

**Journal Article**

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## **Preventing homelessness among women prison leavers in Wales: Addressing the multiple and complex needs of women in an age of austerity**

### **Abstract**

Under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, prison leavers are among those who are no longer considered a priority need. This paper draws on interviews conducted with 17 women prison leavers and ten professionals that formed part of a Welsh Government funded evaluation of homelessness services to adults in the secure estate. The findings in this study lend support to previous research that indicates women who come into contact with the criminal justice system often have multiple and complex needs. The need for gender specific services and more availability of supported accommodation to ensure the effective resettlement of women prison leavers is also identified.

### **Key Words**

Housing (Wales) Act 2014, homelessness, women, prison, prison leavers

### **Introduction**

In 2014 the Welsh Government introduced The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and obligations on local authorities to prevent homelessness and offer more support to those not considered a 'priority need' for housing. The legislation removed the priority need status (for housing) for all prison leavers meaning that there was no longer an automatic obligation on local authorities to secure accommodation for this particular population. Previously, prison leavers maintained their priority need status under the 2002 Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order. From 2015 onwards, however, only homeless prison leavers who were vulnerable as a result of custody would have priority need status (Moore, 2017: 8). Alternative arrangements to help the majority of prison leavers find accommodation 56 days prior to their release date and involving referrals to housing departments and efforts to source accommodation in the social housing or private sector were outlined in *The National Pathway for Providing Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate* (Welsh Government, 2015).

The Corston Report (2007) highlighted the need for reform of the criminal justice system to better meet the needs of women. The report suggested that provision in prison is designed for men and therefore cannot necessarily meet the needs of women. Both the Corston Report and a report by the Fawcett Society in 2007 found that housing for women prison leavers was a significant need, not least because women's lives tend to be more disrupted by custodial sentences than men's. For example, because there are fewer women's prisons they are more likely to be imprisoned further from home than men, at a great distance from their family or support network. This is a more significant issue for women from Wales, with the distances facing Welsh women considerably higher than those facing women from England and Welsh males in custody (Jones, 2018). The Corston report highlighted that approximately a third of women who enter prison will lose their home. As many had experienced violence finding secure and stable independent accommodation on release was paramount (Moore, 2017). Yet an HMIP report found that 38% of women prison leavers in England and Wales did not have stable accommodation upon release (HMIP, 2001). According to Crook (2019) 17.5% of the 6,000 women released from prison in 2017/18 were homeless on release (240 were rough sleeping and 831 were 'other homeless'). Additionally the whereabouts of another 13% could not be established. Provision for women who reported they were likely to be street homeless was poor so that some were simply offered sleeping bags and tents to use upon release.

The link between homelessness and offending is well established (Authors, 2018). The Prison Reform Trust (2018) highlight how those who come into contact with the criminal justice system are more likely to have a 'volatile' housing history. St Mungo's, a homeless charity, report that almost half (42%) of the homeless women they encounter have an offending history, and over a third (36%) have been to prison. They report that 19% of women were not in permanent accommodation on reception into prison - with 10% rough sleeping.

Having stable accommodation on release from prison can reduce the chances of reconviction by 20% (SEU, 2002). Additionally, those who have stable accommodation on release from prison are four times more likely to also have employment, training or education than those who are released homeless (Niven and Stewart, 2005). According to the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction study in 2012, over three quarters of prison leavers (79%) who were homeless prior to custody were reconvicted in the first year of release. This compares to approximately half (47%) who were not homeless prior to custody (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

Moore (2017) points out that there are different ways in which homelessness has been defined and understood. The United Nations (2004) define homelessness as the absence of a permanent home and thus requires the effected person to carry around their possessions and find shelter wherever they are able to. However, others argue that homelessness may be defined on a continuum, for example rough sleeping at one end and living in “temporary, insecure or inadequate” housing on the other (Authors 2018: 6).

