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# Going straight home

A policy briefing on the role of housing in preventing offending



## The links between housing and offending

Homelessness and poor housing contribute to the likelihood that people will commit antisocial behaviour or crime

- One in three prisoners is not in permanent accommodation prior to imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> Although many homeless people do not break the law, housing problems are linked to an increased risk of offending.
- Major factors contributing to youth crime include poor housing and living in deteriorated inner-city areas. Those young people who commit crime from an early age are more likely to become habitual offenders with long criminal careers.<sup>2</sup>
- Getting an education, undertaking training, finding and keeping a job and building relationships with other people are all important elements of having a positive stake in society – making it much less likely that people will offend. Many homeless people lack the everyday life skills that can be used to avoid social exclusion.<sup>3</sup>
- More recent government initiatives mean that those committing antisocial behaviour may find it difficult to obtain or keep their accommodation, potentially increasing the risk that they will offend.

## Homelessness can contribute to reoffending

- People leaving prison without somewhere to live are more likely to offend again (short-sentence prisoners are two to three times more likely to reoffend if they don't have suitable accommodation<sup>4</sup>) – but up to one third of prisoners lose their housing while they are in custody.<sup>5</sup>
- There is a range of obstacles to finding and keeping a home for ex-offenders, which then increases the risk of social exclusion and, potentially, of criminal behaviour. Barriers can include existing rent arrears, insufficient funds for a deposit or rent and landlords' reluctance to house ex-offenders. There is also a shortage of supported housing for people with lower-level needs – a particular problem for short-term prisoners leaving custody with no statutory supervision, who are then often left without any form of resettlement support.
- Not only can homelessness and offending become a vicious circle, there is also evidence to suggest that homelessness increases the severity with which offenders are dealt within the criminal justice system. Lack of housing can make it more unlikely that a defendant will be bailed<sup>6</sup> and more likely that they will receive a custodial sentence – in turn, exacerbating their housing problems.

## Some barriers to improving housing options for ex-offenders

- Some prisoners do not receive adequate advice or assistance in finding accommodation as part of their preparation for release. Provision – both in quantity and quality – varies between prisons.<sup>7</sup> Other prisoners lose their home on sentencing as they do not receive help with managing the process of keeping their home or disposing of it in a way that increases their chance of being rehoused on release.
- The Government's Supporting People programme, which funds much of the existing provision, is under severe financial pressure and there is concern that the programme so far has paid insufficient attention to socially excluded groups.
- The Housing Benefit '13-week' rule limits the payment of Housing Benefit to convicted prisoners to this short period – and only for those serving sentences up to 13 weeks. Those serving longer sentences receive none at all, which means that many prisoners fall into arrears with their rent. This means they generally lose their housing and may also be excluded from being rehoused on release because of their arrears. Local authorities have no discretion, so they cannot, for example, pay Housing Benefit long enough to allow a prisoner to arrange for their property to be emptied and to terminate the lease.
- The Government's proposal (currently out to consultation) to dock Housing Benefit as a sanction against antisocial behaviour is another development whose potential to generate homelessness among those most at risk of offending is a cause for concern.

- Very few local authorities will give a commitment to rehouse prisoners on release in return for terminating their tenancies. Also, although legislation provides that people leaving custody may be considered to be in priority housing need, in practice ex-prisoners have very limited access to social housing. The very length of the housing process can mean that housing is often not available immediately on release, when a prisoner is at his/her most vulnerable.

Nacro has long campaigned for the recognition that having stable accommodation is an important part of enabling people to lead law-abiding, constructive lives. Providing access to good-quality, secure housing, therefore, is an important contribution to efforts to reduce crime and to make communities safer: going a long way towards reducing both the likelihood of the onset of offending and of reoffending after conviction.

*'Being at the project made me realise that doing drugs is a waste of money and that I could be doing something much better with my life.'*



At 26, **Gavin** (not his real name) had been homeless for eight years before he was referred to a Nacro Housing project for offenders with drug problems. 'I started taking drugs when I was 13. I dropped out of school – by the time I was 17 I was injecting heroin every day. I left home and was dossing at mates', sleeping on the street or in hostels. I've been in court loads of times for burglary, robbery, street theft and driving without a licence. I was 17 the first time I was sent down and I've been in prison six times. My probation officer told me about [Nacro]. At first I felt a bit scared about it. I thought it would be like rehab and I've never done anything like that before.

I never had any reason to get up before but I really enjoyed talking to the other residents and the project workers. At night, when I went to sleep, I felt safe knowing that I wasn't going to be attacked. Being at the project made me realise that doing drugs is a waste of money and that I could be doing something much better with my life. [They] helped me get off heroin and stabilised on a methadone programme. A Nacro support worker helped me find a flat. I've got a job and it's going really well. I've never had anything of my own before. A year ago I would never have imagined that I'd have my own flat and a job. I've still got some problems to work through, but I really want to make a go of it and I know that my support worker is there for me if I need a helping hand.'

