

Finding Home

Policy Options for Addressing
Homelessness in Canada

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 E-book

Chapter 7.3

Homelessness, Incarceration, and the Challenge of Effective Discharge Planning: A Canadian Case

STEPHEN GAETZ AND BILL O'GRADY

Canada has the fifth-greatest incarceration rate in the world (Griffiths, 2007).¹ Over the past several decades, we have seen calls for reforms to the criminal justice system that emphasize harsher prison sentences. This has included calls to reform the *Young Offenders Act* (now the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*), to place greater restrictions on bail, to eliminate house arrest (conditional sentences), and impose minimum sentence prison terms. The federal government has announced that it has plans to build more prisons in Canada. Critics of “law-and-order” approaches to crime contend that such measures can increase the prison population, both by incarcerating more people, and also by lengthening the amount of time inmates remain in prison.

While a “get tough on crime” approach may put more people in jail, the vast majority of individuals who wind up in jail will eventually be released into the community. Whether one sees the goal of prison to be

¹ Yet Canada’s incarceration rate in 2003-2004 was at its lowest since 1981-1982 (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, December 16, 2005).

punishment or rehabilitation, from a public safety perspective, all agree that it is desirable that those who are released from prison successfully integrate into communities, and that they not reoffend.

Since almost all prisoners – whether sentenced or in remand² – will one day be released, how we prepare prisoners for release has important implications for communities across the country. Inadequate transitional supports may increase the risk of recidivism for inmates, undermining a key goal of corrections, and jeopardizing not only the health and safety of inmates, but of all Canadians as well. This is where the relationship between incarceration, prisoner re-entry must be considered.

While the nature of homelessness may differ in many regions, it is becoming apparent that across Canada, many inmates discharged from prison are winding up homeless, and conversely, that many homeless people end up in prison (Novac et al., 2006; Vitelli, 1993). Without access to housing and employment, without support for problems such as addictions and mental health, inmates released from prison are at risk of becoming homeless. At the same time, people who become homeless are at increased risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. This “revolving door” syndrome is fuelled as local jurisdictions continue to adopt and enforce policies and ordinances such as the *Safe Streets Act* in Ontario (2000) and Vancouver (2004) that criminalize activities such as sleeping and panhandling in public spaces. Once into the criminal justice system, incarcerated or detained, many people leave jails and prisons without a destination, and bereft of the resources necessary to secure housing or social supports.

If a goal of corrections in Canada is to make Canadians safer through reducing recidivism, then we need a deeper understanding of the relationship between incarceration, prisoner re-entry, and homelessness. While a considerable body of research exists on the nature and extent of homelessness, specific research on the relationship between homelessness and incarceration in Canada is limited.

² Remand refers to accused people who are placed into custody while awaiting a further court appearance.

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The study

We conducted research in 2005–06 in Ontario and British Columbia, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Our investigation was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the nature of discharge planning in provincial correctional facilities (in Ontario)? What are the policies that frame discharge planning practice? How do provincial employees within the corrections system manage discharge planning?
- What are the key similarities and differences between the prison population and the homeless in Canada? Are the backgrounds of homeless and domiciled prisoners and releasees similar? To what degree do releasees – whether housed, underhoused or homeless – share risks associated with housing, employment, health, mental health and substance use?
- How do inmates and releasees experience discharges? Is discharge planning seen to have an impact on the lives of releasees? How do releasees envision a more effective discharge planning process?

Data and Methods

We collected information from male informants who are or have spent time in provincial corrections facilities in Ontario or British Columbia, including inmates and releasees. All interviewees had some experience with discharge planning (or the lack of it) in provincial facilities. In addition, we interviewed personnel involved in the discharge planning process in both British Columbia and Ontario.

Inmates refers to persons currently in provincial corrections facilities who have been convicted of a crime, and who are awaiting release. One provincial institution in western British Columbia, and one provincial institution located in central Ontario were selected for the study.

Releasees refers to persons who are no longer in prison, but who were recently held in provincial corrections facilities either as convicted offenders or while on remand. The population of releasees interviewed includes:

- Housed releasees – individuals who have stable, permanent housing.

