



Trying to Make it Home: Halfway Houses and the Reintegration of Ex-offenders

*"What if God was one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make Its way home."*¹

1. Introduction

The prison door closes, time has been served and now the big outside looms, with the opportunity to go home. However, many ex-offenders encounter tremendous difficulties in finding the way back. They are not assured of a welcoming home and supportive family. Their imprisonment may have had a number of negative consequences for the families of the incarcerated member. Families may resent the stigma associated with having a relative who has committed a crime; they may have incurred legal costs and experienced a drop in socio-economic status.

Many offenders have been imprisoned some distance from their families and may have become virtual strangers; children have grown older and the absent parent may have missed important milestones; the child may feel a sense of shame regarding a parent who has been in prison. A long term of imprisonment may mean that parents have died or relocated. The world has changed and ex-offenders, having been isolated, need help and support in order to adjust. Furthermore, his or her family may live in impoverished circumstances with no extra resources to invest in an ex-offender. Relationships between offenders and family are often fraught with unresolved emotional issues. Worst of all, perhaps, young ex-offenders who are orphaned or fostered may have no family to which to return.

Furthermore, families are not always willing to take the offender back. As an ex-offender and resident of a halfway house remarked, "my family didn't want me anymore because I messed up. I've

been 11 years in and out of prison, so they were fed up." Families and communities do not always understand the difficulties of the newly released offender. The ex-offender may need a change of environment. Some do not want to return to the community from which they came as it might be toxic and encourage participation in crime/gangs/drug culture, which would encourage recidivism and prejudice the rehabilitation process. The role of peer pressure in the commission of crime, particularly among young offenders, should not be underestimated.

Stephanie van Wyk, executive director of 'Beauty for Ashes' a halfway house which offers rehabilitation and support for female prisoners and parolees,¹ emphasises that

"a large segment of the prison population consists of the poor, the illiterate and the unskilled. Many leave prison and return to their families where they bring an extra burden to already impoverished living conditions. Poor job skills and inadequate education cause many to re-offend. Our experience is that many families do not want ex-prisoners to return to their communities because of these reasons and because socially they are ashamed and want to be rid of the "trouble maker". Most reintegration services in South Africa do not provide a comprehensive service which starts in prison and continues after release".²

Historically, our justice system has been largely retributive. It is easy to see offenders one-dimensionally, that is, simply in terms of their crime/offence. However, it is instructive to note that two thirds of prisoners in South Africa come from broken homes; 5% of men in prison had no

loving father figure as a role model; two-thirds abuse drugs and alcohol; 80% of women prisoners have been physically or sexually abused; 50% of men have been physically or sexually abused; 45% of men were out of work when they were arrested; one half never went beyond the sixth grade of school; 60 – 80% cannot read or write well enough to get along in society; and only 13% of prisoners behind bars participate in education or skills programmes.³ Many leave prison with very few resources and support to assist them in adapting to the world outside of prison, and they struggle to adapt to non-institutional life. The process of successful reintegration is critical in reducing recidivism and the revolving door of the criminal justice system.⁴ Halfway houses can play an important role in assisting the reintegration process.

2. What Are Halfway Houses?

A halfway house can be defined as “a community-based residential facility for offenders who, having been sentenced to a term of incarceration, are serving a portion of their sentence under supervision in the community. Halfway houses provide twenty-four hour supervision and general counselling and assistance to offenders”.⁵ Programmes may differ from facility to facility, but in general candidates for entry must be 18 or older; have undergone all the requisite rehabilitation programmes; be eligible for parole, or eligible but for the fact that they lack a fixed address.⁶ People guilty of sexual offences do not qualify.

The paucity of services to help ex-offenders and their families with the reintegration process is a matter of ongoing concern. There are very few halfway houses, and those that exist face many challenges. The White Paper on Corrections focuses on rehabilitation and seeks to give offenders new hope and encouragement to adopt a lifestyle that will result in a second chance of becoming a responsible citizen.⁷ Halfway houses provide transitional living places and spaces for newly released offenders offering them the opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to reintegrate into society in a supportive and encouraging environment; as such, they are a vital intervention in the lives of ex-offenders.⁸ One of the conditions of offenders to be released on parole is that they must have a monitorable address and a support system. The address must be confirmed by a correctional official. Many offenders who would be eligible for parole thus

remain incarcerated as they have nowhere to go, and halfway houses can therefore be the difference between early release and continued imprisonment.

3. Establishing Partnerships

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) is in the process of establishing partnerships with halfway house initiatives across the country. These partnerships regulate the relationship between DCS and any non-profit organizations (NPOs) that are able to assist in the establishment and operation of halfway houses. DCS Spokesperson Pumla Mathibela says, “these halfway houses are for people who don’t have monitorable addresses, who qualify for parole, but because they don’t have monitorable address and they do not have a support system, then we put them in halfway houses”.⁹ Halfway houses provide structure; supervision; support; accountability and opportunity. The DCS’s partnership approach acknowledges the expertise and experience of NPOs, and the DCS pays a stipend to the NPO providing services to a parolee being accommodated at a halfway house.

