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Promoting Integration: The Provision of Prisoner Post-release Services

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One way that Australian correctional authorities can safeguard the community is by incapacitating offenders and keeping them away from potential victims. The community can also be protected in the longer term by minimising the likelihood of ex-prisoners reoffending after they are released. One strategy for reducing the risk of recidivism is the provision of treatment, services and support to prisoners during their incarceration and after their release. This approach is gaining prominence in Australia and internationally. It recognises that prisoners are confronted by a range of social, economic and personal challenges that can be barriers to a crime-free lifestyle.

This paper examines various issues linked to the provision of post-release services to prisoners, drawing on both international literature and a roundtable discussion held at the Australian Institute of Criminology in October 2002.

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The majority of Australian prisoners will one day return to the community — of the more than 18,000 sentenced prisoners in custody at 30 June 2002, only about four per cent were serving “life” sentences (ABS 2003a). Although there are no precise statistics on the number of adult prisoners who return to the community each year, estimates place this figure at over 30,000¹ (see Baldry et al. 2002). For some offenders, prison experiences do not seem to have any deterrent or rehabilitative effect in preventing future offending. Figures indicate that around 58 per cent of the over 22,000 sentenced and unsentenced individuals incarcerated as at 30 June 2002 had been previously imprisoned (ABS 2003a). Of prisoners released in 1999–2000, 37.4 per cent had returned to prison by 2001–02 (SCRCSSP 2003).

The costs of imprisonment are high: in 2001–02, average recurrent expenditure per prisoner per day in Australia was \$155 (SCRCSSP 2003). The costs of crime are also high (Mayhew 2003), so it would be of benefit to the whole community if the rate of recidivism among ex-prisoners could be reduced. However, the greatest benefits to the community would accrue if ex-prisoners not only ceased to reoffend, but also productively contributed to community life, and *integrated* into the life and activities of mainstream society. Some have referred to this process as *reintegration*, although this term implies that prisoners were once integrated, which, given the range of disadvantages typically experienced by prisoners, makes the term somewhat inappropriate (see Ward 2001).

Returning Prisoners to the Broader Australian Community

The post-release management of Australian offenders varies with jurisdiction. In general, though, offenders can be released on license or parole, on intensive supervision orders or on temporary release orders. The responsibility for the management of these offenders typically belongs to community correctional staff (SCRCSSP 2003). Offenders can also be released *unconditionally* into the community upon completion of their sentences. Government correctional

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agencies do not provide post-release services or supervision to this group, although non-government and faith-based organisations can provide welfare and other services.

Official statistics show that there was an average of over 8,400 ex-prisoners on parole orders in 2002 (ABS 2003b).² If over 30,000 convicted prisoners are released each year, the majority are not subject to parole supervision. It has traditionally been accepted that around one-third of prisoners will be released on parole, although preliminary data from a recent research project suggest that rates vary between jurisdictions and that even when released on parole, prisoners may not always have the opportunity to meet with a parole officer before release (see Baldry et al. 2002). Not all parolees may receive sufficient pre- and post-release contact with parole officers to improve their chances of successful community integration.

“Throughcare” refers to treatment and support that commences in custody and continues after release into the community. Australian research into the delivery of throughcare is not as well developed as that found in North America and the United Kingdom. There are also large gaps in our knowledge concerning the specific post-release challenges facing Australian prisoners, as well as the best ways in which to approach prisoner return so as to decrease reoffending and maximise the chance of successful integration into the community.

To address this lack of evidence in Australia, post-release issues were explored at a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, which was attended by individuals with knowledge of, and experience in, post-release services in Australia. This paper outlines the major themes raised in that discussion, and places them in the context of relevant international research and theory.³

Obstacles to Recently Released Prisoners Achieving Community Integration

Offending has been linked to social disadvantage. Overseas literature shows that, on average (and relative to the general population), prisoners are confronted with an extensive range of social challenges. Poverty, poor education, unemployment and poor physical health, accompanied by alcohol, drug and mental health issues, intellectual disability, and poor social and communication skills, may place an individual at high risk of rearrest and reimprisonment (see Social Exclusion Unit 2002). Personal barriers to integration, such as intellectual disabilities, mental illness and poor life skills, feed into more systemic obstacles such as poor education, unemployment and debt.

