

## **Chapter 4 Release from prison: plans, expectations and experiences**

The six to twelve week period between a prisoner agreeing to enter *Bridging the Gap* and their release from prison was used to think about the issues he or she was likely to face after release, and to develop strategies to deal with these issues. Agency workers aimed to visit participants at least two or three times in this period to help them develop their release plan. This chapter discusses the process of planning for release, the issues that were identified by participants, and the experiences of participants prior to and immediately after release from prison.

### **4.1 Previous release experience**

Very few prisoners who engaged with *Bridging the Gap* were going through the release process for the first time. On average, participants had already served nearly four prison terms. As a result, most of the participants approached the problem of release with some prior experience of the problems that they were likely to face. The start of the release planning process was their understanding of, and willingness to recognize and deal with the things that had gone wrong in the past.

Some prisoners were very conscious of the potential difficulties they would encounter after release. A common perception by prisoners was that things were likely to go wrong almost from the moment of release. One of the most frequently cited causes of post-release failure was their inability cope with their drug dependence. Even though many had been relatively drug-free while in prison, they saw their problems with drug dependence as having been in abeyance rather than “cured”.

(Interviewer): What were the problems that you thought you might face when you were released?

Just the craving for heroin and boredom as well, also having nothing to do. Seeing people on it and thinking that I wouldn't mind one – seeing old mates and stuff... every time I've been out, I've always used from day one and then I get locked up again. .... the first thing you wanna do when you get out is just use. (Brosnan client)

Another perspective on the likelihood of post-release failure was that the problems they faced were deeply embedded in their lives in and out of prison. Often, previous attempts to solve these problems had been unsuccessful, and they had few expectations that any new attempt would change this situation.

I've got a lot of money issues. Past fines, I owe the Sheriff's office, I've got children, so I've got child support...there's a backlog of child support I've gotta catch up on. So my bills were unfortunately still building up while I was in prison. And it is so hard, only because it's going on about 7 or 8 years, I've been trying to get off the merry-go-round, and I've failed quite a few times, and I ended up back in custody.... I also owe Centrelink money as well, so a lot of negotiating. I had to work out a pay-back agreement with them, as well as child support, as well as catching up on the arrears. So, it was very difficult financially. My financial situation was very hard to get out to from before I'd gone into custody. So unfortunately you go to jail, but you don't pay for all your sins, you've gotta come out and pay for them as well. (ACSO client)

Not all prisoners were as pessimistic (or realistic) about the problems they were likely to face. One common response by prisoners to the offer of a place in *Bridging the Gap* was that they did not need to be involved in the program because “everything was going to be alright” or they would be able to solve any problems without assistance. *Bridging the Gap* workers reported that some prisoners who were actually very anxious about the prospect of

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release coped by simply avoiding thinking about it. One of the barriers that prisoners face in thinking realistically with the problems of release is that there may not be anyone in prison who they can talk to about these issues.

(Interviewer): Did you ask anyone or seek assistance from anyone about these issues while you were in prison?

I could, but they don't know what they're talking about, cause its never happened to them. You do need to be very careful who you talk to and what you talk to them about in prison. (SEADS client)

#### **4.2 *Planning for release***

Not all of those who agreed to take up a place in *Bridging the Gap* went on to develop a release plan. Of the 319 prisoners who took up a program place between April 2001 and September 2002, 23 dropped out of the program before release. However, there were also further 35 prisoners who joined the program before release (that is, who didn't appear in the assessment outcomes reported in the previous chapter), so the total number who went through the release planning process was 331, comprising 58 women prisoners and 273 men.

Release planning was about more than just identifying problems and finding solutions. Workers used this period to build rapport with clients, and to get clients to think realistically about how they will deal with release.

It's really important to give clients a realistic expectation of what is achievable. They have to understand that you (the worker) can't perform miracles, so you've got to be careful about what you offer and how you explain it.... I'm pretty blunt in the way I

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work and I'll tell a bloke, "stop your crap, that's highly unrealistic". One of them is wanting to be drug free for the rest of their lives. I'll say, you've done 10 prison sentences, now how many times have you been coming out thinking right, now I'm gonna be drug free? They'll say. Oh every time and I'll say right, so that goal was unrealistic. When do you normally use drugs after jail, and they'll say on the first day, so I can say right, then lets make it our goal to be drug-free on the first day (VACRO worker).

