

# **ACCOMMODATION ISSUES & CHALLENGES FOR EX-OFFENDERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown that offending is associated with homelessness and housing is considered as one of the critical factors that helps reduce re-offending (Gojkovic, Mills & Meek, 2012). Indeed, international research has consistently illustrated that appropriate housing is critical for ex-offenders' social reintegration and related to re-offending if suitable accommodation is not found on release (Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone & Peeters, 2006; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996). For example, it has been found that poverty, lack of social support, accommodation instability and chronic homelessness are associated with re-offending and the return to prison (Baldry et al., 2006).

This paper focuses on examining existing literature and research on the impact and implications of housing problems for ex-offenders and discusses how these issues affect and impede upon their reintegration and rehabilitation process. Considerations will also be given on how these issues could possibly be addressed from a multi-agency and multi-faceted approach. Implications of these findings in Singapore's context will also be discussed.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSING ISSUES FACED BY EX-OFFENDERS**

There is substantial research evidence that suggests there are a number of key factors contributing towards re-offending. Nine key factors identified include employment, housing, financial support and debt, family network, education, drug and alcohol misuse, attitudes and self-control, institutionalization and life-skills, as well as mental and physical health. It has also been found that having stable accommodation can reduce the risk of re-offending by one-fifth, whilst being employed can reduce the risk by between one-third to half (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Indeed, without a stable and safe place to stay, ex-offenders are unable to focus on change and improvement in their lives and securing their future, since their energy will be spent on the immediate need to survive on the streets (Moraff, 2014). Likewise, although employment, education, mental health issues and drug treatment have important roles to play in the ex-offender's reintegration, these factors can have little effect if stable housing is absent (Moraff, 2014).

In the United States, a team of researchers conducted a comprehensive assessment of a Washington State programme that focused on reducing recidivism by providing high-risk offenders with housing support for the duration of 12 months after their release from prison. Results from this study indicated that the programme helped to reduce new offences and readmission to prison for the participants. However, although housing the main goal of the programme, it also provided a range of other support services that assisted individuals in their reintegration back into society (Moraff, 2014). Besides being heavily subsidized to reside in apartments with other room-mates, participants of the programme were also engaged in treatment services, employment, as well as actively working towards self-sustainability. Hence, stable accommodation not only decreases violations of public order laws linked to living and working on the streets, but it also increases participants' exposure to pro-social

networks and provides them with a sense of well-being and safety that assists their receiving of treatment and other support services (Moraff, 2014).

Likewise, another successful housing programme in the United States for ex-offenders is provided by the Fortune Society that was formed in 1967 as a non-profit and advocacy agency to assist ex-offenders recently released from prison. The agency set up a residence called 'The Castle' at West Harlem that straddled between the line between transitional and permanent housing and it also provided support services that assisted ex-offenders to reintegrate into society. Almost all of those coming out of prison is eligible to stay at the residence and tenants reside for an average duration of 18 months until the agency assists them to obtain more permanent housing. Among those who stayed at the residence, only less than 1% return to prison according to the agency's report for the period of 2010-2011, although New York's recidivism rate is almost 40% (The Network, 2015).

## **CHALLENGES EX-OFFENDERS FACE IN OBTAINING SUITABLE HOUSING**

According to research, three factors have been found to be instrumental in affecting ex-offenders' success in obtaining and keeping suitable accommodation for themselves. These include their financial status, the availability of housing benefit and the quality of family relationships (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996). Challenges and problems that ex-offenders face in meeting their housing needs may involve limited financial resources that affect their access to mainstream accommodation and the reluctance of ex-offenders to stay in hostels due to the concern of being drawn back into re-offending through contact with other ex-offenders in those settings (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996). Literature also indicates that poor pre-release preparation and arrangement for offenders' accommodation needs also lead to inadequate and poor shelter provisions for them after their release (Baldry et al., 2006).

In addition, studies also suggest that ex-offenders with intellectual disability or mental illness and single women with children are especially vulnerable to not having adequate or suitable housing support after release. These issues all raise the importance of close coordination between various agencies to help these individuals with their housing needs, having a greater variety of housing types, as well as providing the appropriate and related post-release support services (Baldry et al., 2006).

