

Failure of a Scottish national scheme aiming to **link released prisoners to services** shows how intensive and systematic such attempts must be to overcome logistical barriers and motivate offenders.

From 2001, the Transitional Care Initiative targeted problem drug users not already subject to mandatory post-release supervision and sought to link them to community services. Prisoners nearing release were assessed and if those with a drug problem consented, prison-based staff planned for their release and transferred them to sub-contracted staff outside, who met them up to three times over 12 weeks to help implement the plan. **Researchers aimed to track** about 700 who had agreed to transitional care in prison, but four months after their release only a quarter could be interviewed, and at seven months a third returned a postal survey. ❶ Routine monitoring data was also available and staff involved in the initiative were interviewed.

Just 28% of offenders attended a post-release appointment. Around 4 in 10 said they simply had not received notification. 'No fixed abode' prisoners were harder to contact and far fewer attended. When offenders who had attended an appointment were compared with those who had not, only slightly more (51% v. 42%) had contacted relevant services. Seven months after release, those who had received transitional care were no less likely to have unresolved needs, nor were there any differences in health, substance use, injecting behaviour, housing, employability or crime.

Scotland's initiative suffered from logistical barriers (such as transfer between prisons, re-arrest for prior offences, and unexpected release) which it did not have authority or resources to overcome. It was also argued that three meetings over 12 weeks was often insufficient and that there was not enough scope for proactively reaching out and engaging prisoners. **Researchers have shown** that a more rigorous – but also more resource-intensive – follow-up system could have reached many more. ❷ It is, for example, important to check the validity of post-release contact information *before* the prisoner is released.

The initiative has now been replaced by a prison 'in-reach' service run by local authorities which will work with prisoners six weeks before release and at least six after. It focuses on high drug use areas and priority prisoners, including those most committed to treatment in prison, a 'cherry picking' strategy which may aid retention.

❶ MacRae R. *et al.* *Evaluation of the Scottish Prison Service Transitional Care Initiative*. Scottish Executive, 2006. Copies: www.drugmisuse.isdscotland.org/smrt/smrt.htm.

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❷ Scott C.K. "A replicable model for achieving over 90% follow-up rates in longitudinal studies of substance abusers." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*: 2004, 74(1), p. 21–36 **DS**

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