

Prisons-Homelessness intersect in WA, including releases into homelessness

This document has been prepared by the Home2Health Research Team (University of Notre Dame) as a briefing for meeting between the WA Alliance to End Homelessness, the Home2Health team, and Executive from the Department of Justice in June 2025.

Magnitude of the Problem

National Overview

There is substantial evidence internationally and in Australia illustrating the complex and often bi-directional links between homelessness and incarceration.

- A [2022 report](#) by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) indicated that about two in five (43%) Australian prisoners reported being homeless within the 4-weeks before their incarceration, and 48% expect to be homeless upon release (45% plan to sleep in short-term or emergency, and 2.8% plan to sleep rough).¹
- AIHWs Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) [2023-24 report](#) indicates that nationally, 8,900 people exiting from custodial arrangements accessed SHSs in 2023-24, with 7 in 10 requesting support with accommodation.² This is an undercount of the number of people who would be exiting prison into homelessness as SHS data is only captured by services that receive Federal funding under the umbrella of SHS.
- In 2022, the AIHW released a report on [a longitudinal analysis of people exiting custodial services](#) who accessed SHSs between 2014-17 which clearly demonstrate the cyclical nature of the homelessness and prison:³
 - More than half (57%) of the 20,000-cohort required long-term accommodation
 - About half had accessed homelessness services in the 3 years prior to the study period, and over a third continued to access homelessness services in the 3 years following.

Extent of Prison Releases into Homelessness in WA

In contrast to several other States, **WA does not keep statistics regarding prisoners released to no fixed address** or without suitable accommodation. This was raised in a Parliamentary Question by the Hon Dr Brad Pettitt in Parliament Question Time, 13 October 2021. When asked “*How many people had been released from WA prisons this year without secured accommodation?*” the Minister for Corrective Services responded:

“The Department of Justice does not keep statistics regarding accommodation for released prisoners. Prisoners released from prison to freedom have no requirement to provide a residential address as they are no longer subject to a legal order. When under consideration by the Prisoners Review Board for release to parole, prisoners are assisted by the Department of Justice’s adult community corrections in preparing a parole plan, which includes suitable accommodation. The requirement for a prisoner to have suitable accommodation upon release is a primary consideration of the Prisoners Review Board in determining suitability for release to parole. If a prisoner released from prison on community supervision is homeless, adult community corrections will provide information about temporary emergency accommodation options and assist with applications where necessary.”⁴

The absence of data collection on this by Corrections in WA was a gap identified in the WA Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness, and a formal recommendation was made in relation to this:⁵

RECOMMENDATION 55

Page 240

The Department of Communities and Department of Justice collect data about the post-release accommodation status (including homelessness) of people exiting prisons and other correctional facilities in Western Australia.

In other states/territories:

- Corrective Services **NSW** collects data on releases to No Fixed Address (NFA).⁶
- As part of the Housing Action Strategic Plan (2018-2028)⁷, the **ACT** has established a transitional Justice Housing program for those exiting custody and provides some data.⁸
- **Victoria** does not publicly report statewide data on exits from custody into homelessness, but program-specific data is sometimes included in evaluations of initiatives like the ReConnect program.⁹

There is no recent WA breakdown in the SHS data on people exiting custodial settings seeking assistance from homelessness services. The last available WA data (2019–20),¹⁰ showed an increase from **1.4 to 1.8 clients per 10,000** exiting custody into homelessness. No figures have been published since. As noted earlier, SHS data represents only a subset of people experiencing homelessness in Australia, with recent findings from our team suggesting that **only a third** (24-34%) of people accessing services supporting people experiencing homelessness are actually captured via SHIP or other SHS metrics.¹¹

HOWEVER, observed increases in prison releases to homelessness in WA have been noted, including:

