

Bridge Matters

What do ex-prisoners need to stay
ex?

It's not always nice outside

- Prison can feel safe and secure compared to being on the street with no roof, no food, nowhere to go and seemingly no-one to listen and no way out. (Davis 2001, Parity, vol 14, pp 13-15)

What is the Bridge Foundation?

- A small community agency
- Developed following a visitors day at prison
- Do more inside than out
- What about doing something for them on the outside?

What do we do?

- Over the years we have done different things including:
 - The bags for release programme,
 - Meeting prisoners on release and transporting them home
 - Organising many visitor days in the prison
 - Advocating for ex-prisoners with agencies on release
 - Provided support workers for ex prisoners
 - Provided housing
 - Provided employment support
 - Provided educational support
 - Spoken to agencies as advocates
 - Spoken to politicians
 - And the list goes on.....

What do we do now?

- Advocacy
- Education
- Publication
- Bags for release

Bags for Release

- When prisoners become ex they are given the clothes they arrived in and a plastic garbage bag to carry their belongings in
- On public transport they are easily noticed
- The Bags programme provides a good quality second hand or a new bag for carrying possessions.
- This programme operates out of Fulham Correctional Centre near Sale
- Currently we give out in excess of 400 bags a year

Advocacy

- Talking to service clubs
- Talking to schools
- Talking to politicians
- Talking to anyone who will listen
- Presenting papers
- Writing papers
- Newsletter distribution

Education

- We provide financial support for prisoners in prison to obtain forklift licences, drivers licence, ID papers, anything related to education
- We have a fund for children of prisoners or ex prisoners in the local area for any educational expense eg camps, music lessons, uniforms

Publication

- Bridge Matters : newsletter
- Literary Competition : Sentences
- Book publications : Fighting the Demons,
This is Serious, Out of Sight Out of Mind

Issues facing prisoners on release

- Housing
- Employment
- Financial security
- Social support

So what happens?

Housing

- There is not enough public housing in Victoria for anybody, lest of all single men getting out of prison
- There are housing services & housing workers but it is a cruel system as people believe that this logically means that there is public housing.
- The housing officer visits the prison regularly. Prisoners eagerly await his/her visit, to get on the list...
- No one tells them the waiting list for public housing in most of Melbourne is ten years . Nowhere is it less than 2 or 3 for single men.

About housing

from Parity, vol. 14, no. 10, 2002

- Prisoners with no stable accommodation to go to on release are three times more likely to re-offend than those with accommodation (Baldry: 1994)
- Serving a prison sentence, in particular short sentences, increases the chances of being homeless or suffering severe reductions in accommodation standards and this in turn increases the risk of returning to prison (Baldry: 2001)

- Young men hit the streets, spend what little money they have on drugs or alcohol and find themselves a few days later seeking accommodation at one of the overnight hostels. They are then effectively homeless, and if they are not able to find suitable accommodation and support within a short time they will go back to prison (Baldry: 2001)

- A 1998 report on housing and support needs of women leaving prison in Victoria found that 80% of women interviewed said that appropriate housing was a major factor in preventing them from returning to prison. (Davis)

- The issues facing prisoners post release are neither simple nor uniform. On the one hand the matters that ultimately led to imprisonment may be unresolved and so still capable of influencing the life of the newly released prisoner, and on the other, the very fact of imprisonment may itself give rise to altogether new problems that need to be addressed. Factors such as mortality, drug use, accommodation, alienation, unemployment, financial resources, low self-esteem can all be cited by impacting upon people post release (Ogilvie)

So what happens? employment

- About 60% of men going to prison are unemployed at the time of imprisonment.
- Most men leaving prison are not going to jobs
- Working 40 hours in the factory for \$500 a week is not much of a comparison to a five minute \$500 drug deal.....

Mental health

- Prevalence of mental health problems for prisoners is 74% it is 22% in the general population (NSW)
- 82% of Victorian prisoners had, or had had, a mental illness in 1991.
- ‘prisons are the biggest mental hospitals in our country.’ (Heilpern: 1998)

So what happens?