Social disadvantage can be further exacerbated by the prison experience. Prisoners tend to possess low levels of workplace skill and education, and the addition of a custodial term to an ex-offender’s personal history further diminishes employability. Similarly, stable accommodation can become hard to obtain because on release, ex-prisoners do not have the financial means to secure private housing, or may be ineligible for priority public housing (Social Exclusion Unit 2002).

Without sufficient material and social support upon release, the cycle of release and rearrest can become increasingly difficult to break. This is especially true for prisoners serving short sentences who may not be imprisoned long enough to receive any in-prison assistance and who are probably not subject to any formal post-release supervision (see NACRO 2000).

The effects of imprisonment have been felt at a community level in some jurisdictions in the United States. Prisoners often come from, and return to, disadvantaged communities. When large numbers of offenders are repeatedly removed from and returned to a locality, the community can experience further challenges. For instance, it can become stigmatised because of the number of ex-offenders it contains,

ultimately resulting in decreased economic and social opportunities (Petersilia 2001).

The relationship between all these factors is certainly not straightforward and the pathways to community integration may be equally complex and interwoven. Interventions that aim to decrease reoffending should attempt to address the factors that contribute directly to offending simultaneously.

Facilitating Prisoners’ Return to Mainstream Society

International research indicates that addressing antisocial and criminal behaviour while an offender is in prison with known-to-be-effective programs, can help minimise reoffending upon community re-entry (Cullen & Gendreau 2000). The best outcomes for returning prisoners may arise when factors predisposing a person to criminal activity (criminogenic needs) are addressed and when physical and social needs are appropriately supported, both in prison and post-release via throughcare (see, for example, Travis, Solomon & Waul 2001). Recent emphasis has been on using a “strengths-based” approach (for example, Maruna & LeBel 2003), or making use of personal and community assets to address ex-prisoners’ challenges and disadvantages.

There is increasing recognition that all interventions, regardless of content, are best delivered as part of an integrated program designed to address an individual prisoner’s specific issues, disadvantages and problems. Areas of need identified as important range from practical physical considerations (providing viable, comfortable and secure housing, not simply temporary accommodation), to less tangible factors such as fostering social interactions that permit ex-offenders to give back to their communities. Programs aimed at supporting the children and families of prisoners and at building offenders’ parenting skills should also be incorporated to minimise the probability of continuing a cycle of offending across generations

(Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners 2002).

One response to the issue of prisoner return is a philosophical commitment to better service provision through integrated, multi-agency partnerships (National Audit Office 2002). In practice, this involves a coordinated response by correctional authorities as well as those government agencies responsible for the delivery of welfare services. In some US jurisdictions, *re-entry partnerships* incorporate non-government organisations, as well as representatives of both victims and the communities to which offenders return (US General Accounting Office 2001).

Some jurisdictions have implemented *case management* to coordinate the delivery of multi-agency throughcare services to individuals with differing needs. A case manager serves as a central point for the delivery or brokerage of treatment, support and, in some instances, correctional supervision in the community (Murphy Healey 1999). This type of service delivery can ensure continuous care between custody and the community, allowing in-prison rehabilitative gains to be maintained and applied in mainstream society.

New models of service delivery to provide throughcare from prison to community, such as partnerships and case management, are not easily implemented. Overseas researchers and practitioners have identified impediments to successful implementation, including factors such as community attitudes (Burrows et al. 2001). At the most practical level, effective throughcare can only be delivered if adequate human and financial resources are committed to it and its associated services and programs.

The Integration of Australian Prisoners: Perspectives from the Roundtable

Participants in the roundtable discussion identified many of the barriers to integration found in international literature. They also highlighted other, less tangible challenges for prisoners. For

instance, a tacit belief that prisons (and, by extension, prisoners) are not part of the broader society was noted, which is closely tied to a belief that prisoners are not entitled to the basic human services available to the community at large. The expectations that accompany the “prisoner persona” can be equally detrimental: stigmatisation and discrimination can result when a prison history is disclosed. This appears to be especially true when seeking employment (see Metcalf, Anderson & Rolfe 2001).

Services to prisoners are sometimes perceived by members of the community as unfair advantages to the undeserving. Acknowledging that prisoners can benefit from support and services in prison and post-release is not to deny prisoner culpability, or prisoners’ own responsibility for their rehabilitation. However, community acceptance for a rehabilitative agenda seems unlikely whilst evidence of the potential for integration is either not available or not publicised among the mainstream population.

