

Release and Resettlement: the perspectives of older prisoners

Elaine Crawley reports on research into the pre-release experiences of older prisoners, and points to the need for a national strategy.

The number of prisoners over state retirement age has increased on both sides of the Atlantic. In the UK, there are now well over 1200 prisoners aged 60+ in the prison system – a rise of 216% since 1990 (Prison Reform Trust 2003). While some of the practical effects of this development (e.g. the spiralling costs of prison health care) have received attention, the extent to which the rise in the older prisoner population has been translated into concrete policies, programmes, services and facilities contrasts markedly across jurisdictions. In the UK, unlike Canada and the United States, the presumption that imprisonment is ‘a young man’s game’ has marginalised the dimensions of age in both research and policy debate.

Older prisoners represent a special population in terms of health care needs, problems of individual adjustment to institutional life and problems of family relationships. In consequence, they pose special difficulties to the prison system regarding custody, rehabilitation, and parole (Aday, 2003). Like their counterparts ‘outside’, elderly prisoners suffer from a variety of age-related health problems, including poor mobility, depression, impaired vision and hearing. It is generally understood that our interests, needs and physical capabilities change as we grow older. In terms of physiological change, a national survey conducted in 2001 found that over 60% of elderly people had a longstanding illness which limited their physical and social activity in some way (Office of National Statistics 2001). Like their younger counterparts, however, older people also need to feel that they are ‘part of something’; this entails engaging in meaningful activities with others. These health and social care needs also apply to elderly people in prison.

Yet the Prison Service has not yet developed a national strategy for dealing with ageing prisoners. At the *local* level, however, (i.e. within individual prisons) the question of how best to manage this population is stimulating a range of practitioner-led adjustments and initiatives (Crawley and Sparks 2003). HMP Wymott is currently developing an Elderly and Disabled Prisoner regime and HMP Kingston is seeking to improve its elderly prisoner unit.

This article draws on a two-year study of the social, psychological and emotional impacts of imprisonment on men of 65+ years. The study was conducted in four UK prisons each holding relatively large proportions of men aged between 65 and 84

years. Since the study did not include a follow-up study of interviewees after release, this article is largely concerned with the release and resettlement concerns of older men still in prison. The article also draws upon comparative research conducted in Canada (Jamieson et al 2002).

How older prisoners view release and resettlement

Although Prison Service Order 2300 (para.1.12) states *inter alia* that account must be taken of the diversity of the prisoner population and the consequent differences in resettlement needs, and that specific sections of the prison population (e.g. elderly prisoners) may need to be catered for in different ways, it is clear from my research that older prisoners due for release often have intense anxieties about, and an inadequate understanding of, the resettlement process. What seems to give older prisoners the most concern is the lack of clarity from prison and probation staff as to where they are going to live, how they are going to get there (with limited money and poor mobility) and whom they will be living with.

The research found that, in the main, only prisoners with a supportive wife and/or family were hopeful and enthusiastic about resettlement. For these men, release means being with family again and regaining the freedom to structure their own days and choose their own activities and company. Importantly, for those whose wives were infirm, release also provides the opportunity to resume the protector role which they had been forced to leave behind. Most of the older men who do not have marital or familial ties, however, are unsure how they will fare when released. For those with chronic illnesses, the fear of not being able to access health care is often central (on this see also Prison Reform Trust 2003; Ware 2004). In the prison, these men are heavily dependent on both formal health care and on the informal care provided by other prisoners. In all the prisons in this study, the elderly infirm received some degree of care from other prisoners – men who would help the less mobile put on their socks, fasten their buttons, fetch their meals and clean their cells (again see Crawley and Sparks *ibid*; Jamieson et al *ibid*.)

For those convicted of sexual offences, a key preoccupation is the fear of being assaulted once released. Largely as a consequence of the current media obsession with ‘the paedophile’, the fear that they will not be *allowed* to resettle is significant. For older men with no family to return to (amongst this

prisoner group, marital and familial ties are often non-existent) concerns about unsettled housing or even homelessness are commonplace. Resettlement in later life is also likely to be made much more difficult by the many *losses* incurred through the imposition of the sentence itself. In addition to the loss of marital/familial/friendship ties, many older prisoners – particularly those previously living in council-owned accommodation – have lost all their personal possessions during the first weeks of custody. Numerous interviewees claimed that the council had re-possessed and entered the houses or flats they had lived in and simply thrown everything out, including private papers and photographs. This had happened to one 70 year-old whilst he was in a bail hostel awaiting trial. Despite having lived in a council maisonette the whole of his married life (40 years), he was told in a letter from the council that there had been “nothing of any value” in it. Understandably, he had found this deeply distressing. Elderly prisoners such as this man had neither family nor friends with the resources to remove and store their property; consequently, resettlement, for these men, means “starting from scratch”. Since they had “nothing to go out to” (i.e. no relatives, no friends, no home and, because of their age, no chance of work) several elderly interviewees said that they would rather just “stay put”. They simply had insufficient years left in life (or the energy) to “start over”.

Elderly prisoners convicted of sexual offences have very real reasons to fear release. Several of my interviewees said that, prior to their sentence, they had been threatened with physical assault by local residents, and that they had received threats that their houses would be burned down if they did not leave the neighbourhood. For one prisoner (a 77 year-old widower serving 12 years for a sexual offence committed 30 years ago) the knowledge that he would have to live in a hostel with a large group of much younger men filled him with dread. His anxieties were not lessened by the fact that, when only two weeks away from his release date, he had found it difficult to obtain concrete information about the resettlement plans that had been made for him.

The need for appreciation and communication

Just as the health and social needs of older prisoners are inadequately provided for and understood, so are their resettlement concerns and needs. From the research it was clear that elderly prisoners are often bewildered and frustrated by the resettlement process, partly because, as their release dates draw nearer, they often have little clear idea as to what they are supposed to do, or what (if anything) has been arranged for them when they get out. Prisoners placed the blame for this confusion either with the Probation Service or with the lack of knowledge of staff on the wings – some of whom were seen as deliberately ignoring their concerns. I was interested in a prison-based probation officer’s ‘take’ on the situation. From her perspective, probation service support was indeed patchy “largely because our resources are so overstretched (as such) resources are allocated according to perceived degrees of ‘risk’ to the public.” Since the elderly prisoners in this study were not currently defined as a risk (because they were still locked up), they were likely to stay at the bottom of the list for support and supervision until they were defined as a risk — i.e., when release was imminent.

It is important to note, when considering the issue of information provision and communication, that elderly prisoners

are generally much less assertive than their younger counterparts and less likely to press uniformed staff for information when it is not forthcoming. In short, they are less likely to question the legitimacy of prison regimes and processes than younger prisoners. The relatively compliant nature of this prisoner group may contribute to their specific resettlement needs and concerns being overlooked. In the first steps toward the resettlement of elderly prisoners, it is important that all available information is effectively communicated to them and that this information is properly understood.

Dr Elaine Crawley is Research Fellow in the Department of Criminology, Keele University. The article draws upon findings from her ongoing research ‘Surviving Prison in Later Life’, a two-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and from collaborative prison research conducted in British Columbia, Canada.

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