

Summary

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Released and homeless

Homelessness and housing after imprisonment

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The “housing and homelessness after imprisonment” project was commissioned by the Norwegian State Housing Bank. One important goal of the project was to acquire and document knowledge about the inmates’ housing situation after release from prison. The results are reported here. The report is based on several sources of data. The two most important were a survey of inmates in a selection of prisons and a modified form of network interviews with an inmate, the inmate’s contact office – or the social consultant in the prison in those cases where the inmate did not have a contact officer – and the inmate’s caseworker at the social welfare office in his or her home local authority.

The principal asked for light to be shed on a series of issues associated with the post-release housing situation. These are described in more detail in chapter two. The data collection itself, the choice of methodology and execution, and the analyses and presentation of the findings were structured such that they could provide answers to the questions. Furthermore, this means that the report is organised around these issues. The data collection, especially the quantitative part, also yields background information that is indirectly associated with the housing situation. The report presents these findings.

Inmates and homeless people

The issues in the project are associated with the government’s strategy to counteract homelessness. One of the goals of this strategy is that no one should spend time in temporary provision after release from prison. From this perspective it is interesting to compare some characteristics of homeless people as a group and inmates as a group. The comparison is based on data from the questionnaire for inmates

and a nationwide survey of homelessness, which was conducted at the same time (autumn 2005). Both of these groups are compared with the general population.

The surveys show that inmates and homeless people have a number of shared characteristics and that both groups stand out from the general population. Both inmates and homeless people have a clearly younger profile than the population as a whole. Both groups have lower education levels and weaker ties to the labour market than the general population. However, there are also some marked differences between inmates and homeless people. Overall, inmates have more resources – social, cultural and financial capital – than homeless people. Inmates have stronger ties to the labour market measured by percentage of wages or social benefits in relation to the labour market as a source of income than homeless people. The level of education among inmates is clearly lower than in general population, but is higher than among homeless people. The data indicate a division among inmates. Those with the highest education have also spent the most years in paid work. Inmates with a number of years in paid work often also had wages as the most important source of income in the last month prior to their imprisonment.

Family and belonging

Inmates are to a far lesser degree settled with families than the general population and also in this area are more similar to homeless people. More than two thirds of all the inmates are single (88 percent among homeless people). In the general population more than 60 percent are in couple relationships. Almost half of the inmates have their own children under 18 years old, but had varying degrees of contact with their children prior to their imprisonment starting. 16 percent of all inmates were responsible for the day-to-day care of their own children prior to imprisonment.

The survey wanted to shed light on the extent to which the inmates' lives were characterised by stability or moving. Two out of five state that they grew up in a local authority or country other than where they lived immediately prior to their imprisonment. One third of all the inmates were born in a country other than Norway. This is a higher than the proportion of people with ethnic minority backgrounds among inmates in general.

59 percent lived in owned or rented housing prior to their imprisonment. 28 percent lived with others (family, relatives, girlfriend/boyfriend, friends) and nine percent lived in temporary provision or on the street. The remaining four percent lived in

institutions or with foster families. Among those who lived with others were some who lived with their parents. However, there is reason to assume that many of those who lived with others were in an unstable and temporary housing situation. The findings from this survey thus confirm earlier findings; namely that two thirds had housing prior to imprisonment. One third must be regarded as homeless.

The time they had lived in the housing prior to their imprisonment was short: three and a half years on average. Those who own/owned housing and those who lived with family and relatives, had lived in the housing the longest. The time they had lived in temporary provision, specified in the questionnaire as “e.g. shelter/boarded house/night shelter/camping cabin”, is also very high, namely two years.

Housing during imprisonment

The housing situation develops negatively during imprisonment. Two thirds state that they do not have housing while they are in prison. 14 percent of the inmates have owned housing and 23 percent rented housing while they are in prison. The data show that there is a clear correlation between owning or renting housing prior to imprisonment and having housing during imprisonment. It is particularly housing owners who retain their housing. A few of those who say they were without housing upon imprisonment say they have housing during imprisonment. In other words there are some who obtain housing during their imprisonment, but these are the exceptions.

Two thirds of inmates state that they shall move to the local authority they were resident in during their imprisonment or to the country they came from prior to their imprisonment. The majority of the last one third – one out of four in total – either answer “other” or did not answer the question at all. This may indicate that many people are unsure of where they are going to live after release.

Even though two thirds reckon they will move back to the same local authority they lived in prior to imprisonment, this does not mean they have housing there. Only a minority of 28 percent say they shall or expect to move into their own housing after release. There are no differences between convicted inmates and inmates on remand. The others – 72 percent – are in an uncertain housing situation or they respond that they do not have housing: less than one quarter – 22 percent – say they expect to purchase or rent housing upon release. Only six percent of inmates on remand state they expect to obtain housing upon release.

