Strengthening prisoner transition to create a safer Victoria

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JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES

BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

"Three things are needed by people upon their release from prison; a place to live that is decent, a job that they can handle and friendship, and the hardest to provide is friendship."

Fr John Brosnan, former Chaplain of Pentridge Prison

Victoria's prison population has more than doubled over the past two decades from 2,272 in 1993 to 5,762 in 2013. This has resulted in significantly increased costs to Victorian taxpayers, with over $400 million extra spent on Victorian prisons in 2014, compared with 2004. Victoria is not alone, with national prison numbers and costs also increasing (Productivity Commission, 2014).

Nearly all people in prison are released at some stage; most within two years. In Victoria, 6,600 people were released from prison in 2012-13 (Victorian Ombudsman, 2014), many of whom will reoffend and return to prison.

In Victoria, over half of all prisoners have previously served a prison sentence (ABS, 2013).

Our modelling calculates some of the cost of this cycle of reoffending and the benefits that might be achieved if it is reduced. We utilised previous research by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research ('BOCSAR') (Weatherburn, Froyland, Moffatt & Corben, 2009) that developed a model for simulating the impacts on prison populations of reductions in reoffending rates or the number of new entrants to the prison system.

Table 1 outlines the findings of applying the BOCSAR model to Victoria. It shows, for example, that a 15 per cent reduction in the rate of reoffending would result in a reduction in the state's male prison population by 458 people over the long term. For young adult males (aged 18-24), the same reduction would lead to a decline of 149 people from the prison population over the long term.

Table 1

Reduction in reoffending rate	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%
Reduction in male prison population	35	167	319	458	586
Reduction in 18-24 year old male prison population	11	54	104	149	191

Looking at the potential cost savings outlined in Table 2, the same 15 per cent reduction is projected to result in cost savings to Corrections Victoria's annual expenditure of between $15.2 and $23.4 million over the long term. Further fiscal savings would accrue from similar reductions in the female reoffending rate.

Table 2

Reduction in reoffending rate	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%
Reduction in prison population	35	167	319	458	586
Cost savings at $91 per day per prisoner	$1.1 million	$5.5 million	$10.6 million	$15.2 million	$19.5 million
Cost savings at $140 per day per prisoner	$1.8 million	$8.5 million	$16.3 million	$23.4 million	$30.0 million

Far greater benefits to society could be estimated if we also accounted for the impact of reducing reoffending on crime, as the annual cost of crime in Victoria has been calculated at $9.8 billion (Smyth, 2011). However, our model only considers the direct savings to the Corrections budget.

This paper considers the reforms and investment needed to achieve this reduction in reoffending. Our analysis is drawn from Jesuit Social Services' long experience working with prisoners and ex-prisoners and is reinforced with evidence from the emerging international research on 'desistance' – the factors which contribute to people stopping offending (McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, & Maruna, 2012) (McNeill, 2012).

This analysis led us to focus on how we can improve our approach to transitioning people from prison to the community. However, we also recognise that in order to reduce reoffending and build safer communities, we must relentlessly target the disadvantage that lies at the heart of crime and have an evidence-informed criminal justice system focused on accountability, diversion, and restoration.

Understanding the needs and experiences of people returning to the community

Many prisoners have extremely difficult and often traumatic experiences returning to the community,

which exacerbate their likelihood of reoffending. Major issues that impact on their lives and experience transitioning from prison are outlined in Diagram 1 and include: unemployment, a lack of affordable and safe housing, poor physical and mental health, family violence, drug and alcohol addiction, child neglect and experiences of trauma, low educational attainment, and poor quality infrastructure and services. Particularly vulnerable groups include young people, women, and Aboriginal people.

For many prisoners, opportunities to rebuild their lives are often further compromised by exiting prison into communities where a web-like structure of disadvantage exists (Vinson, 2007). These disadvantaged communities are significantly overrepresented in our criminal justice system; 2.1 per cent of Victorian postcodes account for 25 per cent of prison admissions (Ericson & Vinson, 2011).

Significantly reducing reoffending relies on relentlessly targeting the disadvantage that underlies crime (Burnett & Maruna, 2004), (Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone, & Peeters, 2003), as well as responding to the more direct individual and community needs.

