

## Reintegration of Prisoners in Ireland: New Research Findings\*

Agnieszka Martynowicz and Martin Quigley†

**Summary:** This article presents selected findings of a study of the provision of reintegration support for prisoners leaving custody in Ireland undertaken by the authors for the Irish Penal Reform Trust. It argues that provision of certain support such as accommodation has improved significantly in recent years, but some important difficulties remain. Considering the sharp increase in the number of people in custody in Ireland, the authors argue that investment in post-release support should form the central part of the State's response to the rise in prison population.

**Keywords:** Custody, management of offenders, prison, prison policy, rehabilitation, reintegration, reintegration services, resettlement.

### Introduction

Return to life outside prison walls can be a traumatic experience. Provision of support, where required and welcomed by those leaving custody, is crucial to the successful transition from prison back into the community and return to independent living. Individual motivation plays a central role in reintegration. Initial support such as provision of information about accommodation, welfare entitlements, and assistance in gaining access to healthcare, however, has the potential to preclude the frustration and sense of rejection by society that may be felt when the basic needs of prisoners are not addressed.

Between September 2009 and April 2010, the Irish Penal Reform Trust conducted a research study to evaluate the provision of reinteгра-

\* This paper is based on the findings of a research report (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

† Agnieszka Martynowicz is a former Research and Policy Officer in the Irish Penal Reform Trust. Martin Quigley was the Research and Policy Intern between September 2009 and February 2010. Email: a.martynowicz@btinternet.com or martinquigley2003@hotmail.com

tion services to prisoners in custody and upon release. The purpose of the research was to assess (where possible) the extent of service provision in Ireland, to assess the impact of post-release support currently provided on reoffending and reimprisonment, and to identify and assess existing barriers to reintegration *vis-à-vis* provision of services. Its purpose was also to enable the Irish Penal Reform Trust to assess the implementation of recommendations made in an earlier report, *Re-integration of Prisoners*, published by the National Economic and Social Forum in 2002 (NESF, 2002).

This paper presents the context of the study, as well as some selected findings.

## **The context**

Prison imposes limitations on the rights of prisoners quite apart from the deprivation of liberty; it has a profound negative social impact on the prisoner, the prisoner's family and his or her community (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2009). Often the consequences of even short periods of imprisonment are permanent or long-lasting for both the prisoner and those close to him or her (Liebling and Maruna, 2005).

On an individual level, experience of imprisonment may lead to institutionalisation and damage 'is done to prisoners' social functioning and their ties to the lawful community, making them vulnerable to a rapid return to crime when they leave' (Coyle, 2005). Research has also shown that the communities to which prisoners return on their release are characterized by high levels of deprivation and least able to cope successfully with their re-entry (O'Donnell, Teljeur, Hughes, Baumer and Kelly, 2007). Reintegration support should therefore be one of the most vital elements of penal and wider social policy to stem reoffending, the increase in prison population and multiple returns to custody.

### *Imprisonment in Ireland*

The daily prison population in Ireland has more than doubled in the past 20 years, from 2,100 prisoners in 1990 to over 4,300 in June 2010. It increased by over 400 prisoners between June 2009 and June 2010 alone, bringing the rate of imprisonment up to 97 per 100,000.<sup>1</sup> Additionally,

<sup>1</sup> The daily population figure for 25 June 2010 was 4,317 (information supplied to the Irish Penal Reform Trust by the Irish Prison Service on request). On the same day, the number of people on temporary release from prison was 941. The last recorded figure for the estimated population of Ireland was 4,459,300 in April 2009.

nearly 950 people were on temporary release (TR) in the community in June 2010.<sup>2</sup> This adds up to over 5,200 people who were subject to custodial sanctions in mid-2010.

