



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Focus Ireland, a voluntary organisation working with homeless people and PACE, an organisation working with and for ex-offenders recognised that ex-offenders on leaving prison faced homelessness. Given the areas of work of Focus Ireland and PACE it was decided that both organisations could work together to investigate the issue of homelessness among ex-offenders. This would involve looking at the housing difficulties and social barriers that ex-offenders face, the contribution that these makes to their offending and the obstacles that they create for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society and deriving a set of recommendations from this for the future treatment of men and women leaving prison with no fixed abode (NFA).

### Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland was established in 1985 in response to the identified needs of homeless women in Dublin city. Since its establishment the organisation has grown and now provides a range of services from long-term and transitional housing to day centres and emergency accommodation.

### PACE

PACE was established in 1969 and works in partnership with agencies such as the Probation and Welfare Service, FAS and the VEC to create high quality settlement services for offenders. PACE also provides further training and education for male and female ex-offenders and supported accommodation for men at its Coolock site.

### Objectives of the research

To date there has been no significant research into the relationship between homelessness and release from prison in Ireland. Data linking homelessness with prison release is often an accidental by-product of other types of research. Thus the immediate objectives of this research project are to explore the relationships between homelessness, crime and release from prison. Specifically, it aims to:

- Document the experiences of homeless ex-offenders in other countries;
- Document the experiences of homeless ex-offenders in Dublin; and
- Look at the relationship between homelessness and offending as perceived by offenders.

However as PACE and Focus Ireland are both key service providers, it is also important that the research investigates the extent of, and the obstacles to, service use, and to look at how appropriate housing and services can be provided. The overall objective is to provide evidence-based recommendations to combat the cycle of homelessness experienced by ex-prisoners.

## Summary of Research Findings

### (i) Socio-Demographic Indicators

The participants in the research were characterised by low educational attainment levels, high levels of unemployment, family breakdown/dysfunction, and histories of drug and/or alcohol abuse.

## **(ii) Homelessness and Crime**

This study shows that the relationship between homelessness and crime is a complex one. Homelessness did not inevitably lead to criminal behaviour among the sample. For some (less than half the sample) being homeless led to crime which in turn led to imprisonment. For others it was being released from prison that led directly to homelessness. The type of crimes committed by those homeless prior to their first term of imprisonment shows a preponderance of vagrancy, larceny and drug offences. This is in contrast to the more “serious” crimes committed by those homeless after a period of imprisonment.

However both groups - those homeless prior to and those homeless after their experience in prison – had previous contact with the judicial system from an early age. Forty-one per cent of respondents who had been homeless prior to their first term of imprisonment were on remand for the first time before the age of 18 and 54 per cent of those settled prior to their first term of imprisonment as an adult had been placed on remand for the first time when they were less than 18 years.

The differences between the two groups carried over into the issue of relationship breakdown. Relationship breakdown with immediate family or partner/spouse was common to both groups, but the reasons for the breakdown were different. Those in settled accommodation prior to their term of imprisonment identified the type and nature of the crime they committed as the reason for their relationship breakdown. Those homeless prior to their committal to prison identified other reasons for relationship breakdown such as mental ill health (their own or a member of the family), drug addiction (their own or a member of the family), domestic violence or the threat of anti-social eviction. The differences also carried over into the reasons why they became homeless. The reasons for homelessness among those who were on the streets prior to their imprisonment were similar to the reasons for the breakdown in their relationship. But for those homeless following a period of imprisonment there were additional reasons that included the loss of private rented accommodation or the loss of local authority housing during their imprisonment.

## **(iii) Other Contributory Factors**

Respondents in both groups reported a variety of factors that contributed to their homelessness and their criminal behaviour. These included histories of residential child-care, family dysfunction or breakdown, mental ill health, drug misuse and alcohol addiction.

Thirty-seven respondents reported that their criminal behaviour was directly linked with their drug misuse, and 35 of them (95 per cent) reported that they had committed their offence in order to finance their drug habit. The life experiences reported by the respondents were echoed in the discussions with professionals working in the welfare and prison services and voluntary organisations. All of these recognised drugs as a major factor in offending behaviour.

The issue of alcohol misuse is also important. Sixteen respondents reported a direct link between their alcohol consumption and their offending behaviour. Seven participants reported that their drunken behaviour led to the offence being committed; these offences included Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH) and other types of assault. A further 3 participants had been arrested on drunk and disorderly charges.