Diagram 1

Understanding the complexity of transitioning from prison to the community

Society	2.1 per cent of Victorian postcodes account for 25 per cent of prison admissions (Ericson & Vinson, 2011)	Aboriginal people in Victoria are 12 and a half times more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Victorian Government, 2013)	In 2010 every child in Victoria who had been remanded before age 13 was known to child protection (Jesuit Social Services, 2013)	A single person on Newstart Allowance can afford only 0.3 per cent of rental properties in Melbourne (CHP, 2014)
Community	75 per cent of a sample of people exiting prison who were seeking work were unemployed (Baldry et al, 2003)	People leaving prison experience increased risk of death and risk of overdose for substance misuse (Kinner et al, 2012)	High levels of loneliness and isolation and low levels of community acceptance and tolerance of ex-prisoners	
Household	87 per cent of women in prison are victims of sexual, emotional or physical abuse (Johnson, 2004)	43 per cent of people leaving prison expect to be homeless (AIHW, 2013)	40 per cent of people in prison have a relative who has been imprisoned (Lazarus & Rosewood, 2000)	
Individual	42 per cent of people in prison have a psychiatric risk rating (Victorian Ombudsman, 2014)	55 per cent of people in prison have alcohol and drug issues (AIHW, 2011)	42 per cent of males in prison have cognitive impairments (Parliament of Victoria Law Reform Committee, 2013)	6 per cent of males and 14 per cent of females in prison have completed secondary education or higher (Department of Justice, 2011)

Improving our approach to transitioning people from prison to the community

Jesuit Social Services' experience indicates that improving prisoner transition can contribute to reducing reoffending. This is supported by emerging research on 'desistance'.

The research shows that the key support needs for promoting desistance are: individualised approaches, building and maintaining hope, developing relationships, focusing on strengths, encouraging self-sufficiency, and enhancing social capital (McNeill, 2012). It is also clear that the process of 'desistance' is influenced by both individual and wider community factors, that it is very rarely straightforward and often involves relapses.

This evidence of what contributes to change must inform coherent policy around transition (Wright & Cesar, 2013) and comprehensive programs. Our proposals take into account the wide and complex range of individual, household, community, societal and systems factors that influence the transition experience. They aim to ensure every person who experiences imprisonment in Victoria is provided with the level of support that they need in order to have the best chance of transitioning successfully into the community. This recognises that fragmented and inconsistent approaches are unlikely to significantly improve transition and reduce reoffending and its associated costs.

These efforts need also to be complemented with further research to deepen the local evidence and practice around emerging international work on desistance (Decarpes & Durnescu, 2013). While the need for further research does not preclude immediate action, it should purposefully inform ongoing program development.

Priority areas for reform

Through our own experience, research and consultation Jesuit Social Services has identified a range of issues that need to be addressed in order to improve prisoner transition and reduce reoffending. Addressing these will take time and require ongoing attention from both government and the community. It will require upfront investment in order to achieve savings over time. We have identified two priority areas of action that should be resourced and implemented immediately. These immediate actions would provide the starting point for a longer process to improve transition which will ultimately contribute to reducing reoffending, building a safer community, and a less costly corrections system in the long term.

Priority Reform: A collective approach to improving transition

People exiting prison often experience the consequences of the failure to pursue a coordinated and evidence-informed approach towards reducing reoffending. Too often, they interact with support service systems that are under-resourced, fragmented and working towards inconsistent aims, (Victorian Ombudsman, 2014).

While policy and systems coordination can be difficult to achieve, social services and criminal justice systems in American cities such as Cincinnati (Strive Partnership, 2013), Norway (Ploeg, 2011) and New Zealand have demonstrated an ability to achieve 'collective impact', including impressive progress in New Zealand of working towards a target of reducing reoffending by 25 per cent (Comptroller and Auditor General (NZ), 2013). These efforts have demonstrated success where they have purposefully brought stakeholders together to identify common goals, a shared analysis of complex problems, and shared targets.

Victoria can draw from these examples and pursue a focused, collaborative process, with strong authorisation from government. This will allow gaps to be identified, system issues addressed and the necessary resources leveraged to effectively improve support for people transitioning from prison.

This collective approach recognises that people exiting prison have complex and diverse needs and that isolated initiatives, on their own, will not produce the broad changes needed. Many, if not most, of these people are users of multiple government and non government services. Ultimately, a common agenda will lead to better planning, pooling of resources, integrated record keeping and information sharing systems, impact evaluations, and investment in the most effective approaches to reducing reoffending. It will allow many wider issues and longer term reforms to be realised.