The Provision of Throughcare and Post-Release Services

In the roundtable discussion it was recognised that a range of means exist for addressing reoffending and integration. Promising trends in prisoner rehabilitation noted by participants are outlined in Box 1.

The development of inter-agency partnerships to deliver post-release services was a recurrent theme of the roundtable, and important features of viable partnerships were highlighted. For instance, government-mandated and formalised assignment of a single agency to take a leading role in the partnership is seen as critical to the success of what has become known as a joined-up approach. This allows for a more effective coordination of policy actions originating from the various portfolios. It also provides a more accessible, consistent and “human” point of service delivery for the ex-prisoner, provides improved specialist resources, and a safety net of service providers.

Collaborative service delivery can be even further enhanced with appropriate intra-agency (or, ideally, inter-agency) information management systems. The interactions between participating organisations should also be formalised, and accompanied by clear protocols for dealing with issues such as privacy. Staff movement between organisations could facilitate a greater understanding of the differing policy agendas of participating agencies.

Possibly the most important benefit of a partnership approach is the shared responsibility it

Box 1: Promising trends in prisoner rehabilitation

- Support for diversion and non-custodial justice responses where appropriate, especially for those at high risk, such as those with mental health or intellectual disability issues.
- A recognition of the lack of services available to those sentenced to a short term in prison, or being held on remand.
- Learning from and involvement of ex-prisoners in pre- and post-release work and programs.
- Recognition that interventions may be best delivered when staff have experience and knowledge of both bureaucratic requirements and social approaches to care.
- Continuing those tailored services initiated in prison after return to the community, to ensure that gains made in prison are not lost—that is, a resourced commitment to throughcare.
- A focus on the whole person and his or her personal context, therefore necessarily including family and social networks.
- Partnerships: communication, interaction and knowledge-sharing between custodial, community correctional staff, other government agencies, and non-government organisations working in prison and post-prison support.

engenders. The task of ex-prisoner integration is probably too great for a single agency but it is far more attainable via a whole-of-government response.

The manner in which post-release services can be delivered is not uniform. Aspects of delivery that emerged in discussion are summarised in Box 2.

The long-term benefits of community and social capital development, and a whole-of-life approach to crime prevention are also receiving increasing attention from correctional authorities. It is especially relevant in geographic areas with socioeconomic disadvantages because the task of community integration is even more challenging if the community that a prisoner returns to has no capacity or resources to provide support.

A Model of Throughcare Delivery

Roundtable participants formulated a set of factors they saw as critical to throughcare service delivery, such as case management, and risk and needs assessment. Figure 1 summarises these factors, in a model of “ideal” service delivery developed in discussions. Post-release services would be on a continuum with pre-release services, best initiated at prison reception. For example, a prisoner’s housing and family situation would be ascertained to ensure that the housing authority and other human and community agencies secure the services needed at release. Even if serving a short sentence, a release plan could be developed examining needs for and arranging access to an alcohol or other drug worker, a mental health worker, parenting and life skills training and so on.

Floating care, which is central to this model, has its roots in the provision of accommodation (see, for example, Fisk & Phillips 2000), but can be used in a broad range of services. In the case of post-release interventions, floating care would involve a single case manager providing and/or brokering multi-agency support to a client and his or her family (if relevant), from a base in the offender’s own home. Optimally, the case manager would work with the client from reception

Box 2: Important aspects of post-release service delivery

- Individually tailored case management, flowing on from risk-assessment using reliable tools, and incorporating the prisoner’s input.
- Case (sentence) plan development outlining programs and access to services as soon as possible following prison reception.
- Brokerage of services from organisations best equipped to provide services, while also recognising that some key organisations may not have the critical mass necessary to operate viably within a brokerage system, and generic service providers may not be adequately skilled to deal with this population.
- A demarcation of staff responsible for supervision and the staff responsible for social and other supports.
- An understanding that individuals may easily become overwhelmed if confronted with a range of reporting requirements following release.
- A definition of service success beyond reduced recidivism, incorporating small gains and progress rather than only reoffending.
- A genuine engagement by a worker with the individual ex-prisoner.

to post-release. The benefits of this focus on accommodation are twofold. First, it ensures that the accommodation issues that are so instrumental to successful integration are addressed at re-entry. It also means that services are delivered from an accessible and familiar setting that will be less alienating to a client.