Ireland also continues to have a very high rate of committals to prison. Over 13,500 people were committed to prison in 2008 (Irish Prison Service, 2009), up from 11,934 in 2007 (Irish Prison Service, 2008). Nearly 80% of committals are for sentences less than 12 months, with 60% for less than six months (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

#### *Cost of imprisonment and reimprisonment rates*

Ireland experiences high reoffending rates, with nearly 50% being reimprisoned within four years (O'Donnell, Palmer and Hughes, 2008). An analysis conducted by O'Donnell et al. (2008) of available information relating to over 19,000 prisoners showed that 27.4% of those who leave prisons are back in custody within the first year, increasing to just over 45% within three years.

Imprisonment in Ireland is also very expensive. One prison place costs on average €92,717 per year (Irish Prison Service, 2009).

This cost does not necessarily translate into high-quality facilities with high-quality provision of rehabilitative services. In many of the prisons the opposite is true. The Irish prison system is chronically overcrowded and the prisons, as well as service providers from outside agencies in the statutory and voluntary sector, struggle to engage with the vast majority of prisoners in a meaningful way despite marked improvements in service provision in recent years (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). Provision of support is also made more difficult by the physical conditions prevailing in many of the facilities.

#### *The importance of reintegration support*

The increasing number of prisoners in the State translates into an increasing number of people leaving custody each year. The prison environment itself is not conducive to rehabilitation or to preparation for release due to the inherent nature of imprisonment, as the isolation and disempowerment during a prison sentence can increase one's sense of lack of control (Maruna, 2001). Dependence on the structures in place in prison is often internalised by prisoners over the period of incarceration (Haney, 2001). The constant presence of external controls

<sup>2</sup> '938 prisoners on release as jail population hits record level', *The Irish Times*, 21 June 2010.

and their role in regulating prisoners' behaviour can result in the individual's self-regulation becoming muted and, for younger prisoners, underdeveloped (Haney, 2001).

In Ireland, the problem was well illustrated in a research report on the experience of prisoners and their families following release from custody in Limerick Prison (Bedford Row, 2007). Family members were deeply concerned by the level of institutionalisation experienced by prisoners, stating that following release from prison even simple things could be difficult. Prisoners were not, for example, used to eating with other people, having been accustomed to eating alone in a cell (Bedford Row, 2007). The long periods of time prisoners spent in the cells and the negative impact of long periods of lock-up on the prisoners' functioning were among the concerns raised – an issue of utmost importance in Ireland, where 20% of the prison population at any given time is placed in protective custody often requiring 23-hour lock-up (Inspector of Prisons, 2009). It is therefore clear that support is often needed to counter the effects of imprisonment if prisoners are to be successful in their return to their families and communities.

#### *The 'burden of resettlement' in Ireland*

A study undertaken by O'Donnell et al. (2007) demonstrated that areas characterized by deprivation, particularly if they are located in a city, experience by far the greatest challenge in term of accommodating released prisoners. Most importantly, the study looked not only at the number of prisoners being released from prison every year, but also at where they were going following release from custody. In doing so, it considered the potential *burden of resettlement* on communities that are dually and disproportionately affected by deprivation and the task of facilitating the re-entry of community members coming out of prison.

The mapping exercise by O'Donnell et al. (2007) showed that a total of 2,335 (68%) of the 3,422 electoral divisions (EDs) in the country had no released prisoners associated with them during 2004. The study reveals that nearly 24% of all prisoners came from 1% of EDs, while less than 5% of the overall population of Ireland came from the same 1% of EDs.<sup>3</sup> When looking at the number of prisoners from certain areas, the study found that there were 145.9 prisoners per 10,000 in the most

<sup>3</sup> The 1% of EDs were in the cities of Dublin, Cork and Limerick and the towns of Dundalk, Tralee, Tullamore, Navan, Clonmel, Dungarvan and Mullingar.

deprived areas. This compared with a rate of just 6.3 prisoners in the least deprived areas. The authors go on to state that:

this difference is startling and demonstrates unequivocally that it is the areas already marked by serious disadvantage that must bear the brunt of the social problems that accompany released prisoners. (O'Donnell et al., 2007)