Recommendation 1

The Victorian Government commit to achieving a 15 per cent reduction in reoffending over the next five years. The Department of Premier and Cabinet initiate and chair a process across government and the community to achieve this target that is informed by 'collective impact' principles and practice.

Priority Reform: Longer, deeper and fuller support targeted at highly vulnerable people

People exiting prison in Victoria include some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community, yet the support they are provided with is extremely limited. Annual expenditure of $3.5 million provides a maximum of 30 contact hours of support to only 695 of the approximately 6,600 people leaving prison each year (Victorian Ombudsman, 2014), with most of this group receiving less intensive support (between three and 22 contact hours). The limited nature of transitional support makes it a challenge for those who work with people exiting prison to adequately address the problems that they face. In particular, the lack of available housing places a significant burden on transitional services staff, compromising their capacity to address other important problems.

A key element of improving transition must be an immediate strengthening of the support offered to highly vulnerable people exiting prison. This increased investment should also allow for intensive transitional support to be provided to more people, in recognition of the fact that high levels of issues such as mental illness, alcohol and drug dependency, homelessness, and disability in the prison population mean that more than 695 people are in need of support.

The support provided under expanded transitional support services should be longer, deeper and fuller than under the current model. In practice this will mean:

Longer – Current limits on the length of support are arbitrary and a new model should allow for support over longer periods of time. Intensity and duration of support are important factors in the success of programs working with people in the justice system, including engaging prior to release from custody (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).

Deeper – A therapeutic, trauma-informed approach focused on building capabilities and increasing 'soft skills' reduces incarceration risks (Reeder & Aylott 2012). Promising relationship building approaches such as mentoring and 'Circles of Support' could also be utilised (Fox, 2012).

Fuller – People exiting custody have multiple and complex needs requiring integrated, whole of government responses. Existing efforts to integrate services and funding in Victoria, such as the Multiple and Complex Needs Initiative ('MACNI') and Services Connect provide potential approaches that could be utilised. The availability of a flexible range of secure and stable accommodation, including with

ongoing support, is crucial. The effectiveness of intensive supported housing approaches has been demonstrated through initiatives such as Next Steps (a program of Jesuit Social Services) and the Journey to Social Inclusion (a program of Sacred Heart Mission). Cost benefit analyses of intensive support approaches show that upfront expenses have the potential to be offset over time by wider savings to the community (Johnson, Kuehnle, Parkinson, Sesa, & Tseng, 2014).

Recommendation 2

The Victorian Government invest in the development and evaluation of an expanded model of transitional support services that are targeted at people exiting prison who have been assessed as highly vulnerable. This should include trialling and evaluating new approaches to supporting vulnerable cohorts such as: women; 18-24 year old men; Aboriginal men; Aboriginal women; and people in prison with histories of homelessness.

Longer-term reforms: building an effective approach for all people exiting custody

Recommendations 1 and 2 will begin the process of reforming the approach to people exiting prison in Victoria. However, longer term action is also required to address wider issues around family and community connections as well as interactions with the social services system. Through our experience, research and consultation we have identified areas for longer term action which are outlined below.

Long-term reform: A seamless approach to transition from prison that operates from end to end

The need to begin early and develop a continuous approach to preparing people in prison for return to the community is something that has been identified in research (Maguie & Raynor, 2006). The need to improve Victoria's approach to preparing people for release from prison was identified in the Callinan review into parole (Callinan, 2013) and the recent Ombudsman's *Report into Deaths and Harm in Custody* (2014). A seamless approach to transition can be complemented by staged processes of release from prison (Decarpes & Durnescu, 2013). The Judy Lazarus Centre in Melbourne provides a model of staged release focused on fostering

community connections and participation in training and employment prior' to the formal end of a prison sentence. This type of model is being expanded elsewhere, including the United Kingdom where there are plans to create 70 resettlement prisons (Grayling, 2013).

are being utilised to rebuild social relationships and community connections for people exiting prison in the American state of Vermont, whilst in Denmark, the High Five initiative directly advocates to major employers and society to reduce employment stigma experienced by people exiting prison.

Recommendation 3

The Victorian Government ensure there is a proactive, planned and well resourced approach to preparing every person in prison for transition back into the community.

This will include:

- Sophisticated assessment early in a sentence covering housing, health, family, education, and employment needs

- Co-ordinated planning and support to address these needs pre-release and build wellbeing and social connections prior to release

- Options for staged release, including expansion of the Judy Lazarus Centre model of transitional release and opportunities to undertake employment pre-release.