It should be noted that one size does not fit all in post-release services. For example, independent accommodation, even with individualised floating care, may not be appropriate for some because of institutionalisation, serious mental health problems, or intellectual disability. These ex-prisoners may be better placed in shared and supported accommodation. It is also important to recognise that such a model can be over-rationalised. The model will be ineffectual without workers bringing enthusiasm and

commitment, and without adequate resources to enable its effective implementation.

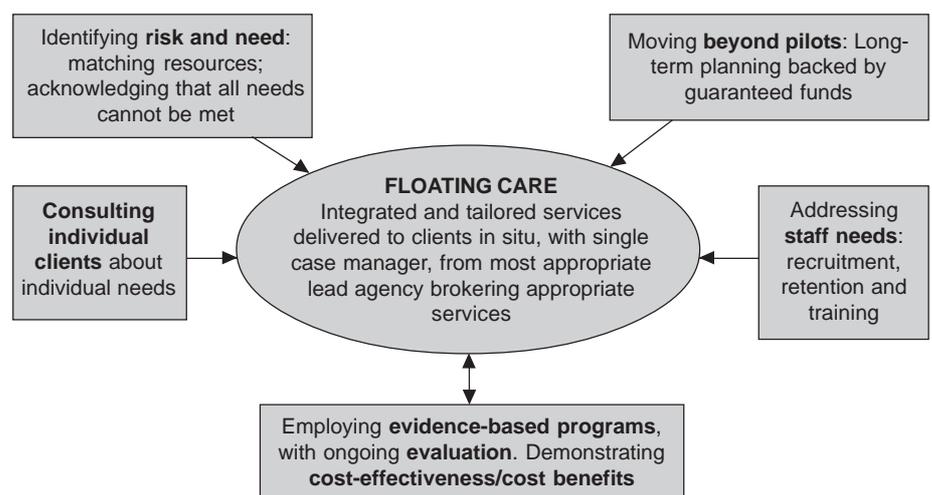
Throughcare Practice and Research Needs in Australia

An earlier examination of Australia’s post-release situation noted three areas for research (Ogilvie 2001):

- identifying the purpose of post-release programs;
- ascertaining the means of achieving these goals; and
- identifying how to work across organisations to attain these ends.

The roundtable acknowledged that throughcare and post-release services can achieve multiple ends: reduced reoffending, improved integration with mainstream society and, ultimately, enhanced community safety. There are also multiple means of achieving these ends, drawing on different service

Figure 1: A model of throughcare service delivery to ex-prisoners



delivery models, such as floating care. Inter-agency work is increasingly important in delivering services to disadvantaged groups, and Australian correctional practitioners are increasingly aware of the benefits and challenges associated with implementation of partnerships. There are other areas of need in post-release correctional practice and research in Australia, however, and roundtable discussions elaborated on these.

Practice-related Issues

Funding

Interest in offender rehabilitation has resulted in the implementation of a range of pilot programs and initiatives. There is now a need for effective pilots to be transformed into ongoing programs with recurrent funding. Program administrators and service providers need guaranteed funding to plan and achieve long-term goals. The recruitment, retention and adequate remuneration of skilled and motivated staff to deal with this challenging population are central to any long-term planning. The implementation of programs — not only pilots — can also assist in perception change because throughcare and reintegration become valued, mainstream correctional activities.

Funding arrangements for the provision of services to Australian prisoners should be clarified. For instance, monies funding current post-release services are spread over a range of (non-communicating) agencies and tenders, and can be awarded to multiple service providers. Often funds are not specially earmarked, and can be insufficient to permit an evaluation component to programs. Sometimes monies are linked to highly specific outcomes that may be inappropriate, unattainable or simply inadequately conceived.

Evaluation

The call to transform pilots to programs is not to imply that the evaluation should be abandoned. Indeed, the roundtable-developed model in Figure 1 has evaluation and ongoing research as critical to service delivery because it permits programs and services to be fine-tuned, revised and monitored. It

also provides transparent accountability and demonstrable outcomes to the broader community (see also Home Office 1999).