## The benefits of housing for offenders and those at risk

### For the individual:

- Stable housing allows offenders to get help with the range of problems they may be experiencing – including drug treatment, medical help and addressing their offending behaviour.
- Having an address makes some offenders eligible for schemes such as home detention curfew, enabling them to start the process of resettlement sooner and with more support.
- Having a stable address makes it easier for ex-offenders to find and hold down a job, another important element in successful resettlement.
- Having a positive stake in the community motivates offenders to lead law-abiding lives.

### For the community:

- Housed offenders are less likely to reoffend, making communities safer.
- Offender housing schemes allow for a thorough risk assessment to take place for each individual and for this risk to be managed in the interests of both the individual and the local community.
- Knowing where an offender lives allows monitoring and surveillance to take place if necessary.

### For statutory and other agencies:

- Supported housing can complement work done by probation and youth offending team staff, increasing the chances of successful resettlement.
- Providing housing for serious offenders can reduce the risk to the local community, allowing more rigorous monitoring and contributing to the work of the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements.
- Stable housing is an essential element in delivering some of the newer sentences, including Custody Plus and Custody Minus.

## Improving offenders' access to housing

- Offender housing needs and provision must be included in key local and national planning processes, including local housing strategies, crime and disorder reduction strategies and Supporting People strategies, and be linked to the emerging framework of Local Area Agreements.
- The Government's future strategy for Supporting People (SP) needs to recognise the analysis of the recent Audit Commission report and that of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister itself, including ensuring that SP funding levels are not reduced by their closer integration into local authority benefits, and increasing the priority on social exclusion generally within the SP programme.
- The development of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) needs to take account of the current probation investment in SP for offenders. Any regional commissioning role must take account of the local level, where SP commissioning operates and where voluntary sector partnerships are strongest.
- Local authorities should be resourced to allow them to meet consistently their obligations to ex-prisoners under the *Homelessness Act 2002*.
- Adequate, accurate advice to all prisoners, including those on remand, should be provided initially at reception and then at key points in a prisoner's sentence to ensure they retain housing wherever possible and find suitable new accommodation for their release.
- Prisoners' housing needs should be considered as part of an integrated approach to resettlement.<sup>6</sup> This means assessing housing in the context of other resettlement needs, which might include family relationships, drug treatment or training and employment. Integrated resettlement also requires that prisons and communities have strong and mutual links to ensure prisoners' resettlement is supported before and after release.
- Prisons should give local authorities maximum notice of a prisoner's release date and applications for housing should be accepted as early as possible.
- The '13-week' Housing Benefit rule should be altered to 12 months for sentenced prisoners (as it currently is for remand prisoners). Ways of minimising rent arrears accrued during a sentence, and more flexible ways of addressing prisoners' rent arrears, could reduce the number of ex-offenders excluded from housing registers on release.
- The restriction of Housing Benefit eligibility against perpetrators of antisocial behaviour should be rejected in favour of more constructive interventions to reduce antisocial behaviour.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners* Social Exclusion Unit, July 2002,
- <sup>2</sup> *Understanding and preventing youth crime* JRF Findings, Social Policy Research 93, April 1996, [www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/SP93.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/SP93.asp)
- <sup>3</sup> *Life skills key to tackling social exclusion and homelessness*, Crisis/Demos press release, 12 October 2004, <http://www.demos.co.uk/media/pressreleases/pressreleases2004/survivalskillsrelease/>
- <sup>4</sup> *Housing and ex-offenders risk management protocol Wales*, March 2005, <http://www.housing.wales.gov.uk/content/English/k/k120.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> *Op cit, Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*. [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/reduce\\_reoff/rr.main.pdf](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/reduce_reoff/rr.main.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> *Going straight home* Nacro, December 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> Ex-offenders briefing note, Shelter, <http://england.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-968.cfm> [www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)
- <sup>8</sup> *Integrated resettlement: Putting the pieces together* Nacro, 2005.

## About Nacro and Nacro Housing

Nacro is the leading crime reduction charity – dedicated to making society safer. Since 1966, we have developed practical solutions to crime and fresh thinking about how to reduce it. We aim above all to reduce crime by giving offenders and those at risk of offending a positive stake in society.

Nacro Housing is a housing association (Nacro Community Enterprises) and has over 30 years' experience of setting up and running housing projects. Each year, we house over 3,000 ex-offenders and other vulnerable homeless people in self-contained flats, shared houses and in hostels. We work with tenants to enable them to develop the independent living skills needed to find and keep a place of their own. Nacro Housing also runs a range of housing-related services, including family support projects, mediation schemes and foyer schemes, which provide accommodation and on-site training and employment opportunities.

Find out more about our work at [www.nacro.org.uk](http://www.nacro.org.uk)

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