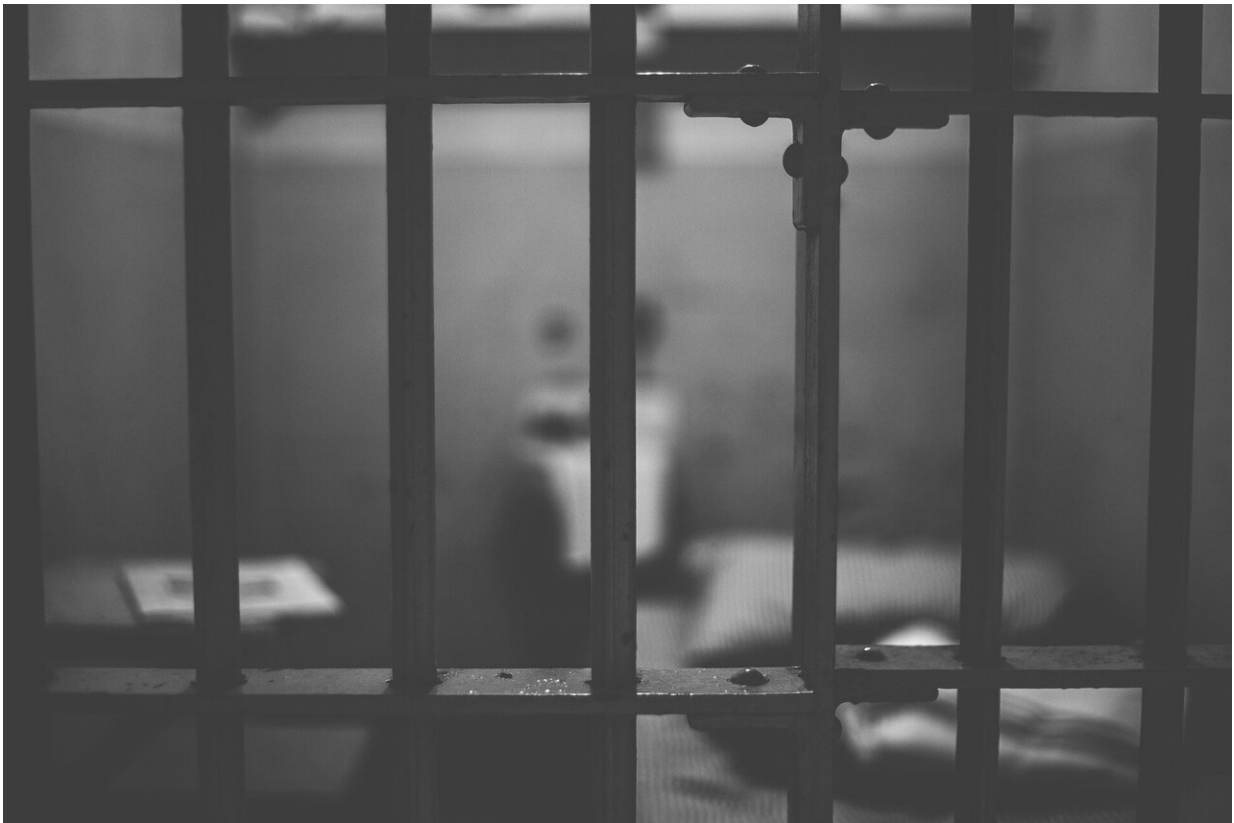


Homelessness an issue for one in three prisoners

January 9 2020, by Floris Van Den Driesche



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A stable home situation is important for the successful return to society of prisoners. So what is their home situation like? And what effect does it have on reoffending? Ph.D. defense on 16 January 2020.

Having a place to live is one of the basic necessities of life. According to Ph.D. candidate Maaïke Wensveen, this is also very important for prisoners. "Following imprisonment, they have to rebuild their lives as best as possible and often experience problems due to their detention history. Without a place to live, this becomes even more difficult. It is hard for them to find work or apply for benefits without a fixed address."