Other barriers that research has identified for ex-offenders' access to effective housing advice and provision include difficulties in the coordination and partnership of multiple agencies involved such as whether they view housing for ex-offenders with urgency, limited availability of suitable housing, restrictions on types of offenders prioritized for housing, as well as exclusion policies of certain housing facilities (Gojkovic et al., 2012).

## **OVERSEAS GOOD PRACTICES FOR HOUSING PROVISIONS**

As the above review of available research on housing issues that ex-offenders face shows, the obstacles which ex-offenders meet in having their housing needs met are multi-faceted. The consequence of their housing needs not being adequately met is also great and impacts not just on the individual lives of the ex-offenders, but also translates to negative effects on public safety and rehabilitation costs involved as well (Social Exclusion Unit,

2002). Nevertheless, it is recognized that no one individual or agency is solely responsible for the rehabilitation process of the ex-offender at any one specific level, from the national policy level to the level of the individual, the offender himself. The accountability and responsibility for offender rehabilitation outcome essentially involves a multi-party, multi-agency and multi-pronged approach since offenders' lives are usually highly complex and complicated. This then requires a co-ordinated multi-agency approach starting from the in-care phase when the offender is still incarcerated and to be continued in support for the offender even long after his/her release from prison, in order to ensure sustained support during the transition phase and the resettling and reintegration process post-release (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

A number of considerations have been identified as critical in the planning for housing facilities and programmes to meet the housing needs of ex-offenders. Important considerations towards developing housing for ex-offenders include bearing in mind the segment of the population being served, stakeholders involved in every phase, the availability and source of funding, the type of housing being provided, as well as the implementation and management of the housing programme (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Community Capacity Development Office, 2004). Another critical factor to bear in mind whilst planning a housing programme is to decide whether it is a temporary, intermediate or long-term facility, or a combination of these. In particular, it will be important that the rate at which inmates are being released is borne in mind, such that existing housing facilities and programmes for ex-offenders are adequate to meet the housing needs of those in need of these services (U.S. Department of Justice et al., 2004).

Besides considering the factors aforementioned, it is also helpful to consider the stakeholders with whom to work with to develop the housing project or programme, such as the local service providers, the government agencies, bankers, as well as private and non-profit developers. If there are existing local housing programmes that can be expanded or abandoned housing that may be considered for rehabilitation, these may also translate to opportunities for developing suitable housing developments and programmes for the resettlement of ex-offenders in need of shelter upon release (U.S. Department of Justice et al., 2004).

It is also important to match the appropriate type of housing for ex-offenders with specific needs or background, since there is no 'one-size-fits-all' or 'one-type-fits-all' when it comes to addressing the ex-offender's housing needs in view of his/her unique social and criminal background and history. For example, specific after-care housing models for ex-offenders can be an effective one for ex-offenders who require community-based treatment. Research has shown that ex-offenders with substance use disorders who stayed at residential settings which emphasized on socialization and also abstinence from drugs and alcohol, following their release from the criminal justice system, were more likely to have increased employment and reduced drug and alcohol use compared to those who stayed with family or friends after their release (Jason, Olson & Harvey, 2015). This suggests that ex-offenders with substance misuse issues may benefit better from staying in supporting and structured residential settings to help them cope with their reintegration following their release from prison.

In addition, key factors identified by research that appear to constitute promising practice in helping ex-offenders with their housing needs include partnership working among various agencies to increase diversity in housing provision and capacity, early assessment and planning for ex-offenders' housing needs, provision of holistic and comprehensive support

for ex-offenders post-release from prison (Penfold, Day, Dixon, Webster, Jones & Thomas, 2009).

In relation to partnership working, this refers to the importance of strong partnership and links between criminal justice agencies and other agencies that work with and provide ex-offenders with housing and related services, including housing providers working on increasing the capacity and variety of housing for ex-offenders. This is critical considering the multiple and varied challenges that ex-offenders may face in accessing and obtaining appropriate housing following their release from prison. Indeed, research has indicated that ex-offenders face a myriad of procedural, financial and structural barriers to getting their housing needs met (Penfold et al., 2009).

