

‘At Home’ in Prison? Women and the Homelessness–Incarceration Nexus

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Summary: Research in Ireland and internationally has documented a strong association between homelessness and incarceration. Nonetheless, the dynamics of this relationship are poorly understood. Although research suggests that the experience of incarceration among the homeless may have gender-specific dimensions, women have been largely ignored in the literature, which has tended to focus on the male experience. This paper examines the incarceration experiences of a sub-sample of women who are participants in a larger biographical study of women’s homelessness in Ireland. It charts their paths to incarceration and explores women’s perspectives on prison as well as their experiences post-release. Rather than a discrete life event, incarceration emerged as an extension of an institutional circuit that served to exacerbate their marginalisation and diminish their prospects of securing stable housing.

Keywords: Women, homelessness, prison, incarceration, institutionalisation, pathways, Ireland, biographical interviewing, ethnography.

Introduction

A relationship between homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system is well established, both in Ireland (Duffy *et al.*, 2006; Hickey, 2002; O’Mahony, 1997; Seymour and Costello, 2005; Wright *et al.*, 2006) and internationally (Baldry *et al.*, 2006; Dyb, 2009; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Kushel *et al.*, 2005; Metraux and Culhane, 2004, 2006; McCarthy and Hagan, 1991; Shlay and Rossi, 1992). In recent years, a

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great deal of research attention has focused on the direction of the relationship between homelessness and imprisonment; that is, on establishing whether persons who are homeless are at increased risk for incarceration or, conversely, if release from prison makes individuals vulnerable to homelessness. In other words, research has begun to examine the link between incarceration and homelessness, whether studied from the perspective of the extent to which incarcerated populations experience homelessness or the prevalence of incarceration among the homeless.

Emerging from this body of research are two dominant arguments. The first asserts that persons who are homeless are at increased risk for incarceration. Indeed, the road from homelessness to prison is relatively well charted. This literature often draws on concepts of ‘survivalism’, acculturation to street life, and immersion in a homeless subculture, to account for the increased risk of criminal involvement and criminal justice contact among the homeless (Carlen, 1996; Gowan, 2002; Snow *et al.* 1989; McCarthy and Hagan, 1991). The concept of ‘rabble management’¹ has also been invoked to explain the greater propensity for arrest and incarceration among homeless males, in particular. Gowan (2002, p. 521), for example, found evidence of an approach to the policing of homeless men in San Francisco that ‘continuously circulated them through jails’. Thus, the subsistence and survival strategies frequently adopted by homeless individuals make them susceptible to arrest and incarceration because these activities have become highly restricted and criminalised (Feldman, 2004; Fischer, 1992; Gowan, 2002; Snow *et al.*, 1989).

Equally, there is strong evidence that release from prison leaves people vulnerable to an episode of homelessness, and high rates of homelessness among prisoner populations, both prior to and post-incarceration, have been consistently documented (Baldry *et al.*, 2006; Caton *et al.*, 2005; Dyb, 2009). Indeed, imprisonment has been described as ‘a major gateway to homelessness’ (Dyb, 2009). Homelessness, it is argued, may be one consequence of more general readjustment problems that

¹ The term ‘rabble management’ was used by Irwin (1986) to describe the routine jailing of disaffiliated persons for minimal offences in the interest of public order. The central argument is that law enforcement agencies target the homeless population for offences including begging, sleeping rough, drinking in public, and so on because they are highly visible (and also considered offensive), while similar behaviour by non-homeless persons would not be detected or sanctioned in this manner.

accompany release from prison (Metraux and Culhane, 2006). Other studies have drawn attention to the lack of effective discharge planning as placing persons at risk for homelessness, reoffending and reincarceration (La Vigne *et al.*, 2003; Visher and Courtney, 2006). Finally, the fragility of family ties, and the lack of a secure family base to which ex-prisoners can return, have been highlighted as increasing individuals' risk of homelessness following their release from prison (Gowan, 2002; Seymour and Costello, 2005).

The available research clearly documents increased vulnerability for arrest and incarceration among homeless persons, and also identifies the multiple barriers to stable housing post-release. The extent of overlap between homeless and incarcerated populations suggests a bidirectional association between homelessness and prison stays, in that homelessness can be a catalyst for arrest and incarceration. Incarceration, in turn, may precipitate homelessness by disrupting housing, social networks and economic opportunities. Although research across several jurisdictions has advanced knowledge and understanding of the homelessness–incarceration nexus, the dynamics of the relationship are poorly understood (Metraux *et al.*, 2008).