Coordinating Agencies and Activities

A fundamental issue in the implementation of an Australian throughcare agenda is the practical challenge associated with multi-agency service delivery. To help overcome the lack of integration, each state could form a *post-release desk* that could be headed by the appropriate lead agency, or based in the Premier’s or Chief Minister’s Department within each jurisdiction. This desk could act as both a clearinghouse (keeping all relevant agencies and staff informed of programs, research and developments) and as a secretariat, to ensure partnerships are developed and sustained.

The Place of Parole

Travis and Petersilia (2001) suggest the post-release component of a person’s sentence should be a time for preparation for re-entry into mainstream society. Roundtable participants noted that this concept harks back to the more intensive parole services once available in Australia. Every prisoner was attached to a parole officer who worked with that client throughout their sentence and post-release, and contact intensity and duration was dictated by both the client’s situation and the court or parole board.

Contemporary Australian parole officers have large case loads and spend considerable time assessing risk and compiling reports. More resources and a greater focus on case management are required if parole is to be maximally effective in terms of integration. Participants

observed that the role of the parole service in the rehabilitation of prisoners requires clarification, mirroring international discussion about the purpose of parole (Travis & Lawrence 2002), and the place of community corrections in voluntary and mandatory post-release services (Maguire et al. 1998).

Research-related Issues

The coordination and funding of services requires an understanding of the risks and needs of the returning prisoner population. The process is severely constrained because the size, nature, characteristics and particular disadvantages of the returning prisoner population in Australia are not known. Therefore, a critical item on the research agenda for post-release services is an accurate description of the returning population, including the localities where ex-prisoners settle, to ensure a matching of services to geographical need.

Additional research needs identified during the roundtable are shown in Box 3. This knowledge will allow the Australian prison experience, rehabilitation and community integration to be assessed in an international context. Further, each jurisdiction has unique legislative, penal, social, economic and demographic characteristics that may underpin differences in prisoner challenges and in rehabilitative outcomes. Comparative research *between* Australian jurisdictions may help uncover causal relationships between correctional interventions, offender and community characteristics and successful post-release integration. Importantly, addressing these knowledge gaps

Box 3: Research agenda in the provision of post-release services

- The compilation of a central inventory of policies and services available within jurisdictions.
- A review of what programs and services work in offender rehabilitation and integration, what elements within these programs are the specific factors that facilitate success, and what specific benefits can accrue from throughcare programs.
- An analysis of the risk factors that make Australian ex-prisoners vulnerable to re-offending.
- An examination of the protective factors that can help prevent prisoner reoffending, but that, more broadly, can assist in offender reintegration.

will assist in ensuring that Australian correctional resources are allocated for optimal outcomes in terms of crime reduction and maximising the possibility of successful community return.

Summary

Prisoners exiting custody and returning to mainstream society are confronted with a range of personal, economic and social challenges. These challenges can minimise the likelihood of a successful and crime-free integration with the broader community. Practitioners and researchers have recognised that rehabilitative services and support provided both before and after release can improve a prisoner's chance of successful integration into the community.

A model of post-release service delivery formulated at the recent AIC roundtable contained a number of features that are being implemented and examined in various jurisdictions around the world. Key features include:

- systematically identifying prisoner risks and needs, incorporating client input, and matching in-prison and post-release services and supports accordingly;
- case management from a base central to the offender;
- inter-agency partnerships, with a lead agency designated from among partner agencies;
- adequate funding for required services and for thorough evaluation of those services; and
- long-term throughcare programs made central to the correctional agenda.

The limited literature concerning Australian prisoners means that there are substantial gaps in our knowledge. There is, nonetheless, recognition of a need to implement throughcare for prisoners in order to enhance community safety by promoting integration and reducing recidivism, and to develop programs for the delivery of this throughcare that are suited to the Australian environment. However, as policy, practice and research agendas evolve, at least 30,000 offenders are being returned to the Australian community this year. It is critical that stakeholders progress their

policy and research agendas mindful of both the obstacles that exist to their implementation and the challenges confronting Australian prisoners today.

Notes

- 1 This estimate does not incorporate individuals released after remand in custody, or released following short sentences of less than 14 days.
- 2 The total number of prisoners released under parole was not available. Jurisdictional differences in release and recording practices make it difficult to precisely quantify numbers released nationally, or the status of those releases.
- 3 This paper is not a verbatim record of proceedings, but rather a distillation of ideas. As such, the views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of all participants in the roundtable discussion. Interpretation of and comment on the discussion and other material are those of the authors.

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