It is also critical that early assessment and planning take place prior to the release of ex-offenders from prison, to ensure that they will have appropriate accommodation following their release. It is now acknowledged that the assessment of housing need should commence as early as possible, starting at the offender's entry into the prison and to be reviewed at various points (Penfold et al., 2009). However, challenges to this practice include local authority practices and the policies and practice of various agencies and their willingness to consider applications for housing assistance earlier than 28 days prior to the release of the offender. To work towards addressing these issues, effective housing advice and assistance should firstly be incorporated as part and parcel of the offender's programme whilst he/she is still in incarceration. In addition, local authorities and housing providers need to individually review their policies and practices in terms of the adequacy and effectiveness in meeting the needs of ex-offenders in their community and adjust accordingly (Penfold et al., 2009).

Additionally, it is also critical for ex-offenders to continue to receive appropriate support and related services in relation to their employment needs and financial issues, family issues, as well as addiction issues, since all these play an important role in influencing their housing problems and vice versa (Penfold et al., 2009).

The above mentioned housing issues faced by ex-offenders highlight the need for the problems to be addressed from a multi-pronged approach from various levels and involving different stakeholders and agencies. Besides involving a multi-agency approach discussed in the above, considerations and change also need to be taken into account at a national level. Firstly, a cross-government approach towards the rehabilitation and reduction of re-offending is critical. In the United Kingdom, such an approach is viewed as pertinent, whereby the government is to provide a national rehabilitation strategy that involves all relevant departments. The strategy will then involve tackling financial and housing needs that newly-released prisoners face. This also includes reviewing existing housing policies, social benefits, structural and procedural obstacles that pose challenges for ex-offenders in accessing and having their housing needs met after their release from prison (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). For example, certain national housing policies may not be in the favour of offenders as they may not meet the minimal requirements or eligibility for long-term housing in consideration of their employment or educational background. In such a context, the government need to consider strategies to prevent and tackle the problem of homelessness or unstable/ inappropriate accommodation arrangements for ex-offenders. This will involve the review of current housing needs of vulnerable offenders and planning for their future housing needs as well (Mills, Gojkovic, Meek & Mullins, 2013).

## **IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SINGAPORE**

There is no published or publicly available information or statistics on homelessness and/or housing needs of ex-offenders in Singapore. For the purpose of this paper, no local study or research could be found on the public domain either on accommodation issues specifically faced by ex-offenders in Singapore and how these issues may impact upon their re-offending and the recidivism rate. Nevertheless, there are various learning points and considerations that could be gleaned from the above literature review of existing overseas research on accommodation issues faced by ex-offenders.

Firstly, baseline research should be conducted to obtain statistics and information on the housing needs of ex-offenders in Singapore and how they are being addressed from the time they are incarcerated and even after they leave the prison system, in order to track and find out whether and how housing needs affect re-offending and recidivism in Singapore.

Considerations need to be also given on how the local existing system that assists ex-offenders on their accommodation needs could be reviewed on its effectiveness and adequacy on meeting the housing needs of ex-offenders. It will be pertinent then to find out the housing arrangements of ex-offenders after their release, be it with their family and/or friends, half-way houses, and/or other temporary shelters and how these temporary and long-term housing arrangements influence their reintegration process.

In relation to the provision of temporary housing arrangement through shelters, an important consideration in its planning and development would be to take into account the possibility of psychological effects of institutionalization. It would be important to minimize the possibility of such effects and to prepare ex-offenders for a smoother transition from an institutionalized setting for re-entry into community living. This is in view that there are known psychological effects of institutionalization through incarceration. In this regard, it would be of interest to study if temporary housing arrangements through shelters may similarly affect their residents in a similar manner. At the same time, it would be vital to incorporate measures to ensure that there are minimal 'contamination' issues when ex-offenders stay in shelters or temporary housing that specifically cater for a specialized group, such as drug offenders. A study on whether there are any 'contamination' issues and the impact on the residents would also be useful in evaluating if such shelters are effective in helping the residents in their reintegration process.

