

REDUCING RE-OFFENDING BY EX-PRISONERS: REPORT BY THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION UNIT, July 2002

Summary by James Kenrick, Youth Access, of what the report reveals about the need for advice and counselling services amongst prisoners and ex-prisoners

Housing

‘Prisoners who are homeless are more likely to be reconvicted. But up to a third of prisoners lose their housing during custody’ – strong link to Housing Benefit policy and poor communication with housing providers.

‘Prisoners face severe difficulties accessing housing on release’

‘Research suggests that stable accommodation can make a difference of 20% in terms of reduction in reconviction’

Three-quarters of ex-prisoners were likely to depend on HB for help with rent.

Good practice identified in report:

- Advice and advocacy in prison to prevent loss of housing.
HMP Norwich – Anglia Care Trust cited as example. Assists in retaining or terminating tenancies; managing debts; and negotiating with housing providers to re-establish accommodation on release.
- Advice on release to find and secure accommodation
HMP Drake Hall – Housing Advice Centre and Homelessness Directorate housing advice schemes cited as examples.
- Advice for BME prisoners on housing
Housing Advice for Black and Asian Prisoners (HABAP) project cited as example.

Benefits and Debt

‘Financial stability in the period immediately following release is essential if an ex-prisoner is to effectively resettle back into the community and avoid reverting to crime. However, many prisoners enter custody with a history of debt and financial problems which, left unaddressed, often get worse during their time in prison and the system leaves many almost penniless in the weeks immediately after release.’

72% of prisoners are in receipt of benefit before coming into prison

81% claimed benefit after release

48% had a history of debt

For a third of prisoners, existing debt problems had worsened in prison

Almost a quarter said they had needed help with benefit and debt problems

Re juveniles: The report quotes *The Benefits Guide 2000/2001*: "The rules about who can claim are complicated and harsh. Consequently, many young people may be wrongly denied benefit, and many others may not bother claiming at all." The report also states that 'The SEU found little evidence of relevant expertise either among secure unit staff or among YOT workers to advise on financial matters, nor of JobCentre Plus liaising effectively with these services.'

Good practice identified in report:

- General advice to prisoners
Citizens Advice Bureau, HMP Wormwood Scrubs – the only full-time CAB operating in a prison in the country – cited as example. 'The majority of advice covers housing problems, legal matters, and benefits. Other areas include relationship issues, tax, employment, utilities, education, health, immigration and nationality.....The project plays an important role in helping prisoners in preserving or obtaining accommodation, easing financial pressures and maintaining links with the community – factors that are recognised as contributing to reduced re-offending.'

Mental health of young prisoners

95% of young sentenced prisoners aged 15-21 suffer from a mental disorder.

'Young adult prisoners are more likely than adults to suffer from mental health problems'

'further work is needed to ensure that help [with mental health problems] continues on release and that prisoners are linked to services in the community'