

## **Australian Prisons Are Failing Prisoners**

*Renee McNab*

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**M**y name is Renee McNab and I am a former prisoner and now a passionate prison advocate doing my best to support those currently affected by the justice system in Australia and to fight for change. I aim to be a voice for the voiceless who are incarcerated.

### **EXPERIENCE IN THE SYSTEM**

There is really only one way to describe my time in the Australian prison system and that would be absolute hell. I always imagined jail would be a hard experience, but nothing could have prepared me for the things I would see and experience. From the lack of medical care and drug, alcohol, and mental health support to the disgusting and unhygienic living conditions (think cockroach infested cells) and the cruel, inhumane, and heavy-handed treatment by the guards who are meant to have a duty of care for prisoners was an experience I would not wish on anyone.

I remember going into prison as a very broken woman and because of the lack of mental health support and medication I had been legally prescribed, I became mentally unwell. This broke me even more. I waited four months just to see a professional to be prescribed vital medicine I had already been prescribed in the community. This lag time hindered my ability to become mentally stable and led to me having a psychotic break inside prison, which was horrible and could have been prevented if I had been given my medication soon after being processed at the jail. Instead, I was made to wait months for medication. This is unacceptable. People in jail should be given their medication they have been on in the community, because otherwise this leads to jail time being even harder than it already is (see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016).

Prison is not meant to be easy, but it certainly does not need to be the inhumane place us Australians call our so-called “corrective services system” – there is nothing correct about it. The people who work in the system like to say it rehabilitates people but, if anything, it does more harm than good. There is no rehabilitation. Rather, there is more suffering for those who are already struggling with health issues, mental health and substance use problems, and who have very little access to the actual services and treatment that would benefit them. Instead, they are made to wait excruciating long periods of time just to see anyone for the medications and treatment that would actually help them.

The lack of support and proper medical care is a reason so many prisoners suffer unnecessarily and resort to things like self-harm and suicide, because they cannot get the help that they really need. It is heartbreaking to see and experience.

## **LACK OF POST-RELEASE SUPPORTS**

Then there is the basically non-existent post-release support and housing that often leads to people ending up where they started – PRISON – because they do what they need to survive in a world that sets them up to fail. They resort to reoffending often just to feed themselves. We need to do better.

Being released is an overwhelming experience and is a period of readjustment, but when you are released with no support or long-term housing it makes an already stressful experience even harder. It can lead to re-incarceration because you lose hope and resort back to crime to survive. If given the chance many could avoid crime if there were better supports and housing opportunities available.

In Australia, in most cases you are given 28 days of temporary accommodation. This is temporary accommodation in a hotel, motel, or caravan offered to prisoners exiting corrections. You are only eligible for the temporary accommodation if you have not accessed it before, but once those 28 days is up, there are very few housing options available to a former prisoner. This often leads to homelessness all over again. Combine homelessness with mental health issues or substance use issues and it is a recipe for disaster that hardly ever ends well.

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

Our Australian government puts so much funding into the prisons themselves, but very little in post-release services that would assist prisoners in ways that are vital to their reintegration back into society. These supports would also reduce recidivism, but here in Australia we are sent to prison to do our time in a broken and inhumane system that does not see or truly understand what we really need and would benefit from, both inside and outside of jail. That is why so many prisoners are set up to fail and left broken and unsupported more than they ever were prior to their jail time (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019).

This system needs to change. Yes, we may have broken the law and did things to find ourselves in jail, but that does not justify the treatment we receive and the constant breaches of human rights (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012) and the medical negligence so many face every single day. As I like to say, people make mistakes, yes, but it does not make us bad people and with the right support we are capable of turning our lives around as I have done. However, in order to do so, we need to be given the opportunity and if given the right amount of support inside, once we exit prison things could be so different for many of us. I truly believe we fail so many because we do not give them any hope to hold onto. We give them virtually no stability and housing once we are free and that is a disaster waiting to happen. This needs to change and now.

Prison will never be an easy experience, but with the right support services and care it can be an experience that we learn from and where we can get long term support so we can survive in the outside world and turn our lives around. So much of that survival depends on the prisoner themselves, but it also requires being given the chance to do so. With little to no long-term post release support and housing we fall through the cracks. It is a very tiring and soul-destroying cycle. It is a toxic system that makes us feel like we will never be understood or treated like human beings who have made mistakes but are quite capable of learning from them and not repeating them if given the chance to do so. We as a country need to do better – people’s lives depend on it. Literally!!!

## REFERENCES

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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