#### **(iv) Re-offending Behaviour**

A total of 40 of the respondents were convicted of more than one crime and had been in prison on more than one occasion. The average length of total time spent in prison was 72 months. However, many of the respondents were sentenced to short periods of time in prison on a number of occasions. Sentences ranged from between 6 months and 2 years for non-violent crimes.

The key issues that respondents perceived to have contributed to their re-offending behaviour included breakdown of family/partner relationships, the coping difficulties associated with independent living after a period of institutionalisation, and drug and alcohol addiction.

The most important factor cited for re-offending behaviour was drug addiction. Forty-six per cent of respondents reported that homelessness had directly contributed to their offending behaviour, through committing survivalist crimes or the inability to abstain from drug taking when living on the street. The inability to maintain addiction treatment following release from prison was also a significant problem for respondents and this was commented on by key informant interviewees. Homelessness made drug treatment programmes even more difficult to access, as provision is based on catchment area and possession of a permanent address.

#### **(v) Access to and Provision of Information and Advice**

The survey found that rates of access to information and advice on release from prison were significantly higher than rates of access while in prison. There were also notable discrepancies between the identified needs of prisoners and the level of support they received. The most common immediate and practical need identified by respondents was accommodation; in addition they reported the need for addiction treatment, family reconciliation services, employment advice, further training and education, and emotional support in the form of counselling. Unfortunately, the level of met need was especially low. For example, 27 respondents required counselling only 6 received it, 29 respondents identified addiction treatment as a need only 16 received it and 25 respondents required employment advice and only 6 received it.

There was little difference between the needs of female and male ex-offenders. The main difficulties faced by the men and women leaving prison proved to be housing, addiction treatment, family/partner reconciliation, employment and “generally adjusting to life”. It is interesting to note that female respondents (46 per cent of women or 6 out of 14) ranked more highly the difficulty of “generally adjusting to life outside” as opposed to just 26 per cent of men. There may be a number of reasons for this including the disparity between the level of support and advice available to them when in the Dochas Centre (female prison) and that available to them once released. In addition, the needs of women can be more complex and demanding in terms of co-ordinating services and supports, particularly where women have children and are the primary care givers.

### **Discussion**

For the majority of respondents it was simply not a case of their homelessness, their drug use or their alcohol misuse that led to the offending behaviour. The findings from this small-scale study indicate a number of pathways into homelessness and a variety of complex relationships between homelessness and the committal of a crime, and between release from prison and entering a cycle of homelessness, crime and re-offending behaviour. For some homelessness contributed to their

offending behaviour through the criminalisation of certain behaviours such as public order offences like being drunk and disorderly and vagrancy, the adoption of criminal behaviour for street survival such as shop lifting, and their development of addictions to cope with the isolation, insecurity and difficulties of being homeless.

For others it was criminal behaviour that led to homelessness, most crucially because the nature of the offences for which they were imprisoned led to a break-up of their relationships and their time in prison led to a loss of accommodation. However in addition both groups had drug and/or alcohol addiction and mental health problems to contend with and these contributed to and exacerbated their problems of homelessness and in turn had an influence on their likelihood of re-offending.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations suggested in this section are based on the findings of the research supplemented by the interviews and discussions held with both statutory and voluntary service providers. They are broken down under a number of headings including:

1. Custodial and Non-Custodial Sanctions
2. Services while in prison
3. Post-release needs
4. Interaction with other developments
5. Information systems

## **Custodial and Non-Custodial Sanctions**

This research shows that the imposition of custodial sentences for relatively minor offences led to family and spousal relationship destabilisation and accommodation and employment loss. Many of the respondents had experienced periods in prison for offences such as vagrancy, public disorder and larceny. In addition, the survivalist nature of these crimes indicates that the criminal behaviour is not always predatory but based on subsistence and need. This suggests that custodial sentences might not always be appropriate for such offenders.