Women’s homelessness is often invisible and underestimated (Watson, 2000). Moore (2017) refers to the phenomenon of ‘hidden homelessness’ whereby a person’s homeless status is not visible because of staying in squats, sofa surfing or waiting for release from prison with no secure accommodation to go to. ‘Hidden homelessness’ is likely to apply to many women because they are more motivated to keep themselves hidden while sleeping on the streets and are less likely to approach homelessness services (Please, 2016; Casey et al., 2008). It follows from this that some forms of homelessness is understood only with reference to men’s experiences of it so that it’s gendered quality is unappreciated. Women’s homelessness is frequently linked with domestic abuse and other forms of abuse (Broll & Huey, 2017). Indeed,

Broll & Huey (2017) found significant association between women's homelessness and multiple forms of victimisation (e.g., physical *and* sexual abuse) in childhood, adulthood, and/or across the life course. St Mungo's (2014) reported that nearly 50% of the women they worked with had experienced domestic abuse with 19% having experienced childhood abuse. For a third of the women in their study, domestic abuse had directly contributed to their homelessness. However, they note a distinct lack of gender specific services that recognise and are able to respond to the different routes into and experiences of homelessness for women.

The Corston Report (2007) highlighted three barriers to securing stable accommodation for women prison leavers: the application process, a shortage of accommodation, and difficulties accessing their children. The Report highlighted various unmet needs of women offenders, including those linked to mental health, self-harm, substance misuse, access to their child(ren), and overcoming a history of physical, emotional and sexual abuse during childhood. Thus, the Corston Report advocated the need for a women's specific accommodation pathway. Specially, it was suggested that there should be more provisions for supported accommodation for women to prevent repeat offending (Corston, 2007).

Humphreys and Sterling (2008) examined the role of the accommodation pathfinder in reducing re-offending, specifically in Wales. It was found that during 2006, there were 385 homeless women on either community sentences or having been released from prison. Also, reflecting the Corston Report, the women had a variety of complex support needs; there were a significant number of women who had not completed the homelessness assessment process despite having been referred to the local authority rehousing services; and significant unmet housing needs for women prison leavers (Humphreys and Sterling, 2008).

Women in Prison (2017) argue that the housing situation for women prison leavers in general is "even more desperate" than it was when the Corston report was published and that this

situation “is compounded by the fact that women are systematically deemed ‘intentionally homeless’ for going to prison, the scarcity of supported accommodation places and the absence of joined-up thinking to manage the human trauma and reoffending risks caused by homelessness(Women In Prison, 2017: 13). In Wales Moore (2017) found that despite the preventative obligations outlined in the Housing Act (Wales) 2014, women were still being released from prison homeless. Moore (2017: 66) concluded that removal of priority need status for housing from prison leavers in Wales had increased women prison leaver’s risk of “homelessness, sex working, reoffending, and poor living conditions”.

### **Methodology**

The data presented within this paper is from a larger study undertaken as part of a Welsh Government funded evaluation for the National Pathway for providing service to adults leaving the secure estate. The primary purpose of the original study was to investigate how services to prison leavers who are facing homelessness have developed since the introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2015 that removed priority need status for those leaving prison. The study was approved by the National Research Council, the National Probation Service (Wales), Working Links (CRC in Wales); Purple Futures (CRC in North West England), the Governors of the prison establishments involved in the research study and Wrexham Glyndŵr University’s Research Ethics Committee.

The evaluation involved a significant number of participants (N=189) and interviews (n=211) The sample from the original study comprised prison leavers from five prisons (three male, two female) The current paper focuses on the evaluation strand dedicated to the experiences and needs of women prison leavers. This paper, therefore draws on interviews with women

prison leavers from two different prisons; one in the North and one in the South of England<sup>1</sup>, both listed as Welsh resettlement prisons by the Ministry of Justice in 2014 (Jones, 2018). Attempts were made to interview women prison leavers twice: once 4-6 weeks prior to release (n=17) and the second time, 6-8 weeks following release (n=4). Consistent with the wider study, key gatekeepers at selected prisons supported recruiting women participants. Gatekeepers were asked to invite women to participate in the research who were due for release in the following 6-8 weeks and were identified as needing a housing service.

Efforts were made to contact all 17 women interviewed prior to release for a follow-up interview, however, this was not always possible; some had been recalled (n=6), no response (n=2), not found (n=2), or moved out of area (n=3). Where women were not available for interview, it was possible to interview their Responsible Officers to capture data about what happened to the women post-release.

The sample of women was reflective of the Welsh female prison population being aged 23-54 years old and the majority being White. The participants were also largely serving short term sentences, ranging from two weeks to 12 months and for many this was not their first sentence. The demographics of the four women interviewed post-release were consistent with the initial sample, yet reflected an older age range from 35-54. The longitudinal aspect of this study is a strength. However, it is recognised that the attrition post-release necessarily means there is some bias towards the experiences of those most likely to have engaged with services.