One of the clearest gaps in the existing research base is that the experience of women has been largely ignored. Possibly reflecting a historical absence of gender in the analysis of imprisonment (Baldry, 2010; Carlen, 1998; Carlton and Segrave, 2011) and homelessness (Baptista, 2010; Edgar and Doherty, 2001), the vast majority of studies have focused either exclusively or predominantly on the male experience. This situation significantly limits our understanding of gendered experiences of homelessness and incarceration, and impacts the development of policies that ultimately shape the way in which homeless women with histories of offending are 'disciplined' and managed.

A significant rise in the female prison population is evident in both the UK and North America (Barry and McIvor, 2008; Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007; Guerino *et al.*, 2011; Ministry of Justice/NOMS, 2008), a trend also apparent in Ireland, where, over the past decade, the number of women committed to prison on an annual basis has more than doubled from 923 in 2001 to 2,151 in 2012.² There is also evidence internationally, and to a lesser extent in Ireland, that large numbers of women experience

² Data from Irish Prison Service, available at: www.irishprisons.ie/index.php/information-centre/statistics

homelessness or housing instability both prior to their incarceration and post-release (Gelsthorpe *et al.*, 2007; Lindquist *et al.*, 2009; Linehan *et al.*, 2005; McIvor *et al.*, 2009; Weiser *et al.*, 2009; Seymour and Costello, 2005; Wright *et al.*, 2006).

One recent US study that examined gender-specific correlates of incarceration among marginally housed individuals found that longer street stays among women were associated with a higher likelihood of incarceration (Weiser *et al.*, 2009). This research also revealed stimulant drug and heroin use to be strongly associated with incarceration, with the effect far stronger among women, whose drug use increased the odds of incarceration by at least four-fold. Significantly, Weiser *et al.*'s (2009) study demonstrates that correlates of incarceration may be gender-specific and that patterns of housing instability have different associations with incarceration according to gender.

Although there is evidence that the experience of incarceration among the homeless may have gender-specific dimensions, there is currently a dearth of dedicated research attention to the dynamics of homelessness and incarceration among women. This paper seeks to redress this gap in knowledge by exploring the incarceration experiences of a sub-sample of women who are participants in a larger biographical study of women's homelessness in Ireland. All the women in the sub-sample had been homeless, sometimes for many years, prior to the first experience of incarceration. We examine their paths to incarceration and focus, in particular, on their repeat entries to prison and other institutional settings.

Women's perspectives on prison are a key focus of the analysis, as are their experiences post-release. We argue that, rather than a discrete life event, incarceration is an extension of the interventions and institutions that featured throughout women's lives and that served, albeit inadvertently, to reinforce their social and economic marginalisation and diminish their prospects of securing stable housing.

Research methodology

The study set out to explore the lives and experiences of homeless women in Ireland using a qualitative approach that integrated biographical interviewing and ethnographic observation. Central to the research was the aim of documenting women's entry routes to homelessness, the homeless experience itself and, possibly, their exit routes from homelessness.

The fieldwork commenced with a 'Community Assessment' phase (Mayock and Carr, 2008; Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007), which involved an initial period of engagement with homeless and domestic violence services. This phase of fieldwork helped to inform these communities of professionals about the research and also facilitated access to numerous recruitment sites. Formal meetings were held with 27 homeless and domestic violence services nationally.

Over a period of 18 months, 60 women were recruited from strategically chosen sites in Dublin and two additional urban locations known to have a significant homeless population. The recruitment sites included homeless emergency hostels (both single- and mixed-gender), domestic violence refuges, transitional accommodation, long-term supported housing, drop-in services and food centres. The eligibility criteria for entry to the study were as follows: (1) a woman who is homeless or has lived in unstable accommodation during the past six months; (2) age 18 years and upwards; (3) single and without children, or a mother living either with, or apart from, her children in a homeless or domestic violence service; (4) Irish or of other ethnic origin. In other words, the study focused on *single* Irish or migrant women who were homeless rather than on family homelessness. A combination of purposive, snowball, theoretical and targeted sampling guided the recruitment process, a strategy that helped to circumvent the risk of bias that can arise from an over-dependency on one sampling technique.

