

## Chapter 1 Release from prison and the *Bridging the Gap* program

### 1.1 *Release, re-entry and the revolving door of prison*

In the next year, approximately four thousand prisoners will be released from Victorian prisons after serving sentences that may have been as short as a few days or as long as twenty years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Within two years, a third of them will have returned to prison, and within five years nearly half of them will be back (Productivity Commission, 2003). For many prisoners, life consists of alternating episodes of imprisonment, release, re-offending and then further imprisonment.

This continual cycling from prison to the community and back to prison is a complex problem with multiple causes. Drug and alcohol dependence, mental disorder, aggression, greed, poverty, and sexual deviance are all contributing factors to the offending that leads to imprisonment. However it is also clear that being imprisoned is itself a factor that leads to imprisonment, in large part because of the problems that released prisoners face in re-establishing themselves in the community when they are released. These problems include unstable and inappropriate accommodation, lack of vocational skills leading to high levels of unemployment and the absence of legitimate forms of income, rejection by their family and friends, and lack of access to mainstream health and social services. The ultimate consequences of failing to make the transition back into the mainstream community include injury or death, mainly from drugs, re-offending and further imprisonment.

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the importance of managing the post-release needs of prisoners as a means of improving their reintegration into the community and reducing subsequent recidivism and other health and social problems (Conly, 1998; NACRO, 1998; Petersilia, 2000). The *Bridging the Gap* program was conceived as a way to

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tackle these problems of the transition from prison to the community. It was established in early 2001 and has now been running for over two years, during which time around 500 prisoners have been engaged with the program in some way. The *Bridging the Gap* program model is based on intensive involvement by community-based organisations in supporting the highest risk and highest need individuals who are released from Victoria's prisons.

This report presents the findings of the evaluation of *Bridging the Gap* over its first two years of operation. Our goal in preparing this report was to present a detailed and balanced perspective on how *Bridging the Gap* developed over these first two years, the problems that were encountered and the solutions that were adopted to address them, and the effect that the program had on the lives of its participants. We believe that *Bridging the Gap* represents an important step forward in the development of transitional support for prisoners, and the lessons learned from this program have potential application to corrections systems both in Australia and internationally.

## **1.2 Description of *Bridging the Gap* program**

*Bridging the Gap* is an intensive post-release support program for high risk and high need offenders with drug or alcohol issues. The program is intended to provide intensive transitional support to participants by addressing their needs through direct service provision and supporting access to drug and alcohol treatment, accommodation, education, health, legal assistance, training and employment, family reconciliation and child care and custody. It was established in 2001 by the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner in Victoria as a 2-year pilot program. It was subsequently re-funded for an additional six months to mid-2003, and at the time of writing has been re-funded for a further four years.

The goals of *Bridging the Gap* were defined as<sup>1</sup>:

- to reduce the risk of re-offending and re-imprisonment
- to reduce the risk of post-release overdose and death
- more generally, to reduce harm associated with use of alcohol and other drugs.

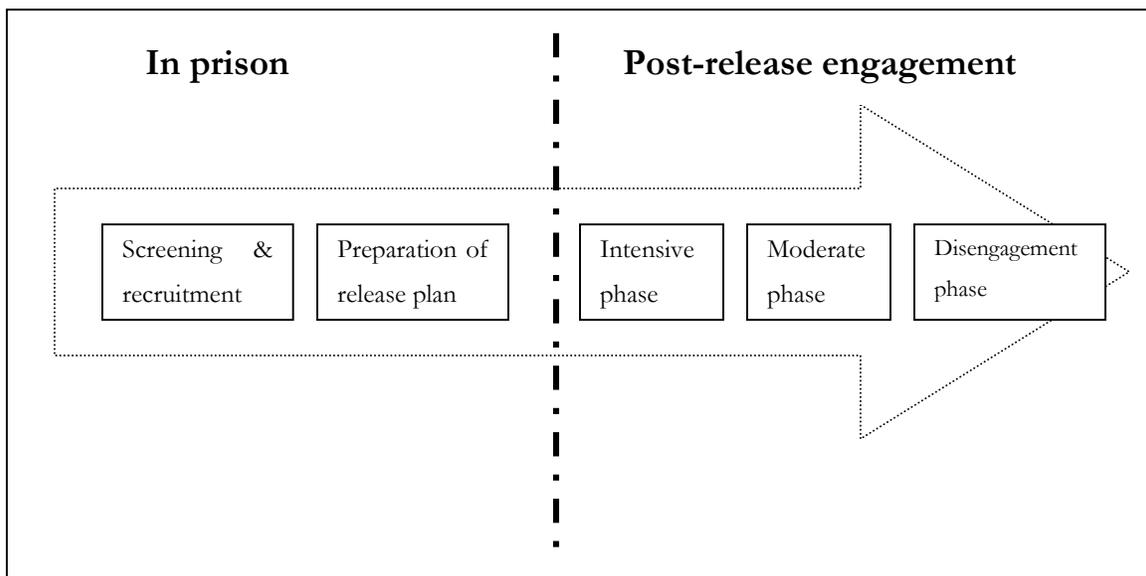
The program was administered by five community-based agencies, with each agency having a distinct target population (see Table 1.1) for its support services. While all five agencies worked to a common *Bridging the Gap* program model, there were a number of significant differences in the issues facing each agency, the resources available and the nature and priorities of the support services offered. For example, issues about child custody were more salient for the Melbourne City Mission program, while the problem of institutionalisation was more significant for the VACRO program.