This paper also draws on interviews undertaken with representatives from four participant groups of professionals/practitioners, including community-based staff (n=4), Responsible

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<sup>1</sup> There are no women's prisons in Wales.

Officers<sup>2</sup> (n=5), prison-based staff (n=1). Professional staff and stakeholders were sampled through existing contacts with criminal justice personnel and those working in housing and representative of the range of professionals working with women prison leavers.

All women prison leavers were interviewed face-to-face at the prison in the first instance and in the case of those who could be followed up, in probation settings upon release. Relevant staff and stakeholders were interviewed by either telephone or face-to-face. Respondents were informed that they were under no obligation to discuss any issues they did not want to. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data was analysed thematically to organise and identify patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013) in relation to how homelessness was experienced, understood and responded to as the women approached release and sought to resettle in the community

## **Findings**

### **The multiple and complex needs of women prison leavers**

Participants in this study were asked questions exploring how housing was being addressed for *all* prison leavers. However, the accounts of many women who participated in this research eluded to the gender specific complex needs and multiple disadvantages pertinent to women. The women's lives were often characterised by homelessness, addiction, bereavement, previous custodial sentences, separation from their child(ren), poor mental health, and a history of domestic abuse.

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<sup>2</sup> Probation service staff supervising prison leavers



Many of the women spoke of experiences of homelessness. For example, Carys (interviewed pre-release) suggested, “I slept rough a few times. I have slept in a tent, slept in doorway”. Similarly, Kirsty (interviewed pre-release) told us, “I was staying on people’s settees and stuff”. Angela (interviewed pre-release) also spoke of the places she had stayed with her partner owing to homelessness prior to her imprisonment:

*sometimes we were staying in the tent ... flippin hell we have stayed behind Wickes...,  
down the hill from Mecca bingo..., I'd rather be in a tent, not on the streets (Angela).*

The relationship between homelessness and offending has long been recognised (SEU, 2002) and accommodation is seen as important to reducing recidivism; however, the precise relationship between these factors is less well understood (Authors 2018). Even less well understood is the gendered nature of the relationship between offending and homelessness. Moore (2017:12) emphasises that the term ‘homelessness’ holds a gendered meaning because “if homelessness is defined in terms of men’s experiences..., then women’s homelessness becomes invisible”. **Exploring persistent homelessness amongst women, Finfgeld-Connett et al. (2012) note issues such as domestic violence, mental illness and substance abuse often exacerbate women’s homelessness.** Similarly, Corston (2007:24) suggested that “for women, stable accommodation is probably the most significant resettlement need”; yet women who come into contact with the criminal justice system tend to have multiple disadvantages and complex needs.

Some of the women described or alluded to a history of mental health issues: “I have also been to psychiatric hospitals”; “I took an overdose at the last hostel”; “I had tried to kill myself” (Carys); “I suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder, I’ve got anxiety and depression” (Emily) (interviewed pre-release). The relationship between mental health and homelessness and mental health and offending are well established in research and reflected in policy (NOMS,

2015). More specifically, there is a body of research on the mental health needs of women who come into contact with the criminal justice system (Covington, 2008). One major finding from this body of research is that women are more likely than their male counterparts to report having received treatment for a mental health problem in the year before custody and of experiencing symptoms indicative of psychosis (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Whilst the co-existence of mental health, offending and homelessness is now better recognised, the relationship is multifaceted and the links between them remain poorly understood. Moreover, Fox et al. (2016) have argued for a greater understanding of the way in which the relationship may be mediated by other prominent risk factors such as substance use or victimisation.