The core method of data collection was the biographical interview. This is an approach to interviewing deemed particularly effective in illuminating respondents' perceived opportunities, constraints and 'turning point' experiences (Denzin, 1989; Miller, 2000; Roberts, 2002). The biographical interview is also claimed to be 'the most appropriate method for unpacking the more sophisticated explanations of homelessness' (May, 2000, p. 63).

Interviews commenced with an invitation to women to tell their 'life story'. Later, a range of specific issues were targeted for questioning, including: housing/homeless history; family circumstances; children; drug/alcohol problems; health and mental health; experiences of service provision; criminal offending and contact with the criminal justice system; and women's perspectives on their situations, past, present and future. Rather than tracing *only* a person's housing and homeless history, the

interview thus attempted to construct *multiple* biographies by capturing transition and change, along the same timeline, in the women's personal, social and economic circumstances (Reeve *et al.*, 2007).³

Throughout the data collection phase of the study, ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken at four homeless service settings in or adjacent to Dublin's city centre, including two homeless hostels (one single-sex and one mixed-gender) and two food centres. This level of engagement with women facilitated a better understanding of 'their worlds' within more natural settings by 'being there' (Agar, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). By capturing the daily life and routines of homeless women who utilise services, the use of ethnographic observation helped to supplement and triangulate the data garnered from the biographical interviews.

The large volume of data generated meant that several different strategies and techniques were developed to guide and assist data analysis. All interview data were coded using NVivo,⁴ a software package for the analysis of qualitative data. A case profile documenting key features of the 'life story' of each participant was also prepared. This profile thematically documented key life history events; their routes into homelessness; family situations and relationships; substance use; health; criminal offending and contact with the criminal justice system; and level of service utilisation and engagement.

A separate accommodation biography (May, 2000) documenting women's housing and homeless trajectories and their pathways 'through' homelessness was subsequently prepared for each study participant. These profiles, combined with the coded data, significantly aided the analytic process. Data excerpts from the biographical interviews and ethnographic field notes are used in the presentation of findings in later sections of the paper. To protect the anonymity of the women, all have been assigned a pseudonym and all identifiers (names of places, services, family members, friends and so on) have been removed from the data.

³ At the end of all interviews, a questionnaire was administered in order to gather data on the following: demographics (schooling, employment history, income), family composition and children, alcohol and drug use, experiences of victimisation, history of offending, and physical and mental health.

⁴ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International (www.qsrinternational.com).

Women with criminal and incarceration histories

This section provides an overview of the criminal and incarceration histories of the study's women. To avoid a decontextualised account of women's offending and imprisonment, we also document several other important dimensions of the women's life stories.

Of the 60 women interviewed, half ($n = 30$) had been charged with one or more criminal offence in their lifetimes.⁵ Nearly two-thirds ($n = 18$) of those who had appeared in court stated that a fine had been imposed or, alternatively, that they had been referred to the probation service and/or were obliged to attend a drug treatment programme. The remaining 12 women who had appeared in court reported more persistent offending histories, and 11 had served one or more prison sentences during their lives. All the women who reported histories of incarceration were of Irish or UK origin. Thus, of the 43 women born in Ireland or the UK, just over one quarter reported histories of incarceration. A majority of the criminal charges reported by women were for non-violent offences. Table 1 is based on women's self-reports of the offences for which they were arrested and charged. Theft was by far the most commonly reported crime, followed by public order offences.

Table 1. Number of women arrested and charged with offences by category ($n = 30$)

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Number arrested</i>	<i>Number charged</i>
Theft	19	18
Public order	14	11
Assault	7	5
Selling stolen goods	5	5
Soliciting	4	4
Criminal damage	4	3
Drug offences	4	4
Trespassing	4	3
Possession of an offensive weapon	3	3
Begging	2	0

⁵ Only two of the 30 who reported criminal justice contact were migrant women. Migrant women tended to have higher educational qualifications and stronger employment histories than their counterparts who were born in Ireland or the UK; they were also more likely to be caring for their children full-time (see Mayock and Sheridan, 2012b and Mayock *et al.*, 2012 for a more detailed account of migrant women's experiences of homelessness).

For the women with histories of incarceration ($n = 11$), once again the most commonly reported charge was for theft (9/11). This was followed by public order offences (6/11), criminal damage (4/11) and selling stolen goods (4/11). Less commonly reported offences included possession of an offensive weapon (3/11), drug offences (2/11) and soliciting (1/11).