However, halfway houses are **not** an extension of correctional centres. Those accommodated in halfway houses are residents rather than inmates, and they are there to be enabled, encouraged and empowered. The programme is structured and there is a treatment plan which could include further education and training; occupational therapy; counselling; household tasks and responsibilities; visits from family members, including resident’s children; ongoing assessment and evaluation, as well as participation at house meetings. Drug and alcohol counselling is important given the role played by substance abuse in crime and domestic violence. Mental health issues should be addressed and appropriate referrals made. All these assist in the reintegration of ex-offenders into their families and communities. They also do much to foster self-esteem; cultivate a sense of competence; engender self-respect; and affirm the dignity of all.¹⁰

4. The Efficacy of Halfway Houses

Some people have challenged the success of halfway houses in the prevention of recidivism. The New York Times reported on research that indicated that halfway houses do not play an effective role in the reduction of recidivism, citing

escapes, violence, substance abuse and other problems.¹¹ Furthermore, it mentioned examples where the recidivism rate was as high as 67%. It could therefore be argued that halfway houses are expensive to maintain, with little positive impact; and that offenders should simply be released directly into the community without the seemingly ineffective interventions provided by very cost-intensive halfway houses.

Another study found that, “although some halfway houses are adequately managed and staffed with competent professionals, others are operated more for profit than an interest in helping offenders successfully return to society. Too many incidents involving poorly-supervised halfway house residents and indifferent, or even criminal, behaviour by employees, have occurred in almost every state as well as the federal prison system”.¹² Concerns have also been raised in Britain and the United States that halfway houses are being used as a means of reducing the prison population and addressing overcrowding.¹³ Furthermore, the release of sex offenders to halfway houses in Britain has brought much disquiet and protest.¹⁴ The above suggests that halfway houses may become merely temporary accommodation centres with little supervision for ex-offenders, rather than treatment centres which have programmes aimed at the successful reintegration of the ex-offender.

Other experts differ, however, arguing that there are three phases associated with successful offender re-integration programmes, namely: “programmes that take place during incarceration, which aim to prepare offenders for their eventual release; programmes that take place during offenders’ release period, which seek to connect ex-offenders with the various services they may require; and long-term programmes that take place as ex-offenders permanently reintegrate into their communities, which attempt to provide offenders with support and supervision”.¹⁵

5. Difficulties Encountered

Organisations seeking to establish halfway houses experience many difficulties, the most common of which is the siting of the residences. Residents and home owners are reluctant to have such a facility in their area (this is termed the NIMBY phenomenon, from the acronym for ‘Not In My Back Yard’). Such opposition can be very forceful. ‘Forgiven Ministries’, a Cape Town-based organization working with ex-offenders was

unable to secure premises in a residential area due to opposition from other residents who lobbied the City Council. Eventually, the organization was obliged to return substantial monies allocated to them from the National Lottery Fund as they were unable to find appropriate accommodation.¹⁶

In the Archdiocese of Cape Town, the Prison Care and Support Network has secured a house but has been unable to use it as a residence due to a lack of funding. However, they have been able to use it to run social reintegration programmes and offer skills training in building construction and electrical engineering through a bursary programme. They also offer home gardening training, home-based skills, arts and crafts, as well as screen printing.

The expressed commitment from the DCS to halfway houses as a reintegration strategy which substantially reduces recidivism would play an important role in securing the support of municipalities, as would further research into the efficacy of halfway houses. Evaluation of treatment strategies and programmes would assist in establishing best practice modalities and in the development of programme manuals. As Director Azwihangwisi Nesengani points out, “the best treatment programmes follow a model that is based upon data-driven evidence of what works and what doesn’t; furthermore, follow-up is essential, as is having a treatment model that incorporates appropriate rewards and appropriate consequences and then following up with those rewards or consequences.”¹⁷

Most prisoners are released with the hope that they will not reoffend. Everything possible must be done to prevent recidivism and promote reintegration. In this respect, communities need to understand that

*“halfway houses create an important bridge between institutional care and the community. They provide much-needed rehabilitative and residential services. Halfway houses provide an opportunity for unique and innovative programming that is tailored to the needs of residents and the community. Furthermore, halfway houses are a vehicle for community awareness of and involvement in corrections”.*¹⁸

6. Prevention

Prisons and prisoners hold up a mirror of the state of society. There is convincing evidence that the

family within which a child grows up will play an enormous role in the extent to which the child's peer group will influence it later in life. Unfortunately, the indication is that young people who do not have sound relationships with their immediate family, who do not cope academically at school, who do not participate in sports or other positive activities in community, are more vulnerable to be influenced by the wrong peer group.¹⁹