Many of the women who participated in this research specifically spoke of substance misuse: “I was on heroin” (Margaret); “Mine wasn’t the drugs, it was the drink” (Glenys) (interviewed pre and post-release); and “I was drinking and taking tablets, basically overdosing” (Iona) (interviewed pre-release). Several of the women’s accounts explicitly linked their homelessness, substance misuse and their offending. Sian highlighted the relationship in the following way :

*I was sleeping at the train station, bus stops, at people’s houses where I was drinking every day because I’m a recovering alcoholic but I had nowhere else to go, I had to go somewhere.*

For some women, the relationship between offending, homelessness, mental health and substance misuse was complicated by loss and bereavement. Women spoke of the death of a loved one including parents and close friends. Several women also spoke of being separated

from their children prior to custody, as highlighted by Theresa and Sian (both interviewed pre-release):

*I lost my little boy through alcohol, I had a nice flat, got kicked out of there and then started drinking more and that's why I'm back in this position because of drink (Sian).*

*He [baby's father] wouldn't give me and the baby the flat, so I moved back with my mother..., I went downhill a little bit, I was drinking and all that (Theresa).*

Research indicates that women in prison are more likely than their male counterparts and women in the general population to report extensive histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Messina, Burdon, Hagopian, and Prendergast, 2006). A majority of women in prison have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence with strong links between women's offending and their experience of abuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). However, less is known about the links between offending, domestic abuse and homelessness. Several of the women who participated in this research spoke of being in abusive relationships. Lynne told us "I was living with my partner [prior to being in prison], but he was remanded in custody for assaulting me". Equally, several women made explicit links between abusive relationships, their housing situation and their offending behaviour:

*I did have a partner but there was domestic violence ..., I got myself a little flat but then I ended up coming to prison (Bethan; interviewed pre-release).*

*My partner is a bit of a pain because he knew I had nowhere to go and I was living with him and he'd be like 'get out, you don't live here'. So, I'd be walking the streets, 12, 1 O'clock in the morning (Glenys).*

The co-existence of substance misuse, post-traumatic stress, mental health problems, homelessness and offending have been highlighted in both research and policy (Home Office, 2018). However, such issues are often considered and responded to separately without understanding their multi-faceted and relational nature. Reiterating the overwhelming combination of issues faced by women, this study further points to the need of women centred working that aims to integrate and tailor support around each woman's specific situation as originally recommended in the Corston Report (2007). Providing stable and secure housing is essential in this process, as a lack of appropriate housing can make it more difficult for women to access and sustain engagement with support services (Prison Reform Trust, 2016).

### **Barriers to securing suitable accommodation**

#### ***Lack of suitable and affordable accommodation***

The lack of suitable accommodation is an issue for both men and women leaving prison. However, there are specific issues facing women and particularly women returning to Wales; available accommodation was deemed particularly unsuitable for women prison leavers who may have complex need (Moore 2017). As a result, women may be placed in unsuitable accommodation which puts them in vulnerable situations and exposes them to risk. Our research found women were often placed in temporary accommodation like hostels and B&Bs. Such places were consistently described as unsuitable by both women prison leavers and professionals because it typically means associating with people who increase their risk factors i.e. substance misuse, which is strongly associated with women's reoffending (Travers and Mann, 2018). One Responsible Officer also told of women being placed in accommodation known for its "floor space" (R.O.1) where residents sleep in pods that have a gap at the top and bottom of the door. As with many of the B&Bs and hostels, men also reside there, which

potentially places women in vulnerable situations and exposes them to further risk. As many of the women have experienced gender-based violence, being placed in accommodation alongside men, may increase their sense of vulnerability and fear for their safety.

Since there are no women's prisons in Wales and very few in England, the women who were interviewed were distanced from their families, children, and support networks. This was problematic in terms of retaining a "local connection" which is often a precondition for local authority housing (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). One Responsible Officer told us that women prison leavers can find themselves placed some "40/50 miles" (RO1) from their family. Several women prison leavers also highlighted that they had been told they will be placed long distance from their home towns and support networks on release; Angela told us: *'[they're] putting me in Leeds..., I would more than likely fall flat on my face if I went to Leeds'*. Similarly, Bethan told us:

*There are no female hostels in north Wales for women..., I was supposed to go to a hostel in Liverpool, but I don't live in Liverpool, I live in Wales, so I'm a million miles away from home.*

### **Need and Risk**

Overall there was variability in terms of perceptions about the real world effect of prisoners having their automatic priority need for housing removed. This related to the tendency identified for prison leavers to be filtered out of the system by being deemed intentionally homeless even when they had priority need status. One Community based worker, however, highlighted the paradoxical nature of deeming only the vulnerable to be in priority need:

*They've got the most vulnerable being allocated housing and dealt with and supported but there are so many that are going to turn into those vulnerable people through living on the streets and becoming more ill, becoming more chaotic with substances (CB2).*

Another community-based worker emphasised that there was no duty to house women prison leavers and they were often screened out from services even when they were vulnerable: "What housing say is, "you've made yourself intentionally homeless, we've got no duty to you' and that's it" (CB2).

