Ageing Prisoners in Ireland: Issues for Probation and Social Work

Jan Alvey*

Summary: Interest in older prisoners is gaining momentum, and this is reflected in research undertaken in the USA and the UK over the past decade. Studies on this sub-population of prisoners have focused on prevalence, profile, specific health and social needs, and raised questions about how different sectors of the criminal justice sector should be adjusting policy and practice in response. Attention has also been directed to what probation/social work has to offer to older prisoners and their specific needs. This paper presents a review of the literature relating to older male prisoners alongside key findings from a research study undertaken in an Irish prison in 2011. The research study was conducted using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, and sought to provide a preliminary description of ageing male prisoners and their specific needs in Ireland. The implications of these findings for social work/probation policy and practice are considered, and directions for future service provision are recommended. Further insights into the circumstances of older men imprisoned in Ireland are offered to the various professionals (including Probation Service/social work staff) working in the criminal justice system who strive towards providing ‘prisoner well-being’ and a ‘duty of care’.

Keywords: Older male prisoners, older prisoners’ needs, Irish prisoners, probation, social work, social work response to working with older prisoners, social work policy and practice with older prisoners.