In terms of policy implications, the allocation of resources for reintegration support should be targeted equally at areas that have the highest numbers of returning prisoners, and

The challenge of connecting ex-prisoners with relevant services, supports and treatment options is of critical importance from a penal planning perspective. (O'Donnell et al., 2007)

While understanding the rate of and reasons for reoffending and reimprisonment is important, post-release integration must also be measured on more than simply rates of recidivism. Underneath the figures of repeat offending lie a multitude of needs, events, experiences, processes and progression routes. If reintegration is to be a core aim, or even a duty of the Prison Service and other agencies working with prisoners and ex-prisoners, then co-ordinated and appropriate services are required that both address the complex needs with which prisoners present and support desistance from crime in the long term. The next section outlines some of the information available regarding such needs in the prison population in Ireland and internationally.

### **Service provision *vis-à-vis* need**

Often the issues that form barriers to reintegration following a period in custody are the very issues that may have contributed to offending and resulted in incarceration in the first place. It is therefore important to understand some key characteristics of the Irish prison population, and the difficulties faced on an individual level by those who come into contact with the criminal justice system in custody and on release.

#### *Mental health*

The rates of mental ill-health observed among prisoners are significantly higher than rates in the population as a whole. Research by Kennedy et

al. (2005) found that 27% of sentenced men and 60% of sentenced women in Ireland suffered from mental illness. The same study found that 2% of sentenced men and 5.4% of sentenced women suffered from psychosis while 5% of male sentenced prisoners and 16% of female sentenced prisoners suffered from a major depressive disorder.

In the same year, it was estimated that such high rates of mental illness in the prison population would require approximately 376 additional transfers from prison to hospital per annum, and between 122 and 157 extra secure psychiatric beds, in addition to extra mental health in-reach clinics providing services directly in the prison setting. The most recent *Annual Report* of the Irish Prison Service (Irish Prison Service, 2009) notes that, following discussions with the Central Mental Hospital (CMH) in 2008,<sup>4</sup> 10 additional beds were opened for transfers from prisons by the CMH, reducing the number of individuals on the waiting list. Unfortunately, the *Report* doesn't note the size of this reduction.

### *Addictions*

The issue of drug use among the prison population has long been a recognised feature of the Irish prison system. In the past, statistics showed that prisoners with a history of drug use greatly outnumbered those with no such history (O'Mahony, 1997). It has also been observed in the Irish context that rates of drug use remain high while individuals are in prison.

Seymour and Costello (2005) found that of prisoners who had been homeless prior to imprisonment, two-thirds used illicit drugs while in prison. In 2008, Longe provided an analysis showing that more than 20,000 voluntary tests were carried out each year to monitor drug use and responses to treatment in all prisons (Longe, 2008). The tests included those carried out on committal to prison (new entries) as well as on prisoners already in the establishments. The study therefore assumed that some of the positive test results related to drugs or alcohol consumed outside the prison. Between one-third and half of those screened tested positive for at least one drug. Cocaine and alcohol were detected in a small number of tests (Longe, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>The CMH provides the National Forensic Mental Health Service in Ireland. The Service takes referrals from courts and prisons to provide active assessment, treatment and rehabilitation of all service users admitted to the CMH. Specialists from the CMH also provide a range of in-reach sessions in the prisons. For more information, see [www.centralmentalhospital.ie/en/AboutUs](http://www.centralmentalhospital.ie/en/AboutUs)

### *Homelessness*

The connection between crime, custody and homelessness is of particular importance, as prisoners released without a place to stay are more likely to reoffend (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). In re-entering a life of homelessness on release individuals are exposed to higher risk in the same situation that may have contributed to their imprisonment in the first place. Even those wishing to desist from crime may find themselves with a perceived limited set of opportunities to change. The reality of homelessness as a problem facing those leaving prison should not be underestimated. Seymour and Costello (2005) found that one in four prisoners in Dublin had been homeless on committal, and that over half of prisoners had experienced homelessness at some stage in their lives.