The current study indicates that homelessness and substance misuse are inextricably linked and often associated with an array of other complex need. Yet as a result of this, some female prison leavers with complex needs could be deemed "too risky" (RO4) for supported housing. A Responsible Officer highlighted the counterproductive nature of such women not being considered as a priority since its removal inevitably renders the person "a high risk of offending" (RO3).

An important difference between 'risk' and 'need' of the prison leaver emerged, highlighting a gender disparity. One Community based worker explained that where men are deemed a high 'risk' they are more likely to be housed immediately to a "supported flat" which will be "partly furnished, bond covered, because the police have an active interest in that" (RO2). In contrast, she highlighted some of the vulnerabilities and specific needs of women prison leavers could be ignored and such women enter into a cycle of substance misuse and offending. She explained that this was "frustrating" because risk wins over need. This current study highlights the way in which 'new penology' and its concern with managing risk and dangerousness

(Feeley and Simon, 1992) continues to disadvantage women offenders, who are less likely to be assessed as presenting high/very high risk of harm (3% of women compared to 12% of men (Ministry of Justice, 2012)). The findings of this study echo recommendations from the Corston Report (2007: 79) and the need for a holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach that attends to women's vulnerabilities whilst also attending to 'risk' of offending.

### ***Lack of support in prison***

When women prison leavers were asked the question if they were aware of the process for getting accommodation help on release, the women generally responded that they were not given any specific advice, as highlighted by Kirsty: "Nothing. I was just asked to fill out a form to say my home address, if I had any housing issues and sign it". Sian was a prisoner working within a trusted position and tasked with helping other prison leavers find accommodation. She illuminated some similar experiences of other women:

*I have girls that have been in six, seven months and they are like "what is going on with my housing app" but once I fill all the forms out, all I do is hand them in like..., you literally fill the forms out and that's it (Sian).*

Several of the women interviewed were critical of the use of other prisoners to help them find accommodation, as expressed by Iona: "I don't even think they know like what they are meant to do". Similarly, Emily told us: "The people helping you find a place are the prisoners, if they didn't like you then they won't help you".

Volunteers with lived experience and peer mentors can often be a credible and acceptable source of support (Einat, 2017); they can help to create an empowering environment, to share skills and help build a bond of trust (WomenCentre, 2014). However, without training in core areas of women-centered working, such as “relationship building, confidentiality, domestic abuse awareness, information giving and signposting, establishing professional boundaries, listening and communication” (WomenCentre, 2014: 6), such volunteers may be ill equipped to support women with such complex needs.

Vicky explained that a member of staff from resettlement “took some details down” about her homelessness but after two months she had “heard nothing”. She said she would need to rely on someone in prison to help her secure accommodation but when asked if she knew who to contact, she said, “I haven’t got a clue”. As a consequence, some women emphasised the need to ‘sort’ their accommodation issues themselves or rely on family members:

*I put a general app in and ask to speak to someone about housing. Other than that, I just jump on the phone and ask my mother (Theresa).*

Carys told of how she had always relied on family to secure accommodation on release from previous sentences:

*I have gone to my mum’s, my first sentence I got released on tag to my mum’s address, so I had a property to go to, my last sentence in 2016 I went back to my partners.*

Similarly, Margaret explained that if it were not for her children and domestic violence worker explaining to the council why her rent was not paid then she would have “definitely” “lost” her accommodation when she was sent to prison.



### *Short sentences*

Women in custody serve sentences of varying duration, however, over 68% are serving a sentence of less than six months (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). This was reflected in this study with half of the women interviewed serving short sentences (four months or less) and over half did not have stable accommodation upon their release. Some prison leavers described the difference in support between long term and short-term serving women:

*They tend to help the ones that are in for longer but the ones who are in for two or three weeks and they end up going out with nothing (Vicky).*

*Most girls have only got little sentences anyway so they are out within six or seven weeks so they don't get to be seen (Sian).*

These sentiments were reflected by a Responsible Officer who also highlighted the implications of recall:

*Some people are in and out, they might go back in for two weeks and then they're out again. So, you haven't got enough time to do anything (RO1).*

The number of women recalled to prison has risen dramatically following changes introduced by the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014, which mandated post-custody supervision for all people serving sentences of more than one day. Several women in this study reported having been recalled and serving such short sentences that it was difficult to access support.