1. There needs to be a review of the use of custodial sentences as part of our judicial system for people who are homeless. Committal to prison should be viewed as a “punishment of last resort”.
2. If custodial sentencing is to continue as the punishment of choice by the courts, initiatives must be developed to overcome the difficulties faced by short-term prisoners in accessing education, training and detoxification programmes. An initial assessment of prisoner needs in terms of education and training, medical, psychiatric and/or substance misuse difficulties should be conducted for both long and short-term prisoners and the appropriate interventions identified.
3. Education programmes for Gardai, Judges, and other professionals working with the judiciary is necessary. It is essential that those in contact with homeless adults in a law enforcement capacity should understand more completely the particular difficulties that homeless men and women face and what the implications of imprisonment might be on their accommodation, family relationship or substance abuse status and on their likelihood of re-offending.
4. Adequate resourcing of the Drug Court is essential to make it a viable option to the imposition of a custodial sentence.
5. An assessment of need immediately prior to release is also essential to provide the supports necessary to help prevent re-offending behaviour.

6. The practice of releasing prisoners with no accommodation late on Friday evenings needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

### **Services While in Prison**

It is clear from the interviews with respondents that access to and uptake of the developmental, educational and training and employment programmes within the prison is very poor among the respondents. In full recognition of the current resource shortages in our prisons, the following recommendations are made:

1. In addition to assessments of need at the beginning and end of sentences, such assessments should be a recurring activity throughout the person's term of imprisonment as needs and personal circumstances change over time.
2. Facilities within the prison system should have a range of "family-friendly" facilities to encourage family visits.
3. Identification of family mediation and family support needs should be an integral part of the assessment process and the appropriate services developed to ensure that family networks are protected during periods of imprisonment.
4. There should be greater inter-statutory agency collaboration and these agencies must also collaborate more effectively with voluntary/community organisations to ensure the recognition and appropriate response to assessments of need, even when they are carried out by other institutions/organisations.
5. Pre-release advice, information and support is essential particularly for offenders sentenced to longer than 2 but less than 4 years.
6. The detoxification, therapeutic and rehabilitative facilities for drug users should be expanded and the links between prison facilities and community facilities strengthened (Centre for Health Promotion Studies, 2000). Continuity of drug treatment for ex-offenders would also increase accommodation chances, as local authorities would be more willing to re-register applicants with a substance misuse history if the substance misuse is being addressed.
7. Offenders sentenced to less than 9 months in prison should not be removed from community or city drug treatment clinics (waiting) lists.
8. The provision of alcohol treatment programmes should be improved.
9. Offenders sentenced to less than 12 months in prison should not be removed from Local Authority waiting lists.
10. Prisoners at least 4 months prior to their release should be allowed to re-register on Local Authority housing waiting lists if their accommodation has been lost during the term of their imprisonment.

### **Post-release Support**

The key principles underlying the provision of support following release from prison should be consistency and continuity. Key recommendations for post-release support include:

1. A variety of appropriate accommodation ranging from emergency accommodation hostels through to transition/supported housing through to permanent housing be that provided by local authorities, voluntary organisations or the private rented sector is needed.
2. Continuation of drug treatment programmes post-release is essential.
3. The introduction of needs assessments throughout the lifetime of an individual's sentence would greatly help in the identification of ex-offenders in need of support and the types of supports required.

## The External Environment

1. The needs of homeless ex-offenders are complex and cut across sectoral divides. The development and implementation of strategies to prevent homelessness among ex-prisoners should be developed in light of other strategies developed for the homeless population as a whole, e.g. Strategy on Youth Homelessness, Homeless Action Plans, Housing Strategies, Health Strategy, National Anti-Poverty Strategy etc.
2. Housing departments should designate prison liaison personnel to work with Probation and Welfare or Prison Service staff to carry out homeless assessments at least 6 weeks in advance of release.
3. Housing Associations offering both long-term and transitional housing must ensure that their letting/admissions policies do not discriminate unnecessarily against ex-offenders.

## Information Systems

1. An information system that collects information on socio-demographic and other indicators is needed that will help identify prisoners' needs and provide more comprehensive information on Ireland's prisoner population.
2. The development of appropriate information systems to collect information on accommodation and other needs of offenders in pre-release for planning and provision of services and supports purposes.
3. Inclusion of prisoners who are homeless in homeless statistics is essential so as to provide a clearer picture of both the homeless and prisoner populations for planning purposes.
4. There needs to be recognition by prison authorities that rough sleeping is not the only form of homelessness, but prison statistics relating to homeless inmates should include those men and women who have been or who on release will be staying in hostels, B&Bs and dossing with friends and/or family.