### *Barriers to employment experienced by ex-prisoners*

Ex-prisoners encounter numerous barriers in accessing and staying in work. A report by the National Economic and Social Forum on *Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market* (NESF, 2006) identified these obstacles as including 'low self-esteem, lack of educational qualifications and training, insecure housing, lack of recent job experience, difficulty in setting up a bank account and discrimination in trying to get a job.' Having a criminal record was also identified as a barrier to accessing employment. This is important, as unemployed ex-prisoners are twice as likely to reoffend as those in full-time or even part-time employment (Law Reform Commission, 2007).

Furthermore, a 2005 study highlighted that only 41% of prisoners in Dublin were in full-time employment prior to imprisonment (Seymour and Costello, 2005). In the same year the annual average unemployment rate was 4.4%.<sup>5</sup>

The Council of Europe recommends that criminal policy be aimed at prevention and social integration, and has identified having a criminal record as a feature that may jeopardise the convicted person's chance of social integration (Council of Europe, 1984). In Ireland, section 258 of the Children Act 2001 provides that where an offence is committed under the age of 18, and following a three-year conviction-free period, the person shall be treated as not having committed the offence and is

<sup>5</sup> Central Statistics Office, *Seasonally Adjusted Standardised Unemployment Rates*. Available at [www.cso.ie/statistics/sasunemprates.htm](http://www.cso.ie/statistics/sasunemprates.htm)

not obliged to disclose their convictions. Unfortunately, while control and access to criminal records can ‘critically’ affect the chances of social integration (Redmond, 1997) with research showing that employers are less likely to hire an ex-offender (NESF, 2002), no such provision yet exists in Irish law for adult offenders.

### *Education*

Employment options for former prisoners are further impacted on by educational disadvantage. In line with academic studies (for example, Seymour and Costello, 2005), a research paper published by the Irish Prison Service found that ‘a significant number of prisoners have virtually no literacy skills’ (Morgan and Kett, 2003). The study found that rather than there being a directly causal link between low educational attainment and engagement in crime, there is a relationship whereby sometimes ‘poor literacy skills restrict a range of life-choices (particularly employment), and thus become a pre-disposing factor in criminal activities’.

Research by the authors very clearly shows that prisoners often present with multiple needs, and service providers are more often than not required to address complex issues in their support for individuals leaving prisons (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

The next two sections focus on some selected findings relating to service provision currently available in Ireland at a systemic level as well as provision by selected areas of need.

### **Research findings: Some systemic issues**

In 2002, the NESF report noted a number of key issues that needed to be addressed if the reintegration of offenders in Ireland was to improve their chances of desisting from crime in the long term and lower the potential for reimprisonment (NESF, 2002). The report stated (p. 30) that:

1. after-care services for ex-prisoners were patchy and lacked a national framework
2. available initiatives covered only a small number of ex-prisoners
3. there was a need for greater linkages between prison-based and community initiatives.

While the research by the authors (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010) found evidence of improved co-operation between prison-based programmes and agencies and those based in the community – particularly in those prisons that are piloting Integrated Sentence Management (ISM) as described in the following sections of this article – serious concerns remain as to the provision of after-care services and the number of prisoners whom such provision effectively covers.

*'Post-code lottery' and the need for co-ordinated national framework*

Despite important developments in the reorganisation of the Irish Prison Service, and the establishment of the Regimes Directorate in 2002 with responsibility for creating a more integrated approach to reintegration, the provision of after-care services for prisoners and ex-prisoners on a practical level remains patchy (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). There still appears to be no uniform approach to provision of reintegration services in individual prisons. Access to a variety of support mechanisms – including homelessness advice and drug and mental health services – is dependent on the facility in which a prisoner finds himself or herself on sentence, or even on remand. Provision of services such as homelessness and welfare advice, or drug addiction support in the community, also varies between areas of the country, often limiting access to reintegration support when required (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

There are many reasons for such a situation, according to those interviewed for the authors' study (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). These include:

1. differences in the nature and characteristics of the prison population in various prisons (for instance, reintegration work and case management were seen as more effective in addressing needs in those prisons with a large proportion of long-term prisoners)
2. the geographical location of the prison and the post-release location of ex-prisoners (for example, it was seen as easier and more effective to work with prisoners in the Dublin area who were released from prisons in Dublin, and much less possible to plan the release of prisoners at Portlaoise and Midlands Prisons as very few ex-prisoners would reside in the immediate vicinity of those prisons post-release)

3. the rural versus urban divide in relation to availability of and access to dedicated post-release support services in rural communities, with most services concentrated mainly in cities and larger towns (Dublin and Cork in particular).

While these reasons are clearly valid, interviewees also expressed the view that some of the services should be provided regardless of the location of the prison or the nature of its population, and the Irish Prison Service should take overall responsibility for equality of service across all of the prisons (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). According to the findings of the authors' research, differences persist in:

1. access to mental health support and treatment, including psychiatric and psychological support
2. access to appropriate therapeutic environment, including appropriate facilities to meet with counsellors and psychologists in the prisons
3. access to drug treatment, including availability of drug-free facilities in the prisons
4. access to education, work and training
5. access to programmes addressing offending behaviour
6. access to appropriate information about the range of services available to prisoners while in prison and on release.

#### *Focus on high-risk offenders*

Currently, the Probation Service in prisons prioritises work with: prisoners who are subject to post-release supervision orders; sex offenders (who may also fall within the previous category); and life-sentenced prisoners who are released on licence/supervised temporary release. Yet even with those priorities, the practice of engagement with prisoners appears from the authors' findings to differ across individual prisons, with the Probation Service in some establishments making contact with all prisoners committed on sentence (at least initially) while in others, contact is only made with those who fall into the categories outlined above (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

This prioritisation of resources by level of risk leads to a lower level of resources being made available to those who pose little or no risk of committing serious crimes but who could still benefit from increased support.

A number of the interviewees commented that this focus often leaves prisoners who do not pose high risk on their release with very limited access to support while their needs in relation to accommodation, training and employment, addiction services and other support are often equal to, if not higher than, those of high-risk offenders (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). While resources are directed into the supervision of high-risk offenders and their management in the community, they may not be available to those in equal or even greater need of support on release who do not fall in that category.

*Limited reach of the Integrated Sentence Management model*

In the course of this study, the researchers had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the model of Integrated Sentence Management (ISM) currently operational, at various stages of development, in four prisons, including Arbour Hill and Wheatfield prisons in Dublin.

ISM provides a case management structure to co-ordinate service provision, sentence planning and management as well as release planning for prisoners who are committed to prisons on sentences of 12 months or more.<sup>6</sup> Engagement by a prisoner in the ISM process is voluntary. Following an initial assessment, referrals are made to services within the prison (such as Education or Work and Training) and outside agencies providing in-reach services (such as homeless advice). The ISM system includes a development of a Community Integration Plan in preparation for release.

Initial indications are that, where provided, ISM is working well, providing a co-operation tool for the Irish Prison Service, the Probation Service and providers of other services, such as drug counselling, accommodation and health care. Any assessment of its effectiveness in terms of improved integration back into the community, however, is so far very limited. The ISM system is new and it has not been running for long enough for the first sample of prisoners to be released and its impact assessed. Such an assessment of effectiveness should be conducted before ISM is introduced nationally.

An analysis of all committals on sentence to Irish prisons between 2005 and 2008 (Table 1 below) indicates that under the current design of the ISM model, it will only be available to around 20% of all sentenced prisoners. While this may be significant in terms of the number of

<sup>6</sup> For more information on ISM see [www.irishprisons.ie/ISM.htm](http://www.irishprisons.ie/ISM.htm)

prisoners on ISM at any given time in the prisons (in relation to the resources that are needed to operate the system with long-term prisoners), it will not offer support to the vast majority of those who are leaving prison following completion of short-term sentences.