If ex-prisoners are unsuccessful in rebuilding their lives, they are more likely to reoffend. Little attention is paid to the [home](#) situation of prisoners and ex-prisoners in academic research on detention. The current housing market is also a concern in society. Single earners, for example, are finding it increasingly difficult to buy their own home. In the case of ex-prisoners this can be even more problematic; they have little or no income since they possibly lost their job while in detention.

Prison Project

This Ph.D. research on the home situation of prisoners and ex-prisoners is part of the Prison Project, a national, long-term research project studying the consequences of imprisonment on the future lives of prisoners. As part of this research, around 1900 male prisoners and ex-prisoners were followed over a long period. They were interviewed about their lives before and after detention on several occasions, both during their period of imprisonment and following their release. A number of the ex-prisoners were traced and interviewed six months and two years following their release.

"For my research into the home situation I used information from the interviews and data from official registers. In the interviews, for instance, respondents spoke of their home situation at a certain time before or following their imprisonment (e.g. living alone, with their parents, with a partner, homeless, etc.). Using official data taken from

the Dutch Personal Records Database and with the permission of the respondents, I was able to retrieve exact addresses and the start and end dates of periods of residence. By combining this information I could establish whether and how long a respondent was homeless, and whether this was a one-off situation or if it occurred more than once. I also used officially registered data to analyze reoffending and to link the various home situations to subsequent reoffending."

In this research, homelessness was measured by the absence of a postal address in the municipality's registry data in combination with information gained from interviews. Here the term "homeless" includes living on the streets, using night or crisis shelter facilities, as well as staying with family or friends in a non-structural way, with no fixed residence.

Prisoners and ex-prisoners homeless more often

Wensveen's research shows that homelessness among prisoners and ex-prisoners is a recurrent issue. Thirty-two percent had been homeless at least once during the research period. The percentage of homelessness among the general population is much lower.

A number of those who were homeless before they were imprisoned, are able to find a place to live during their period of detention. Others who were homeless at the time of their release, were able to find somewhere to live within the next few months. Almost no-one was homeless throughout the entire period the research was conducted. The situation therefore mainly concerns short periods of homelessness.

This research emphasizes that a large section of the respondents is homeless at some point, and that this homelessness can occur at any given time. "The results make it clear that assistance in relation to housing needs to be tailored to the specific needs of each [prisoner](#) in

order to prevent or resolve homelessness."

Reverting to crime

Wensveen's research also demonstrates that respondents who were homeless during the period of the research, are more likely to revert to crime than respondents who had never been homeless. "It was also clear that prisoners and ex-prisoners who had experienced several periods of homelessness re-offended more often than those who had only been homeless once. It was irrelevant whether the period of homelessness occurred before detention, directly following release or at a different time."

Moving home also affects the likelihood of reoffending, Wensveen continues. "Prisoners who change address during their detention, and so upon their release go to live at a different address than their address when they were imprisoned, are less likely to reoffend than those who never move home. A move during detention can be a sign of a fresh start in a new environment. That said, respondents who moved home more than once did re-offend more often than those who didn't move home. This indicates the importance of proper aftercare in relation to housing, also for prisoners who do have a home."

Supervisor Dr. J.M.H. Palmen said, "The dissertation of Maaïke Wensveen is one of the dissertations written as part of the Prison Project conducted at Leiden University (in collaboration with the NSCR and Utrecht University), under the supervision of Paul Nieuwbeerta (UL) and Anja Dirkzwager (NSCR). Maaïke's dissertation focused on the home situation of prisoners and ex-prisoners, and has provided an important contribution towards our knowledge on the importance of a stable home situation for this group. Housing is now one of the five areas of aftercare, indicated by the Custodial Institutions Agency as being essential for a successful return to society. Finding suitable housing for

ex-prisoners is therefore a key objective for policy. Maaïke's findings can give direction to this policy, and they confirm the importance of a stable home situation. Her results, however, also reveal important nuances. Not all forms of instability in relation to housing constitute risk factors; a move can also have a positive effect. In her research, Maaïke has been able to link and analyze large amounts of data, and as a result she has made a significant contribution to our knowledge about the home situation of prisoners and ex-prisoners and its importance in the resocialization process."

Provided by Leiden University

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