One out of five expect to live with others – friends, girlfriend/boyfriend, family or relatives – three percent say they are going into an institution and one out of five answer temporary provision or “do not know”. Seven percent answer “other” and the additional information from this group shows that they either do not know where they are going to move to, they clearly state that they have nowhere to live, or they state temporary alternatives. Inmates on remand are somewhat worse off than convicted inmates: fewer people on remand have their own – owned or rented – housing and fewer believe they will obtain housing upon release than is the case with convicted inmates.

Housing after release

A survey conducted of people who are still imprisoned will not provide a completely precise description of the post-release housing situation. But the definition from the survey of the homeless people, i.e. people who are going to be released within two months and who lack housing, is a good measure of the post-release housing situation. The proportion who state they are going to move into their own – owned or rented – housing increases somewhat as release approaches. 31 percent of all those who are going to be released in two months or sooner have their own housing. The survey again confirms that inmates on remand are in a worse situation than convicted inmates: 37 percent of the convicted inmates and 17 percent of the inmates on remand state they have their own housing. However, the proportion that expects to purchase or rent their own housing after imprisonment lessens as the moment of release approaches.

Almost one third of those who have two months or less left of their imprisonment state they are going to live in temporary provision or that they do not know where they are going to live. One out of four state that they are going to live with others.

Two thirds are homeless two months or less before release by the definition used in the three surveys of homelessness. This study, both the quantitative and qualitative data confirms that it is too late to start solving the housing problems two months before release.

Number of homeless upon release

One third thus lose their housing during imprisonment, and only the exception obtain housing prior to release. The imprisonment itself creates homelessness. Using the logistic regression analysis technique provides an opportunity to look for correlations between several background variables or characteristics of the inmates, which may

help to explain who has and who does not have their own housing upon release.

The most important explanation why inmates have housing upon release is that they have housing prior to imprisonment. Owned housing prior to imprisonment especially is of more dramatic significance than any of the other characteristics (resources) of the inmates. Civil status, having a cohabiting partner or spouse, is also of great significance. People with wages as a source of income also have a clearly greater chance of having housing upon release than people on benefits, social financial support, and crime as the most important source of income. Age, education, previous periods of imprisonment, and country of birth (Norway versus other countries) are of relatively little or minimal significance.

A total of 9,689 people were released from Norwegian prisons in 2005. This figure has been relatively stable during the last five years. Based on the number of releases and this survey we find that the number of releases to temporary provision or uncertain/no provision is 4,000 during the space of a year. A large number who say they are going to live with others are with overwhelmingly likelihood homeless. If this number of releases is included, homelessness approaches 6,000. Most periods of imprisonment are short and more than half have more than one period of imprisonment behind them. Behind these figures we can therefore find the same person more than once. In this case, this indicates that homelessness is a permanent condition for one group of inmates.

Inmates' assessments

The majority of the inmates believe they need help to obtain housing. They have little access to housing adverts in prison and are not very familiar with the housing market. Less than half believe that the social services in and outside prison will help with housing and even fewer have faith in cooperation between the two. Inmates have greater faith in family and friends helping them obtain housing and just as many think they will find housing on their own.

The majority also believe that private landlords do not want to rent out to former inmates and housing applicants who are in prison. Several believe that the local authority will rent out to former inmates. A very large proportion state that they will not receive a mortgage to purchase housing and that they have debt which makes it difficult to acquire housing. A large majority state they do not have a substance abuse problem that makes it difficult to retain housing. However, almost half believe they need help in the housing.

Inmates and the housing situation – the interviews

The interviews with inmates, prison staff and social welfare offices confirm and support the problems associated with retaining housing during imprisonment. Several of the interviewees among the inmates, who had housing, say that they lost their housing at the start of their imprisonment. Finances were stated as the most important reason. They could not afford to retain their housing during imprisonment when their source of income disappeared.

All of the inmates highlight housing's key importance as a basis for a good life after serving a period of imprisonment. The wish for permanent housing – owned or rented – is widespread and is strong. At the same time the survey highlights a variation in the desired form of housing upon release. While most want to move right from prison to permanent housing, there are some who want suitable housing provision as a sort of soft transition to living outside prison. This encompasses good but temporary forms of housing such as housing with follow-up services, places in rehabilitation institutions, or living with one's mother and father. All three groups of actors unanimously agree that there are three critical factors: having housing upon release, that the housing is ready in good time, and that the provision is tailored for the individual.

Many inmates perceive themselves to be in a very vulnerable position in the housing market for a number of reasons. This partly has to do with problem identities that society ascribes to inmates and partly to being in a vulnerable financial and social position, including loss of income, housing and assets.

The three groups of actors highlighted the following three important factors as critical for an inmate's chances of obtaining and keeping housing: the inmate's motivation and driving force, the inmate's resources of various kinds, and the inmate's family situation and network. These factors each play an independent role and interact between themselves. Income opportunities and debt, substance and psychological problems together with family situation – especially the relationship with parents or partners – are highlighted as very decisive.