However, one Community based worker suggested that although in theory, a longer-term prison sentence should facilitate better securing of accommodation because of more time to organise and prepare, this was not always the reality:

*They are placed on our list a couple of weeks before they come out because they are longer term they are usually more serious offenders – more complex needs..., they are just treated like short term prisoners and we are seeing them as I say within weeks sometimes days before they come out (CB2).*

### **Consequences of the barriers to securing accommodation**

#### ***Re-entering the cycle of reoffending: homelessness and substance misuse***

The interviews with both women prison leavers and professionals highlighted a range of consequences for women leaving prison without secure accommodation. Several key themes emerged, namely, for women being released homeless or residing in hostels or B&Bs, they typically entered into a cycle of reoffending:

*I've been in jail three times this year, because I'm homeless and I've been drinking every day and things are just getting worse because I'm homeless (Iona).*

Emily described her homelessness and problematic use of alcohol prior to her last offence and linked staying in hostels to her drinking, which she claimed resulted in her re-offending:

*I will be homeless and drink again and be back in here again..., there's no point in putting me in a hostel if there's going to be drinkers.*

Similarly, Hazel reflected on the vicious cycle of homelessness, alcohol and drug misuse, and re-offending:

*I'm scared. I don't want to end up on the streets because when you are on the streets you end up drinking, taking drugs and then crimes get committed.*

Sian stressed the detrimental impact on progress and recovery made when being placed in a homeless shelter: "They tried sticking me in like a homeless shelter and I had been clean off drugs and everything and then going back there where it was rife with it".

Analysis suggested that accommodating women prison leavers with other people with substance misuse was problematic:

*Don't stick everyone in approved premises because you are setting them up to fail because the majority of people get drugs from them places and then they will sell it*  
(Alison).

Lynne described the impact living in a bedsit (prior to her custodial sentence) had on her mental health:

*I had a bedsit but it was in a really rough place and I wasn't taking drugs or drinking and they put me somewhere where there was a lot of drugs ..., I wasn't getting any sleep because of the partying..., my mental health went mad.*

Julie spoke of being placed in a hostel, approximately 40 miles from her support network, which consisted of her mother, siblings, and adult children. Julie emphasised her personal need to stay away from hostels in order to “stay clean” due to the common alcohol and drug misuse by other residents. She explained that this, coupled with her lack of nearby support network influenced her decision to abscond:

*Just literally begging on the streets, I was literally homeless with nowhere to go because I couldn't go to my family..., I ended up using drugs (Julie).*

#### ***Unable to access children***

Available research highlights the detrimental impact of imprisonment on maternal relationships (see Authors, 2017; 2018). A couple of women talked specifically about separation from their children as a direct consequence of the lack of suitable accommodation available to them on release. Their primary aim for securing accommodation was to gain or maintain access to their children, as expressed by Angela: “I want to get somewhere now sooner than later..., I need somewhere for me and my boys, I don't know where [they are] at the minute”. Similarly, Sian spoke of the challenges of contact with her children owing to unsuitable accommodation;

*He [father of child] isn't going to let me have my daughter until I'm stable and in a property of my own..., so it's a nightmare because without a property there is no way I can have my daughter even in the hostels.*

The Prison Reform Trust (in print) highlight the challenges for women leaving custody who need to be caring for their children in order to secure appropriate accommodation, yet need suitable housing in order to have access to their children. This was emphasised by Emily who with a history of homelessness, substance misuse and mental health issues, explained that her child was currently in local authority care and suggested that she intended to appeal the decision, yet explained “I can't do it when I'm homeless”. In addition, the lack of available suitable housing for women leaving prison can make it difficult to maintain or regain access to their children (Prison Reform Trust, in print).