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Target groups</b>
Melbourne City Mission (MCM)	Female prisoners
Jesuit Social Services (Brosnan Centre)	Prisoners under 25 years
Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO)	Male prisoners aged 25+ serving long sentences (3+ years) Older male prisoners with family issues
Australian Community Support Organisation (ACSO)	Males prisoners aged 25+ and socially isolated Older prisoners with mental health issues
South East Alcohol and Drug Services (SEADS)	Indo-Chinese prisoners

**Table 1.1: *Bridging the Gap* agencies and target groups**

<sup>1</sup> These goals are those set out in the policy framework for the program. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, clients and workers may have also been striving to satisfy quite different goals.

The original brief for *Bridging the Gap* envisaged a program that was structured around six distinct stages (see Figure 1.1). The first stage was that of recruitment and engagement in the program. While the program was promoted to prisoners and prison staff, mainly through leaflets, workers from the support agencies did most of the recruitment on site in prisons. The workers were supplied with lists of prisoners due for release as a guide for recruitment. These lists included prisoners' release dates, criminal histories, indicators of drug or alcohol issues and a "risk score" calculated from criminal history information (see Appendix 1). Workers were required to screen potential participants for eligibility. In order to be eligible for *Bridging the Gap*, a prisoner needed to be assessed as medium to high risk, with drug or alcohol abuse or dependence issues, and with significant post-release needs that were not likely to be met without some external support.



**Figure 1.1: Stages of the *Bridging the Gap* program**

Prisoners who accepted the offer of a place on *Bridging the Gap* were then asked to draw up a detailed release plan. Ideally, participants were recruited to the program at least six weeks

before their release date in order that workers had time to establish a relationship with them, identify post-release issues and make preparations for their release. Usually this meant that workers visited participants on two or three occasions over the six weeks.

It was envisaged that the period of post-release engagement in *Bridging the Gap* would last six months, commencing with a period of intense involvement between worker and participant beginning on the day of release, and lasting a few weeks or months until the participant was settled. This would be followed by a period of less intense involvement lasting between one and three months that would gradually tail off into a period of low intensity engagement leading to the participant exiting the program. In fact, patterns of post-release engagement were much more complex than this, and this graduated process of engagement and disengagement only applied at the aggregate level (see Chapter 3).

While most of the operational work associated with *Bridging the Gap* took place in prison or through intensive outreach after release, there was also an important co-ordination element that involved the five agencies, the public and private prisons and the Community Corrections Service, the program's sponsor (the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner), and the evaluation team. There were regular meetings between these to discuss program operational issues, review progress and develop solutions to problems. These co-ordination meetings were a key mechanism in the development of the program over the two years .

### **1.3 Structure of this report**

The evaluation was based on a three-stage "Conceptual – Formative – Outcome" evaluation strategy (Rossi, Freeman & Lipsey, 1999), and this report is organised around these three elements.

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*Conceptual issues:* This phase of the evaluation was concerned with reviewing the theoretical basis of the program, and the way that program theory was translated into practice. Chapter 2 reviews current knowledge about the problems that face prisoners on release, and the way that these transitional issues are incorporated into correctional theories about release and rehabilitation. This chapter also considers how these practical and theoretical considerations were reflected in the design of *Bridging the Gap* and other transitional prisoner support programs in Victoria. The policy basis for *Bridging the Gap* required that the program be directed to high risk and high need prisoners with drug or alcohol issues, and Chapter 3 describes the participant selection arrangements that were developed in order to meet this requirement.

*Formative issues:* This phase of the evaluation was concerned with how *Bridging the Gap* was implemented, and with feeding back information on the program's operations so that the providers could fine-tune their assessment and service delivery processes. Chapter 3 describes the flows of prisoners through *Bridging the Gap* throughout the period March 2001 to September 2002. This chapter considers the outcomes of program assessments, the numbers and characteristics of those who entered the program in prison and their level of post-release engagement. Program flows were generally lower than had been anticipated, and some of the issues that limited program flows are considered.

The essential operational processes of *Bridging the Gap* were the identification of issues and problems in the release planning stage, and the work that went on with participants after their release. Chapter 4 describes the problems that prisoners anticipated before their release and the way that these issues were dealt with in their release plans. Chapter 5 considers the release process itself, and the barriers and problems encountered by prisoners immediately after release. Chapter 6 describes the process of working with prisoners, including how the intensive outreach model worked in practice, the relationships between workers and clients, and the interactions between the *Bridging the Gap* agencies and other social support agencies.

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*Outcome stage:* The outcome or summative phase of the evaluation was concerned with assessing the impact of the program on clients. Chapter 7 considers the impact of *Bridging the Gap* on clients' social integration, including their accommodation, employment, and family reintegration. Chapter 8 examines the effect of the program on clients' health and drug status and re-offending, and also looks at some examples of the way that clients engaged with the program, and the effect that this engagement had on their lives. Chapter 9 considers the lessons that have been learned from the evaluation of *Bridging the Gap*, and makes recommendations for the design and operation of future transitional support programs.