

A Study of the Number, Profile and Progression Routes of Homeless Persons before the Court and in Custody,

By Dr Mairéad Seymour, Dublin Institute of Technology and Liza Costello (2005).

Introduction

Bringing readers information on recent research that is relevant to work with offenders is part of the Irish Probation Journal (IPJ) editorial strategy. This part of the present edition provides summaries of two such reports, both published over the past couple of months. Aspects of the research on homelessness among offenders (Seymour and Costello) were reported on in the first edition of IPJ. It is very relevant to work with offenders, and the PWS is actively following up on its findings and recommendations. The summary of the report on domestic violence (Watson and Parsons), commissioned and published by the National Crime Council, is particularly apposite for inclusion in the present edition of IPJ given the articles by Mark Shevlin, David Morran and Christine Hunter also included in this edition. Those articles, allied to the NCC research report, are a timely reminder of the importance of developing effective responses to domestic violence offenders and victims with whom probation services come in contact. This research report brings new clarity to this field of research and practice. It underlines the previous dearth of relevant research in the area, and highlights the need for professionals in a variety of agencies to improve their understanding of and responses to domestic violence. In particular, findings refer to prevalence in the general population, risk factors, impact and reporting issues. Recommendations are made with specific reference to the criminal justice system. Some of these, such as the recommendations on data collection, staff training, treatment and rehabilitation of offenders and measures to ensure the safety of complainants, have relevance for probation services and their partner agencies. Both reports, published over this summer, have received significant media attention and are available in hardcopy and electronic versions:

The Research

The issues faced by offenders that are homeless or at risk of homelessness, both in the community and in custody, have been the focus of increased consideration in recent years. Such issues have been brought into stark relief in the context of the Government's Integrated Strategy on Homelessness (2000), and probably even more so following the publication of the Homeless Preventative Strategy (2002) and the NESF Report No. 22 (2002) on the Reintegration of Prisoners. The establishment of the Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST – see Geiran in IPJ, Vol. 1, 2004) is a direct outcome of that strategy.

The research by Seymour and Costello (of the Centre for Social and Educational Research at Dublin Institute of Technology), which sought to obtain accurate information about the numbers, profile and progression of homeless persons appearing before the courts and in custody in Dublin, employed a range of methodologies. These included a review of the relevant literature, analysis of PWS, Detention Schools and Courts Service records, and a survey of 241 prisoners

in custody in Dublin prisons and places of detention; as well as in-depth interviews with the prisoner sample; focus groups with PWS staff and consultation with a range of service providers in local authorities, health services and homeless services. The research set out to 'generate path-finding information relevant to Probation and Welfare Service policy formulation, service development, planning and deployment of resources' and 'suggest new responses...'

The research found inter alia that:

- Official statistics under-represent the numbers of homeless individuals in the criminal justice system, with women being disproportionately highly represented in both courts and prison samples,
- 1.6% of those appearing before the courts and 9.3% of those referred by the courts to the PWS (over a six week period) were homeless,
- In the prison sample, 54% had experienced homelessness at least once prior to imprisonment, with many experiencing lengthy periods homeless,
- 25% of prisoners were homeless on committal to prison,
- Approximately half of all homeless offenders progressing through the criminal justice system, and 73% of all (those homeless) referred to the PWS, were under 30 years of age,
- Homeless offenders rated highly on a range of indicators of disadvantage, including poor education, employment, accommodation, lack of family and other supports, drug and alcohol misuse, and mental health issues,
- Youth homelessness emerged as a significant factor in subsequent homelessness histories and progression routes,
- 64% of prisoners who experienced homelessness had first done so before 19 years of age,
- Many offenders experienced difficulty accessing accommodation and other services.

Findings specifically related to offending and sanctions, including PWS supervision, included that homeless offenders had high rates of arrest, charge and conviction, and were more likely to accumulate higher numbers of charges than other (non-homeless) offenders, although the offending by the homeless sample tended to be of a less serious nature. Homeless prisoners tended to have spent significant periods of time in custody. Almost half of those had previously been on PWS supervision. The research identified a range of difficulties for Probation and Welfare Officers in supervising homeless offenders on community sanctions. These included

difficulties tracking homeless individuals, case management dominated by complex and chronic series of crises, and difficulties accessing appropriate accommodation. Challenges in the reintegration of homeless prisoners after release were also identified, as were particular issues identified by respondents in accessing homeless services.

The report makes a range of recommendations which should assist and inform policy and practice. These include:

- Homeless prisoners be recognised as a sub-group of the homeless population,
- Specific responsibilities of respective agencies in relation to homeless offenders be clarified by the Cross Department Team on Homelessness,
- Community sanctions be considered for homeless offenders where possible,
- That the PWS consider introducing improved ways of engaging and working with homeless offenders,
- That the PWS build on existing contacts to improve and develop services to homeless offenders, including partnerships with drug treatment agencies,
- The Homeless Person's Unit (Dublin) and other such in-reach initiatives be developed in other institutions across the Irish Prison Service (IPS) estate,
- Drug-free units in prisons to be more widely available,
- The PWS and IPS to encourage and foster family contact with prisoners,
- Provision be made for more widely available and user-friendly, basic information and advice services on housing, welfare entitlements and support services to prisoners in all custodial institutions, and
- Local authorities to provide clear and user-friendly information to homeless individuals on the operation of their housing and homeless lists and to simplify the associated processes, as well as ensuring access to an increased range of housing options.

The researchers highlight the need, evidenced from the international research, for reintegration planning to begin at the earliest stage in the sentence. In this regard, the advancement of effective, multi-disciplinary positive sentence management for all prisoners is recommended, as a way of preventing homelessness and addressing the problem where it already exists.

This research, which is methodologically rigorous, scholarly and well written, is a valuable addition to the literature on homelessness and offending, particularly in the Irish context, in which it stands out as much on account of the previous dearth of comparable enquiry as for its own value as a study. The report is available in pdf format on the PWS website: www.pws.ie.

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