### ***Prison as a safe place***

One Community based worker reported that for many female prison leavers, the prospect of homelessness upon release meant that prison was considered the safer place to be:

*The crimes they are committing become more serious because they actually want to go into custody because they've had enough and they are going to do something really serious (CB2).*

On this point Helen commented:

*They've had the same trouble and they just ended up back inside 'cause it was easier for them inside prison than outside prison. They're getting their three meals, they're getting a roof over their head, they're getting their clothes washed every day, they're having their showers (Helen, post-release interview).*

This was emphasised by Lynne, who suggested “it’s safer here”. Vicky also compared the safety of prison to what she was likely to face when released:

*I'm not even looking forward to getting out because I've got nowhere to go. I don't know where I am going, and I'm in an abusive relationship as well, so at least being here I am safe.*

The certainty of insecure accommodation on release was associated with feelings of stress and dread as expressed by Margaret:

*I can't bear the thought of going back there in the tent in the sleeping bag, especially when the winter sets in again, am I going to be blown down the mountain and drown in the lake? Or am I going to be gang raped which I have been in the past. Am I going to be found hanging from a tree because I can't take anymore out there?*

Margaret went on suggest: “It’s just so stressful out there that I do stupid things to come back”.

### **Facilitators to finding suitable housing**

#### ***Communication and collaborative working***

A key theme to emerge related to what really helped and facilitated finding accommodation was the proactive and collaborative working of professionals. Some women referred to one individual worker who had made a difference:

*Since I have been interacting with [name of Resettlement Officer] I have been getting up in the mornings, I have something to wake up for (Carys).*

The same prison leaver described her Resettlement Officer as “fantastic”. Reciprocal relationships with professionals is a pivotal concept in women centred working and important in the aspiration to deliver more effective services for women (Carroll & Grant, 2014) and the benefit of this was evidenced in many of the women’s stories.

Margaret pointed out the perceived differences in the working practices of some professionals:

*Don't get me wrong, there's some amazing officers who go way above and beyond. But then you get some who don't. You ask them to ring up housing and they don't bother.*

Such differences were echoed by one Responsible Officer interviewed:

*I don't know whether the prisons just expect the community probation officers to sort out the issues that are identified..., people who work with TTG<sup>3</sup>. Some appear to just wait for it to happen. Whereas others are proactive (RO4).*

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<sup>3</sup> Through the gate

One Community based officer suggested that there was improving communication with local authorities (CB2). Another highlighted some good practice by emphasising the communication and collaboration with other people and agencies such as local landlords and the police:

*I will often get the council referring people to me..., they know what I do, they know the people I deal with. So, they tend to help me out when I need to house people. I always seem to house people. I have this understanding with the landlords. Most of the time there's no bonds involved, or rent in advance..., So, we have this wonderful arrangement where we all talk to each other and people get housed (CB3).*

### **Need for supported accommodation**

The need for supported accommodation for women to facilitate the transition from imprisonment to community life was highlighted by the full range of respondents:

*I can't see them having a date for my release and everything set up for me like drug teams, mental health because none of it was set up last time but if they get a date, I'll be happy because I will know and have support networks (Julie).*

One Community based officer underscored the high level of support needed in helping women prison leavers reintegrate back into the community. The worker talked about 24-hour assistance in order to properly address the complex needs, mental health, substance misuse and domestic violence (CB4). The safety that supported accommodation could provide was foregrounded by some respondents and considered an essential feature for women with multiple and complex needs:



*We've linked in well with the local PCSO,<sup>4</sup> he comes up quite regularly..., our project is quite unique as well in that we've got quite a lot of rules..., It is quite tight on that, but we're completely covered by CCTV because of the domestic violence aspect, that's why we've got that sort of element of safety (CB4).*

Supported accommodation also seeks to encourage independent living and each woman has their own kitchen and facilities to prepare them for life on the 'outside'. One woman emphasised the positive aspects of the supported accommodation in which she was living:

*It's that support, it's priceless..., if [name of supported accommodation] weren't there, I know for a fact that I'd either be on the street, or would be back in prison (Bethan).*

Such quotes highlight the need for women centred holistic working that serves to work with the whole woman, rather than individual issues associated with their offending.

