

Homelessness

From arrest through to post release, offenders and their families are exposed to housing instability and are at risk of homelessness.

Arrest /Court

From the first contact with the justice system, there are several factors which present as housing risks to families of offenders; social isolation stemming from shame and stigma; forced re-location; and loss of income and increased financial hardship. This mother expresses the loss of dignity that she experienced as a family member of an offender:

I have found that families of prisoners are often treated and dealt with in the very same way as their incarcerated family member is; as though the family member somehow is a criminal as well.

From the time of arrest, many families experience the shame and stigma commonly associated with the criminal justice system which can further isolate them as they struggle with the judgement of the community or alternatively the burden of maintaining the family 'secret'. Affordable housing advocates argue that the definition of appropriate housing embodies inclusion in a community where there is a sense of safety and networks of support¹. The erosion of these networks and, therefore of housing stability can begin at arrest, which is often a highly visible and stigmatising process.

There are a number of factors which contribute to housing breakdown for family, including a compulsion to move house as a consequence of shame, incapacity to meet housing payments when someone is placed in custody and the need to be living in closer proximity to the relevant prison for visiting.

Finally, the more overt risks for families during

arrest, pertain to the loss of the primary income earner (if that person is remanded in custody), and additional costs associated with having a family member in prison. Families can feel uncertain about the length of time that they may need to survive without this income as the duration and outcome of the trial are unknown in many cases. Sole parent families, where the parent is incarcerated, are particularly vulnerable to experiencing financial hardship and housing breakdown.

There may be other additional costs associated with the justice system, including legal costs as well as pressure to provide bail for the defendant. Although many families may have had intergenerational contact with the justice system, there is increasingly a raft of families who might not have any experience with these issues, and this may affect their capacity and willingness to access 'welfare'. For families where there may be complex issues and long term involvement with the justice system, the issues and support needs can differ greatly.

Prison

Following arrest and trial, the period of incarceration is another critical transition point of housing vulnerability for offenders and families. **If the family is experiencing homelessness:**

- They may find it difficult to provide enough identification to visit at the prison;
- They may not be able to provide a contact phone number for the prisoner to call (only landlines are accepted);
- They may not be able to provide a mailing address for the prisoner to contact them;
- All of the above has the potential to lead to family disintegration and increased isolation for both the prisoner and the family on the outside.

Additionally, families will often bear the costs of imprisonment- a substantial financial burden. Added to this are the costs associated with visiting a prison.

The accumulation of multiple expenses presents a huge burden to families who are already struggling on a reduced income; this can contribute substantially to housing stress. However, many families wish to preserve family relationships throughout the period of incarceration and this has been shown to have positive effects for both offender management in prison, and the reintegration process for both families and offenders. Supporting families to bear the costs of imprisonment and manage other housing risks are important interventions in reducing the risk of both family and housing breakdown.

Post-Release

People are released from prison in a number of different circumstances. Many people exiting prison are released on parole (in the period to June 2007 approximately 1500 persons were released from prison on parole¹). To be paroled, prisoners must have an address upon release¹ and families often experience significant pressure to supply this address. This can increase the levels of stress on the family unit. If familial relationships and connections have been completely severed through incarceration, the family may refuse or be unable house them upon release. Consequently, the prisoner may have difficulty finding suitable, stable accommodation to satisfy parole. Conversely, the family may not want that person to return home, particularly where there have been instances of family violence or drug and alcohol abuse. They may, however accommodate that person, unwilling to see them go homeless. Finally, families might also be eager for the family member to return to the home. This can

nonetheless be a difficult and intense period as families and offenders recover from the period of separation, trauma and loss that the family unit has experienced. Both families and offenders need support during this critical transition.

Conclusion

There are significant economic and social costs not only to individual families but to the whole community in allowing the circumstances of vulnerable families to worsen. Engaging and supporting families of offenders can produce longer term community benefits. Identifying and responding to triggers for housing breakdown is one facet of this support.

Identification of the housing issues for offenders and their families and the provision of information, financial counselling and housing advocacy, can assist families and offenders to maintain and sustain their housing.

References

Nissim, R. (2004) *Little Piece of Heaven: Thoughts from Victorians on Housing as a Human Right*, VCOSS: Melbourne.

Adult Parole Board Annual Report 2006/07.

Adult Parole Board Annual Report 2006/07, p. 15.