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- Underhoused releasees – individuals with a precarious housing situation, temporarily staying with friends or relatives and paying rent, or in treatment at the time of the interview.
- Homeless releasees – individuals without stable or permanent housing who are sleeping outdoors or in temporary shelters.

Planners refers to persons who are responsible for “discharge planning” in provincial corrections facilities, either as corrections employees or as volunteers. Fourteen planners were interviewed for the study.

In exploring the experiences of discharge planning from the perspectives of inmates and releasees (both domiciled and homeless), we found a lack of congruence between policy and practice, and between the perceptions of discharge planning by those who provide it, and those who receive it.

Correctional programs for provincial inmates

In Canada, provincial governments are responsible for persons convicted of crimes and sentenced to less than two years, as well as the care and incarceration of people awaiting trial (on remand). Programs and services available for convicted prisoners are not the same as those for people on remand. We interviewed those responsible for discharge planning in both provinces, but the focus of analysis here will be on the policies and practices of correctional programs and discharge planning in Ontario.

The policy directives of the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services (Commissioner’s Directive 726) include the mandate: “to ensure that correctional programs meet the identified needs of offenders and promote successful reintegration.” This includes “in-prison” supports as well as discharge planning. Prisoners who are convicted of a crime are provided with a “correctional plan” that identifies needs and makes suggestions regarding programming. Psychological assessments are mandatory only for prisoners convicted of violent crimes and high-risk sex offenders, but not those deemed to have other mental health problems. Prisoners with identified substance use problems are referred to counselling.

Correctional programs provided within prisons include work/skills training, education, counselling, and programs for substance use, vio-

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lence, and sex offenders. Participation is voluntary and requires informed consent, but prisoners are encouraged to take part in such programs and early release may be tied to such participation. For sex offenders, post-treatment assessments are done to determine the effectiveness of treatment and to assess risk.

The Province of Ontario has procedures for releasing prisoners. All prisoners convicted of a crime receive information on the conditions of their discharge, a “certificate of release,” and identification. They are issued any savings they may have accrued while in prison, and released with a minimum of \$50 in hand. They are released into the community in which they were arrested in or to their last place of residence, and if necessary, police inform specific community services of the impending release. Those who receive conditional releases (parole, work release) may receive additional community supports. The Ontario Government has no mandate or responsibility to provide programming and services in the community once a prisoner has completed a sentence, nor for those who were on remand but who have been released.

Discharge Planning for Provincial Inmates

While discharge planning is not officially mandated for all prisoners in Ontario (it is available only for those convicted of a crime), the Ministry of Community Safety and Corrections apparently intends that prisoners should receive some form of support and planning by corrections staff prior to discharge. However, because different institutions are responsible for the development of program plans and delivery, the nature of discharge planning varies from institution to institution.³

Discharge planning is provided for inmates in Provincial Corrections Facilities by corrections staff and by community-based groups such as the John Howard Society and Ontario Multi-Faith Council on Spiritual

³ While the provincial government has been criticized for a lack of a standard policy throughout the province, best practices guidelines for discharge planning, including areas that focus on offenders with special needs, have been developed (Ministry of Community Safety and Corrections, 2006). For this project, we were not able to evaluate the implementation of this new policy direction.

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and Religious Care. The community-based groups provide both in-prison counselling regarding discharge, as well as some transitional supports in the community.

Changes in criminal justice policy relating to corrections in Ontario that have occurred since the mid-1990s have had an impact on discharge planning in provincial prisons and supports for prisoner re-entry. Many of these changes were the result of reforms by the Conservative government to reduce costs and move towards “no-frills” prisons. The result has been that fewer inmates in Ontario have access to discharge planning and transitional supports. Some of these changes include:

- *Reduced program support for discharge planning.* “Funding for many community-based programs and services for offenders have been eliminated or reduced. These include programs geared to: employment, family counselling, men who are abusive, community youth support, diversion and discharge planning for those being released” (John Howard Society, 2000:1). It is not clear how many of these programs have been replaced or enhanced since 2000. Reduced funding means that non-governmental organizations have less capacity to enter prisons and engage in thorough discharge planning with high-risk prisoners, and that there are fewer resources in the community to which discharge planners can refer releasees. Cutbacks for parole and probation officers means higher case loads which compromises their ability to offer effective supports (Government of Canada, National Homelessness Initiative, 2005).
- *Reduction in parole and conditional release programs.* Since the mid - 1990s, the use of conditional release programs for provincial inmates has declined dramatically. For instance, in 1993-94, the average count of convicts on provincial parole in Ontario was around 1,800, and in 2004-05, this number dropped to fewer than 200.
- *Elimination of halfway houses.* The Ontario government has eliminated halfway house and transitional housing programs for provincial prisoners. According to the John Howard Society of Ontario, this change limits released inmates’ opportunities to “maintain community and family responsibilities, such as employment, school, or child care” (John Howard Society, 2000: 1). Instead, the government expanded electronic monitoring. While “house arrest” gives restricted

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offenders some access to the community, electronic surveillance does not normally involve programs and services designed to reduce offending, which were a major component of the halfway house system. In addition, people who are homeless are clearly not eligible for house arrest.

- *Increase in remand population.* Persons on remand are held in custody awaiting trial, and are therefore presumed innocent. Since the early 1990s, fewer persons charged with offences have been granted bail, leading to a steady increase in the size of the remand population; at the same time, the number of persons convicted of offences has declined. In addition to the increase in the percentage of persons held in Provincial Corrections Facilities being held on remand (at present, they make up 60 percent of the prison population in Ontario) the average length of time on remand has increased from 22 days to 34. Those on remand for even a short period of time whether convicted of a crime or not, experience disruptions to their day-to-day lives, including the potential loss of housing and employment. People who are homeless are more likely to be held on remand, as bail conditions often require a home and employment. In the 1990s, Ontario's Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services deemed that persons being held on remand are not eligible for programs available to sentenced prisoners, including discharge planning supports. However, in some prisons, inmates on remand have access to supports.

Staff Perspectives on Discharge Planning in Ontario Provincial Corrections Facilities

We interviewed five discharge planners in Ontario provincial facilities, all of whom were provincial employees, including four social workers and counsellors responsible for substance use and sex offenders, as well as a "transition coordinator." Because different facilities organize their correctional programs (including discharge planning) in different ways, we recommend caution in generalizing from these findings.

As a group, they spend between 15 minutes and an hour with each releasee. The intensity and depth of the discharge planning varies from planner to planner, based on their job description and the resources to

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which they have access. This means that there is no consistent approach to discharge planning, and different inmates receive different levels of support. The transition coordinator, presumably because of her job description, does the most intensive work with releasees.

Discharge planning may involve the identification of needs, sharing of information, establishing community linkages where needed, ensuring accommodation support and providing other supports within the community to assist in the transition. However, given large caseloads and the lack of resources in prisons and in the community, the bulk of discharge planning involves merely the sharing of information, rather than more intensive planning involving contact with and establishment of appropriate and necessary supports in the community. Planners may try to make referrals to major institutions in the community, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Works, or the reintegration programs of the Multifaith Council and John Howard Society. The areas covered in discharge planning may include employment, mental health and substance use issues, family contacts, and accommodation.

Employment supports arranged by discharge planners vary considerably, ranging from nothing at all to providing the person job ads from the Internet. Arrangements with Ontario Works are sometimes set up prior to release. Some planners strive to provide more intensive support:

Yes, I will make telephone calls to employers for them or allow them to make telephone calls to employers. I'll counsel them about the appropriateness of employment, i.e., if a guy has a substance abuse problem and wants to go back to an environment that might trigger him. (Social Worker 4, Ontario Provincial Facility)

In other cases, participation in in-prison programming may help.

(Our facility) has a bricklaying pre-apprenticeship program. ... If they complete this program, inmates leave with a job, hard hat, work boots, housing secured, and Ontario Works. They are then monitored by Education Department while out for next 8 weeks to ensure they are coping. (Social Worker 5, Ontario Provincial Facility)

Convicted sex offenders or prisoners who have been identified previously as requiring support for substance use problems or anger man-

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agement may receive additional discharge planning support from the counsellors they have been working with while incarcerated, in order to establish supports in the community.