The prison's role in the work on finding housing

The interviews revealed that many of the relationships between inmates and contact officers are characterised by trust and a large degree of mutual respect, especially in lower security prisons, and that the contact officer's assistance has in many cases been crucial with

respect to the inmate having obtained permanent housing to go to when released. At the same time two out of three prisoners do not have housing to go to less than two months prior to release.

The contact officers play a central role in the work on finding housing. All of the inmates we interviewed had contact with their contact officer, though several report previous periods of imprisonment in high security prisons where they were not assigned a contact officer or were never in contact with him or her. The contact officers emphasise that housing is on the agenda in their work with the inmates. The goal is that the housing situation should be analysed at the start of the period of imprisonment, but many report that the work is often delayed. In the case of inmates that do not have housing during the period of imprisonment, several contact officers say that they regard a situation in which one would start the job of looking for housing around six months prior to release would be desirable. As a rule contact is made between two and six months prior to release. The contact officers believe that one "is late" if contact with the home local authority is made only to months prior to release. It is either the inmate himself or herself or the contact officer, acting on the inmate's behalf and with his or her permission, who contacts the social welfare or housing office in the inmate's home local authority.

Easier to obtain housing from lower security prison

One clear finding is that there are big differences between inmates in lower security prisons and inmates in high security prisons. All three of the groups of actors who were interviewed were of the clear opinion that the follow-up regarding housing is generally better among inmates in lower security prisons.

The inmates in lower security prisons report that they generally have better access to housing adverts through newspapers and the Internet, as well as better access to telephones and opportunities to go to viewings. Their opportunities are also better when it comes to participating in meetings with social services or other outside the prison, and to meet social services or other official agencies inside the prison. The contact officers in lower security prisons reinforce this understanding. They report that on the whole they have greater opportunities and resources to contribute to the process of finding housing than prison staff in high security prisons. It appears that these differences between prisons with various levels of security are primarily to do with the framework conditions such as time and resources, as well as security requirements.

The local authority's role

A local authority's housing finding resources include financial housing support, local authority housing, housing provision with various follow-up services, and housing provision within various treatment institutions. Within all these four categories the local authorities often cooperate with other public agencies (the Norwegian State Housing Bank, National Insurance Office, etc) or voluntary organisations (The Church City Mission, the Salvation Army, etc).

Despite the aforementioned resources associated with housing there are two factors in particular that make it difficult to retain housing during imprisonment: firstly, as a rule, the inmate loses his or her source of income and secondly the social welfare office's willingness to pay housing expenses for inmates is relatively limited. In addition, many inmates are in debt. Several contact officers and caseworkers at the social welfare offices point out that the greatest challenge linked to debt is to put in place a debt repayment arrangement that makes it pay to be in work while at the same time the debt is dealt with. Unofficial debt or 'undeclared' debt is a form of debt that can be even more difficult to deal with. It is almost impossible for public agencies or other actors to help with such 'undeclared' debt.

Social services and social welfare

In the local authority it is usually the social services that are in direct contact with the inmate and the prison with respect to the issue of housing. Inmates without income are entitled to social welfare during imprisonment. However, this is most often a limited amount and the amount itself varies from social welfare office to social welfare office. One key challenge associated with social welfare is to do with the extent to which the social welfare office regards paying rent for part or all of a period of imprisonment as legitimate. This applies to both inmates who want to retain housing during imprisonment and for inmates who are offered a tenancy agreement just prior to release. Many contact officers and inmates have experienced that it is difficult to get local authorities to pay housing expenses in such cases, and want greater flexibility and longer-term perspectives in such cases. Caseworkers at social welfare offices report somewhat varying practices in this area. Most state that they pay rent for periods of imprisonment of up to six months.

The social welfare offices rely on receiving notification about housing needs from inmates who either need assistance to obtain housing or to retain housing. The moment at which a social welfare office receives notification about a housing need from an inmate varies. It most often

happens towards the end of a period of imprisonment, though the social welfare offices also state that they have received such notification before, during or after a period of imprisonment. The greatest chance of a good solution being found exists if the social welfare office is informed prior to the period of imprisonment, which means that they can also assist inmates who have housing to retain it during their imprisonment. In the case of inmates who either did not have housing upon imprisonment or have lost it during imprisonment it is vital that the social welfare office receive notification of an upcoming housing need in good time prior to release, preferably six months in advance. All caseworkers have however experienced that an inmate first makes contact when the person concerned is released and is standing there with nowhere to live. In such uncertain situations one must, as a rule, resort to temporary solutions that are very unsatisfactory. All of the caseworkers at the social welfare offices emphasise that work on finding housing prior to release from prison should begin earlier.