In addition, it will be important to examine if and how at the national level housing policies may affect ex-offenders' access to obtaining long-term housing arrangements for themselves and/or their families, since the meeting of housing needs have been identified by research to be critical in reducing re-offending.

Last but not least, in view that local statistics show that repeat offenders are on the rise and many of them are drug offenders, it will be important to review how their housing needs have been met over the years that they have been in and out of the prison system. In addition, it is also critical to examine how this relates to their socio-economic background and criminal profile, as their access to social capital and resources may be limited and this could further impede upon their housing needs being adequately met and further place them at risk of re-offending. This group of vulnerable ex-offenders may need specific housing arrangements and related supportive services and/or treatment that could help them better.

## **CONCLUSION**

As this paper has highlighted, stable housing is critical and instrumental towards reducing the risk of re-offending. However, it cannot take place in isolation from other measures and initiatives to assist the ex-offender in his/her reintegration and resettling back into society (Mills et al., 2013). Indeed, although structural factors such as employment and housing can help the ex-offender in that it removes the economic need and unstable environment that heightens the risk to commit crime, desistance from offending is nevertheless a continual and active process whereby the ex-offender has to be motivated himself/herself not to re-offend (Mills et al., 2013).

As such, as much as looking into the adequacy, quality and type of suitable housing arrangements for ex-offenders are important for their reintegration; the providence of other related services to ensure their other needs are met holistically cannot be neglected. For example, initiatives such as mentoring schemes and support professionals to help the ex-offender in his/her reintegration after release are also essential and need to be planned in tandem with plans and programmes to meet the housing needs of ex-offenders (Mills et al., 2013).

## **REFERENCES**

- Baldry, E., McDonnell, D., Maplestone, P., & Peeters, M. (2006). Ex-Prisoners, homelessness and the State in Australia. *The Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*. 39 (1), 20-33.
- Gojkovic, D., Mills, A. & Meek, R. (2012). *Accommodation for ex-offenders: Third sector housing advice and provision*. Retrieved from [http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/337980/1/WP77\\_Accommodation\\_for\\_ex-offenders\\_-\\_Gojkovic,\\_Mills\\_and\\_Meek,\\_March\\_2012\[1\].pdf](http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/337980/1/WP77_Accommodation_for_ex-offenders_-_Gojkovic,_Mills_and_Meek,_March_2012[1].pdf)
- Jason, L.A., Olson, B.D. & Harvey, R. (2015). Evaluating Alternative Aftercare Models for Ex-Offenders. *Journal of Drug Issues*. 45 (1), 53-68.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (1996). *The housing needs of ex-prisoners*. Retrieved from <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/h178.pdf>
- Mills, A., Gojkovic, D., Meek, R. & Mullins, D. (2013). Housing ex-prisoners: the role of the third sector. *Safer Communities*, 12(1), 38-49.
- Moraff, C. (2014). *“Housing First” Helps Keep Ex-Inmates Off the Streets (and Out of Prison)*. Retrieved from <http://nextcity.org/daily/entry/housing-first-former-prisoners-homelessness>
- Penfold, C., Day, N., Dixon, J., Webster, S., Jones, A. & Thomas, S. (2009). *Homelessness prevention and meeting housing need for (ex)offenders: A guide to practice*. Retrieved from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/7849/1357348.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7849/1357348.pdf)
- Social Exclusion Unit. (2002). *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*. Retrieved from [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/assets/publications\\_1997\\_to\\_2006/reducing\\_summary.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/publications_1997_to_2006/reducing_summary.pdf)
- The Network. (2015). *Fortune Society: Helping the formerly incarcerated forge a new path*. Retrieved from <http://shnny.org/learn-more/member-profiles/fortune-society/>
- U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Community Capacity Development Office. (2004). *Guide for Developing Housing for Ex-Offenders*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/203374.pdf>