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Accommodation, homelessness and reoffending of prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey

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This report summarises the accommodation backgrounds and needs of newly sentenced prisoners, and the links between these and reoffending on release. Data for this report come from Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) (a longitudinal cohort study of 1,435 adult prisoners sentenced to between one month and four years in prison in 2005 and 2006), the Police National Computer (PNC), and the 2003 general population survey – the Offending, Crime, and Justice Survey (OCJS).

Key points:

- Fifteen percent of prisoners in the sample reported being homeless before custody. Three and a half percent of the general population reported having ever been homeless.
- Over two in five prisoners (44%) reported being in their accommodation prior to custody for less than a year. Twenty-eight percent of the sample reported living in their accommodation for less than six months.
- Nearly two in five prisoners (37%) stated that they would need help finding a place to live when they were released. Of these, 84% reported needing a lot of help.
- Prisoners who had been sentenced to prison, probation or community orders before were more likely to report needing help finding accommodation when they were released from prison, than those who had not been sentenced before. They were also more likely to have been homeless before entering prison.
- Prisoners who reported needing help with a drug or alcohol problem were also more likely to report needing help finding a place to live when they leave prison, compared with those who did not report needing help with a drug or alcohol problem.
- Three-fifths (60%) of prisoners believed that having a place to live was important in stopping them from reoffending in the future.
- More than three-quarters of prisoners (79%) who reported being homeless before custody were reconvicted in the first year after release, compared with less than half (47%) of those who did not report being homeless before custody.

Background

Prisoners leave their accommodation when they enter custody, and they may not return on release. The relationship between accommodation needs and offending is complex (Grimshaw, 2002). Prisoners were more likely to be reconvicted after release if they had both accommodation and employment problems (May et al., 2009) when leaving prison. However, there is little research on the accommodation needs of prisoners *before* entering custody, and any associations between these needs and being reconvicted on release.

Aim

The aim of this report was to detail the accommodation backgrounds and needs of newly sentenced prisoners, and examine any links between these and being reconvicted on release. Another aim was to make comparisons with prisoners' pre-custody accommodation status and that of the general population, where possible.

Approach

The analysis was based mostly on Sample 1, Wave 1 of Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction¹ (SPCR) data. SPCR is a large, general purpose longitudinal cohort study of adult (i.e. age 18+) prisoners, consisting of interviews on reception to prison (Wave 1), prior to release (Wave 2) and post release (Waves 3 and 4). The prisoners were sentenced in 2005 and 2006 to between one month and four years, and served their sentences in England and Wales. Sample 1 is representative of prison receptions with these sentence lengths,² and was mostly used for this analysis as it provides a picture of the majority of prisoners entering prison.³ Prisoners were asked about previous contact with the *criminal* justice system; accommodation and relationships; physical and mental health; employment; qualifications; attitudes; and drug and alcohol use. Details of the sample methodology and

questionnaires are published in the technical reports.⁴

The survey consists of an overall sample of 3,849 prisoners, comprising a representative sample (Sample 1) of 1,435 prisoners sentenced from one month to four years, and a longer-term prisoner sample (Sample 2) of 2,414 prisoners sentenced to between 18 months and four years. Two samples were taken to allow for investigation of each of: the prison reception intake, which is mostly short-sentenced prisoners,⁵ and longer-sentenced prisoners.

Results in this report are mostly based on Sample 1,⁶ as it is largely representative of prison receptions.⁷ However, where comparisons are made by sentence length, Sample 1 and Sample 2 are combined. Because Sample 2 over-sampled women prisoners, adjustments were made to ensure women are not overrepresented.⁸ This resulted in a total combined weighted sample of 3,606 prisoners (unweighted = 3,849). Differences between key subgroups⁹ significant at p<0.01 are presented.

Survey participants were matched to the Police National Computer (PNC), allowing reconviction in the one and two years after release from custody to be investigated. Of the 1,435 prisoners in Sample 1, only 1,331 prisoners could be matched to the PNC, for the one-year reconviction analysis, and 1,330 prisoners for the two-year reconviction analysis.¹⁰ Analysis of the reconviction sub-samples showed that they were not significantly different from Sample 1 in terms of key variables.¹¹ Measuring true reoffending (the amount of crime committed after release from prison) is difficult, as only a proportion of crime is detected, sanctioned, and recorded. The PNC records reconviction (in court), and this paper only reports whether an offender was

⁴ Available at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis/moj>

⁵ Less than 10% of prison receptions were sentenced to greater than four years in prison in 2006: Offender Management Caseload Statistics Table 6.1, Available at: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/prisons-and-probation/omcs-annual.htm>

⁶ Sample 1 was not weighted and the base size is 1,435.