With sex offenders, we notify them [inmates] of the sex offender registry, review conditions, and remind inmates of them. (Social Worker 2, Ontario Provincial Facility)

Although inmates may get some support for substance use while in prison (one prison had three substance abuse counsellors), referrals to the community (which seem to focus only on treatment rather than harm reduction) are often difficult to arrange, given not only the lack of staff resources within prisons, but also the challenges of finding and obtaining timely and appropriate sources within the community.

More staff are required ... at my institution we are doing what we can, but resources are limited. Linkages to counselling prior to release are non-existent. Bed availability and timing to get inmates into treatment is not effective. (Social Worker 4, Ontario Provincial Facility)

Help in contacting family is available if the inmate requests it. However, in some cases this can lead to problems with accommodation, if spouses, partners, or family members do not wish the inmate to move back with them.

The range of supports for obtaining post-release accommodations is limited. While one planner attempted to assist all her clients in obtaining housing, she was unusual. Several of the planners simply provided releasees with a list of shelters and hostels in the area they were to be discharged to. If prisoners do not have pre-arranged accommodation or an expectation of finding housing through family or friends, the main discharge planning strategy seems to be to direct releasees to the shelter system for homeless people. In spite of the importance of accommodation as a transitional support, several staff indicated they do not have the resources to do an adequate job in this area.

For me, it's a time thing and I have never been directed to do that kind of work. I don't think here it has been deemed a priority. (Social Worker 2, Ontario Provincial Facility)

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Yet all the planners we spoke with see the value of discharge planning and transitional supports, and believe that if done effectively, can have a positive effect on recidivism.

If an effective plan is not set up that gives the inmate an opportunity to use that for an excuse to offend again. Inmates are overwhelmed with adjustment to community. They need an effective discharge plan. (Social Worker 5, Ontario Provincial Facility)

At the same time, the planners recognize that under the current conditions, it is extremely difficult to meet the needs of releasees.

More staff are required. At my institution we are doing what we can, but resources are limited. Linkages to counselling prior to release are non-existent. Bed availability and timing to get inmates into treatment is not effective. (Social Worker 4, Ontario Provincial Facility)

From the remand side of it, we technically do not have a discharge process. This is very frustrating. For the guys, they can't get their property, court may have not even been in the town they come from, they are stuck with no property, no money, no transportation. (Social Worker 1, Ontario Provincial Facility)

Inmates, Releasees and the Discharge Planning Process

How do inmates experience the discharge planning process? To address this question, we interviewed 38 inmates and asked about their custodial discharge experiences. All told, 35 percent of the inmates reported that they had met with a staff person in the institution who discussed a discharge plan with them. Inmates in this sample were all entitled to discharge planning, since all were serving time under sentence, not under remand. Moreover, most were approaching the date of their release.

There were few differences in the percentage of British Columbia and Ontario inmates who reported receiving discharge planning from institutional staff—about one-third in each sample. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that inmate drug use may be associated with receiving some kind of discharge planning in both provinces. In British Columbia, 83 percent of those inmates who had been in contact with a discharge planner also reported having been heroin users before their incarceration. While there were relatively few heroin users in the Ontario

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sample, 67 percent of those who received discharge planning had used cocaine or crack before being incarcerated. On the other hand, inmates who had not reported being drug users in the past were less likely to have a discharge plan. It appears that institutional drug counsellors are involved to some extent in the discharge planning process.

There were significant ethno-racial differences in the reported experience of the discharge planning process as well. Aboriginal inmates received less contact with discharge planners than non-Aboriginals. While 11 of the 27 non-Aboriginal inmates indicated to our interviewers that they had contact with a staff person to discuss a discharge plan, only 1 of 7 Aboriginal inmates reported this type of pre-release contact. These differences, however, can be partly accounted for by the fact that fewer Aboriginal people in either the Ontario or B.C. samples were cocaine or heroin users, compared to the non-Aboriginal population. All Aboriginal inmates reported being heavy drinkers prior to their incarceration, but most did not receive any assistance with their release. Inmates with drug problems seem to attract more attention from authorities than men with drinking problems.