This is the most significant shortcoming of the current ISM system, as those on short sentences are often more likely to reoffend (National Audit Office, 2010; O'Donnell, et al., 2008). Moreover, the ISM system will not 'catch' those who are coming back to prison on a regular basis for consecutive short-term sentences and who may present with a high level of unaddressed needs.

**Table 1.** Committals on sentence by sentence length, 2005–2008

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total no. of sentenced committals</i>	<i>Under 12 months (%)</i>	<i>Under 6 months (%)</i>	<i>Under 3 months (%)</i>
2005	5088	3944 (77.5)	2982 (58.6)	1962 (38.6)
2006	5802	4607 (79.4)	3473 (59.9)	2253 (38.8)
2007	6455	4952 (76.7)	3667 (56.8)	2293 (35.5)
2008	8043	6424 (79.9)	5020 (62.4)	3526 (43.8)

*Source:* Irish Prison Service (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009).

While the introduction of ISM is welcome, the authors submit that with its limited reach, there is a need for the introduction of additional systems that would ensure that an assessment of the needs of all prisoners is undertaken and support provided where needed. Reliance on the ISM as the main tool supporting reintegration runs the risk of falling short of meeting the needs of prisoners, and also of not meeting the requirements of international standards in this area.

In particular, it runs the risk of not meeting the obligations of the prison authorities under the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006) which require that:

1. as soon as possible after admission (committal on sentence), a report should be drawn up about the individual situation of *each* prisoner, together with a proposed sentence plan and the strategy for preparation for their release (Rule 103.2) (emphasis added)

2. individual prisoners should be encouraged to participate in drawing up their sentence plans (Rule 103.3)
3. such plans should, as far as practicable, include work, education, other activities during the sentence, and a plan of preparation for release (Rule 103.4)
4. where applicable and necessary, social work and medical and psychological care may also be included in the regime for individual prisoners (Rule 103.5)
5. particular attention is to be paid to providing appropriate sentence plans and regimes for life-sentenced and other long-term prisoners (Rule 103.8).

*A note on the use of temporary release*

The use of structured release on a temporary basis is considered of utmost importance in preparation for transition from life in prison to life back in the community. The 1982 Council of Europe Recommendation on Prison Leave (Council of Europe, 1982) considers temporary release a means of facilitating the social reintegration of prisoners and urges national authorities to grant prisoners leave to the greatest possible extent, 'not only on medical, family and social grounds but also for educational and occupational purposes' (van Zyl Smit and Snacken, 2009). In van Zyl Smit and Snacken's view,

Procedures for early release are of particular importance because of their role in limiting the overall use of imprisonment ... and assisting with reintegration of prisoners.

As stated in the data above, in June 2010 almost 1,000 prisoners were on TR in the community. The main concern with the use of TR in Ireland has been that it is mainly used as a 'safety valve' to release pressure on prison places rather than to support reintegration in any meaningful way. While there are obvious advantages to the use of TR as a measure that in effect improves conditions in prisons through preventing even higher levels of overcrowding, the overall balance appears to be tilted towards such narrow use. Opportunities may therefore be missed in relation to its use as a preparatory resource in planning for eventual release.

In the course of the study, the authors found that the lack of planning for release, and the continuing use of TR to relieve pressure on prison spaces rather than using it as a structured tool to support post-release

integration back into the community, impact negatively on ex-prisoners' access to post-release support (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). One of the ex-prisoners, in interview, stated about his experience that:

you are told at 6.20 pm that you are supposed to pack because you are coming out; couple of hours later you are out.

This experience is in line with the findings of the Brown, Evans and Payne (2009) report which states that:

Many current and ex-prisoners interviewed noted that, prior to release, there was little preparation for release, bar ensuring that prisoners had provided a release address. Current and ex-prisoners and practitioners noted that the short notice periods often given to prisoners of their release can affect the co-ordination that can take place. Those serving short sentences or released on Temporary Release (TR) are often only given, at most, a few days' notice. Some ex-prisoners reported they were only told on the day of their release and given a few minutes to pack their bags.