⁷ See Technical Reports for details

⁸ This was achieved by weighting the women in the sample to match the prison reception population.

⁹ Male/female; Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)/white; younger (18–20)/older (21+) prisoners; and short (less than 12 months) and longer-term (12 months to 4 years) prisoners.

¹⁰ The Police National Computer (PNC) is constantly updated, meaning that samples can change over time.

¹¹ Age, gender, sentence length, etc.

reconvicted or not (yes/no measure) for an offence committed in the one and two years after release from custody.¹²

Comparison with the general population is made using data from the 2003 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), which is a sample of 10,079¹³ participants, representative of the population in England and Wales.

Results

Prisoners were asked about their accommodation before custody (**Table 1**).

The most frequent answer (34%) given by prisoners was that they had been living in a flat or house that they or their partner rented. Reported home ownership rates amongst the prisoners were low – around 13%¹⁴ of the sample. Seventy-four percent of the general population reported home ownership in the Offending, Crime, and Justice Survey (OCJS).¹⁵ In 2008 this figure was reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2008) to be 71%.¹⁶ Twelve percent of the prisoner sample had been living rent free in accommodation rented or owned by someone else.¹⁷

Table 1: SPCR prisoners' living arrangements before custody

Living arrangements	Number	%
House/flat rented by prisoner or partner	491	34
Rent free in a house or flat rented or owned by someone else	176	12
House/flat owned by prisoner or partner	163	11
Paying board in a house or flat owned by someone else	162	11
Homeless/sleeping rough	125	9
Paying board in a house or flat rented by someone else	117	8
Homeless/temporary accommodation	96	7
With family member	49	3
House/flat part-owned, part-rented by prisoner or partner	34	2
Other	21	2
Total	1,434	100

One prisoner did not answer this question.

Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Fifteen¹⁸ percent of SPCR prisoners reported being homeless (i.e. in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough) before entering custody, including 9% who reported sleeping rough. The OCJS (2003) showed that around 4% of adult respondents had ever been homeless or in temporary accommodation, including 1% who had ever slept rough for more than one month.¹⁹

There were no significant differences between key demographic groups amongst the prisoners in terms of whether they reported being homeless. However, prisoners were more likely to have stated that they were homeless prior to custody if they were serving sentences of less than 12 months, compared to those on longer-term sentences (17% compared to 8%).

¹² Offence must have been committed in the 24 months after release from custody; conviction in court for this offence may have occurred up to 30 months after release.

¹³ Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS), core dataset, 2003. Data were obtained from the UK Data Archive, and weights applied following the Data Archive user guide. OCJS was conducted with 10–65-year-olds. Therefore, to make results more comparable with SPCR, 10–17-year-olds were excluded from this analysis, resulting in an unweighted base of 7,376.

¹⁴ 11% of prisoners (or their partner) owned their home and two percent part-owned. Does not add up to 13% due to rounding.

¹⁵ Note that the OCJS participants were older, on average, than SPCR participants (mean 37 years, compared with 30), and that OCJS participants were interviewed at home. These, and other factors mean that the results are not directly comparable.

¹⁶ General Lifestyle Survey, unweighted base: 20,503.

¹⁷ The responses to this question were recoded as several of the 'other' responses clearly fit into the standard question categories. Therefore the numbers will not exactly match the numbers stated elsewhere as some respondents were not asked the questions relating to their correct accommodation category due to being classified as 'other'. This affects 60 individuals across all categories.

¹⁸ Nine percent homeless/sleeping rough plus seven percent in homeless/temporary accommodation. Totals do not add to 15 percent due to rounding.

¹⁹ The OCJS survey reports a cumulative figure whilst SPCR reports a snapshot. This means the figures are not directly comparable.

Prisoners who had served a previous custodial sentence were more likely than those who had not, to state that they were homeless before their current sentence (19% compared to 6%), as were those who had previously served a community order or supervision by a probation officer (17% compared to 9%). Eleven percent of respondents who had served a previous custodial sentence were sleeping rough prior to custody, compared to 3% of those who had not been in prison before.

When asked how long they had been living in their accommodation prior to custody, among those who did not report being homeless, 44% stated that they had lived in their accommodation for less than a year, and 28% had lived there for less than six months.

Those who were living in rented accommodation were asked who they rented from. Forty-four percent rented from their Local Authority, 17% from a housing association and 36% from a private landlord. Two percent did not know.