Age, sentence length, and number of past convictions appeared to be unrelated to whether or not an inmate received a discharge plan, although the sample is too small to make generalizations. But the connection between illegal drug use and discharge planning should be a focus of further research.

We interviewed only inmates who were serving court-imposed sentences. But relatively few inmates in Ontario and British Columbia provincial correctional institutions receive systematic release planning, because so many inmates are in prison on remand. Also, inmates who have been serving time on remand and then are given short additional sentences by the courts may also miss out on a formal discharge plan due to problems of timing and organization. As one inmate told us:

I don't see a lot of remand inmates who have some sort of access to health and abuse programs, even though they are not sentenced. A lot of people come here and do remand, and get their time served. In my situation, I got a 90-day sentence, since my remand time, I only have 2 weeks left. It's a disadvantage. It takes longer time to set up discharge plans, but it's not the inmates' fault. (B.C. inmate)

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Inmates who received some discharge assistance reported a number of areas that were addressed. In Ontario, assistance with finding housing was an area where inmates reported the most attention. In B.C., consideration was most likely to be directed at substance abuse issues and supports upon release. Employment, family reunification, mental health, and physical health counselling were also considered in the discharge process, according to our interviewees.

Releasees and the Discharge Planning Process

We also explored the experience of discharge planning from the perspectives of those who are now released from prison. This included those who are housed, those who are underhoused, and those who are homeless. All interviewees had been incarcerated in provincial facilities in the previous six months.

We asked currently housed recent releasees from Ontario and British Columbia if anybody in the institution from where they were last released had been responsible for their discharge planning. Less than half (40 percent) in both provinces reported that they had seen a staff discharge planner before the completion of their sentence. Of the underhoused releasees, 45 percent had received discharge planning (the higher percentage of underhoused receiving discharge planning may reflect the fact that several are in treatment).

Among the 52 homeless releasees living in shelters or on the streets who had recently been incarcerated in an Ontario or British Columbia correctional facility, only 15 (29 percent) reported that they had met with a correctional staff person who had talked to them about a release plan.

Releasees who did receive discharge planning – whether housed, underhoused, or homeless – were asked to state how useful the planning had been in terms of employment, housing, family reunification, health, and dealing with substance abuse. Some found discharge planning to be quite helpful:

The John Howard Society [representative] helped with getting access to my vehicle and my personal property that had been seized by police. She made arrangements with a friend of mine and contacted three detachments of the RCMP and acted as a liaison and arranged from my friend to be able to go down and pick everything up. I didn't know about JH be-

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fore, so it opened the door for getting help for things that were sort of beyond my control at that time. (British Columbia releasee – currently housed)

For releasees who received planning, the area that was typically found to be most the effective was that of substance abuse.

The only discharge planning that I had which had success was at the Don Jail ... pretty good, too, because a lady came to see you a week before you get out. And had everything for you before you got released, like welfare, you gotta pick your cheque for your housing, and you go to get your money, and get your money for the housing for the next week or two... a social worker came in ... also someone from the John Howard. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

However, most releasees – whether housed, homeless or underhoused – had not received a discharge plan prior to release.

No discharge planning – that's it, you're free to go, gave me a token and told me to go. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

No [discharge plan]. I've been to jail when I was younger, 15-16 times – never once has anyone ever asked me where I lived. This is how I ended up on the streets several times. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Regardless of government policy for discharge planning for provincial inmates, and regardless of existing resources within correctional facilities and provided by non-profit groups, the vast majority of releasees in this study either did not receive discharge planning, or did not experience whatever help they did receive as a transitional support.

Challenges of Post-Prison Release

Many releasees face challenges in making the transition from prison to the community, and people with a history of homelessness are particularly vulnerable. We collected data on the experiences of housed, underhoused and homeless releasees in the areas of housing, income, health (including mental health and addictions), and relationships.

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Housing

Never in my life have I ever been in a prison in Toronto where someone has offered to assist me in finding things like housing before I get out of jail. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Obtaining adequate housing is a challenge for many releasees, and the inability to do so is a defining feature of homelessness. Individuals who are poor, who have a previous record of homelessness, and who have weak (or nonexistent) attachments to family and friends are particularly at risk. We selected individuals for whom obtaining and maintaining housing is a challenge: 45 percent of our sample of releasees were homeless at the time of the interview, 20 percent were underhoused, and 34 percent were housed.

