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POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE





PREVENT HOMELESSNESS AND REDUCE REOFFENDING

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PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS needs to be central to the delivery of community justice in Scotland. The lack of a stable, safe and affordable home on release from prison brings an increased likelihood of reoffending. The solution is to find a secure home and offer a range of support services to people while they are in prison and after their release.

A 2013 Scottish prisoners survey found that 49% had lost their accommodation when they went inside (Carnie et al, 2013). This is not a small, isolated or localised problem, but one that affects thousands of people and their families each year. In 2014/2015, 6% of homeless applications in Scotland came from people leaving prison (Scottish Government, 2015). For particular vulnerable groups there is an increased level of risk of homelessness, for example women (Lidell Thompson, 2015). Our research has shown this destructive cycle can be prevented (Shelter Scotland, 2015).

We have been working with prisoners to prevent homelessness since 1999. For the past three years we have been working with partners at Sacro and Inverness Citizens Advice Bureau to provide the Supporting Prisoners; Advice Network (SPAN). In 2014, SPAN supported 467 people across HMP Perth, Grampian and Inverness.

Our research provides evidence for the foundational role that stable housing has in promoting desistance. We wanted to understand what mattered for them, what works and what doesn't work from their perspective about housing, and to promote the voice of people with lived experience in planning future services and systems.

The interviews gave us a valuable, and often poignant, insight into our service users' stories and opinions. Interviewees shared their high levels of anxiety, fear of being released to accommodation that would set them back, and their overwhelming sense of being at the mercy of systems they do not understand. What happens to personal belongings, support from family and communication from professionals were key concerns. Perhaps most powerfully, we heard just how much having a home to return to matters to people in custody. A home meant far more than just accommodation for the people we spoke to: it represented a sanctuary, something to have pride in and safety for the future.

Crucially, participants strongly believed that having a home of their own would reduce the chance that they would re-offend. Almost all interviewees believed that they would have become homeless if they had not received help and that being homeless, or staying in unhelpful accommodation, would see them back in prison very quickly. During his time in custody one interviewee had witnessed several people consciously make the choice to reoffend so that they could avoid the danger and loneliness of the streets. In his words, "it shouldn't be like that in this day and age".

Our experience shows that it is possible to keep a tenancy during time in custody and, thus, to prevent homelessness. Of the 299 service users last year that had a tenancy when they entered prison, SPAN supported 250 (84%) to keep their tenancy when they were released. Often this had included intensive negotiation with landlords, linking with family members or getting involved with finances to put together payment plans. Prisoners felt they had benefited for having an independent voice to fight their corner.

The integrated nature of the service with other agencies, and good joint working between organisations, was found to make the difference in a lot of cases.

Behind the individual stories, we saw systems and processes that do not help and in some cases positively hinder, prisoners' housing pathways. To see real change it is crucial for this to be given priority in both strategic planning and practical implementation of community justice services.

At a strategic level, stable housing should be recognised as a foundation of desistance. Without a suitable place to call home, people are less able to engage in other things that form a positive route away from offending (Sapouna et al, 2011). Attending medical appointments, engaging regularly with support agencies or securing a job, for example, are all a lot less achievable when you do not have a secure base. The forthcoming national Community Justice Strategy and outcomes performance framework are important opportunities to ensure that we get this right for the 20,000 people that are liberated in Scotland each year.

The new model, including Community Justice Scotland as a national body, provides a chance to address the piecemeal nature of provision in Scotland. Currently, you are more likely to become homeless after release from some prisons. The disjointedness of services across the country does not correlate with the movement of prisoners around the prison estate. We are calling for a strategic investigation into how housing advice could be best delivered consistently in a way that ensures prisoners receive the same level of service, regardless of which prison they are in or where they are returning to.

In the Community Justice Bill the only recognition of housing is implicitly through the presence of local authorities as a named 'community justice partner'. Not only does this omit the important role that housing associations and the voluntary sector play in rehousing prison leavers, it also risks the prevention of homelessness being left out of the conversation altogether as local authorities will have multiple areas of concern. Shelter Scotland is calling for other housing partners to be given recognition in the Bill and for housing to be included as part of the national strategy that will drive plans at a local level.

Evidence from the interviews adds weight to the well-established case for the cost effectiveness of prevention and the 'spend-to-save' approach. The cost of not providing effective housing advice and support is significant and falls to many parties. Agitated prisoners require more supervision from prison officers; eviction costs fall to landlords; and homelessness processes cost local authorities thousands of pounds. The most significant price tag is the increased likelihood of re-offending. With the annual cost per prisoner place being calculated at £34,000, the cost to the public purse is high (Scottish Prison Service, 2014/2015). Financial resources must be made available for preventative services that secure positive housing outcomes for prisoners.

There are also things that can be done at a practice level to help as many people as possible to avoid the destructive cycle of homelessness and offending. We know that early intervention is crucial. Systems and processes need to be in place so that help can be available as early as possible to

increase the chances of a tenancy being saved. Promotion about potential housing issues is important and prisoners should be proactively asked on multiple occasions about their situation by prison officers who have been trained to understand basic housing issues. When a tenancy cannot be saved, homelessness assessments should be carried out prior to release. Early assessment not only avoids anxiety for the prisoner but will also help authorities plan for appropriate temporary accommodation to be available on the day of release. Nobody that SPAN has worked with has had to make an emergency homelessness application on the day of their release.