The average age for the subsample of 11 women with histories of incarceration was 35.4 years at the time of interview. Three women were in their twenties, six in their thirties, and two women were over the age of 45 years. Consistent with the profile of the larger sample of 60 women (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012a), all of the women with histories of incarceration had experienced structural disadvantage, including poverty and deprivation, during childhood.

Their schooling was highly disrupted and all entered adulthood with limited or no educational qualifications. All had been financially dependent on welfare for most of their adult lives and few had credentials that would enable them to enter the labour market.

As well as social and economic exclusion, the women's narratives consistently featured multiple traumatic life experiences, including high levels of victimisation across the life course.⁶ Eight of the 11 women had experienced domestic violence in their homes as children and five reported sexual abuse during childhood. For many, experiences of victimisation and abuse extended into adulthood: seven reported intimate partner violence and three of these women had been in multiple relationships with violent partners; most had never accessed a domestic violence refuge. Trauma related to the experience of violence and abuse was consistently reported by women and the physical and emotional impacts associated with domestic and intimate partner violence were enduring throughout the women's lives.

Seven of the women were mothers and all had one or more child under the age of 18 years. All of the women's children were living apart from them the time of interview, having typically been placed in the care of either the state or a relative. Less frequently, one or more of their children lived with their father. Women's lack of regular contact with and access to their children was a source of significant distress, and most

⁶ It is important to note that gender-based violence was reported by a majority of the 60 women interviewed and was not an experience unique to the women with histories of incarceration (see Mayock and Sheridan, 2012a, 2012b; Mayock *et al.*, 2012 for a more detailed account of the experience of gender-based violence for the entire sample and among migrant women specifically).

expressed feelings of guilt and shame associated with the absence of their children. In the following excerpt, Caoimhe expressed her regrets about the impact of her drug use on her son, who was 13 years old at time of interview.

I got very bad then [referring to drug use]. I was like, Jesus, I was even robbin' me family. I was doin' everything. I done really bad things when I think back now of some things, but at the time you don't think about it. You are like, worry about it later, you know? Worry about that later ... I have even sold stuff belonging to me son. That's how bad I was, you know ... Now I can't pay him back enough. Now I am doing everything to just try and buy him back. But you know, me Ma keeps sayin' to me, 'You can't do that, he just wants you doing well and you're off the drugs'. (Caoimhe, 35)

Like Caoimhe, others referred to motherhood and substance use as interconnected distressing issues. All 11 women with histories of incarceration reported heavy or dependent alcohol or drug use. Heroin was the primary drug of misuse in the case of six women, who also frequently reported the use of other drugs including benzodiazepines and/or cocaine. The remaining five women reported heavy binge drinking and/or alcohol dependency.

Without exception, the women reported poor mental health, and a considerable number had had past or recent contact with psychiatric services. Most talked about depressed feelings as well as anxiety and coping difficulties; six of the 11 women had engaged in self-injurious behaviour at some point and eight reported suicidal thoughts at some time in the past. Five had spent time in a psychiatric hospital, often on multiple occasions, during the years subsequent to the first experience of homelessness.

Women's life stories point strongly to their social marginalisation and exclusion, as well as to multiple traumatic events and experiences. These contextual accounts are critical to understanding their paths to incarceration and their narratives of imprisonment.

Women's paths to incarceration

Women with experience of incarceration reported lengthy homeless histories, with the average cumulative duration of homelessness for the sub-sample being 10.2 years. All 11 women had experienced homeless-

ness for more than three years, and eight had been homeless for more than nine years; two women reported 15 and 16 years of homelessness respectively. First homeless experiences occurred during adolescence in the case of a large number of the women ($n = 7$), who frequently reported a pattern of running away from home to escape violence or abuse.

I was running from me father like, I was escaping all the time. Like before that I was running away and I would be sleeping out and I would come home again and it [sexual abuse] would start again and I would be gone again. It was just a vicious circle like. (Stephanie, 32)

While each woman's 'story' of homelessness was unique, their accounts shared a number of distinctive features. All, for example, reported lengthy periods of 'hidden' homelessness (that is, staying with family members or friends, in squats or other concealed locations), particularly during early stages of their homeless 'careers', and a large number had also spent periods of weeks, months or years, in some cases, sleeping rough, most often in the company of a male partner.