The category we have defined as underhoused is important. These are people who currently have shelter (staying with friends or family, temporarily in treatment, or in rental accommodations they are having difficulty maintaining), but for whom their tenancy is very uncertain.

When I was released in November 2005, I stayed with family members in London for a few months. I then came to Barrie in January and stayed with a friend – no rent – for one week, and another friend's for a few days. We went to a shelter for about 3 weeks and I'm now staying at a friend's house again. (Ontario releasee – currently underhoused)

Of those defined as housed or underhoused, 80 percent reported being homeless at some time in the previous six months or since being released from prison; 43 percent reported that since being released from jail they had found it difficult finding a place to stay at least one a week, and 34 percent said that it was a problem they faced every day. Of those who were currently housed, 65 percent had stayed in a shelter on at least one occasion during the last six months. Few releasees overall, then, reported a high degree of stable housing since being released.

One consequence of being released from prison with inadequate housing supports and minimal income is that people often wind up having to live in unsafe neighbourhoods, where they are at risk of being victimized or being drawn into criminal situations. In our survey, most homeless releasees (71 percent) described their neighbourhoods in unfa-

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vourable terms, compared with those who are underhoused (29 percent) and those who were housed (22 percent).

No matter what the weather is like, there's always some kind of commotion outside. So it's a nonstop, crazy-paced, stab-you-for-2-cents-in-your-pocket kind of neighbourhood... (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Many releasees argued that when releasing inmates, consideration should be given to where they are released. Releasing an inmate into the community and placing him in a "bad" environment was considered inappropriate.

They should give people a choice, like if you want to go into a place where there's not a lot of drugs around... I don't want to go into a house where people are smoking crack and drinking Listerine and doing all kinds of crazy behaviour. That doesn't do anything good for you. It brings you down even more. (Ontario releasee – currently housed)

Access to housing was viewed as a fundamental first step for successful prisoner reintegration.

Housing planning should be mandatory. If they keep wondering why people re-offend, they shouldn't be allowed to release anybody who has no address to go to. ... Every person in jail [should have] a case worker and they should be on getting somewhere to live, even if its just a halfway house. The crime rate would drop significantly, just from re-offenders. (British Columbia releasee – currently underhoused)

Finally, releasees were aware of the importance of arranging accommodation before release from remand. That is, the process of being release in such situations often means a direct discharge from the courthouse, without giving the inmate the opportunity to recover belongings or the necessary resources to make arrangements for transition into the community:

Having somewhere to go instead of being released onto the street is important. People that get released from jail don't really have nothing, and they have no place to go. And they're right back into the crime. I know when I got released before, I got released from the courthouse, and, you're kind of out there, and you do whatever to survive, right? (British Columbia releasee – currently housed)

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Income: Jobs, benefits, and making money

The releasees we spoke to are underemployed, regardless of their current housing situation, with only 27 percent currently having a job, and 57 percent reporting any kind of employment since being released. Only two-thirds of the sample who had jobs reported full-time employment. The unemployment rate for the releasees (73 percent) can be compared to the national unemployment rate which for the past six years has hovered around 7 percent.

Those who were housed were much more likely to be employed (40 percent) than those who were homeless (22 percent) or underhoused (17 percent). Those who have some kind of shelter are also more likely to access government benefits such as welfare and disability support than are releasees who are homeless. For inmates at risk of becoming homelessness, helping to facilitate obtaining necessary government benefits should be seen as a priority transitional support.

Releasees are well aware of the challenges of generating income once released. They spoke of the importance of correctional programs relating to employment, and of the necessary role that income plays in a successful transition to the community. Several said how the lack of in-prison supports and discharge planning reduces their ability to generate income and avoid crime.

