



'Prisoners Abroad' Resettlement Service

Housing Security and Lessons for Probation

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Introduction

This paper reports from a small-scale qualitative study involving people imprisoned overseas and supported by the resettlement service 'Prisoners' Abroad' following deportation to the UK. A key focus of Prisoners' Abroad resettlement work is assisting 'returnees' into secure accommodation and to retain housing tenancies over the longer-term in efforts to prevent homelessness. The centrality of housing from the perspectives of both the service users and Prisoners Abroad staff provide important insights and lessons for wider probation practice. Without a housing base, people lack the certainty and stability needed to address practical and emotional issues typically experienced after prison. Moreover, to establish the requisites for everyday functioning so that moving forward can be achieved.

Between September 2021 and June 2022, ten service users and six staff from the Prisoners Abroad resettlement team and external partner services were interviewed. This was to find out how people cope with and manage their day to day lives post-deportation and how the different dimensions of the Prisoners Abroad resettlement programme assists social inclusion and re-integration (Cracknell and Ward, 2022). Our study adds to a growing body of research on 'post-deportation lives'. This maps onto expanded legislation across different countries that facilitates deportation as scholars seek to learn what happens to people through these experiences (cf. Hasselberg, 2016).



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The ten service users included eight men and two women aged between 28 and 73 years who at the point of interview had been back in the UK for between three months and three years. The people interviewed were purposively sampled to gauge experiences during the earlier phase of return and as the months and years unfold beyond. Seven of the ten had lived in the country they were deported from for most of their life, taken there by their families as a small child. As such they had left everything including their children and grandchildren.

All spoke of the multiple difficulties they faced on return and the critical role Prisoners Abroad played in their mental coping. However, for the purposes of this paper, we concentrate on the importance of settled housing.

The Prisoners Abroad Service

'Prisoners Abroad' has supported British citizens imprisoned overseas since 1978 and now operates a service with three main strands - in-prison support, provision to family members of those imprisoned and a comprehensive, phased resettlement package on return to the UK. It is the only service of its kind in the UK. Through their 'resettlement step' approach the first phase is assisting with immediate, critical care when a person arrives into a UK airport. This involves providing people with a 'welcome pack' containing hygiene items, a travel pass, directions to pre-arranged emergency accommodation among other vital necessities. From there a one-to-one service helps people access health and welfare provision, longer-term temporary housing and with employment preparation. The third phase is supporting clients to establish independence and self-reliance and for less need of Prisoners Abroad services.

The approach adopted by Prisoners Abroad is grounded in desistance theory and takes a holistic, strengths-based and person-centred frame of reference (Ward, 2010). Given it is found over a third of 'rough sleepers' in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018) have served prison sentences, understandings of the links between housing security, prison release and desistance is essential.

Findings: Housing security

Leaving prison and navigating the process of settling into the community is daunting and filled with various barriers and potential pitfalls for any person. Yet, this is doubly compounded for Prisoners Abroad clients. They carry a unique set of circumstances linked to the trauma of permanent country removal, severed family connections and a loss of belonging and cultural identity. Most had left the UK as a young child meaning family ties, networks of support and employment experiences were located in a country now far from that they are required to live. They are unfamiliar with how systems work and how and where to access crucial aspects of resettlement, such as healthcare or financial support.

The significance of having accommodation could not be underestimated for this population. Homelessness was something most respondents had come close to as through thoughts about what deportation would result in. A number said that while they were preparing for deportation in the last months of their prison sentence homelessness and "sleeping out" was something they greatly feared. Arriving into the UK with nothing aside from a bag of belongings; some existing distant relations and little knowledge of the extent to which Prisoners Abroad would help, housing was the single most important thing to them.

When it comes to accommodation it is Prisoners Abroad they have done everything since I've arrived. ...I would have been on the street ... you have please to highlight this kind of thing. It's very difficult because a lot of us otherwise will go back to committing crimes. (male, 59 years).

Following the initial stage of support that Prisoners Abroad provide when a person returns to the UK, a longer-term view of resettlement is envisioned for clients. This places stable accommodation as a key factor, and the ability for people to make choices and to start shaping their life. A resettlement worker outlines the main aims the service has for people as they become more settled into the UK:

... the aim in resettlement is to provide the best options for people in terms of making a successful life in the UK. It's not necessarily perfection, but it's just trying to get someone to a stable position where they're capable of making decisions or having the luxury of making decisions and doing things and moving on. ... where someone has options, you are not homeless, everything is not limited anymore, you're aware that you've got options and you can move forward and do something that you want to do next (resettlement worker).

Stable housing also enabled returnees to establish a sense of home and comfort in the midst of deep feelings of isolation and abandonment. Making their space 'homely' and being able to cook food created feelings

of comfort and familiarity and aided cultural connections through cuisine with the place they had left behind. It also assisted to establish a sense of motivation to progress and get on with other aspects of their resettlement.

I feel like I'm in a good place, like I have a place to lay my head. I can think straight, you know I'm doing positive, I'm not doing illegal stuff, I feel good (male, 59 years).

Stable housing also enabled people to begin to be less dependent on Prisoners Abroad which is something that is embedded in the Prisoners Abroad model.

Once I got my house I started moving forward slowly. Then I didn't really need her help, up to that, she really helped me a lot (male, 28 years).

Prisoner's Abroad step-by-step approach beginning with crisis support and working towards enabling people to move-on independently is key in helping returnees to be more resilient and self-managing in the future. The service manager for the resettlement service described a key aspiration for their clients is to ensure people have attained a sense of stability in British society and are "sewn into the community" and are "able to function". Part of this involves plugging people into community and voluntary activities, assisting routes into education, training and employment and ensuring people move into long-term, stable accommodation.

Lessons for probation

Our findings highlight that Prisoners Abroad administer a comprehensive 'through the gate' service, that provides continuous and meaningful support to people during their prison sentence abroad, immediately upon their deportation and as they (re)settle into life in the UK. This addresses the practical, emotional and cultural barriers that returnees face and is fundamental in preventing homelessness with this group.

The approach of Prisoners Abroad and its key values could be replicated within probation practice. Research on probation notes the 'through the gate' experience promised by the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' probation reforms have largely failed to materialise (Cracknell, 2021). The Prisoners Abroad approach can be conceptualised as a truly 'through the gate' service, where meaningful contact is made while the person is serving their sentence and with initial plans drawn up, people are met at the airport gate and emergency accommodation provided. Service users work closely and co-productively with a keyworker to shape necessary practical and emotional support and most importantly housing.

Several Prisoners Abroad staff were former probation officers and noted the combination of a person-centred approach and smaller caseloads meant being able to work closely with clients, to find creative solutions to problems and draw on available resources in the community. Staff mentioned feeling less restricted in their roles and more able to make a tangible difference to the client group they worked with.

Concluding comments

Our research finds the work Prisoners Abroad undertakes is uniquely impactful particularly in relation to housing and preventing homelessness. Prisoners Abroad staff understand that helping

a person secure stable and permanent housing is fundamental and no further aspects of a resettlement plan can be completed until a stable base has been secured. Initial emergency accommodation helped ease the immediate stress and crisis that recently deported clients felt, and further support aided people to navigate the complex local authority and private housing systems. This has clearly helped many Prisoners Abroad clients find long-term housing, as well as ensured that the housing is safe, secure and adequate for an individual's needs.

Housing provision for people released from prison in the UK and in London is scarce with high costs and benefit relief shortfalls, but paying attention to housing security is critical and fundamentally necessary to address all other aspects of functioning in UK society.

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