- In the recent [Evaluation Report](#) on Engagement Hubs in WA, with **five** Hubs reporting an increase in service users who had recently **exited prison**, including young people coming straight from prison to their Hubs.¹¹ These service users often require additional support and resources to connect with appropriate supports. Although none of the Hubs had funding nor specific programs to support this population, they can assist people in these circumstances in a range of ways, including with ID, housing, financial, legal, and social supports, and signposting to other services that work with people post-release.
- More frequent raising of this issue at the regular **Perth rough sleepers working group**. This includes an increased number of people being seen who are recently released from prison, as well as people requesting being able to put short-stay crisis accommodation as a bail or parole address.
- By the Royal Perth Hospital Homeless Team, which notes that in 2025 to date, the Homeless Team has already seen 16 patients who were recently released from prison.
- By Homeless Healthcare outreach staff within last 10 months, including people on the street homeless for the first time following prison release.
- And regionally, Pivot Support Services — a reintegration service contracted by the Department of Justice — reports that of around 280 people they support pre and post release from Albany prison each year, **46% of their current clients are homeless (post release) or are likely to be released into homelessness**. Frequently, Pivot commences supporting individuals 6 months pre-release, but there is a dearth of accommodation options, not even short-term crisis accommodation options in the region, and whilst previously Pivot and a number of other regional reintegration services used to have transitional accommodation they managed as part of their Department contract, the housing component was removed several years ago. Donated swags and tents are sometimes the only option that can be provided. Pivot also reports that many people released to homelessness become repeat clients, reflecting the cycle of incarceration driven by a lack of stable housing and support.

Anecdotally, many homelessness services in WA are raising this issue and the dearth of options for people being released from prison at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness and Prison Revolving Door

1. Increases Likelihood of Entering Prison

For people charged with offences, not having a home can affect the **likelihood of being remanded in prison**. There has been a significant upward trend in Australia in people being imprisoned without a sentence, with the 2024 ABS report on Prisoners in Australia showing that NSW accounts for one of the biggest increases in this (an increase of 18% between June 2023 and 2024).¹² Homelessness has

contributed to this, as bail refusal or home detention before court hearing is less likely if a person does not have suitable permanent accommodation.^{13,14}

2. Increases Length of Time Spent in Prison

Reduces likelihood of parole: Not having a home to go to is an impediment to parole,¹⁵ parole requirements typically include having a residential address, and bail applications enhanced if can demonstrate community support details, employment or training information, and services to address unmet treatment needs. For instance, they may not be approved for bail or home detention before their matter is heard in the court, despite the nature of their charges, as they will not meet the required criteria of bail conditions if they do not have suitable permanent accommodation.¹⁶ Similar challenges are also often experienced by those experiencing homelessness when seeking parole at the end of their custodial sentence. Requirements regarding how the WA Parole Board will grant parole includes (but not limited to) the following:

- residential address where a paroled prisoner will live, names of others living at the same place,
- details of community support and employment or training details including the name and address of where they will be working or training,
- and details of the services they will use to address unmet treatment needs.¹⁶

The parole plan from a prisoner can be strengthened if accompanied by a written commitment from a family member, friend, or welfare agency that confirms they agree to help the prisoner released into the community to serve the balance of their sentence.¹⁶ The complexity of this process immediately becomes prohibitive or at least challenging if a person does not have a home or family support to assist them through the process, thus perhaps leading to longer incarceration.

3. Risk of Recidivism

Our understanding that recidivism rates in WA currently sit around 40%. There is growing evidence internationally¹⁷ and in Australia¹⁸ that people released from prison into unstable housing situations are more likely to re-offend compared with those in more secure accommodation settings. In Australia, seminal research by Baldry and colleagues' research found that 61% of prisoners released to homelessness return to prison, compared with 35% of prisoners who are released to adequate housing.¹⁹ The Ex-Custodial Homelessness Support Service in South Australia reports a recidivism rate 10% among its supported clients compared with 45% nationally.²⁰ Meanwhile, data from the United Kingdom suggests that nearly 67% of prisoners released into homelessness will reoffend within one year of release, compared to 54% released into temporary accommodation and 43% of those released into permanent or supported housing.²¹

Dearth of Targeted Transitional Support & Accommodation Services Upon Release in WA

The shortage of transitional accommodation pathways for people exiting prisons in WA has long been lamented. For example, a [2016 Report](#) from the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services highlighted the high demand for transitional accommodation and support services amongst prisoners leaving WA custodial settings and noted the poor allocation of resources to Transitional Managers and re-entry programs.²²