## **Discussion**

The current study supports findings from previous research (see Corston, 2007; Mette, Kreis, Gillings, Svanberg & Schwannauer, 2016; Moore, 2017) that women involved in the criminal justice system experience multiple and complex needs. These needs include mental health, substance misuse, separation from children, bereavement and loss and fractured and abusive relationships (Corston, 2007; Mette et al., 2016). This study has served to illuminate some of these needs, and how these were exacerbated through homelessness and insecure housing. An interesting finding relates to the explicit links made between homelessness, offending and

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<sup>4</sup> Police Community Support Officer

substance misuse. This association resonates with recent findings by Travers and Mann (2017) who found that class A drug use and binge drinking were more strongly associated with risk of all types of reoffending for women than it was for men. Similarly, this research supports findings from Mette et al (2016), who highlight the link between dysfunctional intimate partner relationships, trauma and loss of children with women's substance misuse and offending. To this end, resettlement without stable and safe accommodation leaves women more likely to re-enter a cycle of homelessness, substance misuse, and reoffending.

Reflecting findings of existing research (Corston, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2018), the current study illuminated key barriers to finding suitable housing, including the lack of available, appropriate and affordable accommodation. Because of the shortage of housing, this may render the women with no other option than to live at a considerable distance from their support network and family. Unsuitable accommodation may also increase the risk of physical danger for women themselves. These temporary housing solutions do not address their multiple and complex needs.

A theme to emerge in terms of barriers to finding suitable accommodation was the lack of support that women said they received prior to release. It appeared that the key issue related to inconsistency across prisons and staff taking a proactive role in making referrals and working in a more collaborative way. Lack of support, information and awareness about the process of securing accommodation was a key issue. It emerged that many women took it upon themselves to make their own arrangements for housing. This often led to women being in more vulnerable situations with more unstable accommodation arrangements. This finding provides an insight into the political context in which practices operate; the neo-liberal agenda of the last 40 years has promoted responsibilisation and a move away from the rehabilitative

ideal (Sullivan, 2001). Apparent limited commitment and capacity to work beyond a “procedural and administrative” approach appeared to be a key obstacle for some organisations and staff to work more proactively to secure accommodation for female prison leavers. The barriers for staff include resource limitations; the “impermeable nature” of prisons; the lower priority need of prison leavers; short sentences; and lack of available housing.

The study highlights the complications associated with prisoners providing housing support for other prisoners with multiple and complex needs, not least because such needs may go unrecognised by non-professionals. Given that prison leavers have historically been afforded a lower priority for housing, having knowledge, experience, and the ability to negotiate with local authorities is essential, not least because definitions of “homelessness, need, ‘reasonable steps’ or vulnerability are not clearly defined” (Authors 2, 2019). To this end, Authors (2019) argued that using peers for housing purposes is “suboptimal” and resources for “Through the Gate” services should be re-assessed to address this.

The findings from this study reflect Moore’s (2017) in that the consequences of being released from prison NFA, can be devastating. Given the unpredictable and stressful nature of homelessness, it was no surprise that women talked about prison as a safe place. Although there is a dearth of research to support the finding that women consider prison as a safe place, this finding is consistent with research by Bradley and Davino (2002) who highlight that for some women, prison may be a relatively safe environment. Although not a finding in this research, there is also evidence from Pattinson (2015) to suggest that prisons are utilised by criminal justice professionals as a safe place for women who have complex mental health needs.

As Mago et al. (2013) emphasise, micro causation such as substance misuse, problematic relationships, domestic violence, and mental health issues may be compounded by the macro or structural causation of the economy, lack of affordable housing, lack of mental health services and patriarchy. Analysis of the interviews for both women prison leavers and professionals, underscores the need for more gender specific services in order to specifically address the multiple and complex needs that women in the criminal justice system tend to have and their routes into and experiences of homelessness (Authors 2018). According to the PLUS Project (2016) despite training about homelessness, substance use and equalities, frontline criminal justice staff remain less aware of the needs of homeless women compared to men. Women are referred to as 'hidden clients' because of their likelihood to not engage with services and this perpetuates a cycle of homelessness, substance misuse, and offending.

Reasons for women not engaging with drug and alcohol services could be fear of losing primary care for their child(ren) or social service intervention. The PLUS Project (2016) point out the specific needs of women that may go unrecognised by staff include: child care responsibilities, histories of abuse, sex work, and mental health. Interventions need to reflect a whole systems approach to more adequately address the multiple and complex needs of women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Available research (Corston, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2018) has consistently recommended that women in the criminal justice system be provided with more supported accommodation following release from prison. The current research supports this finding; the rich descriptions that women gave about their need or experiences of supported accommodation illuminated its value in supporting them to realise the hopes of a 'good life' (Thakker & Ward, 2010) that many of them said they have for their future.

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