Pervasive trauma and lack of attachment in the early years of life can play a determining role in later criminal activity. Dr Elmarie Malek, head of general paediatrics at Tygerberg Hospital, says there is abundant evidence to support the idea that early childhood can be critical in shaping a later propensity for crime or violence. Exposure at that time to what experts call 'toxic stress'²⁰ can have a significant negative impact. She emphasises that "it sets in motion a whole chain of events that can become an ongoing downward spiral. There is definitely a link between the science around brain development and outputs for risk for criminality, anti-social behaviour and mental health problems."²¹ While not every child who is exposed to 'toxic stress' will become a criminal, it can significantly increase the risk thereof.

Dr Malek emphasises "that the need for children to grow up in stable and engaging environments can't be overstated: spaces where there is at least one caring adult available on a long-term basis to create a solid attachment with the infant and to respond to its needs. Such an adult does not have

to be the child's parent; it could be a grandmother, other relative or non-related caregiver."²² Early childhood education must be a priority. This includes offering support services to mothers and care-givers.²³ Institute for Security Studies researcher Chandra Gould concurs that a holistic approach is necessary and that this needs to start with the care of infants. "If we don't take care of those early years of life, we are just pushing the problem of crime to the next generation".²⁴

7. Conclusion

It is clear that those about re-inter society face enormous challenges 'in finding the way home'. Halfway houses are few and those that are encounter many problems including little funding; difficulties in securing appropriate premises; community prejudice and lack of employment opportunities. Those guilty of sexual offences are excluded from the services of Halfway Houses altogether. However, the programmes, support and other services provided by Halfway Houses are of benefit to all ex-offenders and their families and play a major role in reducing recidivism. Investing in Halfway Houses by both the state and civil society is an investment in reduced crime and a safer society where reconciliation is possible.

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¹ <http://www.uthandosa.org/projects/3>

² <http://www.uthandosa.org/projects/3>

³ <http://www.uthandosa.org/projects/3>

⁴ On the 16th July the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office together with NICRO, the Western Cape Department of Correctional Services as well as the Prison Care and Support Network, 'Beauty for Ashes' and 'Realistic', all organizations working with ex-offenders, held a Roundtable Discussion on 'Halfway Houses' focusing on what happens once an offender is released. The Roundtable was held in a response to a request from many organizations who attended an earlier Roundtable on 'Prison and the Family' and wanted an opportunity to explore the concept of 'Halfway Houses' as an important part of the reintegration of ex-offenders into their families and communities.

⁵ Presentation by Solomon Madikane from 'Realistic at the Roundtable Discussion on 'Halfway Houses'

⁶ See 8 above

⁷ White Paper on Corrections, 2005

⁸ The Roundtable focused on best practice modalities, the difficulties encountered and the resources necessary for the establishment of such homes. The Roundtable provided an opportunity for ex-offenders to engage with the Department of Correctional Services and service providers to develop a better understanding of both the reintegration process and restorative justice. Director Azwihangwisi Nesengani of the National Department of Correctional Services was the keynote speaker

⁹ <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/halfway-house-equips-parolees-real-world>

¹⁰ Presentation by the Prison Care and Support Network at the Roundtable on Halfway Houses

¹¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/nyregion/pennsylvania-study-finds-halfway-houses-dont-reduce-recidivism.html? r=1>

¹² <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2015/jan/10/when-halfway-houses-pose-full-time-problems>

¹³ See 13 and 14 above

¹⁴<http://theukdatabase.com/uk-child-abusers-named-and-shamed/calls-for-change-in-law/uk-hostelshalf-way-houses/>

¹⁵ 'Offender Re-entry: Correctional Statistics, Reintegration into the Community, and Recidivism', Nathan James, 12th January 2015

¹⁶ Presentation by Louise Honeyman of 'Forgiven Ministries' at a Roundtable Discussion on 'Prison and the Family'. The organization was offered accommodation in an industrial/warehouse complex.

¹⁷ Presentation by Director Azwihangwisi Nesengani of the National Department of Correctional Services at Halfway Houses, 16th July 2015

¹⁸ Presentation by Solomon Madikane from 'Realistic at the Roundtable Discussion on 'Halfway Houses'

¹⁹ Daily Maverick 6th October 2015 'Crime in South Africa: What's going wrong?'

²⁰ 'Toxic stress' describes a combination of socio-economic and psycho-social factors which create the circumstances within which anti-social and criminal behaviour may occur.

²¹ Daily Maverick 6th October 2015 'Crime in South Africa: What's going wrong?'

²² See 23 and 24 above

²³ Early Childhood Development is fundamental to the successful implementation of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005

²⁴ Daily Maverick 6th October 2015 'Crime in South Africa: What's going wrong?'

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