Financial security

- You are single, over 21
- You have just left prison
- At Centrelink you may receive a crisis payment, \$178.75
- 1 week advance on Newstart \$178.75
- Total: \$357.50
- This has to last two weeks - \$25.83 per day to live, find housing, look for work, eat, clothe yourself, possibly pay about \$10 for methadone, transport to and from the parole office... the next payment you get two weeks later with the advance deducted is \$12.77 per day. (Boulton: 2001, Parity, vol 14)
- This is a few years ago but nothing has changed except everything has gotten more expensive....

So what happens?

Social support

- ‘it’s hard out here Deb’ an ex prisoner in his 40s who had spent the last eight years in prison and had been out a few weeks.
- I had friends on the inside, no-one wants to know me out here’
- ‘You just don’t understand. I’ve got nothing. No family, no friends, nowhere to live, no-one wants me, I haven’t even got any clothes except the black t shirt and shorts, of course I’ll be back.’ (a young prisoner planning for release)

So what happens?

- It is fairly obvious what happens.. They go back to prison. 'the moment arrives, the gate opens and you are free. But the reality is a let down. The world seems much larger, much faster, much louder, less intimate and completely chaotic. It is not the way that you pictured it at all. Optimism and elation turn to fear. Imagined events, plans and strategies suddenly dissolve. Perplexity and anxiety overwhelm certainty and confidence. Strangely you can long for the security and predictability of the prison you had longed to leave... A prisoner's view on release, Bridge Matters No 13, May 2004.

We don't have the answer but...

- We think there are some basic things that could be done to improve the situation. Providing support and housing is vital and this is both in short supply. Mental health services in the community do a great job with their clients in many ways and a similar model could be used for at risk prisoners on release. I will close with two case studies of people we worked with, one successful and one not so...

David

- 40 years old, chronically homeless, except when in prison, leaving prison with nowhere to live
- Got him into a transition flat in Sale
- Linked him with a local man who wanted some house painting done
- He did so well that he moved into houses while he painted them and then to the next one. He was able to get into a public housing flat
- He was doing brilliantly.....he still had a few vices, including a liking for alcohol...

- One Saturday afternoon he was drinking with his girlfriend but nothing was wrong . Someone called the police, they grappled him into the van, and drove off.
- 8 hours later he crawled home, battered and bleeding and called the ambulance
- He was so damaged the local hospital had to send him to another one...
- The surgeon said the injuries could only have been inflicted by another party

- The police said, when contacted by the girlfriend, that he was not injured when he came to the station, then they said he already had a broken leg when he was taken into custody. No charges were laid.
- He didn't want us to do anything when we discovered this. 'It's just another police bashing, I've had plenty'

- We went to the Ombudsman, who, to our horror, sends the issue to the internal police review.....
- We had an article in The Age
- Months later, long overdue, the Ombudsman sent a letter: the police had no case to answer, David must have been injured on the way home

And in the end....

- David disappeared. Months later he reappeared but he is very unstable, he cannot work, he hates all services, he is overly suspicious and has plans to blow up the police station

A better note to finish on

- Shane was also 40, most of the last 20 years in prison, no family support, also to be released to nowhere.
- We linked S with a local mental health support agency (S had chronic depression and PTSD)
- They helped him manage his money, Centrelink, get rental (through their private connections) & supported him to become a community member

And in the end...

- S has not gone back to prison, he lives in a small rural community, picks vegies, played football for the reserves, is a bit of an eccentric but is supported and doing okay
- But for SNAP he would never have escaped. What SNAP did was not all that amazing – it involved common sense, some funding, and support.

References

- The information for this paper comes from several years working in the prison, working with the Bridge Foundation, and continuing to work in private practice with prisoners on release. The quotes come from articles in *Parity*, vol 14, no 10, *Out of sight out of mind*, (2004) Bridge Foundation, Ginninderra Press, *Bridge Matters* newsletters from 2001 -2006, and Smith, Debra (2003) *Can a prison practice good public health?* Unpublished doctoral thesis, Flinders University

Thank you

- Thank you to everyone who has contributed and enhanced our work, and helped us learn better ways to do things. We are but a small voice in a big world but believe that every little bit helps.. Thank you for listening.