Upon entering homeless systems and services, the women typically embarked on a cycle of movement between emergency hostels that extended for many years. Their trajectories through homelessness were often interrupted by exit spells from homeless services. For example, a large number had exited temporarily along with a partner to private rental accommodation, while others lived alone or with family members or friends (situations of 'hidden' homelessness) for a time before returning to hostel accommodation. Other exit destinations following a temporary departure from homeless services included stays in psychiatric and/or acute hospitals, stints in residential drug treatment services and periods of incarceration.

Women's reports of more regular and persistent offending were strongly associated with the condition of homelessness and their inability to finance basic needs. Daily life was unpredictable as women moved between temporary accommodation places and the stresses associated with living in hostels were significant; most talked about the omnipresence of alcohol and drugs in these setting and about the transience and chaos that characterised everyday life.

Many became more immersed in drug use and criminal activity as they commuted between hostels, established new romantic ties or returned to difficult or abusive relationships. While none of the women could be

reasonably described as embedded in criminogenic social networks, they were nonetheless exposed to opportunities for drug use and related criminal activity on a daily basis.

When I came out of prison there were no beds and I went to [emergency wet hostel in city centre]. A girl in the room with me that was on this head [shop] shit stuff and like was sitting in front of me morning, noon and night banging out [administering the drug]. (Liz, 38)

For a large number, offending was directly related to the need to finance their drug use. Liz's criminal offences were confined to theft.

Yeah. I got me charges every two or three months and imprisonment every two or three months as well ... Shoplifting, all shoplifting. I never had one other charge ... To feed me drug habit; I would go out and I would rob probably [pause] €300 for the day and I would go and sell it then for maybe €100 ... People introducing me to people and then people making orders for stuff. (Liz, 38)

Stephanie, who also engaged in shoplifting to acquire money for drugs, described a typical day during a particularly chaotic period of her life.

Ah, it was just robbing and trying to get money for drugs, that is all it was. Robbing shops like, robbing anywhere just to get money to buy drugs. Shoplifting mostly. (Stephanie, 32)

Stephanie estimated that she has spent a total of five years in prison, always for theft: 'they eventually just like keep locking you up then'. In most cases, women's incarceration resulted from an accumulation of charges over time, and several described amassing a large number of criminal charges over relatively short periods. Leah, for example, said that her level of contact with law enforcement agencies increased dramatically during a period spent moving between hostels and sleeping rough.

I was drinking an awful lot and this was when things were gone really, really out of hand like and I was smoking a lot of hash and that at the time and I was just lashing out at girls, getting arrested every night and stuff ... [And what would the arrests and charges be related to?] Drunk and disorderly and public order and stuff like that ... I suppose burglary but there's nothing

really serious; it's just that I got so many of them [charges]. I got about 50 of them in the end or something. (Leah, 22)

Debbie started shoplifting at the age of 21 years and also accumulated a large number of charges over a short period. She was convicted and imprisoned for the first time later that year.

I started shoplifting because I didn't want to go out working on the streets anymore and started getting caught, getting charge sheets. I got my first charge sheet I think when I was 21, do you know what I mean ... I got locked up in prison then. (Debbie, 27)

A majority of the women reported multiple periods of incarceration, often for short periods, although a number had also served sentences of between two and five years. The following section examines this cycle of movement in and out of prison.

Women's journeys in and out of prison

The incarceration histories of a large number of the women were marked by a pattern of entering, leaving and returning to prison. Only one of the women had been incarcerated just once and most of the remaining women reported numerous episodes of imprisonment. Indeed, a number had returned to prison so frequently that they were unable to specify the precise number of prison stays they had experienced. When asked how many times she had been in prison, Kate (23) responded by explaining, 'I've lost count, loads', while Laura (33) 'was in [prison] loads of times but I can't remember. I was in for days sometimes, two days, three days.' At the time of interview, Debbie, who reported the largest number of prison stays, told of a constant cycle of movement between prison and homeless accommodation.

[How many times have you been in prison?] *About 90 times, 200 ... I could be here [hostel] for five days, in prison for two days, back out for one day, back in prison for two days, back out for three days, back in prison for a week. That is the way my life is at the moment.* (Debbie, 27)

Like Debbie, several others recounted a litany of short sentences. Liz had similarly commuted in and out of prison over the course of many years.