A lot of people end up going back to the institution 10 days after they are released, because they got no choice but to do crime to get money in their pocket to survive. Takes three weeks to get an appointment with social services alone, and they won't even accept you, you can't book an appointment when you're in jail, you know. (British Columbia Releasee – currently underhoused)

Given the high rate of unemployment and the fact that only one-fifth of the sample is receiving government benefits of any kind, it should not be surprising that a percentage of releasees – whether housed or homeless – engage in non-conventional ways of making money, ranging from quasi-legal (mostly panhandling or squeegeeing) to criminal activities. (In the interviews, 83 percent of the inmates and those interviewed in the community reported that on at least one occasion they had broken the law in order to survive.) These strategies are also used by

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some releasees who have housing, suggesting the degree of financial stress they also experience.

Finally, releasees spoke of the importance of also providing material supports at the time an inmate is discharged. Many felt that discharging inmates without proper funds, transportation, or proper clothing put them in a difficult situation:

[When I was released] some money would have been nice. Some \$200–300, because I was released on a Saturday on a long weekend, the bus ticket was all paid for ... but [nothing] to buy personal things, deodorant, toothbrush, all that... basic things. (Ontario releasee – currently underhoused)

One of my friends was in the clothes he came in with. And he was released in the winter, and went in the summer... (Ontario releasee – currently housed)

Health, Mental Health and Addictions

The homeless population is characterized by poor health, which is both a cause of and a product of being homeless. When asked to evaluate their health compared to other people their age, 37 percent of homeless releasees rated their health status as “poor to fair,” which was worse than either those who were underhoused (25 percent) and those who were housed (22 percent) releasees. Moreover, over half of all releasees (51 percent) report not getting enough food at least once a week.

Overall, one-third of all releasees identified themselves as having a disability, with domiciled releasees being the least likely to report this. Many inmates may be eligible for disability benefits and unable to work. But only 20 percent of releasees we interviewed were on government benefits, and in most cases this was welfare, not disability benefits.

Compromised mental health is another factor associated with the homeless population, and also a risk factor for incarcerated individuals. Of our total sample of releasees, 29 percent indicated a past diagnosis of a serious mental illness, including schizophrenia (3.4 percent), bipolar disorder (15.5 percent), personality disorder (10.3 percent), and fetal alcohol syndrome (4 percent).

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Relationships

Relationships are important for successful transitions to the community. Released inmates who have strong relations with family, a partner or friends are more likely to obtain shelter (even if it is temporary and transitional) by moving in with family members (parents, relatives, siblings). Family relationships – whatever their form – not only mean that releasees have a home to return to, but also may form a basis for support in obtaining employment and in dealing with other post-release challenges. The absence of relationships – especially quality relationships – can place releasees at greater risk of homelessness:

If they don't have family out there, or they don't have money or their not established out there, they need for the first month or at least, some kind of assistance with respect to shelter ... Some people get out and they're lost, you know, they got to do all this stuff and they're overwhelmed, especially if they have been in for a while. (British Columbia releasee – currently housed)

Several releasees in interviews discussed the importance of relationships in helping with transitions back to the community, and even the necessity of family for obtaining bail:

I'm living with my family again. My wife works part time, and we have a joint bank account. I work driving a cab, doing odd jobs. I've been at the present address for two years. (Ontario releasee – currently housed)

Their bail program makes no sense to me... if you're homeless, and have no family here, then you're stuck in jail. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Some interviewees reported supportive relations with family members, but others reported strained relations.

My family doesn't want anything to do with me since I've been released – I'm the 'black sheep' of the family. (British Columbia releasee – currently underhoused)

Friendships are another important type of relationship. Friends can provide support, including temporary shelter. However, many releasees said they don't have close friends or that friends are a problem, rather than a potential source of support, because their friends are involved in

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crime or are substance users, and continuing a relationship with them once released jeopardizes their ability to avoid jail.

I'm kind of distant [from my friends]. I don't associate with them anymore. They were a bad influence. (British Columbia releasee – currently underhoused)

The Case for Discharge Planning: in their own words.

We asked participants if they had any thoughts on what could be done to improve the discharge process. They are aware that the absence of strong transitional planning places them at risk for homelessness, addictions, recidivism, and reincarceration. They make a strong case for the necessity of discharge planning and transitional supports.