The human face and consequence of this is illustrated in the following case study, shared recently with our team by a concerned Aboriginal mother who was formerly homeless herself:

"Having been homeless myself, and knowing the trauma that my son has been through in his life that contributed to him ending up offending and in prison, I really hoped that his release after his sentence would be a fresh start for him. I wanted him to come stay with me but I only have a one bedroom place for me and my brother, and I sleep on the couch, and my brother has the only bedroom. My son got out and was couch surfing different places, and is now staying with people who have encouraged him to get back into drug use and burglary. The post prison release support program he was connected to said they would give him a few weeks to get settled after prison before seeing him, so he didn't get support needed in those critical first few weeks, and now sadly it seems only a matter of time before he will end up back inside."

Despite the conclusions of the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services in its 2016 report,²² WA still has limited dedicated properties and transitional tenancy supports for people exiting prison. Indeed, as observed by to our research team by someone formerly homeless and in WA prisons:

“There seems to be far less options now to get even temporary housing when you get released.”

- person with a lived experience

However, it is difficult to find much current information/data on:

- Number of people exiting prison each year in WA who are supported to access housing prior to release
- Number of available transitional or post-release programs or properties for this cohort
- Waitlists for such accommodation or support.

In addition to the imperative for increased provision of public housing and supported accommodation options for WA prisoners upon release, this needs to be coupled with the adequate provision of wrap-around support services given the myriad of intertwined and complex needs which also influence the likelihood of effective community reintegration and reduced re-offending.

The under-resourcing of transitional services and prisoner support programs in Australia has been lamented nationally¹⁵, and those that are specifically meeting the needs of people who have previously experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness on release, are sparse. A 2015 Victorian investigation into prisoner reintegration services found that of 4,500 newly released prisoners identified as eligible for Intensive Transitional Support Programs, just 15% (700 individuals) were actually supported.²³ Of those supported, 44% of females and 22% of male clients became homeless upon the conclusion of their support.²³ Comparable data not available for WA.

Economic Benefits of Housing Upon Release from Custodial Settings

As noted earlier, homelessness is associated with:

- an increased likelihood of entering prison (including on remand)
- a decreased likelihood of being able to get bail or early parole
- delays in release
- increased risk of recidivism.

According to the WA Department of Justice Annual Report 2021-2022, it costs an average of \$371 per day to keep an adult in prison. A figure that rises to \$1361 per day for a young person.²⁴

As an example, for 8 young people with delayed release from WA youth detention between 2020 -2021.

- 260 days delayed released
- Equivalent to approx. \$356, 000 in detention costs based on Department of Justice Annual report costs for youth detention for the corresponding years

Prison Review Board submission, WA Parliamentary Inquiry¹⁶

Access to stable housing upon release from prison delivers measurable economic benefits to the justice system and broader society. Both international and Australian evidence shows that secure housing when people exit prison reduces recidivism, improves reintegration, and lowers demand on costly justice services.^{15,25-27}

Supporting this, the *Productivity Commission's Australia's Prison Dilemma* (2021) highlights that imprisonment costs Australia over \$5.2 billion annually, or more than \$330 per prisoner per day. It estimates that if imprisonment rates had remained stable over the past two decades, \$13.5 billion could have been saved. With 60% of prisoners having been incarcerated before, the report suggests that addressing key drivers of recidivism, such as homelessness, is critical to breaking the cycle and reducing costs.²⁵

Similarly, the Queensland Productivity Commission's 2019 Inquiry into imprisonment and recidivism identifies homelessness as a key driver, noting its role as a barrier to bail and a risk factor for

reoffending.²⁸ While not a formal cost–benefit analysis, the report calls for investment in community-based supports, including housing, as a more efficient alternative.

In a 2021 cost benefit analysis with individuals with complex support needs who were placed in public housing following prison release, there was a 8.9% annual reduction in police incidents, and a 11.2% reduction in time spent in custody,¹⁵ with associated justice system cost savings of \$4,996 per person per year.¹⁵

It has been recommended that the WA Department of Treasury quantify and publish estimated cost savings of investing in housing and homelessness services to government, including justice services:⁵

RECOMMENDATION 2

Page 39

A majority of the Committee, consisting of Hons Peter Collier, Dr Brad Pettitt and Steve Martin MLCs, recommends the Department of Treasury quantify and publish estimated cost savings of investment in housing and homelessness services across government agencies involved in the delivery of community services, health, mental health and justice services.