I was going out robbing and I spent most of me life then in and out of prison, I was never out of prison longer than three months ... Me life has just been, since I left him [ex-partner], prison, prison, prison, prison. [How many times would you say you have been in prison altogether?] Oh Jesus Christ, the officer used to say to me, 'Liz, you have done a life sentence but you have done dlibs and drabs'. (Liz, 38)

The following excerpt from ethnographic field notes provides further insight into the extent to which repeat periods of incarceration became the 'norm' for a large number of these women.

From week to week, it is difficult to predict whether Debbie will be in [name of hostel] or back in prison. As she explained in her interview, she can be in the hostel for a number of days and then back 'inside' for days or weeks. A week after I interviewed her, I enquired about Debbie's whereabouts from a member of staff in the hostel, who replied in an ironic tone, 'If you ever want an appointment with Debbie, you will have to catch her in prison'. During an informal chat several weeks later, this same staff member said that Debbie was moving very frequently between the hostel and the prison and that they 'expect to see her again'. During a subsequent visit to the hostel in July 2010, Debbie was standing in the reception area when I arrived and recognised me instantly. I asked how she was and she responded in a cheerful tone, 'Have had a mad few months' (since we last met in March 2010). 'Do you remember when I spoke to you, I hadn't slept in a week? ... It's all 'cos of them head shop drugs', she explained. She went on to say that she went to a psychiatric hospital asking them to admit her because she felt 'out of control', but they would not accept her 'because of the drugs in her system'. 'Me only option was prison', she added, in a matter-of-fact tone.

As stated above, these women typically reported paths through homelessness characterised by frequent moves between emergency homeless hostels punctuated by temporary stays with friends or family members and periods of rough sleeping. The accounts below further illustrate the profound instability resulting from this pattern of movement, as well as the constant uncertainty associated with the absence of a stable home.

So I was there [transitional housing] for a while, and I was doing me course and then I went back drinking and ended back in prison again. I was in prison then, aww, then I was out and down in me brother's for a while in [provincial town]. Then I was back in Dublin, I was in [hostel] and then I ended up back in prison. I was kind of all over the place like, never stable somewhere. (Kate, 23)

And then it got to the stage where I was probably staying with friends tonight and tomorrow I would probably be ringing the Night Bus. I would be ringing there to see could I get somewhere for the night, you know. It's very hard. (Caoimhe, 27)

Prison was just one of a number of institutional settings where women resided intermittently over the course of their homelessness. Hospital admissions were also commonly reported and most often occurred in tandem with problems or crises related to heavy alcohol or drug use and/or mental health problems. Grace had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital for two weeks following an attempted drug overdose.

I tried to OD on me own tablets that just didn't, they just put me asleep like and I woke up and was like, 'Why am I still here?' But ... I got better after that so ... the two weeks [in the psychiatric hospital] was great, I didn't want to leave [laughs]. (Grace, 31)

A number of the women had been admitted to hospital because of injuries they sustained from violent partners.

So, then I was moving from hostel to hostel and then I had an apartment before I came in [to homeless hostel] this time. But I was living with a partner that was violent like; he was like, you know, I ended up in hospital because of him ... It was just horrible like that. I had to walk out of that flat, do you know what I mean? (Stephanie, 32)

Several had moved between hostels, psychiatric hospitals and prison over the course of many years.

I got out of [one psychiatric hospital] to go to the B&B and I overdosed and ended up in [another psychiatric hospital]. Then I took, I moved to a B&B and I was there for nine months and I started shoplifting and then started goin' into prison. (Debbie, 27)

Almost all who reported periods of incarceration had histories of contact with state agencies and institutions that spanned a significant period of their lives.

I'm only out [of prison] since last Friday again and that nine months [spent living in a B&B] is the longest place I've been out of the institutions since I'm 11 ... I've just been in the system since the day I went into care at 11. (Debbie, 27)

Women's perspectives on prison

Women rarely talked about the prison life spontaneously during interview but were very open to questions about the experience. Perhaps reflecting the extent to which many had become accustomed to sequential stints in a range of temporary living places, most talked about prison in quite unremarkable terms. Unlike other topics raised during interview, particularly those related to the women's children and the experience of gender-based violence, discussions about prison tended not to trigger emotive responses. However, a small number, particularly those who had less experience of prison, talked about feelings of fear, particularly at the point of incarceration.

I got arrested, went to court and got one week in Mountjoy. I feared for my life. I said, 'Where am I?'. I didn't know where I was. Oh, it was awful love ... I feared for my life. (Kay, 46)

However, relatively speaking, the vast majority of women appeared not to be affected, in the negative sense, by the prison environment. Opposition or resistance to imprisonment did not feature strongly in their accounts and, to a large extent, their stories of incarceration did not frame prison experiences as 'turning point' moments in their lives.