They should have more people going around in the jails and helping people. People's heads aren't in the right place at the time of release. No-where to go, no assistance, so you just spend the money ... at the bar. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Make sure inmates have a place to go or live, give inmates counselling to not get back in trouble and to look at why you were in there. Have welfare appointments ready for them. (British Columbia releasee – currently housed)

While there, you are given clothes, food, shelter, and you become sober. Upon release, you are given just the sobriety and a piece of paper... we didn't have follow-through with the drug counselling, mental health counselling, life management skills, how you manage your time and money, and, possibly teach us how to make resumes. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

They should contact social services tell them/verify his identity in order for a release to get a welfare check upon release. They should not release you on Friday or a weekend. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

When asked who should provide these services, many respondents said that the correctional institutions should be required to ensure that inmates are released with the proper supports. Moreover, several participants mentioned that there should be more coordination between correctional institutions and social services. Consider these words:

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Where do we put the responsibility? Do we leave it up to corrections? Corrections has a mandate that once your sentence is up, they are no longer responsible for you. And just because I don't have a welfare file set up or whatever, it doesn't mean that they are not going to let me go. They gotta let me out. So, based on their budgets and their policy, their hands are tied. They can't keep us after about release date. Again, the support workers up at the jail, there aren't enough of them to go around. If you are in a remand situation they won't even see you because they're not under contract to counsel people who have been detained without being convicted and then go to court and then are exonerated or released or given a conditional sentencing to the community where the community is not ready for them, don't even know they're coming. Why? Because there's not enough support staff. It's madness, I'm telling you. (Ontario releasee – currently underhoused)

Conclusions

A shelter is an external jail with more yard time. (Ontario releasee – currently homeless)

Our research suggests a need for reinvestment in resources both within prisons and the community to support prisoner re-entry.

There is a bidirectional relationship between homelessness and incarceration; people who are homeless are more likely to wind up in prison and the prison experience itself places releasees at risk of becoming homeless. Allowing releasees to slide into homelessness puts them in a situation where intersecting challenges (lack of housing, lack of income, health problems and nutritional inadequacy, mental health problems and addictions) may make it more difficult to reintegrate and move on with their lives, and as a result may make it more likely that they reoffend.

Different inmates require different kinds of supports once they are released from prison. Some will be considered to be at higher risk than others. High risk clients have more extensive and complex needs, either because of the degree to which their health problems (mental health, substance use, for instance) are acute, or because of the multiplicity of risks that they face. Moreover, the risks that offenders face are linked. For instance, lack of housing affects employability and vice-versa. Persons with mental health challenges or concurrent disorders may face ad-

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ditional barriers to obtaining housing. Thus the potential risks ex-convicts face should not be treated in isolation from each other.

One could argue that one of the consequences of cuts to social spending and prison reform over the past ten years has been that the task of managing prisoner re-entry has been downloaded from corrections services to the homelessness sector in many jurisdictions. Yet homeless shelters, drop-ins, and soup kitchens are not mandated to do the work of prisoner re-entry and reintegration. Staff are not trained in discharge planning. Such agencies are not funded to do this work.

Perhaps the most important barrier that needs to be overcome before any meaningful change can occur in social and criminal justice policy is the politics that surround corrections and homelessness in Canada today. Politicians vow to “get tough on crime,” and during the 2006 and 2008 federal election campaigns the Conservative Party made promises to build more prisons, eliminate conditional sentences, and impose mandatory minimum sentences. At the same time, the media and general public are normally silent when community supports for inmates, such as halfway houses, are reduced or eliminated. When the harm reduction programs such as safe injections sites or needle exchange programs are promoted by local public health officials, the response from the public and some media outlets is often that of hostility and contempt.

Moreover, the surge in the number of inmates who await trial in custody has not been the subject of attention in the mainstream media. The public is much more likely to hear reports of inmates who are free on bail committing heinous crimes, than they are to read about the costs involved in incarcerating inmates while in remand.

The issue of homelessness in Canada has not been adequately addressed by governments. Even though thousands of people are without safe and healthy shelter in Canada, the issue has not risen to the top of political agendas at either the federal or provincial levels. As such, it is our contention that unless the issues of prisoner reintegration and homeless receive the level of political attention that they deserve, urgent calls for action on discharge planning will fall upon deaf ears.

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