

Engagement Hub evaluation – excerpts relating to prison/homelessness nexus

More People Exiting Prison

There is a significant link between homelessness and incarceration, as many individuals exiting prison struggle to find stable housing, which can exacerbate their vulnerabilities. According to the AIHW, in 2018 approximately 1 in 3 Australian prisoners were homeless within 30 days prior to incarceration, while 54% expect to be homeless upon release.³⁵ Over the past decade, former prisoners have become the fastest-growing group of clients seeking support from SHS in Australia, with a national annual increase of 11.6% in individuals accessing homeless services upon release from custody.³⁶

While often not formally recorded, **five** Hubs reported observing an increase in service users who had recently **exited prison**, including young people coming straight from prison to their Hubs. These service users often require additional support and resources to connect with appropriate supports.

In addition, service users **participating in interviews** were also asked what they would have done without the Hub. Services users predicted that, without Hubs, their mental health would have declined, they would have self-harmed or died or that they would have turned to crime and been imprisoned.

*Oh, well I definitely would have **been in jail by now**, through crime. To try and survive feeding. I wouldn't break into a house or a car or anything like that, but no doubt about it without being able to survive, for getting food and stuff, I would have been caught for numerous accounts of shoplifting. I have no doubt about that. – SEAT Service User*

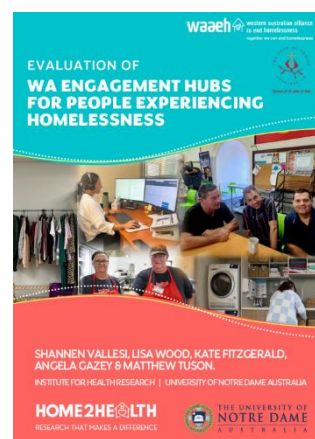
EXITING PRISON SUPPORTS

The revolving door between homelessness and incarceration is a common reality across Australia, and in WA. A recent Australian study found that nearly half (48%) of the prisoners scheduled for release within the next four weeks anticipated becoming homeless upon their exit. Among these individuals, the majority (45%) intended to seek short-term or emergency accommodation, while almost 3% planned to sleep rough.¹²⁵

Navigating the complex legal, economic, and social changes associated with release, whilst attempting to secure stable housing and income can be overwhelming. Without sufficient assistance, this often results in many individuals falling into a cycle of homelessness and reoffending.

A number of Hubs and stakeholders reported seeing an increase in people attending Hubs as a result of homelessness on release from prison. Although we did not identify any Hubs having a specific service or program for 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.

Box 19 below provides an example of how Hubs can provide comprehensive support to an individual recently released from prison, and how this wraparound assistance helps to mitigate the challenges of transitioning back into mainstream society.



Box 1: Support to Transition to a New Life Post-Prison

Background: “Zach” is a man in his late twenties who, after being released from prison, had moved into transitional accommodation with his mother to take on a role as her carer. This was due to his mother's limited capacity to care for herself and to maintain a household on her own. While excited to be reunited, Zach quickly felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of this role and lacked confidence in his own ability to manage finances and ability to provide support regarding meal preparation and cleaning. During this time, Zach was also navigating the process of applying for Carer's Payments, trying to meet the requirements of his Job Network, and attempting to adjust to life out of incarceration.

Support Provided: Feeling overwhelmed, Zach sought support from the St Pat's Day Centre. St Pat's staff were able to first support Zach to meet his immediate needs including additional food, clothing and transport. He was provided with food vouchers, clothing store vouchers and SmartRiders to enable him to travel to purchase necessities. After meeting these immediate needs, Zach was referred to the St Pat's Support Worker to provide ongoing support with the more complex issues Zach was facing. He received a referral to a financial counselling service and was also referred for legal support to assist him with accessing carer's payments and resolving existing issues with his Mum's Centrelink payments. It was also identified through this engagement that Zach's mum and previously been engaged with another support service but had been lost to follow up due to her inability to attend appointments.

Current Situation: The St Pat's staff were able to reconnect Zach and his mum with this support service in order to provide wrap-around support in a more long-term capacity. They remain in transitional accommodation, with Zach feeling more financially secure and supported in his new carer role.

Recommendation 1.2.5: Hubs to undertake brief monthly audits to capture data on trends and emerging issues of concern ‘being seen on the ground’.

Hubs have a wealth of anecdotal intelligence about trends and changes in relation to who is homeless or areas of unmet need. Even basic counts or recording of trends across Hubs would help consolidate and quantify these insights, which can then be provided to the Office of Homelessness or used to inform sector advocacy and service planning. To avoid this being onerous, we propose a brief audit tool to capture over a one-month period, the number of people accessing Hubs in particular circumstances, such as:

- **following release from prison or police lock-up to homelessness**
- people with disabilities who need specialist support that Hubs are not equipped to provide
- people who have children with them
- people who are refugees or asylum seekers or not eligible for Australian Government supports.