Long-term reform: Connections to family & community

Many people struggle to rebuild stable links to family and community on release from prison partly because many people in the community are uncomfortable working with or living near people who have been in prison (Hardcastle, Bartholomew, & Graffam, 2011). This is a critical issue to address, as meaningful relationships and community connections are directly linked to health and wellbeing (Furlong, 2013) and play an important role in successful transitions from custody to the community (Bazemore & Erbe, 2004).

Promising initiatives in Victoria that build relationships and community connections include mentoring programs for members of the African community in prison (AVAMP – Jesuit Social Services) and women (The Women's Mentoring Program – VACRO) as well as Aboriginal community building work (Konnect – Jesuit Social Services) and support for children and families of people in prison (SKY program – VACRO). Overseas, restorative justice principles and practices

Recommendation 4

The Victorian Government expand existing initiatives and pilot and evaluate new projects focused on building the capability of Victorian families and communities to support people leaving prison.

Examples of initiatives might include:

- Community and family support workers, with a particular focus on specific cultural communities such as Aboriginal, Pacific Islander, or African communities

- Using restorative justice practices in the transition process

- Community mentoring – building on the good work of the African Visitation and Mentoring Program and Women's Mentoring Program and developing other mentoring approaches

- Engagement with education/employers to develop opportunities for people exiting prison including initiatives bringing employers and community together.

Long-term reform: Housing

Around 43 per cent of prisoners exit custody into homelessness (AIHW, 2013). Given safe and affordable housing is fundamental to people's ability to get their lives back on track, it is vital that housing issues be resolved prior to release from prison. A range of appropriate housing options is needed, as well as support to maintain housing (Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone, & Peeters, 2003) (Willis, 2004). Victoria has had several housing initiatives supporting people leaving prisons; however no systemic approach to housing has been developed.

Recommendation 5

The Victorian Government prevent homelessness among people exiting prison by delivering a diverse range of housing and support options that meet their needs.

Examples of housing initiatives might include:

- A single housing access point and support service for people in the justice system

- A rental brokerage service supporting people exiting prison to access private rental

- Accommodation and intensive therapeutic support for people with complex needs and challenging behaviours.

Long-term reform: Access to health services

Evidence of a decline in the health of people exiting prison, including heightened risk of death (Kinner, Streitberg, Butler, & Levy, 2012) should compel action to provide a seamless transition between health services in custody and those in the community. This extends beyond primary health services, and includes mental health, alcohol and drug, and disability services. Australian Medical Association (2012) and Victorian Ombudsman (2014) have called for Medicare coverage to be extended to cover services in prison.

Recommendation 6

The Victorian Government put in place processes to enable a seamless transition between health, disability, and alcohol and drug services in and out of custody. This should include working with the Commonwealth Government and community services to ensure access to services through Medicare and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Long-term reform: Education, Training and Employment

Two thirds of Victorian prisoners are unemployed prior to prison and only 6 per cent of male and 14 per cent of female prisoners have completed secondary education or higher (Department of Justice, 2011). Further, only 38.1 per cent of eligible people in prison in 2012-13 were enrolled in education programs (Productivity Commission, 2014), which are rationed and not consistently available. Most prisoners exit custody into further unemployment. Pathways into learning and work must be strengthened. The Sentenced to a Job initiative in the Northern Territory seeks to do this by joining up training and prison industries with employment opportunities during custody and on release. Local labour force demands are having a greater influence on the operation of this initiative.

Recommendation 7

The Victorian Government increase investment in prisoner education to drive up the education participation rates of Victorian prisoners, including hard to reach learners, and develop pathways to training, education and work opportunities in the community.

Long-term reform: Parole

Recent reforms to the Victorian parole system saw a 43.6 per cent increase in the number of parole applications that were denied in 2012-13. This followed the Callinan review of parole, which accepted the role parole plays in supporting release into the community but also emphasised that parole is a concession for good behaviour and that risks needed to be mitigated (Callinan, 2013). The growing number of people who have had their parole denied will eventually be released into the community without supervision. There is a real risk that this will diminish the positive role that the parole system can play in the transition experience and undermine its contribution to reducing reoffending (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2012).

Recommendation 8

The Victorian Government and Sentencing Advisory Council closely monitor the impact of the implementation of the Callinan parole review reforms to ensure that the parole system provides effective supervision and support for prisoners transitioning into the community.

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