treated more severely. For example, the homeless are more likely to experience increased policing (Baldry et al., 2003), they have an increased likelihood of being remanded in custody rather than being bailed in the community and they have a decreased likelihood of being considered for parole (Scottish Executive, 2001; McIvor & Taylor, 2000). The Audit Commission (2004) estimated that in England and Wales over 800 young offenders may be getting a custodial sentence each year because they are not in stable accommodation and sentencers are therefore discounting the possibility of a community sentence (cited in Arnall et al., 2007).

Once imprisoned, people are at an increased risk of losing any accommodation that they might have had. McIvor and

Taylor (2000) note that many people lose their accommodation through imprisonment due to housing benefit restrictions and a lack of information about how to retain their tenancies. They also suggest that private landlords may discriminate against those with criminal convictions who are trying to access accommodation. There is also some evidence that periods of imprisonment can weaken family bonds, meaning that ex-prisoners are unable to return to and remain in their original family accommodation (Hickey, 2002). McIvor's and Taylor's review of research found that about half of the people going into prison were not able to return to their original accommodation on release and 16% to 38% were homeless on release. Applying this information to the Scottish prison statistics suggests that between 3,600 and 8,550 people may have been homeless upon liberation in 2006 (Scottish Executive, 2006). Research in Australia also found that:

"As far as housing is concerned, the policy of imprisonment for short sentences for petty crime seriously destabilises at least half of those imprisoned and results in re-offending and re-incarceration" (Baldry et al., 2003, p. 29).

It has been suggested that the loss of tenancies could be prevented in some cases (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002) and that prevention of the loss of accommodation would be more cost-effective compared with finding new accommodation, both in terms of the costs of re-housing a person and in terms of a reduced risks of re-offending (Carlisle, 1996).

Research has found that, for people subject to community sentences, reconviction rates were higher for those who had accommodation problems as opposed to those who had stable accommodation (May, 1999). Furthermore, research on ex-prisoners by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (2001) found that those who re-offended were significantly less likely to have had accommodation on release from prison and, when surveyed, several linked their lack of stable accommodation with their re-offending. The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) has noted that "Research suggests that stable accommodation can make a difference of over 20 per cent in terms of reduction in reconviction" (p. 94). In turn, the Scottish Executive (2001) has acknowledged that:

"It is now widely recognised that, in general terms, the provision of settled accommodation can assist in reducing the risk of re-offending" (p. 19).

Accommodation can be a formal requirement for accessing certain support services, and may also be an essential influence on attitudes and motivations in helping people to deal with other issues in their lives, such as accessing specialist services, dealing with drug or alcohol problems or securing employment, which may be directly related to their offending behaviour (Allender et al., 2005; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; Arnall et al., 2007; Baldry et al., 2003). In support of a model of intervention that addresses accommodation needs, as well as other criminogenic needs, the literature review by McIvor and Taylor (2000) found that there is some evidence that offenders receiving accommodation and support are less likely to re-offend than those who are homeless.

Very little research exists that actually explores the impact

of Supported Accommodation Services for ex-offenders (McIvor & Taylor, 2000). Research conducted on Supported Accommodation Services for ex-offenders in the Grampian region of Scotland, including Sacro's Supported Accommodation Service based in Aberdeen, found that most of the people who accessed these services believed they had made personal progress since coming to the projects, with several stating they that had stopped offending and/or reduced their drug and/or alcohol misuse (McIvor & Taylor, 1994). The support aspects of the service appeared to be meeting the needs of the service users to some extent according to their own assessments of the services, and the accommodation may have been very beneficial, at least in the short term. However, only a small minority moved from the projects into their own accommodation in a planned way, raising questions about the long-term impact of the services.

An evaluation of a supported housing project in Drumchapel for young homeless people provides some useful information on how to deliver effective services (Communities Scotland, 2007). An unknown number of those young people targeted by the service had offended but the project specifically focused on young people who were homeless, threatened with homelessness, or were looked after and accommodated by the local authority. The evaluation concluded that the project succeeded in delivering holistic and flexible support that assisted independent living. The report highlighted that the support was rated highly by the service users; that a trusting relationship between the key workers and the service users was important in helping to develop skills and confidence amongst the service users; and that the project helped other agencies - such as health agencies - to access young people who were otherwise hard to reach.

A small-scale study by George Nelson (2007) used qualitative methods to explore the role that Sacro's Glasgow Supported Accommodation Service played in terms of desistance from crime. In-depth interviews with 7 of the 58 service users who were engaged with the service in Spring 2007 found that advice and advocacy in engaging housing associations and benefits agencies was seen by the service users as very beneficial. The research highlighted the impact of imprisonment and "institutionalisation" on the service users that reduced their ability and confidence to live independent and crime-free lives, and the extent to which the service helped provide service users with skills for independent living. Six of the interviewees suggested that Sacro helped them to become more independent through "having structure and routine, positive encouragement, role-modelling, good advice, helping to overcome negative thought patterns, a reduction in feelings of being overwhelmed or a growth in self-confidence and self-belief" (p. 10). Five of the seven respondents reported that, due to the service, they now had a greater degree of security, sense of purpose and direction.

Further research is needed to explore the short and long-term effectiveness of Supported Accommodation Services in Scotland in a way that takes account of the different models of service provision, the personal circumstances of homeless ex-offenders and the social and economic contexts in which they live. Recent developments within research and theory on desistance from crime suggest that attention needs to be paid to the impact that such services have in terms of developing human and social capital, the way in which the service users understand these developments, and the opportunities in the community for them to live productive and crime-free lives (Farrall, 2003; McNeill, 2006). It is clear that Supported Accommodation Services have a role to play in terms of integrating

offenders and ex-prisoners into society and addressing the risks of re-offending.

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Footnote

1. For the purposes of this paper "homelessness" relates to a lack of place of residence which is deemed suitable by those responsible for the management of the particular offender. More detailed definitions of "homelessness" can be found at <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/advice/advice-2420.cfm>