Thanks to Scotland's strong homelessness legislation and the work of local authority homelessness teams, most prisoners have better options than sleeping on the streets when they are released. Just giving someone a bed, however, is not enough (McHardy, 2010). Ongoing support is vital. The area that someone is accommodated in can be crucially important in their re-integration.

Many authorities face significant pressures on their temporary accommodation. However, based on the evidence of the importance of appropriate temporary accommodation identified in this research, alongside other previous research in this area (Sapouna et al, 2011), we recommend that local authorities change their homelessness procedures and allocation policies. Wherever possible accommodation should be made available that is in areas away from negative influences, to enable prison leavers to have a fresh start. For many prisoners this means that hostels are not the best place to help them avoid re-offending. One way to facilitate this is through making available a Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme and working with local landlords to provide accommodation, as SPAN has done successfully in partnership with Dundee City Council.

Until now housing has not been given the priority that's needed to underpin successful community reintegration and desistance. The voices of SPAN's service users in Shelter Scotland's recent research report highlight that having a home is a fundamental foundation that enables successful reintegration into the community on liberation.

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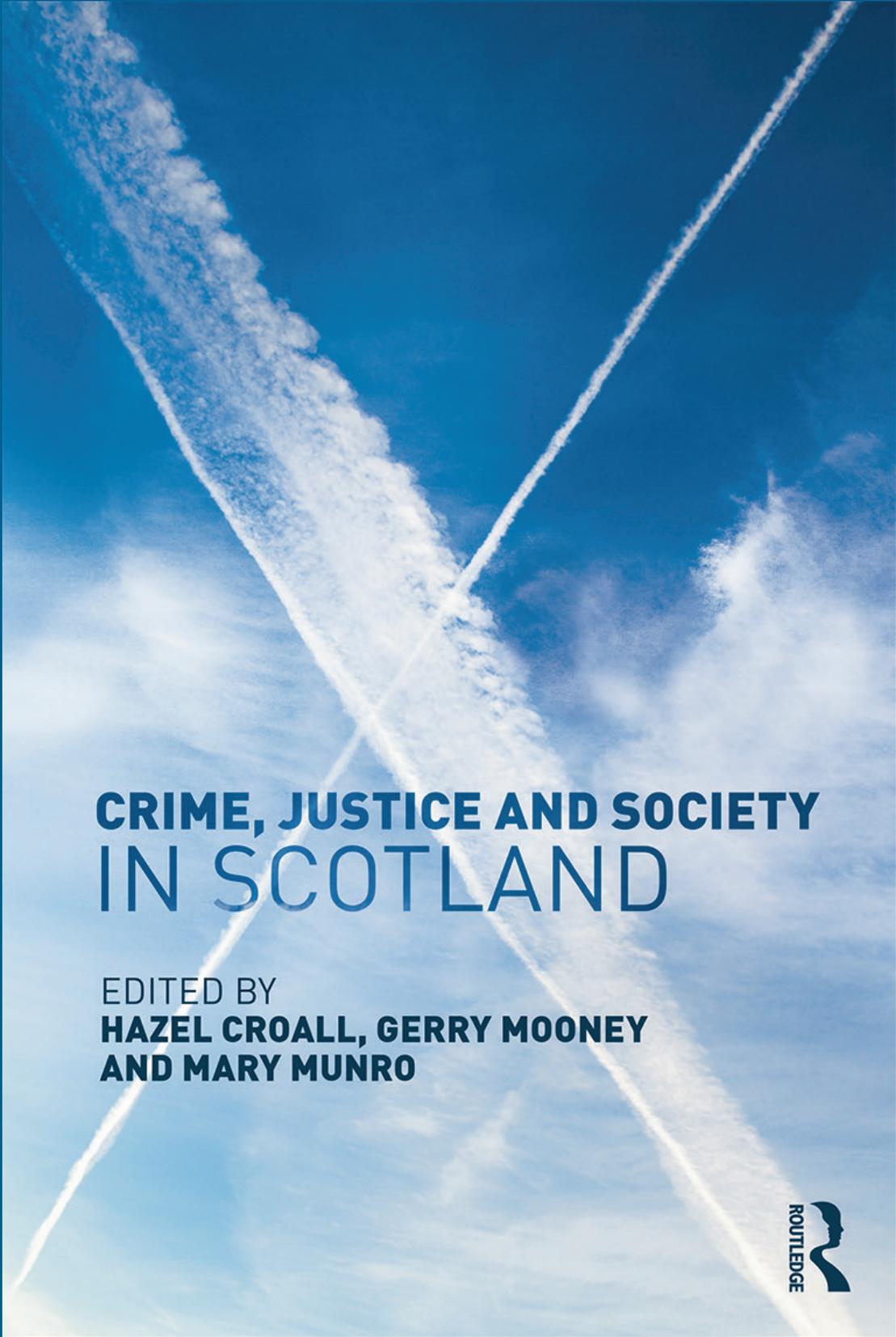
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