The authors' research confirms that prisoners are often given only short notice of their release, and that many are still released at times when accessing support is particularly difficult – on Friday evenings and on Saturdays (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). This appears to be particularly true for prisons experiencing overcrowding, where there is need to free-up places at short notice to take in prisoners committed by the Courts. It mostly applies to prisoners on short sentences or those who have already been assessed as suitable for early release. Short notice of release may undermine the work being done with a prisoner prior to release. Some of the service providers noted that this can lead to prisoners being 'lost' by their organisations on release, or the vital support needed in the first few days post-release is not provided at all (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

#### *Provision of information regarding available services and access*

Of great concern to the authors in this study was the fact that even where services are available in prison and in the community, information about what is available is not always provided on committal to prison, during the sentence or in preparation for release (Martynowicz and Quigley,

2010). Former prisoners interviewed for the study stated that they were often left to their own devices in relation to finding out what services were available during the sentence and how to access them. Often such information was gained only through their contacts with other prisoners and not from those charged with providing custody or services.

Additionally, during the course of the research the authors found that prison culture has a significant impact on the ability and willingness of prisoners to access services available to them in prisons – a situation that has a knock-on effect on their willingness and ability to access services on release (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). This is of particular concern.

As in the Brown et al. (2009) research, interviewees stated that not only can their relationships with other prisoners negatively impact on access to services (for instance, when a prisoner experiences bullying due to their willingness to engage with Community Welfare Officers or with Probation Officers) but – more worryingly – their relationship with some prison staff can have the same effect, with access made harder as informal ‘punishment’ for breaches of discipline (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). This finding is of particular concern, as prevention of access to services and information as a disciplinary measure is wholly inappropriate and should, if it is practised, cease.

## **Selected research findings – Areas of need**

### *A list of priorities*

All those who participated in the study (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010) were asked to provide their ‘wish list’ – a list of services or other provisions that would make their work on reintegration easier and more effective or, in the case of ex-prisoners, would contribute to an easier transition to life in the community following a period in custody.

Respondents pointed to the need for extensive improvements in many areas, including provision of mental health services; increased provision of addiction counselling and other addiction services; provision of accommodation on release, including transitional and supported housing; provision of ‘sheltered employment’; provision of programmes in the prisons dealing with offending behaviours; and provision of more structured activity in the prisons, including easier access to education and vocational training.

The next two sections present the findings of the study in relation to mental health provision and access to accommodation as two examples of issues where further improvements are most urgently needed.

*Mental health provision*

The 2006 report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy, *A Vision for Change*, asserted that:

every person with serious mental health problems coming into contact with the forensic system should be afforded the right of mental healthcare in the non-forensic mental health services. (Department of Health and Children, 2006)

In keeping with these recommendations, the Irish Prison Service has seen the introduction of the mental health Prison In-Reach and Court Liaison Service (PICLS) in Cloverhill remand prison provided by specialists from the Central Mental Hospital.<sup>7</sup> This service offers mental health screening and one of its core aims is to divert those with serious mental health problems away from the criminal justice system. In 2008 the service diverted 91 individuals to community-based mental health services, up from 19 such referrals in 2005.<sup>8</sup>

Despite some progress in the area of diversion to appropriate community-based mental health services, large numbers of individuals experiencing mental health difficulties continue to be imprisoned. While praising the work of projects such as the Prison In-Reach and Court Liaison project operating in Cloverhill Prison in Dublin, service providers commented on the ongoing inadequacy of mental health provision across the prison system, and the often-experienced difficulties of linking ex-prisoners with services on release (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

*Accommodation and homelessness*

Homelessness and the provision of suitable accommodation was by far the most frequently mentioned difficulty facing prisoners and the service providers supporting them on release (all findings in this section are from Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). It is clear from our research that improvements have been made in provision of assistance to address homelessness on release, in particular through initiatives such as the in-reach service provided by Focus Ireland in Dublin, Cork and Limerick,