Many of the women depicted prison as providing an escape from various challenges and pressures, whether related to hostel life, relationships or financial pressures. Most moved directly to prison from hostels or other unstable living situations, environments that they often described as unsafe, insanitary and drug-saturated.

It's [hostel] horrible. Even the corridors smell like urine. (Laura, 33)

[Name of hostel], oh, that was bad news ... When you had money they would take your money. (Kay, 46)

When you are in like emergency accommodation and the hostels like, whatever, it's just no way you can get clean ... Really hard because it's just all around you. (Caoimhe, 35)

All the women were struggling to survive economically, socially and emotionally prior to entering prison. Perhaps reflecting the harsh reality of homelessness, a considerable number depicted prison as providing a 'break' from a lifestyle that held them captive outside.

[Prison] was grand, it's not a bad place you know. It is a holiday camp if you ask me; sometimes it was a bit of a laugh. Sometimes you just think, 'Oh God, it wasn't that bad, no'. (Donna, 35)

Several commented that prison provided an opportunity to have a period 'off' drugs and alcohol. In this sense, incarceration was perceived as positive in the sense of affording women a phase of recovery as well as freedom from relentless pursuit of money to finance their drug use. Stephanie noted that she was 'drug free' while in prison; Liz said that prison had 'saved me from overdosing a lot of times'. Prison also offered women opportunities to engage in educational and leisure activities not available to them 'on the outside'.

I had an education [in prison]. I was seeing a psychologist in there as well; that was good ... It was good to talk through things. I did the DBT course, you know the dialectical behavioural therapy. I did that twice, and got loads from that as well ... Just how to deal with situations, to look at your behaviours. It's interesting ... I started to get into the sports, you know, health and fitness. I did step aerobics classes in there as well, started to get interested in that. (Kate, 23)

Yeah, when I was in the [prison] I was seeing a psychologist and, yeah, I liked her. (Donna, 35)

I was using the gym, I was going to classes, doing pottery classes and reading. (Carol, 39)

It is significant that a considerable number of women indicated that there were times when they viewed prison a preferable to a return to hostel life.

The judge would be letting me out and I would be saying, 'No, I don't want to'. (Debbie, 27)

I really ... to tell you the truth I only half wanted to get out of the prison. (Caoimhe, 35)

Debbie said that there were times when she engaged in criminal activity in the hope of being sentenced because other agencies or services would not accommodate or 'entertain' her.

Sometimes I commit the crime to go in [to prison] ... Yeah, because when I go to a psychiatric hospital for help, if I feel suicidal, they don't entertain me because I'm on drugs. (Debbie, 27)

Nonetheless, prison was rarely framed by women as a life-changing event, nor was it depicted as a catalyst for change.

I was good, like I was kind of keeping quiet then for a while like, when I came out [of prison]. And [pause] but I kept relapsing and then I was in there for another week again. [And did prison change anything for you?] Did it change anything for me? No, not really. I just kind of, I got on with it like. (Leah, 22)

Post-release, women's lives generally returned to their pre-incarceration situations. All of the women re-entered the hostel system subsequent to a period of incarceration, often following a relapse. Kate explained that she never 'lasted long' out of prison because she returned to the same environments and activities.

[And the first time you were in prison, how long were you in for?] Three months, I think it was three months. [And when you left, where did you go?] Eh, I dunno where I went! [pause] I think I was in the hostels. [And how long was it till you went in again?] About a few weeks. It never last long out like, especially when you are living in town and that's all that's around you is drink and trouble. (Kate, 23)

For Liz, who had returned to hostels on countless occasions following her release from prison, life generally reverted to a routine of spending time with other hostel residents. She also said that she almost always quickly returned to a routine of engaging in theft to finance her everyday needs.

[So did prison change you?] *No. I always had the intention but I would go to a shop and I would be queuing and I would have three things in me hand and I could put them in me bag and I would say, 'Ah fuck this, I am not queuing'. I would just walk to the end of the queue and out!* (Liz, 38)

Liz further commented that the experience of prison had only served to increase her antagonism and defiance towards authority figures such as prison officers and the Gardaí.