Prisoners' accommodation needs

Thirty-seven percent of SPCR prisoners stated that they would need help finding a place to live when released. Of these, 84% reported needing a lot of help and 16% needed a little help.

Male and female prisoners did not respond significantly differently to this question. There were also no significant differences between white and BAME prisoners, or by sentence length. Young adults (aged under 21) were less likely to report requiring assistance when finding somewhere to live after prison, in comparison to older prisoners (23% compared to 39%).

Prisoners who reported being homeless before custody, with previous custodial and community sentences, and who reported needing help for drug/alcohol problems, (each problem investigated separately) were more likely to report needing help with accommodation on release from prison (**Table 2**).

Table 2: SPCR prisoners' self-reported background problems and reported need for help with accommodation on release

Reported background problem	Percent of sample affected	Percent reporting of needing help with accommodation on release
Homeless before custody	15	82
Not homeless before custody	85	29
Previous custodial sentence	72	43
No previous custodial sentence	28	22
Served community order/had supervision by probation officer before	80	40
Not served community order/no supervision by probation officer before	20	27
Need help for drug problem	31	58
No help needed for drug problem	69	28
Need help for an alcohol problem	15	47
No help needed for alcohol problem	85	36

Those who stated that they needed help with a drug problem or an alcohol problem were more likely to state that they had been homeless before their current sentence than those without these problems. The 2003 Resettlement Survey (Niven and Stewart, 2005) stated that drug users were less likely to have accommodation arranged for their release than prisoners who had not taken drugs. Twenty-nine percent of those who stated that they needed help with a drug problem said that they were homeless before custody, compared to 9% of those who did not require this help. Twenty-four percent of those who stated that they needed help with an alcohol problem said they were homeless before custody, compared to 14% who didn't report needing help with an alcohol problem.

Future accommodation plans

Respondents (who had not stated that they were in temporary accommodation ($n = 1,291$))²⁰ were asked whether they were expecting to return to the same accommodation when they were released. Sixty-six percent stated that they planned to return to their previous accommodation on release. Twenty-eight percent did not intend to return to their previous accommodation and 6% were undecided. There was no difference by sex, sentence length or ethnicity. However younger prisoners were more likely to expect to return to the same accommodation when compared to older prisoners (78% compared to 64%). Those who had been in prison previously were less likely to expect to return to the same accommodation (64% compared to 78%), as were those who stated that they needed help with a drug problem (56% compared to 70%).

The reasons given for not intending to return to previous accommodation varied, with 'other' reason given by 30% of the 361 prisoners who answered this question, followed by 14% responding to each of 'I want to live in a different property' and 'Family/friends disagreement/fallen out'. Ten percent of respondents answered that they had ended their tenancy since coming into prison and 'It was temporary accommodation'. Nine percent of respondents reported that they had been evicted.

Accommodation and reoffending

The majority (60%) of prisoners reported that having a place to live would help them to stop reoffending.

There were no significant differences in responses to this question between key subgroups. However, those who had been sentenced to imprisonment previously were more likely to state that this factor is important – 63% compared to 54% of those who had not been previously imprisoned. Prisoners who stated needing help with a drug problem were also more likely to state that having somewhere to live will be important in stopping them reoffending in the future (71% compared to 56%).

Prisoners who reported being homeless before custody were more likely to agree that having a place to live would be important in stopping them from reoffending (87% compared with 55%).

Prisoners who reported being homeless before custody were more likely to be reconvicted upon release than prisoners who did not report being homeless (79% compared with 47% in the first year, and 84% compared to 60% in the second year). Those who said they would need help finding somewhere to live when released were also more likely to be reconvicted than those who did not state that they needed this help (65% compared to 45% in the first year, and 74% compared to 58% in the second year).

Additionally, those who had been in their accommodation for less than a year were more likely to be reconvicted than those who had been in their accommodation for more than a year (52% compared to 43% in the first year, and 67% compared to 57% in the second year).

Implications

Many SPCR prisoners reported problems with accommodation prior to custody and accommodation needs on release. This report has demonstrated that these problems can be associated with reconviction – particularly as prisoners who stated that they would need help finding somewhere to live when released were more likely to be reconvicted, as were previously homeless prisoners.

Although accommodation cannot be looked at in isolation from other problems or needs – such as employment or family problems – targeted help with accommodation upon release, based on awareness of prisoners' circumstances pre-custody, may impact positively on reoffending rates.

²⁰ A number of respondents whose answers were subsequently recoded into 'in temporary accommodation' were asked this question, for the reason given in note 11.

References

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