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the Prison In-Reach and Court Liaison Service see [www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/8B71583417C5138080257444003F95FC/\\$File/paper03\\_conor\\_oneill.htm](http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/8B71583417C5138080257444003F95FC/$File/paper03_conor_oneill.htm)

<sup>8</sup> 'Project diverted 91 mentally ill prisoners', *The Irish Times*, 17 October 2009.

as well as in-reach provided in 10 prisons by the Community Welfare Officers of the Health Service Executive's Homeless Persons' Unit.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that services such as Focus Ireland's in-reach are co-funded by the Irish Prison Service, increasing the capacity of community-based providers in prisons.

On the other hand, it is important to note that former prisoners reported that on release they were often provided only with a free-phone number that they could contact to arrange short-term, emergency accommodation, often of a very low standard. Service providers reported facing additional problems in securing accommodation for particular groups of ex-prisoners: foreign national prisoners not entitled to State assistance; ex-prisoners with mental health needs and/or drug addictions; sex-offenders and those who had been convicted for arson.

Of particular concern was what appears to be a complete lack of appropriate accommodation for ex-prisoners presenting with dual diagnosis of mental health difficulties and drug addiction. This, combined with virtually non-existent provision of other services required by this particular group, leads to significant gaps in support for this high-need population.

Service providers offering assistance in the area of homelessness are concerned that local councils are not keen on placing prisoners and ex-prisoners on their housing lists, and expressed a view that a history of imprisonment can seriously hinder the individual's chances of obtaining council-owned accommodation. One of the interviewees commented that if prisoners 'ring from within the prison, the chances [of getting on the housing list] are nil'.

Lack of fixed release dates also appears to prevent a number of prisoners from registering on housing lists, and makes it difficult for community-based service providers to offer support on this. Interviewees stated that all local authorities should be required to treat ex-prisoners in housing need as a priority group and should not be able to refuse assessment or refuse to place someone on their housing list because of criminal convictions.

<sup>9</sup> Figures for 2009 indicate that 759 prisoners accessed assistance provided by the Community Welfare Officers alone (additional information supplied by the Irish Prison Service in correspondence with IPRT researcher, April 2010).

## Conclusions

Not all ex-prisoners will engage with reintegration services; not all prisoners require such engagement or are willing or ready to avail of the support available. For those who choose to engage, such provision is vital if they are to be successful in staying out of prison. The former prisoners interviewed for our research were determined to improve their lives and were highly motivated. At the same time they acknowledged that it was the support offered by community-based projects that helped them to overcome the initial shock of coming out of prison (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

The needs of prisoners returning to their communities following release are vast (Bedford Row, 2007; Brown et al., 2009). This has been confirmed by the authors' study in which practitioners as well as former prisoners identified the need for extensive improvements in areas such as mental health support, addiction counselling, homelessness, education and provision of information (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010).

It is therefore of concern that recent budget cuts are resulting in increasing caseloads for professionals working in the field and often threaten the very existence of services, particularly those led by voluntary and community organisations (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). This is happening against the backdrop of ever-increasing numbers of people imprisoned in Ireland, and an ever-increasing number of people who are likely to be in need of support following release from prisons.

Some important initiatives in service provision have been developed in recent years. It is clear from the authors' study that organisations in both the statutory and voluntary sectors provide high-quality services that support significant numbers of ex-prisoners on release. It remains true, however, that equivalence of provision is yet to be achieved across the Irish Prison Service, the Probation Service and in the support offered to and by community-based projects. It needs to be kept in mind that effective reintegration of prisoners is central not only to their individual progress and moving away from crime (desistance from crime), and to prevention of continuous returns to prison, but also to a reduction in overall number of people imprisoned in Ireland.

Considering the high cost of providing prison places, it is clearly in the interest of the State to invest in post-release support and it is in the interest of society to support such investment.

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