It [prison] didn't do me any good, put it that way. It done me bad if anything ... Em, [pause] because now I hate police and I hate [prison] officers and all them authority people as I say, I just don't like authority and that's it. (Liz, 38)

For women who had served multiple sentences, prison was not necessarily an outcome that was feared. Women did not positively endorse incarceration in the sense of it providing them with the supports that would enable them to desist from criminal activity; rather, over time, prison was simply one of a long list of temporary living places in their trajectories of ongoing homelessness.

Discussion

This paper has explored the dynamics of homelessness and incarceration based on the narrative accounts of a sub-sample of 11 women who are participants in a larger study of women's homelessness. It is important to caution that a majority of the women interviewed for the purpose of the larger study from which these accounts are drawn had never been incarcerated. Thus, it would be erroneous to assume that many or most women who experience homelessness have histories of criminal justice contact. Nonetheless, a strong association between homelessness and incarceration has been documented in Ireland and elsewhere, although analyses of the homelessness–incarceration nexus have not, in the main, specifically addressed the experiences of women.

The findings presented document a range of complex dynamics linked to the homeless-to-prison trajectories of women with long histories of homelessness. Perhaps more importantly, they chart a distinctive interaction between institutional settings and women's homelessness. The women in this sub-sample had commuted between homeless hostels and other institutional contexts – prisons, hospitals and drug treatment facilities – over an extended period even if, along that journey, some had moved (temporarily) to more stable accommodation.

Women's pre- and post-prison lives were marked by multiple deprivations and traumatic experiences, including poverty, gender-based violence, substance abuse and mental health problems. Thus, rather than a discrete event, incarceration emerged as 'an extension rather than a focal point' (Carlton and Segrave, 2011, p. 554) of the disruption, instability and transience that characterised the lives of a majority of the group from an early age. Once they entered the nexus, most of the women continued to commute from homelessness to incarceration, incarceration to homelessness.

All who had moved in and out of prison in this way had very often served a number of short sentences – a form of 'serial institutionalisation' claimed to be extremely disruptive to positive community reintegration (Baldry *et al.*, 2006). Certainly, women's constant movement between prison, hostels and other institutional settings served to reinforce their 'outsider' status and exacerbate their marginalisation from the mainstream.

Women entered the carceral system having experienced homelessness for many years, most often at a point when they were struggling to survive. The impacts of incarceration and women's perspectives on prison must be understood in this context. Against a backdrop of sustained economic marginalisation, the absence of stable housing, drug or alcohol dependency, and the legacy or ongoing trauma associated with violence and abuse, it is perhaps unsurprising that many depicted their time in prison as providing a space in which to recover and establish a distance from the pressures 'outside'. Incarceration was frequently depicted as a period of respite and recovery during which women could recoup and rebuild themselves in a physical and psychological sense.

As the pattern of 'institutionalized cycling' became more frequent alongside women's successive admissions or committals to various institutional contexts, some appeared to adapt to the 'rhythms of these settings' (DeVerteuil, 2003, p. 364). Many accounts of the prison

experience indicate that a number seemed to accept rather than reject a prison stay at particular junctures, suggesting that some felt ‘at home’ in prison.

Nonetheless, women were acutely aware that time spent in prison did not lead to sustained or sustainable change in their lives. Indeed, a common pattern among those who experienced multiple periods of incarceration was that they repeatedly faced the same conditions and challenges post-release. Thus, while prison may have been a safer or more desirable temporary place of residence in the context of their continued struggles, it failed to address the ongoing cycle of their homelessness.

As noted by Carlton and Segrave (2011, pp. 559–560), ‘a “break” from the hardships outside prison may at best serve as a temporary reprieve, while in the long term producing greater harm or further entrenching marginalization and isolation’. At the point of leaving prison, most of the women entered an uncertain transitional space between institution and community in which services are fragmented at the point where they are most vulnerable (Hopper and Baumohl, 1994).

This paper is based on a small sample of homeless women with experience of incarceration, and the findings cannot be generalised to incarcerated or homeless women in general. The answers to ameliorating the nexus described in this paper need to be guided by a more detailed understanding of the contexts and situations of incarcerated women and of the difficulties confronted by them both prior to their incarceration and post-release. However, what is clear from the findings presented is that homeless women with complex histories and needs may be destined for a ‘journey’ through multiple systems, services and institutions that temporarily ‘contain’ rather than substantially addressing the challenges they face in relation to housing, substance use and mental health.

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