Prison-homelessness issues and recommendations in submissions to the WA Parliamentary Inquiry into Funding of Homelessness Services (Inquiry 2022, report released mid 2023).

Home2Health team submission

In 2022, the Home2Health team made a submission to the *Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia*, with a specific focus on institutional discharges into homelessness, including pathways from prison. Our full submission can be accessed here; **Home2Health** ([Submission No.22](#)). Recommendations from our submission:

- Increased investment and dedicated pathways for **access to public housing** tenancies and accompanying support for individuals exiting prison and other custodial settings. This needs to go beyond relying on referrals to homelessness services/accommodation that already have enormous waitlists.
- More concrete **measurable actions relating to exits from prison** to homelessness are needed, including benchmarking and outcomes reporting on the actions currently relating to this in the Action plan.
- Greater **recognition of the importance of releasing prisoners into stable and long-term housing** options instead of short-term or temporary accommodation settings.
- **Ensure data is collected by the justice/corrections systems regarding release of people and the types of accommodation** settings they will be going to, including homelessness.
- Require **annual reporting or regular monitoring of discharges from government institutions to homelessness**. Also, data on justice recidivism and re-presentations to hospital for people released to homelessness.
- **Improve recognition and recording of homelessness status in government records/data systems**. The ‘address on paper’ often relates to a homelessness service or an address where mail can be sent, or where someone is living in an overcrowded dwelling or couch surfing, and the commonly used NFA (no fixed address) acronym has been shown to significantly under-represent the true number of people experiencing homelessness in government administrative records. This recommendation applies to Health, Justice, Housing and other WA government service and systems data.

Other submissions specifically on this issue

We note that several other submissions also highlighted the prison and homelessness revolving door in WA and made recommendations regarding this. This includes the following submissions:

- **The Prisons Review Board** ([Submission No.1](#)) – The Prison Board is forced to deny parole and extend detention in cases where suitable accommodation is unavailable, resulting in human and financial costs. The Board recommends coordinated government action to address homelessness.²⁹

- **SCALES Community Legal Centre and Murdoch Law Clinic** ([Submission No. 45](#)) – which emphasises the need for coordinated housing support for people exiting custody. They recommend integrated, culturally-informed tenancy support, a moratorium on evicting children into homelessness, and transparent eviction data to guide reform.³⁰
- **Street Law Centre WA** ([Submission No. 36](#)) – which highlighted legal and systemic barriers for people leaving prison, including ID requirements that block access to housing services. They recommend urgent reform of identification processes to support reintegration.³¹

Parliamentary Inquiry Report recommendations relating to corrections and homelessness

The 2023 Final Report for the Western Australian Parliamentary *Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia* directly addressed the issue of homelessness among people in correctional and custodial settings (**pp. 227–228**), and made four targeted recommendations.³²

Recommendation 2

A majority of the Committee, consisting of Hons Peter Collier, Dr Brad Pettitt and Steve Martin MLCs, recommends the Department of Treasury quantify and publish estimated cost savings of investment in housing and homelessness services across government agencies involved in the delivery of community services, health, mental health and **justice services** (p.39).³²

Recommendation 51

The Western Australian government take all steps necessary to ensure people with mental illness who are discharged from hospitals, **correctional facilities** or institutional care receive a comprehensive mental health discharge plan, and have access to transitional housing (p.228).³²

Recommendation 52

The Western Australian government improve dedicated pathways for access to public housing tenancies and accompanying support **for individuals exiting prison and other custodial settings** (p.228).³²

Recommendation 55

The Department of Communities and Department of Justice collect data about **the post-release accommodation status (including homelessness) of people exiting prisons and other correctional facilities** in Western Australia (p.240).³²

While beyond scope of this briefing note to document effective programs to reduce the homelessness and justice revolving door, there are good examples elsewhere in Australia and internationally.

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