

Homeless women leaving prison: an appraisal of the in-reach service providing assistance within an Irish prison

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Abstract

There are many homeless women in prison. This study aimed to appraise an in-reach service available to them. Professionals were interviewed, and the interviews were thematically analysed. The findings demonstrated that most homeless women had benefited, as it met their immediate needs. However, their need for support in the community was not met.



Every night, the doorways of city centre offices and the portals of churches are occupied by people sleeping rough.

“They’re begging on the street, they’re homeless, and their kids are in care, and they’re dirty”. (Breda)

“The day you grow up is the day you realise not everyone is going to hand me everything all the time”. (Diane)

Methodology

Qualitative research can be described as “riddle-solving” as it is not based on statistical information. After receiving informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals who had long experience working with homeless women.

The interviews were recorded with their permission, they were assured the researcher would do all she could to maintain their anonymity. The interviews were thematically analysed using Nvivo. The researcher was aware of the importance of ethical issues, not to cause any discomfort to the respondents. No vulnerable groups were involved.

Introduction

Prisons are used as a method of punishment for citizens who do not conform to the laws of the state. In general, women committed to prison have committed less serious crimes than their male counterparts and serve numerous short sentences.

Many of these women do not have a place they can call home. Research has shown that homeless women may have been rejected by their families, have come through the care system or use illegal substances. They may have experienced physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, along with mental and physical illnesses.

Coming to prison can be stressful, but it can be just as stressful for a person who does not know where they will live when they leave. The time in prison can be an opportunity to deal with addiction issues, make reparation to families and plan for release.

Findings

All interviewees agreed that homeless, women and crime were interlinked. Pathways to homelessness included addiction, anti-social behaviour and breakdown in relationships. The homeless women were likely to have behaved in a manner which caused them to lose the support of their families, although, when in prison, they received less family support than their male counterparts. Many women had come through the care system. Homelessness became their identity, and they remained in unhealthy relationships due to the need for companionship. The respondents spoke very highly of the in-reach service, as women leaving prison were sure to have a roof over their head.

Discussion

The opinions of the interviewees broadly corresponded with the findings in the introduction. This research confirmed that the service provided to the women may have benefited most homeless women in Dochas Centre. When leaving prison, they received their payments and had a roof over their heads. However, it became obvious that although the immediate needs of the women were met, the accommodation available to them was unsuitable. Factors which assisted them exit homelessness included accessing support, sentence planning and dealing with their addiction. They must learn to take responsibility for themselves, to take the support that is available. It was also acknowledged that trust and supportive relationships with service providers were vital for women to begin the process. However, they were in a catch 22 situation, as it was difficult to deal with these issues without a home, and it was difficult to get a home while behaving in an unacceptable manner.

References

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