Each prisoner's release plan was structured around a set of seven release goals (Table 4.1). There was frequently substantial overlap between different release goals. If the participant's accommodation goal was to return to live with family members, this might require some formal reconciliation, and family acceptance might in turn require that the participant undertook some form of drug or alcohol program.

Release goal		Sex		
		Females	Males	Total
Accommodation	No.	54	227	281
	%	96.4%	91.2%	92.1%
Family reconciliation or counseling	No.	46	151	197
	%	82.1%	60.6%	64.6%
Personal counseling	No.	21	99	141
	%	37.5%	39.7%	46.2%
Lifestyle skills	No.	28	75	123
	%	50.0%	30.1%	40.3%
Psychiatric or psychological treatment referral	No.	12	30	78
	%	21.4%	12.1%	25.6%
Employment or training	No.	45	205	250
	%	80.4%	82.3%	82.0%
Drug or alcohol program	No.	51	218	269
	%	91.1%	87.6%	88.2%

**Table 4.1** *Bridging the Gap* participants' release goals by sex of participant<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> There were 26 prisoners whose release plan details were missing or incomplete. These prisoners are not included in the analysis of release plan goals.

Release goals often had to be negotiated between the worker and client in stages. A participant might begin with expectations that had to be amended as the release date approached. For example, some participants expected that they would live with their family when they got out. However, when the *Bridging the Gap* worker contacted the family, it became clear that this was not a real option.

The most commonly nominated post-release goal was finding accommodation. Over 90% of releasees identified this as a priority need, and it was frequently the first listed of the short-term post-release goals. Living with family members was the most frequently cited post-release option (40% of cases), although the majority saw this as a temporary step before they found Office of Housing or private rental accommodation. The next most commonly cited option was public housing, usually through a Transitional Housing Manager (about 30% of participants). Approximately one in five participants expected that they would move into temporary, emergency or crisis accommodation. A small number of participants expected to go into a residential drug treatment program on release.

The second most commonly cited set of release goals concerned drug and/or alcohol treatment. Nearly 90% of participants had this goal as part of their release plan. In around half of all plans a treatment or treatment brokerage agency was nominated, although a substantial proportion of release plans simply nominated abstinence or staying away from drugs as a post-release goal. For those being released to parole, their goals in relation to drug or alcohol treatment were frequently linked to their need to comply with their parole conditions. Workers often tried to get participants to focus on short-term goals – attending first appointments rather than complete abstinence.

The third most commonly nominated goal was employment and training, although the majority of plans only stated a general intention to “find work”. Around one quarter of release plans included registering with an employment agency, usually Centrelink. About 10% of plans included a specific intention to undertake some form of vocational training.

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and a further 10% referred to a defined job, often the one the participant had done prior to going to gaol.

Similar proportions of male and female participants nominated accommodation, drug or alcohol treatment and employment as post-release goals. In contrast, female participants were more likely than males to identify family reconciliation and lifestyle skills support as post-release goals, and more than twice as likely to identify psychiatric or psychological treatment as a post-release goal. In general, male releasees framed their post-release plans around the resolution of practical problems, while women were much more likely to see their post-release issues as including the resolution of personal matters.

Women participants' release plans frequently included regaining custody of, or access to, their children. Eighty percent of women on *Bridging the Gap* had family reconciliation or counselling as one of their goals, and nearly half of these made reference to child custody or access issues. Both men and women who included personal counselling as one of their release goals often framed this goal in terms of a need to deal with issues of grief, sexual or physical abuse, or (in the case of Indo-Chinese participants) their experiences as refugees. For both sexes, lifestyle goals were mainly concerned with acquiring financial and budgeting skills. Where psychiatric referral was identified as a post-release goal, in half of these cases the need to arrange post-release medication was identified.